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Authoritarian governance and the university: Repression and social control in Brazilian higher education under the Military Dictatorship (1964–1988)

Abstract

This article analyzes repression and social control in Brazilian higher education during the Military Dictatorship (1964-1988), examining how state power operated through an institutionalized system of surveillance, punishment, and ideological normalization. Grounded in theories of social control (Cohen, Garland) and Aróstegui's concept of illegitimacy of origin, the study understands repression not merely as coercion, but as a bureaucratic and rationalized mechanism sustaining authoritarian order. The analysis draws on diverse documentary sources (repressive reports, military doctrines, surveillance records, and Ministry of Education archives) interpreted through a critical and comparative historical approach. The findings reveal institutional, political and ideological networks that structured control within universities, demonstrating how repression functioned as state policy aimed at reorganizing political and social life. The article also highlights the persistence of bureaucratic control and moral regulation beyond 1988, emphasizing the role of historical memory and critical awareness in resisting the normalization of authoritarian practices in educational life.

Keywords: higher education; repression; Military Dictatorship; social control; Brazil

Resumo

Este artigo analisa a repressão e o controle social na educação superior brasileira durante a Ditadura Militar (1964-1988), examinando como o poder estatal operou por meio de um sistema institucionalizado de vigilância, punição e normalização ideológica. Fundamentado nas teorias do controle social (Cohen, Garland) e no conceito de ilegitimidade de origem de Aróstegui, o estudo compreende a repressão não apenas como coerção, mas como um mecanismo burocrático e racionalizado de sustentação da ordem autoritária. A análise baseia-se em diversas fontes documentais (relatórios repressivos, doutrinas militares, registros de vigilância e arquivos do Ministério da Educação) interpretadas por meio de uma abordagem histórica crítica e comparativa. Os resultados evidenciam as redes institucionais, políticas e ideológicas que estruturaram o controle nas universidades, demonstrando como a repressão operou como política de Estado voltada à reorganização da vida política e social. O artigo destaca ainda a persistência de mecanismos de controle burocrático e regulação moral após 1988, ressaltando a importância da memória histórica e da consciência crítica para resistir à normalização de práticas autoritárias no campo educacional.

Palavras-chave: educação superior; repressão; ditadura militar; controle social; Brasil

Historical legacies and contemporary challenges

How was repression implemented within Brazilian higher education, and to what extent did it operate as a systematic mode of authoritarian governance? Which repressive methods were mobilized during the Military Dictatorship (1964-1988), and what conceptual and historical frameworks sustained their continuity over time? These questions guide the present analysis.

Rather than offering an exhaustive account, this article maps the principal repressive methods employed to control students, faculty, and administrative staff in Brazilian universities, conceptualizing repression as a central component of state governance. Repressive practices did not function in isolation; they were articulated with surveillance, censorship, propaganda, and administrative regulation, forming an institutionalized system of social control embedded in public policy.

Following the 1964 coup, the military regime implemented coordinated actions across multiple sectors of society through a model of governance that combined traditional coercion with modern bureaucratic and ideological techniques. The objective was to preserve a deeply unequal social order rooted in colonial hierarchies and historical patterns of exclusion, reinforced in the Cold War context by fears of political radicalization and social mobilization. Repression in Brazil thus drew on a long genealogy of state violence, encompassing colonial domination, slavery, and repeated military campaigns against popular resistance.

The Military Dictatorship institutionalized this legacy by constructing an extensive apparatus of control that penetrated civilian institutions, including universities, which became strategic arenas of dispute. Higher education was subjected to surveillance, censorship, purges, and ideological intervention, legitimized through legal norms, administrative procedures, and security doctrines. Within this framework, repression functioned not merely as episodic violence but as a rationalized and bureaucratized form of governance aimed at restructuring political, social, and intellectual life.

Authoritarian control is therefore understood as a deliberate state policy that subordinated education to the imperatives of security, order, and stability. Repression operated simultaneously as a governmental technique and as a public policy embedded in the institutional architecture of the authoritarian state, producing durable effects beyond the formal end of the dictatorship.

The analysis also engages with memory studies to demonstrate how repression extended into the regulation of remembrance. The suppression of archives, silencing of academic voices, and distortion of historical narratives contributed to the persistence of authoritarian mentalities after 1988. Recent political crises and the resurgence of denialist discourses underscore the urgency of critically examining these legacies. Mapping repression within higher education thus remains essential not only for historiography, but for safeguarding democratic culture and intellectual autonomy.

