

Debunking the Myths of Brazilian Authoritarianism

Sá Motta, Rodrigo Patto (2023). *A present past - the Brazilian military dictatorship and the 1964 coup* (Portuguese-Speaking World: Its History, Politics and Culture). Sussex Academic Press: Brighton, 210 pp. (ISBN-10: 978-1-78976-157-3). Paperback.

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In recent years, amid political tension and the deepening divide between right- and left-wing politics, arguments about Brazil's past have become more frequent. Notably, a more positive memory of the 1964-1985 military dictatorship has gained grounds in the country, especially since the rise of Jair Bolsonaro. Rodrigo Patto Sá Motta's "A Present Past - The Brazilian Military Dictatorship and the 1964 Coup" offers an accessible introduction to the dictatorship and the main contentious issues that have recently reignited the public debate about the period.

The book covers the major aspects of the dictatorship period, such as the socio-political context leading to the coup, economic and cultural policies implemented during the regime and the transition to democracy. Most importantly, Sá Motta

addresses the centrality of memory of the dictatorship in present-day politics and takes a clear pro-democracy stance. The book also provides readers with arguments to counter those that are nostalgic for the dictatorship, and it may even convince those willing to read it that the Brazilian dictatorship was not as beneficial as they had thought. Sá Motta argues that the Armed Forces did not save Brazil in 1964, but imposed a violent dictatorship that refrained from investigating corrupt leaders and left the public accounts in a critical situation.

The first three chapters provide an overview of the coup (chapter 1), the segments of society that welcomed the coup, including anti-leftist and anti-communist movements (chapter 2) and the participation of foreign powers in 1964 and beyond (chapter 3). Here Sá Motta evidences how, through a carefully constructed, albeit non-existent “red threat,” Brazil was subject to a violent right-wing dictatorship in the name of national safety.

Subsequent chapters examine the main characteristics of the regime. Chapter 4 focuses on its repressive apparatus; chapter 5 explores the ebbs and flows of public support for the dictatorship, and chapter 6 focuses on the social attitudes of adherence, resistance and accommodation toward the regime. Chapter 7 asks whether the violence of the dictatorial state was proportional to that of the left. Chapter 8 examines the regime's projected image of combating corruption and its meagre results in this area. Chapters 9 and 10 analyse the period known as the “economic miracle” and

“decompression,” respectively, while Chapter 10 deals with the transition to democracy and the challenges faced by what Sá Motta identifies as Brazil’s “precarious democracy.”

The book is a timely contribution to the debate about authoritarianism in Brazil's past and present. It does not aim to offer a comprehensive or definitive account of the dictatorship, but rather an introduction that invites readers to learn more about the period and to critically reflect on its legacy. Besides offering accessible insights for general audiences, the book also provides original perspectives, which will prove valuable to those already familiar with the subject. As such, it is a worthwhile contribution for both students and researchers interested in Brazilian history and politics.

A Present Past: The Brazilian Military Dictatorship and the 1964 Coup is a thought-provoking exploration of the military regime and its repercussions in the political imagination of Brazilians in the present time. The book is well written and well researched. It draws on previous works by the author, such as *On Guard Against the Red Menace: Anti-Communism in Brazil, 1917-1964* (published in English in 2020), and the synthesis of other academic’s interpretations of the recent political history of twentieth-century Brazil.

Sá Motta argues that the Brazilian dictatorship was not a homogeneous or monolithic period, but rather a complex and contradictory one, marked by paradoxes

and ambiguities. This includes, for example, the fact that it was at the same time modernising and conservative; its ideological heterogeneity (with liberals, conservatives, authoritarian nationalists and some fascists in its core); its democratic façade and the tolerance of left-wingers in the private sector.

A Present Past debunks myths about the Brazilian dictatorship propagated by its supporters. These include the myth that the military was a "saviour" of democracy, that society was safer during the dictatorship, and the belief that there was no corruption during the regime — each of these ideas is widely held by present-day right-wingers.

Rather, Sá Motta demonstrates that Brazil became a more unequal, more violent and less secure country during the regime and that the fight against corruption was conducted through corrupt means. Records show that illegal acts committed under the military regime's shadow went unpunished so as to preserve the regime's public image. The so-called economic "miracle" is debunked as economic growth for the few, with no concern for its social impacts. Readers learn that this was a period of wasted resources and megalomaniac projects that led to wage suppression for the majority of the Brazilian population and left the country with a huge external debt and rising inflation.

Sá Motta's book is the result of a long, careful and detailed study of a solid set of archival and journalistic sources, as well as academic publications. Throughout the

book, Sá Motta displays a deep knowledge of the period, including its key players and events. In providing a clear critical synthesis, he unpacks the motivations of those who supported the coup, the support of part of society during the military regime and the participation of civilians in its governing bodies. These are hard truths, but confronting them is invaluable. This is not only for contemporary debates on the regime's authoritarianism and the state of democracy in the country today, but also for the debates on the support for authoritarian leaders in Brazil and elsewhere in the world. This book demonstrates the importance of a historical perspective and collective action in addressing the issues of authoritarianism in the present.

A critique of this work might be to point out that a more nuanced view of antagonists is lacking, and that likewise a clearer presentation of terminology is needed. The author does not define the groups acting in the present that he argues against – sometimes referring to those who support authoritarianism, other times to those who are involved in the Bolsonaro government. This provokes a question of, where and how do the military fit into this picture, for example?

Further to this, the author refers to negationist discourses and accuses them of creating distorting versions of Brazil's recent history: "some of the extreme-right versions are accompanied by historical evidence to lend them credibility, such as classified documents stored in archives (...). However, these records are interpreted in a distorted way" (p. 4). These are very important claims, which merit being

explored more thoroughly; both from a theoretical standpoint as well as through practical examples of discourses about the past produced by the extreme-right in circulation in Brazilian society. What exactly is a distortion of the past, and how can it be produced from historical evidence?

Sá Motta's book offers one instance of distorted past rhetoric: a quote from Ricardo Vélez Rodrigues, who declared the coup and dictatorial period to be "not a coup against the Constitution...It was a strong democratic regime" (Sá Motta, p. 50). Rodrigues scarcely shaped Brazilian politics; he merely served a three-month tenure as Education Minister in 2019 - a position given to him by Olavo de Carvalho, a signal of the cronyism associated with the Bolsonaro government.

In Sá Motta's work, some of the central points of the right-wing's defence of the regime are addressed, though this is often done in a synthetic manner. For example, the often-summoned reference to the 120 people killed by left-wing militia groups during the period is discussed (p. 107). Inviting dialogue through the presentation of the right-wing's perspective is a bonus; however, Sá Motta's analysis is too brief in this case. For example, the argument that combatants were not exclusively victims, a subject under-researched in Brazilian historiography, is not fully explored. A more thorough presentation of the antagonist's views and using more precise language would certainly strengthen the book's arguments.

Overall, Sá Motta's 'A Present Past' is an insightful and informative work about an important moment in Brazilian history, the 1964-1985 dictatorial regime. It is a valuable and timely exploration of how it has been committed to memory. Researchers who are interested in Latin America more broadly and the Brazilian case, in particular, will find this work to be a useful starting point for understanding the main points of contention related to the authoritarian period that remain unresolved. It offers a clear and succinct presentation of some of the key aspects of the period and provides readers with arguments to defend democracy, human rights and respect for diversity, against those advocating in favour of authoritarianism today. The book is a welcome contribution to the enormous task ahead of confronting pro-authoritarianism discourses of those nostalgic for the dictatorship.