

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Beyond Order and Progress: Legitimacy and Nation-Building in Military Brazil

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## Abstract

Between 1964 and 1985, a military dictatorship in Brazil combined an arsenal of political instruments—surveillance, violent repression, and propaganda, among others—to justify its illegal rule. How did the Brazilian military regime attempt to justify its claim to power for more than two decades? What discursive strategies did it use to win popular support, despite the violence it perpetrated? This paper investigates how discourse is used to legitimize power and create meaning in authoritarian regimes. Using ethnographic content analysis of archival materials, I pinpoint and analyze three key discursive frames employed in regime propaganda: “defenders of democracy,” “Great Brazil” and “model citizenship.” I argue that the Brazilian military regime used these frames to justify its authority, forge national values and social norms, and redefine the boundaries of the national community. These findings not only contribute to our understanding of authoritarian power that is wielded and legitimized through discourse, but also speak to the enduring consequences of authoritarianism in sociopolitical subjects.

**Keywords:** authoritarianism; dictatorship; Brazil; propaganda; Latin America; state power; military regime; legitimacy

## Introduction

In 1964, a civil-military coup in Brazil overthrew the left-leaning, democratically elected government of João Goulart and instituted a dictatorship that would last twenty-one years. The “Revolution of 1964,” as the Armed Forces and their supporters called it, aimed to fight political and economic instability and prevent a supposed communist plot from dismantling existing social institutions. In the context of the Cold War, this was not, of course, unique to Brazil. The so-called internal threat of communism was common throughout much of the developing world, and the Latin American dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s all based their

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guiding ideology on the National Security Doctrine and other teachings by the Superior War School (Stepan 1973; Menjívar and Rodríguez 2005). But for all its contextual similarities with twentieth-century Latin American dictatorships, Brazil holds particularities in how its military regime built and exercised power. Unlike neighboring Chile and Argentina, for example, Brazil did not dissolve Congress, suspend elections, or immediately ban political parties (Pitts 2023). This does not mean the Brazilian regime upheld democratic practices. Congress was closed when it disobeyed the regime's instructions, elections were manipulated, and parties were tightly controlled. Yet, a carefully constructed semblance of democracy remained, revealing a heightened concern for obscuring the regime's authoritarian nature. The Brazilian case also stands out amongst others in the region for the broad, and to an extent, lasting approval it received from civil society. Though less notoriously violent than its neighbors, the Brazilian dictatorship also used imprisonment, torture, and "disappearances" as instruments of social control (Dassin 1998). Despite its repressive tactics, it was able to count on the support of a large part of the population (Fico 1997), some of which persists today. Not only has Brazil kept its amnesty laws intact, but it also witnesses recurrent protests in favor of a new "military intervention" (Nicas 2022).

How did the Brazilian military regime attempt to legitimize its claim to power for more than two decades? What discursive strategies did it use to win popular support, despite the violence it perpetrated? This paper seeks to answer these questions and uncover how the Brazilian military dictatorship and allied organizations utilized discursive frames to justify and implement their sociopolitical project. I conduct an ethnographic content analysis of official and private propaganda materials produced between 1962 and 1979 to reveal how discourse is used to wield power and build legitimacy in authoritarian regimes. I identify three discursive frames used by the Brazilian military regime: "defenders of democracy," "Great Brazil," and "model citizenship."

While versions of these frames have been discussed within the context of other authoritarian settings, my analysis reveals the specific ways in which the Brazilian regime endeavored to legitimize its authority and indoctrinate the populace in its own national ideals and desired social norms. I find that the military regime employed a discursive strategy that would sustain its democratic façade and transmit an image of political neutrality, all while disseminating highly ideological content. In addition to justifying its own power, the regime attempted to impose strict standards for what "good" Brazilian citizens should be and do. The dictatorship thus pursued a nation-building project, through which it strove to shape new political subjectivities and membership rules in the national community, such that a new Brazilian society would emerge and persist independently of the regime's stay in power. This study also contributes to our theoretical understanding of modern political propaganda. As modern autocrats increasingly seek to conceal their authoritarian nature (Guriev and Treisman 2022), the Brazilian dictatorship's entertaining and seemingly benign propaganda style pushes us to reconsider existing definitions of political propaganda, as well as the types of political regimes that employ it. These findings not only raise questions about strategies of state control in autocracies and democracies alike, but they also unveil the insidious ways in which an authoritarian regime's doctrine can penetrate sociopolitical norms, contributing to a legacy that may endure long after the regime itself has fallen.

## Data and Methods

In order to understand how the Brazilian military regime used discourse to sustain and legitimize its power, I conducted an ethnographic content analysis (ECA), a method in which documents are examined without predefined content analysis categories (Altheide 1987). Short films, speeches, and interviews were transcribed verbatim, and in the case of the films, images were described in detail in text format. Following the spirit of ECA, the data analysis involved a strong iterative element, such that repeated viewings and readings of the files enabled the identification of relevant quantitative and qualitative categories of analysis, the development of a more systematic coding protocol, and, finally, ongoing comparisons to refine themes, language, and frames.

This study analyzed a total of 480 documents, obtained from various collections at the National Archive in Rio de Janeiro. The data comprise interviews and speeches by regime officials, short films, radio productions, and meeting bulletins. I began with materials from 1962 to discern relevant frames that immediately preceded the military coup and to understand how such frames were sustained or transformed during the dictatorship. I then traced regime-supportive frames for almost two decades, gathering materials from 1964 to 1979, including four of the regime's five presidential administrations. I excluded Figueiredo's government (1979–1985) in my analysis because his time in office coincides with Brazil's political opening, the waning of the regime's repressive power, and the resulting decline of the active deployment of propaganda.