Repression, social control, and governance

The analysis of repressive methods applied to higher education during the Brazilian Military Dictatorship is grounded in the interdisciplinary field of social control studies, which conceptualizes control as the ensemble of institutional, normative, and cultural mechanisms through which societies regulate behavior and produce legitimacy. Drawing on the contributions of Co-

hen (1985), Deflem (2007), and Garland (1993, 2001), repression is understood not merely as episodic coercion, but as a rationalized and bureaucratic strategy that integrates punishment, surveillance, and ideological normalization. Within this analytical framework, social control operates simultaneously as a disciplinary mechanism and as a symbolic order that legitimizes domination under the rhetoric of national security and social stability.

Social control assumes a central analytical role in this study, as repression is treated as one of the core modes sustaining authoritarian governance. Following Cohen's (1985, p. 1) classic definition, social control refers to "the organized ways in which a society responds to behavior and to people it views as deviant, threatening, or undesirable." This perspective allows repression to be situated within a broader system of governance rather than reduced to isolated acts of violence.

Empirically, the investigation examines four interrelated modes of control (repression, surveillance, the formation of intellectuals, and propaganda) and their systematic interaction within higher education. These modes did not operate as occasional or improvised responses but formed a relatively stable structure between 1964 and 1988, justifying their treatment as interconnected components of a coherent system of social control (Cohen & Scull, 1983, p. 7). Although not always centrally coordinated, their functional complementarity reveals repression as an integral element of a wider architecture of governance.

Within this system, punishment played a decisive role. As demonstrated by Rusche and Kirchheimer (1939/1984), Foucault (1975/1987), and Garland (1993, 2001), punitive practices are historically contingent and deeply embedded in economic, political, and moral configurations. In this study, repression and punishment are treated as complementary but analytically distinct. Following Aróstegui (2012), repression is conceptualized as an intrinsically illegitimate form of punishment—one that exceeds the moral and legal boundaries of legitimate sanctioning. Aróstegui's notion of the "illegitimacy of origin" illuminates how authoritarian regimes naturalize illegality by converting violence into a routine instrument of order. In higher education, this illegitimacy manifested in the suppression of academic autonomy, the moralization of knowledge production, and the criminalization of dissent.

The empirical evidence further demonstrates the coexistence of multiple temporalities of repression within the Brazilian dictatorship. Modern techniques—such as electric shocks and chemical substances like sodium pentothal—were employed alongside traditional practices, including *pau-de-arara* torture and simulated drowning. Even when restricted to the republican period (post-1889), the continuity of repressive practices across distinct political regimes becomes evident. Political-ideological repression, often associated with authoritarian regimes, also occurred during democratic intervals, as illustrated by the outlawing of the Brazilian Communist Party in 1947. These continuities reveal how successive configurations of control rearticulated inherited structures, underscoring repression as a persistent feature of Brazil's political trajectory.

Methodologically, the research adopts a critical, systematic, and comparative approach inspired by Rüsen's (2010a, 2010b) theory of historical consciousness, situating historical knowledge within its temporal, cultural, and social contexts. This perspective enables the critical interrogation of official narratives and the exposure of interpretive frameworks that sustained authoritarian governance. Freire's (1996) notion of epistemological curiosity informs the interpretive stance, fostering resistance to authoritarian normalization, while Goldmann's (1978) principle

of totality guides the integrated analysis of political, social, and ideological dimensions of primary sources.

The corpus of sources includes: (1) documents from formal repressive proceedings; (2) military doctrinal texts; (3) surveillance records; and (4) materials from the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) concerning state intervention in higher education. These documents were digitized, cataloged, and analyzed comparatively, with attention to their producers, contexts, and intended functions. This process reveals how repression was codified and legitimized through bureaucratic language and policy discourse.

Finally, the study adopts 1964–1988 as its analytical timeframe, following Codato (2005) and Lemos (2014), who identify the promulgation of the 1988 Constitution as the effective closure of the authoritarian cycle. Conceptually, the term "Military Dictatorship" is employed (Fernandes, 1982) to emphasize the centrality of military leadership and the militarization of society, particularly within higher education (Mathias, 2004). Regime manuals, such as those produced by the Escola Superior de Guerra (EMFA/ESG/DE, 1975), explicitly framed governance according to "principles of war," legitimizing the transformation of universities into ideological instruments. Yet higher education also remained a central arena of resistance, precisely because of its strategic role in opposing authoritarian power (Arquidiocese de São Paulo, 1985).

