

Stormy Times: How did Social Movements Conquer the Political Class for the Overthrow of the Dictatorship in Brazil?

Tempos de tormenta: Como os movimentos sociais conquistaram a classe política para a derrubada da ditadura no Brasil?

Pedro Carneiro Teixeira*

Resenha: PITTS, Bryan. **Until the Storm Passes.** Politicians, Democracy, and the Demise of Brazil's Military Dictatorship. Oakland: University of California, Press, 2023.

Keywords: Dictatorship (1964-1985); Popular Mobilization; Political Class, Democratization.

Palavras-chave: Ditadura (1964-1985); Mobilização Popular; Classe Política, Democratização.

Since the last decade, none of the topics discussed by Brazilian historiography has been as evident in the public debate as those related to the history of the military dictatorship from 1964 to 1985. This can be attributed, on the one hand, not only to a significant change in access to documentary sources, but also to the late establishment of transitional justice mechanisms aimed at overcoming a past marked by human rights abuses. The adoption of new legislation regarding the management and access to public documents in the country, through the Law on Access to Public Information (LAI 12,527), the performance of the National Archive, in the so-called opening of the “secret archives of the military dictatorship” and the

* Pedro Carneiro has a PhD in History from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ). In 2018, his doctoral thesis was awarded the Revealed Memories Award of the National Archive. Last year he published the book “A invenção do Inimigo. História e memória dos dossiês e contradossiês da ditadura militar brasileira (1964-2001)”. Between 2015 and 2016 he worked as at the Institute for Social Movements of the Ruhr University of Bochum and more recently, he completed a Post-Doctorate at the Fluminense Federal University (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil), working on innovative research in the field of digital history. Since 2022 he is a Research Associate at the Department of History of the Ruhr University of Bochum (Germany). E-mail: pedro.carneiro@rub.de. Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-5470-2108>.

creation of the Brazilian National Truth Commission, are just a few examples of initiatives (“proactive initiatives”) that would bring academic research on the history of the Brazilian dictatorship to a new level.

On the other hand, the arrival of the extreme right to power, with the election of *Jair Bolsonaro* in October 2018, aroused different reactions in the academic production on the two decades of military dictatorship. By misrepresenting transitional justice initiatives, such as the operation of the Amnesty Commission, and the exaltation of known torturers, such as the case of *Carlos Alberto Brilhante Ustra*, for example, the *Bolsonaro* government encountered significant resistance in Brazilian historiography. The scholarly output concerning the political uses of the past and on denialism (Historical falsification) surrounding the 1964 dictatorship has attained notable quantitative and qualitative benchmarks. Thus, the measures adopted by the new administration as of January 2019 contradictorily promoted initiatives (“reactive initiatives”) in the field of historical studies.

In this way, the historiography on the military dictatorship underwent important transformations throughout the last decade. As the above arguments show, it seems reasonable to say that, to some extent, this phenomenon is the most immediate product of the intersection of politics and academic research. It goes without saying that such a circumstance occurs frequently in the development of studies in the field of the so-called History of the Present. And this also seems to be the case when it comes to the history of the military dictatorship in Brazil.

The “stormy decade”, the period between 2013 and 2023, was marked by a profound ethical, social, and economic crisis that called into question the legitimacy of the Brazilian political system. Indeed, what could be described as a dispute between progressive and conservative forces must be analyzed in the broader context of the contradictions inherited from the dictatorial regime that have shaped the functioning of Brazilian society since 1964. This permanent “state of discord” contributed to the growing interest in themes related to the history of the military dictatorship in Brazil over the past decade. All these changes were accompanied by the emergence of thought-provoking studies and theses that seek to analyze the history of the Brazilian dictatorship through new sources, methodologies, and hypotheses.

Among the numerous works that arise in this new stage of historiographical production, a book recently published by Bryan Pitts deserves reference: “Until the storm passes: Politicians, Democracy, and the Demise of Brazil’s Military Dictatorship”.¹ This work provides an in-depth analysis of the historical events leading to the fall of Brazil’s military dictatorship. Through meticulous research and critical examination of primary and secondary sources, Pitts delves into the political landscape of Brazil during the turbulent period of the dictatorship’s decline, highlighting the pivotal role played by Brazil’s political class in restoring democracy to the country.

1 PITTTS, Bryan. **Until the Storm Passes**. Politicians, Democracy, and the Demise of Brazil’s Military Dictatorship. Oakland: University of California Press, 2023.

The author maintains that the national political class, traumatized by the harmful effects of military tutelage after two decades of dictatorship, began to embrace new possibilities for popular participation in public affairs. To a large extent, according to him, this was due not only to the commitment to the notion of democracy, but also to the fact that this same elite needs the collaboration of the popular classes to break the siege of the military regime. Therefore, it should be noted that the focus that the book assigns to the role played by the political class throughout the democratization process in Brazil is not equivalent to ignoring the relevant role that social movements played in the same process. The book sheds light on the historical role of various social movements, such as the organized labor movement, and other social movements, such as those linked to the Catholic Church. In a similar vein, the author provides a succinct analysis of the contributions stemming from the so-called “new social movements,” encompassing the women’s movement, the black movement, and the LGBTQI+ movement.