Though these documents constitute only a fraction of the propaganda materials produced during the military regime, they reflect the pro-regime frames employed by several key actors. My investigation focuses on four institutions: the dictatorship's two "social communications" agencies: the Assessoria Especial de Relações Públicas (AERP, 1968–1974) and the Assessoria de Relações Públicas (ARP, 1976–1979); and two private organizations: the Institute of Social Research and Studies (IPÊS) and the Campanha da Mulher pela Democracia (CAMDE), or the Woman's Campaign for Democracy.<sup>1</sup> As one of the key bodies campaigning against the Goulart government, IPÊS produced and distributed various forms of propaganda, the most important of which were fourteen short films, exhibited in theaters nationwide and analyzed in their totality here. AERP and ARP, the regime's official propaganda agencies, jointly produced hundreds of short films, documentaries, jingles, radio broadcasts, and reports. Of these, 115 short films are digitalized and available to the public, and this paper analyzes them in their totality. AERP/ARP radio productions, conversely, numbered close to 690, from which 30 percent was randomly selected for analysis. Fourteen speeches and three interviews were also randomly selected, spread proportionally throughout the fifteen-year period under study. Finally, I include all of CAMDE's archived weekly bulletins that are available (1964–1969). These covered a range of subjects, such as inflationary policies and foreign affairs, and provide great insight into CAMDE's perspective on national issues. When examining

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<sup>1</sup>For more on the founding histories of IPÊS and CAMDE, their institutional aims and activities, and the people behind these organizations, see Assis (2001). Assis does not delve deeply into the propaganda produced by IPÊS and CAMDE, but she provides vital historical background into how private interests interfered in Brazilian democracy and sought to influence public opinion in support of the coup d'état against Goulart.

these sources, I considered their language and structure, style, themes, authors or narrators, intended targets, and purpose (Altheide 1987). My goals were to: identify the narrative frames most commonly employed in regime-supportive propaganda; understand how symbolic discourses were used to construct these narratives; and trace potential narrative changes over the period between 1962 and 1979. Importantly, triangulating these narratives with the material political and socioeconomic conditions of the dictatorship allowed me to make more informed inferences about what the regime sought to emphasize and conceal in its propaganda.

The critics of ethnographic content analysis believe it neglects the dialectic nature of discourse by excluding the audience from examination (Widdowson 1995). It is true that little can be inferred from these documents about how regime or private propaganda was received,<sup>2</sup> and even less about how these documents relate to the localized experiences of Brazilians under the military dictatorship. That said, there is value in analyzing state discourse and propaganda strategies for the strict purpose of understanding how power is upheld. In the following sections, I show how the Brazilian military dictatorship intentionally used discourse to build legitimacy and impose its sociopolitical agenda. The extent to which this discourse achieved its intended goals, along with the counternarratives which it inspired, is a separate question and presents opportunities for future research.

### Claiming Authoritarian Legitimacy

To examine the role of political propaganda in the Brazilian military dictatorship, we must first understand how authoritarian regimes accrue and wield power. Research in this field emphasizes the state's coercive capacity (Riley 2010; Levitsky and Way 2010) and elite cohesion (Geddes 1999; Nathan 2003; Schedler and Hoffman 2016) as primary conditions for the survival of authoritarian regimes. More explicit displays of "despotic power" (Mann 1984), including physical violence, are often presumed to be the state's sole, or even principal, mechanism of control. Repression, however, has a toll. It implicates material and reputation costs and runs the risk of inviting backlash (Davenport and Iman 2012). In fact, the empirical record suggests that military regimes, which generally hold a comparative advantage in coercive capacity, are shorter-lived than other forms of autocracies (Geddes, Frantz, and Wright 2014). Even the most tyrannical states, therefore, cannot consolidate and legitimize their power through violence alone (Arendt 1970).

Recent scholarship increasingly points to the importance of legitimacy in the survival of authoritarian regimes (Schneider and Maerz 2017; Gerschewski 2013; Kligman and Verdery 2011). Although they accumulate and exercise power through coercion, authoritarian states must also sustain their authority through legitimation strategies. The scholarly emphasis on coercive factors notwithstanding, legitimation plays a critical role in reifying autocratic power by endeavoring "to guarantee active consent, compliance with the rules, passive obedience, or mere toleration within the population" (Gerschewski 2013: 18). Legitimacy claims offer justification for why

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<sup>2</sup>Neither AERP nor ARP collected data systematically to measure the reach of propaganda or capture public reception. We do know, however, that by the early 1970s, 59 percent of Brazilian households owned a radio and 60 percent of urban families had a television at home, and that starting in 1969, cinemas were required to broadcast the propaganda short films ahead of the main feature (Schneider 2014). This information does not reveal how AERP/ARP propaganda was received, but it does indicate its wide reach.

governments have the right to rule, validate who has power and how it is wielded, and sanction government decisions as collectively binding (Tannenber *et al.* 2021). Notably, these claims also address one of the primary challenges of authoritarian regimes—that of demonstrating elite cohesion—and manage threats through “the management of threat perceptions” (Schedler 2013: 47). Kailitz and Stockemer (2015) go as far as to identify legitimation as the most important mechanism of authoritarian resilience and argue that the beliefs elites and citizens hold about the ruler’s right to rule define the regime’s ability to survive.

Controlling public discourse is part of the state’s efforts to “shap[e] the authoritarian arena,” disseminate legitimating messages, and reduce threats from below and within the ruling coalition (Schedler 2013: 54). Building on Habermas, Dukalskis (2017) proposes the notion of an “authoritarian public sphere” to describe the combined effect of the state’s efforts to delineate the boundaries and control the content of public debate. Whereas Habermas’s (1989[1962]) concept of public sphere is tied to democracy, Dukalskis (2017) writes about authoritarian settings that suppress political discourse, siphon political imagination, nurture acquiescence, and make it difficult to envisage alternatives to autocratic rule. On one hand, the state seeks to communicate to potential threats of the regime that disobedience or transgressions will be penalized; on the other, it “wants to create the appearance of uncoerced loyalty” (*ibid.*: 26). The consequence of these competing goals is an authoritarian public sphere, defined by the marginalization of critical voices and saturated with the state’s legitimating messages. According to Dukalskis (*ibid.*), the authoritarian public sphere fortifies autocracies irrespective of citizen endorsement precisely because it manipulates the context and content of public discourse such as to alter social interactions even in the absence of state agents.

Propaganda, textual and visual media, symbols, education curricula, ceremonies, and speeches all serve to communicate legitimacy claims (*ibid.*). Autocracies employ various channels to mobilize discourse and symbols to manufacture psychological compliance while “appearing as a manifestation of human logos” (Thompson 1982: 668). The effectiveness of a regime’s legitimating messages depends on its ability to frame its claim to power in such a way as “to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists” (Snow and Benford 1988: 198). Though frame analysis has usually been applied in social movements literature, here, I find it is useful to examine the propaganda strategies authoritarian regimes pursue to sanction power. To understand legitimation in the context of authoritarian states is therefore to “study the ways in which meaning serves to sustain relations of domination” (Thompson 1987: 521).