Multiple forms, shared objectives: repression as authoritarian governance

Repressive practices during the Brazilian Military Dictatorship assumed multiple forms, often shaped by local circumstances and institutional specificities. Despite this diversity, these practices shared common objectives: disciplining dissent, producing deterrence, and legitimizing authoritarian governance within higher education. Rather than isolated excesses, repression operated through a repertoire of measures that combined coercion, administrative regulation, and symbolic violence.

A revealing case is that of Professor Maria Luiza de Carvalho Armando. Although she signed a protest letter against the purge of colleagues at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS) in 1969, she was not immediately dismissed, unlike other co-signatories who refused to recant when confronted by Favorino Mercio, Chief of Staff to the Minister of Education, Tarso Dutra. In an unusual move, Maria Luiza repeatedly demanded her own expulsion, submitting petitions to the university administration, the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC), and even the Third Army Headquarters, where she personally delivered her request. Initially denied, her dismissal was later carried out through an "internal purge" that concealed its political nature under administrative procedures. Framed as a contractual issue (the alleged failure to renew her employment contract), this measure exemplifies how repression was bureaucratized to obscure its coercive intent.

Repressive actions also unfolded during public demonstrations, frequently targeting university students due to their central role in resistance movements. The so-called "Massacre of Praia Vermelha" on September 23, 1966, illustrates this dynamic. Police forces attacked a protest march in Rio de Janeiro and pursued demonstrators into the former National Faculty of Medicine, violently assaulting more than 600 individuals who sought refuge inside, including numerous students such as Sylvia Vargas, then a medical student at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (Alves & Bonisolo, 2006). Such operations, like home invasions against political dissidents, were designed not only to repress physically but to intimidate and deter broader social networks.

Large-scale interventions further demonstrate the articulation of repression as governance. The invasion of the CRUSP student residence complex at the University of São Paulo on December 17, 1968, was followed by the opening of an Army Police Inquiry (IPM) ordered by General Manuel Rodrigues de Carvalho Lisboa to investigate alleged "subversive activities." The intervention reportedly resulted from requests by São Paulo's Secretary of Public Security, Hely Lopes Meirelles, and by Alfredo Buzaid, then Rector of the University of São Paulo (Fon, 1979, p. 18). In 1969, General José Canavarro Pereira indicted several students under the National Security Law, accusing them of transforming CRUSP into a "permanent and dangerous focus of subversion" through propaganda, mobilization, and alleged preparation for armed struggle (Fon, 1979, p. 18; Joffily, 2008, p. 30).

The report's depiction of CRUSP as a "ghetto" where "all remnants of authority had been destroyed" (Brazil, 1969) encapsulates the regime's worldview. In this logic, repression was framed not as an exception but as a moral and political necessity. Across diverse forms and contexts, repressive practices converged toward a shared objective: asserting authoritarian governance over universities by redefining dissent as a threat to national security and social order.

Toward a mapping of repressive methods

This section maps the principal repressive methods employed against higher education during the Brazilian Military Dictatorship, based on extensive empirical research previously developed [---]. Rather than presenting an exhaustive inventory, the aim is to identify patterns, functions, and logics of repression as instruments of authoritarian governance. These methods did not operate in isolation; they formed an articulated repertoire of control designed to discipline academic life, dismantle resistance, and restructure universities according to the imperatives of national security.

Purges

The term "purge" (*"expurgo"*) was widely used to describe the summary dismissal of individuals from academic positions for political or ideological reasons. Such measures produced profound economic, professional, political, and psychological harm. Three main types of purges were employed: external, when decisions originated outside the institution; internal, when initiated by institutional authorities themselves; and indirect, when intimidation and threats compelled individuals to resign. In all cases, purges functioned as mechanisms of exclusion and deterrence.

Beyond material loss, purges imposed a dual stigma. Expelled individuals became permanent objects of surveillance, assumed to be "recidivist subversives," while also being socially isolated, as colleagues feared association. Professors, students, technical-administrative staff, and even rectors and deans across Brazil were subjected to this form of repression, severely damaging the intellectual and scientific life of universities.