To support his claim, the historian traces the trajectory of Brazil’s military dictatorship from its inception in 1964 – although the book begins in 1968 – to its eventual collapse in the early 1980s. Throughout this journey, he examines the dynamics between the military regime, civilian politicians, social movements, and external actors during this critical period. He paints a vivid picture of the challenges politicians face in opposing dictatorship while working for a transition to democracy. The narrative is comprehensive, weaving together the historical context, the complex interplay of actors, and the various ideological perspectives that shaped Brazil’s political landscape during those tumultuous years.

“How could the Brazilian political elite support Lula’s vision to reduce class-and race-based inequalities and then, only a few years later, support Bolsonaro’s Far Right agenda?”

The apparent contradiction that seems to mark the choices of relevant actors in national politics throughout the recent past presents the initial questioning that introduces this work. The theoretical framework of the proposition distinctly elucidates that the interconnection between contemporary political concerns and historiography underscores a discernible element that could validate the incorporation of Bryan Pitts’s book into the emerging paradigm of historical studies within the past decade. In addition to this characteristic, the author seeks to distance himself from most social science scholarship by attributing a decisive role to the political class in the fall of the dictatorship. By proposing a new framework for the recurring clash between conceptual dichotomies, Bryan Pitts challenges the literature by proposing a critique of the usual explanations that seek to elucidate the rise, the consolidation, the weakening, and the fall of the regime.

In a scathing critique of the social science literature on military dictatorship, the author asserts that during the last five decades certain debates have remained ongoing. When it

comes to general explanations about the regime, studies have focused on questions of agency (who) and causation (what). Particularly relevant to his proposal is the debate on the historical processes that marked the end of the military dictatorship. According to the author, a lot of ink has been used within an intellectual tradition that insists on promoting the thesis that the end of the dictatorship must be understood around the dichotomy of military power versus civil society. This theoretical position can be summarized in the following question: “Who deserved more credit for the regime’s fall, the generals who permitted liberalization and willingly stepped aside or the civil society that pressured them at every turn?”

The critique proposed by the author aspires to support the hypothesis about the relevance of the political class in the face of the debacle of the military dictatorship. For Pitts, both the prominence of military power and the relevance of civil society, as explanatory keys to the central themes of studies on the Brazilian dictatorship, ended up configuring an intellectual tradition that downplays the role of the political class when it comes to explain the fall of the military regime. The theoretical structure of the critique proposed by the author is completed with some reflections on the subject of causality. According to Pitts, this topic was elaborated by the academic literature based on functionalist explanations, which can be grouped on two fronts. On the one hand, by perspectives such as those promoted within dependency theory, the approach to economic inequality or, also, studies on the functioning of political institutions. On the other, the question of rational choice that drives the historical process. Although the attribution of causality in the analyzed format has found an important refuge in broader methodological currents of political science, according to the author, this approach is also familiar to historiography.

The resource of theoretical criticism serves a dual purpose: on one hand, it endeavors to underscore the constraints within academic output concerning the Brazilian military dictatorship, while concurrently functioning as a foundation for the all-encompassing application of the concept of “Political Class”, a focal point within the author’s thesis. Discerning the utilization of this strategy assists us in comprehending the vulnerability that, within the core tenets of the book’s central thesis, becomes associated with the deployment of this particular concept. Cognizant of the pivotal nature of this concept within the theoretical framework of his thesis, Pitt advances a delineation of the term “Political Class,” grounded in his interpretation of the fundamental elements characterizing Brazil’s societal, economic, and political milieu.

In his proposition, the realm of the political class encompasses individuals from civilian elites who, by virtue of their lineage, affluence, vocation, or education, opt to engage in the process of political decision-making on local, state, or national platforms, often through electoral or governmental appointments. This collective includes a spectrum of actors such as seasoned politicians, business magnates, professionals like lawyers, doctors, engineers, university professors, and many other members of the “liberal professions.” Owing to historical

regional disparities, “the federal political class is effectively made up of delegates from the twenty-six state political classes”.

Henceforth, the concept devised by Pitt finds itself intricately interwoven with the meticulous arrangement of Brazilian federalism. Regrettably, the book lacks an exploration of the historical import of this framework for state organization, omitting comparative analyses, such as those between the blueprint outlined by the 1946 constitution and the contemporary iteration. It is imperative to underscore that, within the Brazilian paradigm, the federative units are endowed with political, administrative, fiscal, and financial autonomy, and they converge in the establishment of a central government through a federative compact. However, this structure evidently confronts political limitations that relegate the model to the realm of theoretical formalism. Consequently, it could be posited that the employment of the concept within the examined work exhibits a measure of theoretical fragility, thereby rendering comprehension challenging. While its deployment does not compromise the fundamental essence of the proposed thesis, the aforementioned fragility unavoidably gives rise to ambiguity concerning pivotal notions like “political class,” “elite,” “oligarchy,” and others.