Legitimation strategies hence cannot be reduced to “cheap talk” or “window dressing” and have profound ramifications for how regimes rule, entrench their power, and shape state-citizen relations (Tannenber *et al.* 2021; Dukalskis 2017; Burnell 2006). Indeed, while legitimation efforts alone cannot explain the robustness of autocratic rule, they warrant more serious consideration as a contributing factor in the consolidation of authoritarian power than they have largely been afforded in the literature. Further investigation is needed in conceptualizing the strategies and effects of authoritarian legitimation (Gerschewski 2013), a task to which this paper aims to contribute. Though the existing scholarship generally focuses on citizen acceptance of regime legitimation efforts, I take my cue from Tannenber *et al.* (2021) and focus, instead, on the discursive strategies autocracies use to justify and entrench their claim to power.

### Crafting Model Citizens

In addition to serving as a vehicle for communicating legitimacy claims, propaganda also aims to impose an intuitive knowledge of the social order, to indoctrinate widespread system support of the authoritarian regime (Kligman 1998; Adler 2012; Chen and Xu 2015). The repeated exposure to a singular worldview in the heavily controlled informational environment of the authoritarian public sphere (Dukalskis 2017) makes citizens likely to internalize the regime's ideas into their own political belief systems (Neundorf and Pop-Eleches 2020). Political socialization, "the process by which people acquire relatively enduring orientations toward politics in general and toward their own political system" (Merelman 1986: 279), is of course not exclusive to authoritarian settings. Nonetheless, recent scholarship reveals the profound and lasting attitudinal effects autocracies can have on their citizens, mainly transmitted through indoctrination tools such as propaganda (Neundorf and Pop-Eleches 2020). Whereas early research in political socialization suggested the process mainly concerned young citizens, who had not yet formed political habits, scholars now understand it to be a lifelong process (Neundorf and Smets 2015). Authoritarian indoctrination therefore can mold political subjectivities with potentially enduring effects that outlast the regime's claim to power.

Given the impact of political socialization, the notion of citizenship is analytically useful for studying authoritarian power. Generally, citizenship is interpreted in terms of status, one bestowed by external entities (Marshall and Bottomore 1987). Citizenship studies scholars, however, have pointed out that it relates not only to what citizens are, but also what they do. Ethics, values, and behavior can be conflated with notions of good citizenship (Westholm, Montero, and Van Deth 2007; de Koning, Jaffe, and Koster 2015). Drawing from the likes of Aristotle, Tocqueville, and Bagehot, political scientists argue that values such as social engagement and rationality are among the base conditions for good citizenship (Almond 1980; Walzer 1989). Despite the normative nature of many of these debates, the types of morals and behaviors that separate good from bad citizens are not self-evident or naturally occurring. The performance of good citizenship is framed and constructed, extending beyond legal status. This analytical lens allows us to consider citizenship as "something that must be enacted and portrayed" (Goffman 1969: 81), and such framing tends to fall within the hands of the state and other elite actors as the more visible agents of power (Chomsky 1985). Indeed, scholars have pointed to the mechanisms through which states mold the "good citizen" as a tool of social control (Pykett, Saward, and Schaefer 2010; Bhandar 2010). In Romania, the Communist Party employed "pedagogies of power" to delineate the "parameters of the permissible," thereby educating and disciplining people into becoming good communist citizens (Kligman 1998; Kligman and Verdery 2011). In Singapore, good citizenship frames are used to inculcate values of rule-following and passivity that help the state better manage the population (Gopinathan and Sharpe 2004). In North Korea, the regime expanded its micro-power in the 1970s and 1980s via a rigid physical education program that aimed to inculcate the values and habits of the New Communist Man (Cho 2023). While states may employ similar strategies, the processes through which frames of good citizenship are constructed, the purpose they serve, and their regulatory mechanisms vary. Citizenship framing is therefore not an ahistorical or static fact, but a highly contextualized process.



Of course, a great many groups outside of the state develop their own ideas of good citizenship. Nevertheless, it is “the framings by relatively elite actors that are most often public, and that both enable and constrain the manner in which citizenship is ‘lived’ by ordinary citizens” (Pykett, Saward, and Schaefer 2010: 527). This argument is evocative of Foucault’s concept of governmentality as “the conduct of conducts” (2002: 337), as well as his analysis of disciplinary power as a state tool for making individuals more useful and docile. In delineating the bounds of good citizenship, states not only model acceptable values and practices; they also designate as “bad” the customs that fall outside these bounds, making them appear justifiably punishable. The very idea of citizenship education connotes a social (and moral) hierarchy, whereby some occupy a position of authority to educate and others are “not-yet-good-enough” and must be disciplined into better citizens (Pykett, Saward, and Schaefer 2010: 529).

If elite and state actors are largely responsible for framing what good citizenship means, then they must also find ways to impart these values onto the larger populace and establish the repertoire of possible behaviors that will be considered virtuous and which will, consequently, define national belonging. Indeed, the question of who belongs to the imagined community (Anderson 1983) is a key feature of national meaning-making processes. The cultural construction of the nation depends on the sedimentation of beliefs about the nation’s past and visions for its future, which in turn are deeply connected to individuals’ senses of self (Brubaker 2004). Educating citizens on the set of behaviors and values that will act as requirements for belonging can thus be understood as a nationalizing, or nation-building strategy (Brubaker 1995). As the Brazilian case illustrates, when the state in question is militarized, good citizenship framings attempt to transpose military ethics to civilian contexts, including routinization of violence, docility, and machismo. The constitution of citizen subjectivities as a reflection of the state, or the “normalization” of these values, serves to enhance and legitimate state power (Foucault 1979: 184; Alexander 1987). Unveiling the discursive strategies that allow for this process is the first step in better understanding the ways in which states construct good citizenship framings, and then wield power through their normalization.

## The Brazilian Military Regime’s Discursive Frames

### *1. Framing the Regime: Defenders of Democracy (1962–1968)*

The Brazilian military regime and its allied organizations engaged three central frames to legitimize their authority and nation-building project. The first, “defenders of democracy,” they used most heavily in the years immediately preceding and immediately following the coup (1962–1968). More than 83 percent of all references to “keeping the order” and “safeguarding democracy” found in the data were from between 1962 and 1968. This period can be divided into two phases of pro-regime propaganda: the first, from 1962 to 1964, is characterized by private propaganda aimed at creating conditions favorable to an authoritarian intervention; the second, from 1964 to 1968, comprises a mixture of private propaganda and official regime communications intended to justify and sustain the coup.