Revocation of political rights

The revocation of political rights (typically for ten years) often accompanied purges, reinforcing their punitive effects. These measures imposed public stigma, frequently amplified by press coverage. Professors such as Antônio de Pádua Ferreira da Silva, Armando Temperani Pereira, and Brasil Rodrigues Barbosa lost both political rights and academic positions after 1964. Such

cases were widespread and illustrate how repression extended beyond individuals to affect the collective academic environment, fostering fear, self-censorship, and long-term institutional impoverishment.

Stigmatization

Stigmatization constituted a central symbolic dimension of repression. Individuals labeled as "subversive," "leftist," or "purged" were publicly exposed as enemies of order. Newspapers regularly published names of punished students, as in the 1971 *Correio do Povo* article listing expelled UFRGS students or the 1976 *Correio Braziliense* report identifying dozens of reprimanded University of Brasília students. Even when punishments were mild, public exposure amplified their deterrent effect.

Visual stigmatization also targeted militants through "wanted" posters. The case of Hiroaki Torigoe, a medical student and ALN member portrayed nationwide as a "wanted terrorist," exemplifies how imagery functioned to isolate individuals socially and legitimize extreme repression (Brazil/SEDH/CEMDP, 2007).

Imprisonment

Imprisonment included arrests officially acknowledged by the regime, as opposed to kidnappings. Arbitrary detentions "for questioning" were routine. Students such as Adolar Koch (UFRGS) were detained and interrogated without formal charges (Koch, 2006). Similar cases occurred nationwide, including the detention of UFPE students by DOPS/PE in 1977 (*Informação nº 74/77*, 1977).

Preventive detentions were common among those tried by military courts. Many students abandoned their studies, families, or country to go underground or join armed resistance (Arquidiocese de São Paulo, 1985). Detentions followed protests such as the Ibiúna Congress and the 1981 Praia Vermelha demonstrations. Sites of imprisonment included police stations, military barracks, ships, and remote locations such as Fernando de Noronha (Del Roio, 2012).

Prominent academics, like Florestan Fernandes, José Leite Lopes, Paulo Freire, among others, were imprisoned, underscoring the regime's systematic targeting of intellectuals. The *Brasil: Nunca Mais* project documents numerous prosecutions, including that of Alberto Goulart Paes Filho (UFBA), convicted for alleged "communist indoctrination" in his lectures.

Kidnapping

Kidnappings were abductions officially denied by the state. Victims such as Francisco José de Oliveira (USP), Emanuel Bezerra dos Santos, and Alceri Maria Gomes da Silva were tortured and murdered, their bodies hidden or falsified (Brazil/SEDH/CEMDP, 2007). Such practices institutionalized extralegal violence while preserving a façade of legality.

Banishment

Political banishment (forced exile) was used primarily during hostage exchange operations. While presented as a humanitarian solution, banishment served to remove perceived enemies from national territory. According to Gaspari (2002), all militants who attempted to return between 1971 and 1973 were executed.

The trajectories of Jeová Assis Gomes and Maria Auxiliadora Lara Barcellos illustrate the devastating consequences of banishment. Both were expelled from universities, tortured, exiled, and ultimately killed or driven to suicide (Brazil/SEDH/CEMDP, 2007).

Torture

Torture was a core instrument of authoritarian governance. Students and professors—including Carlos Eduardo Pires Fleury, Armando Temperani Pereira, and José Roberto Spiegner—were systematically tortured (Brazil/SEDH/CEMDP, 2007). Torture functioned not only to extract information but to terrorize academic environments, enforcing self-censorship and dismantling spaces of intellectual autonomy.

Torture resulting in death

Deaths under torture served as instruments of terror. Victims such as Alexandre Vannucchi Leme, tortured to death at DOI-CODI/SP in 1973, exemplify how lethal violence was combined with concealment, including anonymous burial in Perus. As Joffily (2013) notes, such killings aimed to eliminate opponents, intimidate others, and display institutional power.

Assassinations and disguised executions

Some murders were presented as deaths in armed confrontations, as in the killing of students during protests in 1968 (Brazil/SEDH/CEMDP, 2007). Others were disguised as accidents or shootouts, including the executions of Ranúsia Alves Rodrigues and Catarina Helena Abi-Eçab (Cirano, n.d.).

Induced and simulated suicide

Prolonged torture led some victims to suicide, including Frei Tito and Juan Antonio Carrasco Forrastal. In other cases, executions were staged as suicides, as with Luiz Eduardo Merlino, whose death was falsely attributed to a traffic accident. These practices reveal the psychological dimension of repression aimed at destroying identity and memory.