The task of delineating the term “political class” remains inadequately explored within the current body of literature. This deficiency extends to sociopolitical investigations into this subject matter, as well as to the domain of the so-called “democratic social sciences,” which has witnessed a recent acceleration in the exploration of elite theories. Within this intellectual trajectory, the application of the concept as presented in the book continues to fall short in substantiating a persuasive argument. Consequently, the predicament of uncovering the intrinsic essence of the “political class”, unraveling its distinct characteristics, and discerning its structure across various societal and political paradigms necessitates a broader and more profound inquiry. Therefore, in this specific regard, the book grapples with the identical deficiency in lucidity that appears to typify discussions concerning the concept of the “political class.” Across its pages, the deployment of this particular concept (“political class”) is consistently employed to denote professional engagement (parliamentary activity), which can be further categorized under the rubrics of “professionalization of politics” and “inherent political involvement.”

The book is divided into seven chapters that investigate pivotal moments and key players that contributed to the fall of the military regime and the establishment of democratic institutions. Pitts employs a creative writing methodology, covering various historical junctures over two decades during the dictatorship, thus transforming the act of reading the book into a delightful experience. In the first two chapters, Pitts laid the foundations of his theses on the role of the political class in the democratization of Brazil. The book narrates a historically relevant confrontation between the military and the political elite due to the resurgence of a left-wing student movement, in which some of the prominent figures were precisely the sons and daughters of politicians.

The military reacted energetically to the condemnations of the politicians for their actions in the repression of the students and, consequently, they demanded that the Chamber of Deputies authorize the prosecution of an opposition deputy who allegedly insulted the Armed Forces during a speech in the Congress. Chapter 2 delves into the subsequent events, in which the Chamber of Deputies debated to determine whether the parliamentary immunity of the accused deputy should be revoked. This incident occurred after an extended period of four years during which the military had been usurping the prerogatives of the political class, and reached a point where they were not willing to tolerate any further action.

The period that begins with the approval of Institutional Act nº 5, in December 1968, is the subject of the third chapter. In 1969, the political class was severely punished by the dictatorship. In addition, the military undertook constitutional reforms to prevent any recurrence of the 1968 parliamentary rebellion. As detailed in Chapter 4, there was a multifaceted reaction within Congress to the military acts. While some politicians chose to operate within the system, participating in elections and emphasizing everyday issues that resonated with the electorate - waiting “under the tree for the storm to pass” – other young opposition members were determined to challenge the regime head-on. The beginning of the government of general-president *Ernesto Geisel* marks the adoption of measures to ensure the continuity of the cooperation of the political class.

The next few chapters reached the climax of the book. Chapter 5 explains how the regime’s attempt to be more liberal had unexpected consequences. The analyzes revolve around the electoral disputes that mark the beginning of the *Geisel* Administration. In the 1974 legislative elections, the MDB (Brazilian Democratic Movement) surprised the military by winning a significant number of seats in the Senate and Chamber of Deputies. That victory prompted the military to launch a violent campaign against the banned Brazilian Communist Party (PCB), which they believed had played a key role in the MDB’s success. The author dedicates the next chapter to examine how politicians responded to massive strikes in suburban *São Paulo* led by future president *Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva*. Some politicians began to accept more popular political participation, as members of the opposition supported striking workers in Congress and on the streets. The success and limitations of this coalition were evident during the 1984 presidential succession.

Finally, the last chapter dwells on how the *Diretas Já!* demonstrations were supported by politicians, including some on the side of the regime. However, when the demonstrations failed to persuade Congress to reinstate direct elections through a constitutional amendment, politicians reverted to their usual backroom arrangements to resolve disputes. The author concludes that the melancholic end of the “Revolution” was not due to the fact that the military embraced democracy or the magnitude of the popular mobilization, but rather because it lost the support of the political class.

One of the book’s most commendable aspects is the exhaustive array of sources utilized by the author to substantiate his arguments and provide a comprehensive understanding

of the subject matter. The author draws from a diverse range of primary sources, including nineteen archives in Brazil, Portugal, the United States, Spain and the United Kingdom. In addition to official government documents, archival records, and memoirs of key political figures involved in the transition from military rule to democracy, Pitts draws on newspaper archives. Furthermore, the incorporation of oral history interviews with prominent political figures, including former governors, and congressmen, adds a valuable resource to the book. The result of Pitts' work is a comprehensive and balanced analysis of the complex historical context. The author navigates the intricate web of political alliances, social struggles, and international influences with remarkable clarity, making the subject accessible to scholars and general readers alike.

Bryan Pitts' "Until the Storm Passes" makes a substantial contribution to the scholarship on Brazil's military dictatorship and its democratization process. The book's historical account is well-supported and extensively referenced (including a welcome and creative use of QR codes, granting access to original speeches from key political figures), making it a valuable resource for researchers and scholars interested in Latin American politics and democratization. It distinguishes itself as a commendable piece of work that adeptly amalgamates historical inquiry with captivating storytelling.

Received: 07/08/2023

Approved: 08/22/2023