Formed in 1961 by businessmen and middle-class housewives, respectively, IPÊS and CAMDE were responsible for much of the private propaganda produced in favor of the regime. They presented themselves as protectors against the “red infiltration”

(Simões 1985: 67) and as responsible for the “economic progress, social wellbeing and strengthening of the Brazilian democratic regime” (BR RJANRIO.QL.0.OFU.1).<sup>3</sup> They aspired to represent the middle class and conducted much of the emotional and moral messaging that characterized the regime’s propaganda (ibid.). Through short films and weekly bulletins, IPÊS and CAMDE constructed the “defense” frame by fostering the idea that an intervention by capable authorities—namely, the military with support from business elites—was not an attack on democratic institutions, but a safeguarding of democracy in itself. An analysis of discursive patterns demonstrates that IPÊS and CAMDE were able to create the “defense” frame through a strong emphasis on fear, on one hand, and on maintaining order, on the other. Throughout both elements of this frame, there is a sustained and noticeable attempt to present an image of neutrality and moderation, which supported the regime’s claim to be intervening merely in the interests of the Brazilian people.

Let us begin by examining how, similar to other authoritarian regimes, the Brazilian dictatorship employed a discourse of fear to legitimize its authority. Fear was salient in the data in both pre- and post-coup contexts, appearing in repeated anti-communist declarations and warnings of the chaos that threatened to ensue in Brazil should so-called subversive elements not be stopped. Among the most common terms employed by IPÊS and CAMDE were “war,” “subversion,” “crisis,” “communist” and “now.” These words grant a glimpse into the sense of urgency and pessimism present in these materials, which aspired to instill in audiences the feeling that something had to be done to avoid the total collapse of the Brazilian social and moral order. A particular illustrative IPÊS short film, titled “Brazil needs you,” released in cinemas in 1962, begins with a compilation of videos of Hitler and Mussolini addressing large crowds and of military units marching in formation. The film then shows an image of two bodies hanging from barbed wire, gunshot wounds on their chests. A voiceover warns: “In Italy, Germany, the Soviet Union, Cuba, China, history is the same.... Left and right extremisms became radicalized and destroyed democracy, amidst the passivity of the majority of democrats” (QL.0.0.1). The film continues with video clips of Nazi concentration camps, of firing squads in Cuba, of social unrest in Brazil (figure 1). The voiceover concludes: “Where will these crises take us? To chaos? Where will the omission of the so-called elites take us? Time is of the essence. Brazil cannot wait any longer” (QL.0.0.1). The message is clear: something must be done or else the same misery and disorder displayed in the films will arrive on Brazilian shores. The IPÊS propagandists entreated viewers to intercede, declaring: “The right way to fight against Brazilian problems depends on the exercise of our will” (QL.0.0.5). By “our,” the film refers to the business class, whose support was essential for the success of the coup. Businessmen could not remain indifferent to political issues, another 1962 short film warned, for extremists and demagogues would “mortally embrace all industries” and “divide businessmen into good and bad, in order to tacitly defeat their adversaries” (QL.0.0.14). It was not just the responsibility of capable business leaders to intervene, IPÊS warned—it was in their best interests to do so.

<sup>3</sup> All of the archival materials analyzed and cited in this paper were accessed through the National Archives in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. In particular, three collections were used: the IPÊS (code QL), Agência Nacional (code EH), and Secretaria de Imprensa e Divulgação da Presidência da República (code U3). In the remainder of the paper, I will omit the first part of the archival code, common to all sourced documents (BR RJANRIO), and maintain only the code that specifies the relevant collection and document number.





Figure 1. Civil unrest and an explosion in a residential street. Still image (QL.0.0.1), 1962.

Following the coup in 1964, CAMDE echoed similar messages in its weekly bulletins, cautioning that “certain disaster” would befall the country should communist forces come to power (PE.0.0.88/1: 8). A 1965 bulletin stated: “We can no longer condone the red enemy that is infiltrating from every corner, every nook, always ready to sabotage and undermine the foundations of our Western and Christian civilization” (PE.0.0.88/1: 125). References to Christianity and social norms served to augment the “Red Threat” and the dangers it posed to Brazilian society, which in turn justified the need for a continued strong military response. Such response could appear warranted given the profuse adoption of terms such as “terrorist actions,” “nefarious, anarchical, corrupting and communizing forces,” “cultural terror,” and “communist vipers” (PE.0.0.88/1: 34, 21, 50; PE.0.0.88.2: 20). CAMDE thus strove to inculcate a sense of urgency in its audiences and generate alarm about an ideological war that would come to devastate the nation as, it claimed, had been the case elsewhere in the world. Through fear, both CAMDE and IPÊS expertly created a need—to protect democracy and the social order—and then handily offered its solution: a military intervention with support from the business and middle classes.

The second part of the “defenders of democracy” frame revolved around the advantages of such an intervention; namely, the alleged preservation of Brazil’s socioeconomic order. Though less pervasive once the regime was more firmly established, the maintenance of order was a prevalent topic in early regime propaganda, between 1964 and 1968. It was communicated through repeated messages of military authority and constitutionality. CAMDE’s weekly bulletins and the speeches of regime officials were especially emphatic in their claims that the task to safeguard democracy and to preserve the social (and moral) order fell to the Armed Forces. CAMDE, for instance, described the Armed Forces as “not simply the greatest, but the most authentic, and we would say the only, guarantee this Nation

has had in all its history of the preservation and respect of its political institutions” (PE.0.0.88/2: 21). Another bulletin cites the historical “moderating power” the Armed Forces played in Brazil, their “profoundly democratic spirit” and their “attentive vigilance and unfailing patriotism,” which would keep democratic institutions safe (PE.0.0.88/2: 2). Similarly, all official regime speeches used military authority to buttress the dictatorship’s legitimacy. Upon the issuance of Institutional Act No. 2 (AI-2) in 1965—which entrenched authoritarian power by implementing indirect presidential elections, dissolving political parties, and granting the regime authority to declare a state of siege without Congressional approval—President Castello Branco delivered a speech that sought to justify the new act’s repressive measures. He declared AI-2 was issued “considering the country needs tranquility to work towards its economic development and the well-being of the people, and that there cannot be peace without authority, which is also an essential condition of order” (DIS.414). He concluded by saying the Armed Forces held the “intrinsic” power “not only to institutionalize but to guarantee the continuity of the work it proposes” (ibid.). Their self-referent authority wove militarism into the “defense” frame and endeavored to perpetuate the long-standing view of the Armed Forces as the country’s only trustworthy caretakers of democracy—and by extension, of the people’s will. Under this logic, supporting the Armed Forces became equivalent to supporting the nation.