Sealed coffins, body concealment, and disappearances

Sealed coffins prevented families from viewing bodies, concealing torture marks. Body concealment involved burying victims anonymously, erasing both physical presence and memory and promoting 'radial violence' (Abós, 1979). Political disappearances constituted one of the most devastating forms of repression. The disappearance of Ana Rosa Kucinski Silva (USP) and her husband exemplifies the enduring trauma inflicted on families and academic communities.

Disappearances dismantled intellectual networks and produced collective fear, operating as a technology of terror that extended repression beyond the individual. By denying bodies, names, and mourning, the dictatorship sought to eliminate not only opponents but their place in historical memory.

The hidden side of repression

A substantial portion of the dictatorship's repressive apparatus operated in plain sight, routinely referenced in newspapers, official speeches, and ministerial declarations. Alongside this

visible dimension, however, existed a concealed layer of repression: practices considered indispensable for maintaining control yet politically impossible to acknowledge openly. This hidden dimension was not limited to torture and assassination; it also encompassed measures formally authorized within the regime's illegitimate legal framework, whose application nevertheless required discretion.

A report issued by the Army Intelligence Center (*Centro de Informações do Exército* – CIE) in July 1972 exemplifies this dual logic. The document warned state security agencies of an imminent "wave of agitation in the student sector" during Independence Week, allegedly intended to undermine the Sesquicentennial celebrations. Notably, the report anticipated that such mobilization would "increase progressively in intensity in proportion to the degree of repression executed." To contain this risk, the Minister of the Army reportedly ordered that demonstrations be "repressed with maximum rigor," while simultaneously instructing that arrests be avoided on university campuses, at least initially.

These directives reveal a refined awareness of the symbolic economy of repression. Visibility itself was a variable to be managed. At times, repression was deliberately staged as spectacle, functioning as warning and deterrent. At others, it was executed discreetly, sufficiently forceful to neutralize dissent without generating public outrage or galvanizing further protest. This calibrated oscillation between exposure and concealment underscores the intimate relationship between repression and the manufacturing of consent, suggesting that apparent social acquiescence often resulted from coercion and intimidation, even as genuine support for the regime also existed.

Crucially, the regime's repressive practices functioned as an integrated system of social control. Assassinations, enforced disappearances, body concealment, and psychological torture were not isolated excesses but coordinated strategies aimed at dismantling social bonds and producing a climate of permanent fear. Grounded in the National Security Doctrine (DSN), these practices were framed as necessary instruments for safeguarding order and stability, thereby normalizing political violence as a routine technology of governance.

Repression, agency, and the functional logic of social control

What systematic functions did repression perform within the broader architecture of social control under the Brazilian Military Dictatorship? While repressive practices may have produced contingent or unintended effects, the analysis here is limited to their structured and deliberate functions, as conceived and operationalized by the regime.

According to classifications developed by surveillance agencies, and, crucially, to the perceptions of repressive agents themselves, individuals labeled as "subversives" were categorized based on their presumed recoverability. This notion, derived from doctrines disseminated by the Escola Superior de Guerra (ESG) and embedded within the National Security Doctrine (*Doutrina de Segurança Nacional* – DSN), held that certain subjects could be "reconverted" or "rehabilitated," abandoning their association with the internal "enemy." In such cases, repression aimed not at elimination but at behavioral realignment, seeking to inculcate attitudes deemed compatible with "civic responsibility" and "national development."

This framework reveals a more complex reality than the frequently invoked image of repression as mere mechanical obedience to orders. While a clear hierarchical chain of command existed, headed by the dictatorship and the National Security Council (*Conselho de Segurança*

Nacional – CSN), repression depended on countless discretionary decisions made at intermediate and lower levels. Torturers, rectors, members of purge commissions, intelligence analysts, and even clerical personnel who transformed raw information into "intelligence" exercised situational power to define who was "recoverable" and who was irredeemably "subversive." This does not dilute responsibility at the top; rather, it underscores the diffusion of agency and complicity throughout the apparatus.

Consequently, repressive measures varied according to these classifications. Some were designed to "correct" behavior through comparatively mild sanctions, such as expulsions, dismissals, or short-term imprisonment. Others sought the definitive neutralization of those deemed irrecoverable, often labeled "terrorists", through imprisonment, exile, or elimination. Disguised executions, including simulated suicides and enforced disappearances, were preferred techniques when concealment was feasible.