When military authority arguments were not enough, regime officials fell back on legal discourse to sustain their claims to legitimacy. Legal rhetoric was used more sparingly than militarist discourse but was an important component of the “defense” frame, since it granted the regime constitutional backing. Regime propaganda depicted the 1964 coup not as a violation of the constitution but as its defense against “a situation and a government that sank the country into corruption and subversion” (ibid.). The use of legal discourse then worked in two ways: by legitimating the 1964 coup based on selective compliance to existing legal frameworks, and by sanctioning the regime’s maintenance via new laws and decrees, including the 1967 Constitution. President Costa e Silva’s address to the Army Command and General Staff College in 1968 exemplifies the regime’s self-legitimation through legal rhetoric: “There was no overtaking of power by a military group. The victorious Revolution generated revolutionary law, *de facto* law, and legitimized Congress after the necessary purifications ... Congress approved the current Constitution that institutionalized the revolution itself” (DIS.429). Regime officials commonly sought to grant the dictatorship the appearance of a necessary and well-managed intervention that took place within the confines of the law. Institutional Acts and a state of exception were described as the only path toward ensuring the “right” type of freedom, and legal discourse tied the regime’s methods to traditional channels of authority, like the constitution. The oscillation between revolutionary discourse and reformist legal measures highlights the dictatorship’s concern with appearing committed to the rule of law while also acting as the authority that (re)defines the law (Barbosa 2012). Promising order and democratic stability, the regime and its allied organizations hence strove to reframe the meaning of the rule of law to sanction its sociopolitical projects and legitimize the enduring regime.

Finally, the third pillar of the “defense” frame concerns the façade of moderation, which alongside institutional and legal authority arguments sought to justify the regime’s claim to power. Across IPÊS’ short films, CAMDE’s bulletins, and regime officials’ speeches lies a shared language of fairness, nonpartisanship, and good sense.

In stark contrast to the discourse of fear that surrounded “subversive” groups, the rhetoric that surrounded the dictatorship was euphemistic and idealized. The regime and its private allies set communism as the antonym of democracy and, as such, positioned themselves not as promoters of one ideology over another, but as defenders of the democratic institutions they had toppled. In CAMDE’s weekly bulletins and in regime officials’ speeches, the 1964 coup is never named as such, nor is the military regime described as a dictatorship. Rather, they are referred to using terms or phrases such as “revolution,” “current democratic climate,” and “democratic solution.” This is a typical strategy of authoritarian regimes, which tend to rely on repeated euphemisms to distort reality and alleviate accusations of despotism. In its short films released before the coup, IPÊS cautioned against the dangers of “fanaticism,” including “exhausting work, the dissolution of the family ... the extermination of man” (QL.0.0.13). The pretense of neutrality was further reinforced by the themes broached in both official and private propaganda, which focused on issues of mass appeal and sensible policymaking. Regime officials and CAMDE championed hard work and the dignity of workers, children’s right to education, access to basic services, improved personal hygiene, and alternative energy sources. The emphasis on such benign topics—and the silencing of the regime’s use of torture and repression of civil liberties—helped the dictatorship forge an image of itself rooted in effective governance, orderly conduct, and alleged democratic ideals. The concern to maintain a semblance of neutrality is evidenced by a well-known CAMDE rule to never describe their work as a fight against communism and, instead, to say they worked “in defense of democracy” (Assis 2001: 78). In the words of Justice Minister Gama e Silva, the dictatorship “would ensure an authentic democratic order, based on freedom, on the respect for the dignity of the human person, on the fight against subversion and ideologies contrary to the traditions of our people” (DIS.428). The speech stands in juxtaposition to the reason for the address: the issuance of Institutional Act No. 5 (AI-5) in 1968, which historians have described as inaugurating the dictatorship’s most violent and repressive era (Schwarcz and Starling 2015). The example highlights the gaping dissonance between the dictatorship’s discourse and its actions.

## *II. Framing the Nation: The Great Brazil (1968–1979)*

Starting in 1968 and following the issuance of AI-5, the tone of pro-regime propaganda shifted significantly. The dictatorship and its private allies moved away from an emphasis on order, fear, and legality, and onto a second strategic frame: that of the “Great Brazil.” This frame centered around the (re)construction of Brazil as a nation of opportunity and prosperity, expressed through a discourse of development, nationalism, racial democracy, and social peace. The shift towards a more optimistic narrative reflects the period of rapid economic growth and infrastructure development between 1968 and 1974, known as the Brazilian Miracle. However, it is possible the shift was also a diversionary tactic, aimed at deflecting attention from the regime’s escalating repressive measures starting in 1968, in an effort to bolster its legitimization efforts. Not coincidentally, 1968 also marks the start of the regime’s official propaganda with the foundation of AERP.

The “Great Brazil” was the most common frame regime officials employed in their speeches, and it held a significant presence in AERP/ARP productions as well. Words like “development,” “nation,” “work,” “man,” and “education” characterize the

essence of this frame. Tellingly, the word “development” constituted 17 percent of all words used across the surveyed data, while “nation” and “peace” accounted for a total of 10 percent each. These numbers are hardly surprising, considering that development was a key component of the National Security Doctrine and was presented as the solution to the threat of communism and the “internal enemy” (Stepan 1973). At its core, the “Great Brazil” frame posited the notion that, under the right stewardship and with the support of its people, Brazil was destined to have a peaceful, prosperous future and become a model of Christian democracy. I will examine the mechanisms of the “Great Brazil” frame and focus on its two key components—progress and harmony.

At its core, the new Brazil the regime promised to build was a nation of economic progress and social prosperity. According to regime propaganda, through hard work and obedience, all could and should contribute to the elevation of Brazil to become a developed nation, a country of the future. In 1971, an AERP production stated simply: “In the Brazilian man lies the nation’s greatest development power” (FIT.49). Speaking on the occasion of the ninth anniversary of the coup, President Médici said that Brazil, “having found the path required for its destiny of greatness, today finds itself in one of its phases of greatest progress and prosperity in history. Through this coordinated and shared work, this vigorous participation of all social categories in the plans and programs of public authorities, it has been possible to execute them, one by one, with the desired effectiveness” (DIS.447). In 1973, this type of optimistic rhetoric about economic prosperity and collective effort stood in glaring opposition to the reality of the Years of Lead (1968–1974), a period of exceptional violence, censorship, and human rights violations in Brazil.<sup>4</sup>

Shortly after Médici delivered his speech, however, the regime was forced to change tactics. With the 1973 oil crisis and the end of the economic boom, reinstating confidence in the regime’s guarantee of a “Great Brazil” necessitated more intricate maneuvering. Starting in 1974, AERP/ARP short films, or *filmetes*, employed symbolism to convey the message. An especially emblematic example comes from a 1976 *filmete*, one of the only ones to include nonwhite actors.<sup>5</sup> The film shows a Black child quietly doing his schoolwork (Figure 2), before focusing on a television in the background, a portrait of his father, and a kitchen, where his mother cooks next to a modern refrigerator (FIT.75). The final scene displays a row of similar-looking houses, where laundry gently sways from the clothesline as the sun sets. Meanwhile, the voiceover explains that low-income families may now purchase their own homes, thanks to new credit and mortgage policies. The film’s light-handed style encapsulates many of the values the regime sought to impart to citizens. The availability and accessibility of new household appliances and consumer goods nods at increased social mobility; the boy quietly studying while his mother cooks denotes order in the

<sup>4</sup>“Years of Lead” is an expression used to describe periods of military repression, terrorism, and political violence in a few different countries. In Brazil, it refers to the period between 1968 and 1974 when the most aggressive set of repressive measures were applied. “Lead” was originally a reference to bullets (and assassinations), but it has subsequently been applied to several different contexts and has lost that original meaning.

<sup>5</sup>The choice to represent white families almost exclusively betrays the regime’s vision of a developed, civilized nation, given that Black and mixed-race individuals together composed 49 percent of the population in 1980 (Oliveira 1997).



**Figure 2.** Young Black boy studies at a table in a home setting with a television in the background. Still image (FIT.75), 1976.

home and in social roles; the laundry gently swaying outside transmits a sense of tranquility in social life.

By the late 1970s, Brazil was well on its way to economic recession and a debt crisis that would stretch until the end of the following decade. Still, regime propaganda insisted on the nation of a “great Brazil” available to all through sacrifice and dedication. A 1978 ARP *filme* tells the story of a poor and uneducated man who is granted a piece of land in the Amazon and whose hard work is rewarded with prosperity. The images show him proudly receiving a land certificate from the Ministry of Agriculture, followed by scenes of men working to clear the field and harvest sugar cane (figure 3). The voiceover adds, “It is the man who occupies the land and makes it fruitful” (FIT.61). A number of speeches and AERP/ARP productions likewise fed into the myth of a new Brazil in the making, a country where all citizens had a right to and access to medical assistance (FIT.5), where the “largest social program in the world” ensured that no child would go hungry at school (FIT.11; FIT.42; FIT.80; PIS.56), where any family could own its house (FIT.10; FIT.16; FIT.75; DIS.446; DIS.455). Such romanticized notions of progress and social mobility communicated that Brazil, despite the challenges it might encounter, was on its way to becoming a truly developed nation.

To accompany the messages of prosperity and abundance described above, regime propaganda also produced narratives about national harmony and social peace. This was especially true for the propaganda produced after 1974, when General Geisel assumed the presidency and introduced the period of *distensão*, or gradual political opening (Stepan 1988). It is likely that, once its repressive apparatus started to shrink in size and power, the dictatorship needed to find other ways to build acquiescence or, at the very least, to silence its critics behind the façade of national integration. A shift in rhetorical strategy was made especially necessary given the emerging domestic





Figure 3. Rural worker in a sugarcane harvest. Still image (FIT.61), 1978.

threats to the regime, such as the resurgence of the labor movement following the collapse of the Brazilian Miracle (Santana 2008) and the rise of the Unified Black Movement (Domingues 2007), as well as international pressure due to allegations of human rights violations. To combat these mounting threats, the regime utilized ideas of social harmony, and a compliant working class.

In contrast with the style employed by IPÊS and CAMDE, which was largely explicit in nature, AERP/ARP conveyed its propaganda more subtly. From culture to education to technological advances, AERP/ARP focused their social harmony message on seemingly uncontroversial subjects, giving their productions an entertaining and, in the case of the *filmetes*, aesthetically appealing nature. A 1976 animated *filmete* titled “Miscegenation,” for instance, begins by showing a young, naked indigenous woman with long, black hair flowing in the wind, surrounded by palm trees and hummingbirds (figure 4). Symbols of Brazilian folklore are interspersed with images of men at a construction site and in a laboratory, and the profiles of a white child, an indigenous child, and a Black child are outlined against a cloudless sky. The Brazilian flag flutters in the wind while white doves soar over the ocean. These images are played against cheerful music about a mythical Brazil, in which “native, mulatto and white, all colors” are “united in language, song, dance, common destiny,” and whose smiles reveal “the hope of a new tomorrow” (FIT.17). The *filmete* captures the quintessential style of the “Great Brazil” frame. Brazil, embodied by the figure of the indigenous woman, appears as a country of thriving economy, racial harmony, and social peace. The film emphasizes national collectivity, as Brazilians of different races and class backgrounds work side by side for the advancement of the nation. This mythical depiction conveys national pride and optimism about the future, while conveniently painting over the violence and racial inequalities that mark the country’s history.





Figure 4. Brazil is personified in the illustration of an indigenous woman. Still image (FIT.17), 1976.

*Filmetes* such as the one described above exhibit the kind of sophisticated production and nuanced storytelling that characterized the dictatorship's official propaganda under AERP and ARP. This type of propaganda attempted to camouflage the regime's repressive nature behind displays of national unity. Several *filmetes* appealed directly to nationalist sentiments, encouraging viewers to celebrate Independence Day (FIT.41; FIT.109; FIT.110) and teaching them to show respect for the national flag and anthem (FIT.40). Others purported to broach the subject from an educational standpoint, like one showing a young boy asking his father to explain what nationalism means (FIT.15). Still others took an indirect approach to their nationalist message of progress and optimism, such as a 1977 *filmete* that begins with scenes of a white dove flying against a cloudless sky (FIT.83). It moves on to show a series of short clips of cheerful social interactions: a young, white couple holding hands and laughing in a field; a Black man playing the violin against a tree; an elderly farmer lighting his pipe while herding cows. The group comes together and walks hand in hand along a path in the woods before a pickup truck appears behind them and its driver offers them a ride. The film ends with the group singing and laughing around a campfire while a white dove flies in the distance. Though it appeared to address everyday subjects through a neutral, good-natured lens, regime propaganda in fact tried to use images of social integration to obscure the reality of a repressive dictatorship and a country riddled with racial and economic inequalities.