Underlying these practices was what Magalhães (1997) identified as a "logic of suspicion," according to which virtually anyone could become a subversive. This mentality justified permanent vigilance and transformed fear into a central mechanism of domination. Visibility itself became strategic: certain punishments were deliberately exposed to function as exemplary sanctions, multiplying their impact through public stigma and producing deterrent effects that extended well beyond the immediate targets.

Repression also fulfilled a normative function. It did not merely punish transgressions; it prescribed acceptable conduct, shaping behavior within academic and professional fields through implicit and explicit rules enforced by threat. At the symbolic level, the public display of repression, or of its outcomes, served to legitimize the regime, "demonstrating" the existence of subversion and the necessity of authoritarian control.

Finally, repression reinforced its own institutional logic. Reports circulated internally within surveillance agencies, such as a 1969 SNI document describing mass arrests on the Ilha do Fundão campus, functioned as feedback mechanisms. They validated vigilance, showcased the alleged "success" of repression, and completed the cycle linking surveillance, punishment, and ideological self-justification within the dictatorship's system of social control.

Mapping repressive methods and social control

The documentary analysis reveals a dense and institutionalized system of repressive practices that extended far beyond overt censorship or episodic police intervention. In Brazilian higher education, repression operated through multiple, interdependent mechanisms articulating coercion, surveillance, punishment, and ideological normalization. In line with Stanley Cohen's (1985) conception of social control, these practices must be understood not as isolated acts of force, but as organized and rationalized responses to behaviors and subjects constructed as deviant, threatening, or politically undesirable. Repression thus formed part of a broader architecture of authoritarian governance aimed at disciplining intellectual production and subordinating universities to the regime's political, moral, and security-oriented order.

At the institutional level, the Ministry of Education and Culture (MEC) functioned in close coordination with civil and military intelligence agencies, particularly the *Serviço Nacional de Informações* (SNI) and its Divisions of Security and Information (DSIs), including the DSI/MEC itself. This interinstitutional circulation of information produced a nationwide apparatus of observation, classification, and intervention in academic life. Professors, students, and adminis-

trators were systematically monitored, investigated, and sanctioned according to political criteria rather than academic merit. As Cohen (1985) emphasizes, social control operates as much through categorization and labeling as through punishment; in this sense, surveillance reports routinely reframed critical thought as a threat to national security, transforming universities into spaces governed by suspicion and ideological vigilance.

At the political and legal level, repression was consolidated through a series of institutional acts, decrees, and administrative regulations that endowed authoritarian practices with bureaucratic and legal form. Institutional Act n. 5 (1968) marked a decisive turning point by expanding the state's authority to dismiss faculty members, dissolve student organizations, suspend civil rights, and intervene directly in university governance. Following Garland's (1993, 2001) analysis of punishment as a historically situated and politically productive practice, these measures reveal how coercion was normalized through administrative routines, blurring the boundaries between legality and repression. Punishment, in this context, functioned less as an exceptional response to infractions than as a regular instrument for regulating conduct and reshaping institutional life.

At the ideological level, the dictatorship promoted an educational discourse centered on moral renewal, national unity, and depoliticization. Pedagogical reforms introduced under the rhetoric of modernization and efficiency sought to realign higher education with developmentalist and technocratic imperatives, marginalizing critical and humanistic perspectives. This process resonates with Garland's notion of normalization, whereby disciplinary mechanisms operate through moral and symbolic frameworks that render domination intelligible and acceptable. Through curricula, evaluation systems, and institutional language, the regime aimed to produce compliant intellectuals and to redefine academic activity as an extension of patriotic duty and social discipline.

Taken together, these mechanisms demonstrate that repression was neither accidental nor merely reactive, but a structured and deliberate component of state policy. Drawing on Aróstegui's (2012) concept of the illegitimacy of origin, repression can be understood as an intrinsically illegitimate form of punishment that nonetheless sought to legitimize itself through bureaucratic rationalization and moral discourse. The authoritarian state transformed violence into governance by embedding coercive practices within legal, administrative, and symbolic frameworks that obscured their arbitrary and anti-democratic nature.

Ultimately, the analysis underscores how higher education became both a privileged target and an active vector of authoritarian governance. Universities were simultaneously subjected to repression and mobilized as instruments for reproducing the regime's values, hierarchies, and rationalities. This configuration reveals the depth of state intervention in the intellectual and moral foundations of Brazilian society during the dictatorship and highlights the persistence of bureaucratic control and moral regulation beyond 1988. In this sense, the study reinforces the importance of historical memory and critical awareness as essential tools for resisting the normalization of authoritarian practices in educational life.