Progress and national harmony were powerful discursive tools of regime propaganda. AERP and ARP both explored the image of an idyllic society in which Brazilians of all walks of life came together, moved in the same direction toward a common goal, and lived in harmony. The deception of this narrative is easily uncovered when we compare its message of national peace and love against the actions of repressive organs of the dictatorship. Yet, by forging a myth of national

prosperity and social peace, the military dictatorship and its allies undertook a type of nation-building project that endeavored to instill new truths into the national imaginary and shape how Brazilians understood their world. The “Great Brazil” frame tackled the first step of this project: to change how Brazilians saw their country. The second, to which I now turn, was to define a uniform national identity.

### *III. Framing the Populace: Model Citizenship (1964–1979)*

The third and final frame employed in regime propaganda in Brazil is what I term “model citizenship,” and it is by far the most underexamined of the three. Yet, it was also the most consistent part of regime propaganda, from IPÊS’ short films and CAMDE’s bulletins to official speeches and AERP/ARP productions. It was an essential pillar of the dictatorship’s discursive strategy to legitimize its hold on power, mold political subjectivities, and redefine parameters of the national community. The military dictatorship in Brazil was not only interested in constructing a new vision of the country and transforming it into a “first-world nation”: it also wanted to produce first-world citizens who reflected its espoused values and morality. What good would it do to transform the country into a land of prosperity, with advanced infrastructure and groundbreaking technology, if the population did not know how to behave appropriately? A “civilizing” discourse then aimed to teach citizens how to relate to the regime, and to one another. This discourse engaged with everyday topics—health and hygiene, obedience and hard work, and family and religion—while concealing the ideological nature of its message. This ostensive neutrality blurred the lines between producers and audience, reinforcing the false narrative that the military regime and the population held the same views about the world and worked toward a common goal.

Health and hygiene were key topics through which the regime sought to remodel its citizens. Though these issues rarely received any attention in official speeches and CAMDE bulletins, they were the subject of some of AERP/ARP’s most appealing and entertaining propaganda pieces. Several radio broadcasts used the tagline, “A developed people are a clean people” (PIS.32/1), indicating a discursive tactic aimed at sanitizing the populace, not simply on a physical level but also morally and politically. Through this process, regime propaganda strove to ingrain habits and values associated with supposedly modern, developed nations. The animated *Sujismundo* was particularly popular among audiences (Fico 1997). The series’ main character, *Sujismundo* (a blending of the words “dirty” and “filthy” in Portuguese), refuses to shower (FIT.28; PIS.93/2) or get vaccinated (FIT.32; FIT.107; PIS.17), swims in contaminated rivers (FIT.37), and disposes of his trash improperly (FIT.34). His comical blunders lend the series an entertaining quality, as he is taught by his son, *Sujismundinho*, and a Dr. *Prevenildo*, how to behave and follow the rules. All productions in the series follow the same formula: first, the broadcast uses humor to portray *Sujismundo* as lazy, unsanitary, and ignorant; then, it models the type of behavior that is expected from a so-called civilized people. If *Sujismundo* represents the vulgar masses and uneducated ways of the past, Dr. *Prevenildo* embodies knowledge, progress, and the authority of the military regime to regulate social behaviors. *Sujismundinho* then illustrates the result of the regime’s “civilizing mission,” thanks to which future generations have improved hygiene habits, are better informed about their health, and hold scientific

knowledge in high regard. Despite their legitimate health recommendations and comedic approach, the productions are highly patronizing and classist. The *filmetes* encourage obedience and personal hygiene as qualities of a developed, civilized people but blame the spread of diseases on the population's ignorance, instead of addressing the country's structural problems with regard to health access and sanitation services.<sup>6</sup> They also make clear the consequences of failing to meet expectations: a radio broadcast warns Sujismundo not to come near the "well-kept city," whose residents want nothing to do with him (PIS.93). Behind this humorous discourse, there is a redrawing of boundaries happening, through which the regime is defining new standards of conduct necessary for belonging in the national community.

AERP/ARP also tackled other health-related concerns in their productions, including guidance on making drinking water (FIT.33; FIT.93; FIT.106; PIS.17/2) and taking medications correctly (PIS.46/2), vaccination campaigns (FIT.36; FIT.38; FIT.55; PIS.17/1; PIS.46), and recommendations for an active lifestyle (FIT.48; FIT.126; PIS.48/4). The latter offer an excellent example of the dictatorship's effort to create propaganda that appeared apolitical. For the most part, these productions seem to target youth and students, possibly because they were among the regime's most vocal critics (Schneider 2014). These films show scenes of boys and girls playing soccer and volleyball, swimming, rock-climbing (figure 5), and practicing gymnastics, while voiceovers announce that "it is time for a young country" (FIT.126) and that young people should practice sports with dedication and enthusiasm (PIS.48). The images promote values of health, teamwork, and adventure, along with hard work and optimism for the future. Though these values may appear ideologically neutral at first glance, they are reminiscent of fascist and Soviet propaganda celebrating human strength and championing ideals of discipline, adventure, and self-sacrifice (Berezin 1997). Failure to abide by the regime's health and hygiene standards was not seen as a consequence of unequal social conditions but painted as a personal moral failing. These examples reveal the tenuous line between political propaganda and seemingly benign public announcements. The Brazilian regime's propaganda deliberately diverged in style and form from the stereotypical propaganda of totalitarian regimes, but it promoted many of the same values. Though AERP/ARP's films and radio broadcasts on health and hygiene give the impression of transmitting benevolent messages of a merely educational value, they nevertheless spread the conduct and morals valued by the military regime for a so-called civilized populace: cleanliness, physical strength, discipline, and dedication to the "common good." Efforts to educate and sanitize individual habits mirror the regime's attempt at political sanitization—a cleansing to remove, instead of germs and diseases, perceived subversives and destabilizing forces.

Another key element of the "model citizenship" frame is a focus on hard work and acquiescence. Several propaganda pieces promoted obedience and the absence of conflict as qualities of a civilized people. In fact, many broadcasts specifically targeted workers and painted the picture of an industrious working class, gladly contributing to the country's economic development. Workers generally appear in the *filmetes* wearing factory or laboratory uniforms, their sweat-covered brows illustrating persistence and diligence, while their easy smiles transmit contentment.

<sup>6</sup>They ignore, for instance, that, in 1970, only 22 percent of the urban population had wastewater collection systems (Parlatore 2000), and that public hospitals only accepted patients who contributed social security taxes and thus excluded those most in need of their services (Rodrigues 2019).