Repression, normalization, and the legacies of authoritarian control

The analysis of repression and social control in Brazilian higher education during the Military Dictatorship (1964-1988) demonstrates that repression operated as a coherent, institutionalized, and bureaucratically rationalized system, rather than as a set of sporadic or merely reactive mea-

sures. The articulation between state agencies, legal-administrative instruments, and ideological apparatuses produced a regime of normalization that reshaped the boundaries of academic autonomy, citizenship, and intellectual freedom. In this context, universities emerged as strategic arenas of authoritarian governance: spaces of contestation and resistance, but also privileged sites through which the regime sought to discipline knowledge and reorganize social and political life under the rhetoric of modernization and national security.

The repression of academic actors (students, professors, and administrative staff) was marked by a broad repertoire of practices, ranging from overt measures such as purges, revocation of political rights, and arbitrary imprisonment, to clandestine operations including torture, enforced disappearances, and disguised assassinations. Surveillance permeated everyday academic life through infiltration, cooperation between repressive organs and university administrations, and extensive networks of denunciation and intelligence reporting. These practices were not isolated or improvised; they were embedded in an organized structure informed by the National Security Doctrine and executed through a hierarchical apparatus that encompassed both military and civilian institutions.

As a mechanism of authoritarian governance, repression in higher education followed methodical and bureaucratic procedures. Agencies such as DOI-CODI and DOPS maintained systematic records of individuals classified as threats to national security, while instruments such as Institutional Act n. 5 (1968) and Decree-Law 477 provided formal justification for the punishment of political dissent within educational institutions. In line with theories of social control, these practices reveal how punishment and surveillance were normalized through administrative routines, transforming coercion into an apparently legitimate form of governance aimed at neutralizing opposition, disciplining bodies, and suppressing critical thought.

The analysis identifies three interrelated axes structuring repression in higher education: institutional control, control of bodies, and control of ideas. Institutional control operated through surveillance, sanctions, and direct intervention in university governance, including the appointment of regime-aligned rectors and the establishment of internal intelligence units such as CISMEC and the DSI/MEC. Control of bodies involved expulsions, imprisonment, torture, and enforced disappearances, designed to dismantle networks of resistance and disseminate fear. Control of ideas targeted intellectual production itself, through censorship, intimidation, and the policing of research and teaching, fostering self-censorship and ideological conformity.

The conceptual foundations of this apparatus combined Cold War anti-communism with long-standing colonial hierarchies and the militarization of political life. The construction of the "internal enemy" legitimized repression as a moral and patriotic duty, transforming education into a central battlefield of authoritarian governance. While rooted in specific national conditions, these dynamics reflected broader Latin American patterns of state violence and ideological control during the period, in which security doctrines functioned simultaneously as justification and method for suppressing dissent.

Over time, the forms and intensity of repression shifted. The initial phase of the dictatorship emphasized purges and institutional interventions, while the 1970s witnessed the escalation of torture, executions, and disappearances. During the political "opening" of the late 1970s and early 1980s, repression became more selective and discreet, without dismantling its underlying structures. Bureaucratic control, ideological monitoring, and administrative coercion persisted, recalibrated to sustain the appearance of liberalization while preserving authoritarian power.

These findings underscore that repression was not merely a response to opposition, but a structural component of authoritarian governance. Moreover, elements of this logic persisted beyond 1988, through the bureaucratization of control, the moralization of dissent, and the depoliticization of academic life. Such continuities highlight how the authoritarian legacy of the dictatorship remains embedded in institutional practices and symbolic frameworks within Brazilian society.

In this sense, the reflections of Araújo and Santos (2007) on the politics of memory and forgetting are central. Selective remembrance and institutional silences surrounding authoritarian practices constitute forms of ongoing violence that hinder the consolidation of democracy. The struggle for historical memory is therefore inseparable from the defense of academic autonomy and democratic life. By exposing the mechanisms through which repression was legitimized and normalized, this study contributes not only to historiography, but also to a critical understanding of the conditions under which authoritarian practices can reemerge under new forms of legitimacy. The mapping of repression in higher education thus stands as both an analytical contribution and an ethical imperative, reaffirming education as a space of critical inquiry, plural knowledge, and democratic vigilance.

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