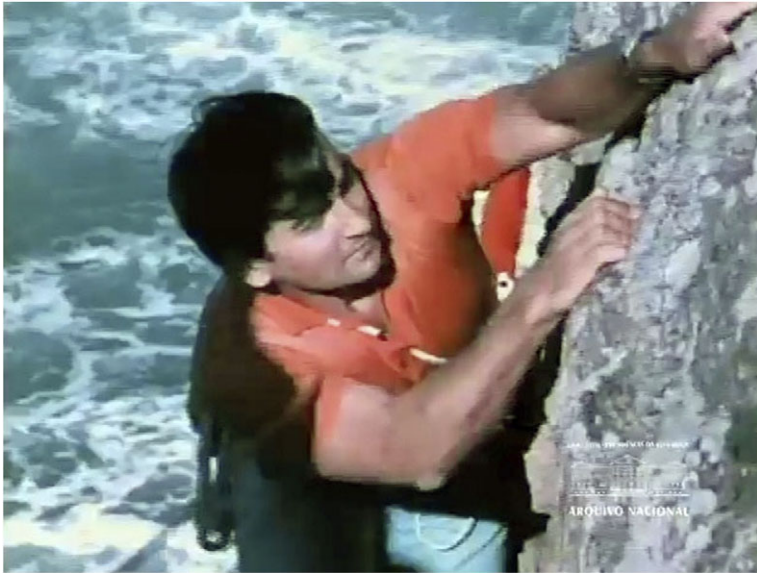


Figure 5. A young man climbs a cliff face above ocean waves. Still image (FIT.126), 1971.

The carefully constructed imagery of these films, together with their omission of poor working conditions, conveys a clear message: the right type of worker follows orders, is dedicated to his work (and, for the dictatorship, it was more often than not a “he”), and does not create disruptions or go on strikes. It is unsurprising that the regime’s official propaganda would pay such attention to workers. Not only was economic development one of the dictatorship’s central tenets, but workers, like students, were also the regime’s staunchest opponents. The 1964 coup can be understood as “a coup against workers” given their active support for the ousted President Goulart (Fontes and Corrêa 2018). In the eyes of the regime, therefore, they were among those most in need of a “model citizenship” education and integration into the dictatorship’s imagined national community.

Presidential speeches and interviews also sought to foster loyalty between workers and the regime. President Médici described “the uninterrupted participation of workers” as one of his chief priorities (DIS.447), and President Geisel claimed the “Revolution” created “a climate of tranquility and progress” for workers (DIS.455). These messages were reinforced in AERP/ARP campaigns for the “valorization” and “love” of workers. A 1974 AERP campaign attempted to present the military regime as an ally to workers and advocate of their wellbeing. In the face of growing inflation and living costs, AERP created the slogan “better work, better wages,” while its broadcasts showed Brazilians in a variety of professions working together in “harmonious rhythm” for “development and security” (PIS.61; FIT.123). The musical broadcasts expanded the slogan, singing to a cheerful tune: “Better work, better wages for you to progress and for Brazil to evolve,” thus tying national development to the will and hard work of its citizens (PIS.61/2). A few years later, ARP updated the campaign to remind workers, “Those who work are good to themselves. Those who work are good for Brazil” (PIS.1). One radio broadcast tells

the story of Severino, a young man who wakes up early each day to sell rice, beans, flour, and porridge to farmers during harvest season. He finds happiness in the rhythm of family life because “he has learned the lesson of work” (PIS.1/1). This type of propaganda endorsed the idea that, in the new Brazil, workers were content in their positions, toiling together to forge a better tomorrow. They were happy to do their part and keep away from perceived political radicalism to help the nation develop. Once again, regime propaganda spotlights the incongruence between the regime’s words and its practices, as it transmitted messages of love and collaboration while outlawing strikes, repressing labor unions, and leaving workers vulnerable to more exploitation (Fontes and Corrêa 2018).

The AERP/ARP broadcasts further stimulated rule-following by focusing on cooperation and the notion that all Brazilians had a role to play in the development of the nation. These ideas were especially salient in the propaganda about inflation (FIT.44; FIT.45; FIT.97; FIT.98; FIT.99; PIS.52/1; PIS.52/3; PIS.53/2; PIS.54/1; PIS.54/2) and fuel consumption (FIT.24; FIT.25; FIT.27; FIT.30; FIT.69; FIT.72; FIT.82; FIT.87; PIS.52/2; PIS.53/1; PIS.54/2; PIS.56/2; PIS.58/2), both of which were the subject of some of ARP’s most prolific campaigns. In the first case, consumers were told they, too, had a responsibility to fight inflation and that they must do so by searching for better prices, finding alternatives to overpriced food items, and bargaining. In comparison, the fuel consumption productions tended to be more cinematic and stylized, with more complex storylines, music, and animation effects. Yet the message was virtually the same: a good citizen is one who works hard, follows the rules, and sacrifices for the advancement of the nation. Thus, whether it was in speeches about employment and productivity, radio broadcasts about a love of working, or *filmetes* championing individual self-sacrifice for the sake of the greater good, the regime painted the civilized, harmonious society as an acquiescent one. Obeying the rules was depicted as more than a matter of civility or social order; it was in the population’s own self-interest to do so if they hoped to prosper and see Brazil progress. Hiding behind an ostensibly neutral façade were highly ideologized narratives about how the good Brazilian citizen should live and behave. By refraining from presenting them as ideals of the military regime and instead as conditions for a civilized society, the dictatorship’s propaganda again obscured its own political projects and aimed to mold subjective beliefs about the nation.

The final component of the “model citizenship” frame centers around religion and the family, and it displays the hugely moral and gendered aspects of the Brazilian regime’s sociopolitical agenda. This frame is especially prevalent in AERP/ARP productions and CAMDE’s weekly bulletins, though their respective discursive strategies differed. AERP/ARP broadcasts focused on portraying a utopian rendition of family life and modeling the type of behavior the regime expected from a “civilized” people, whereas CAMDE employed a more severe tone, denouncing what they saw as the moral decay of Brazilian society. Nonetheless, in both cases, we observe evident attempts to shape political subjectivities and redefine notions of right and wrong in service of the military regime.

The AERP/ARP televised and radio broadcasts about family were among the most strongly ideological content the regime produced. They painted an optimistic picture of a harmonious family life, emphasizing themes of love and peace in the home. The *filmetes* show scenes of a father barbecuing while the mother prepares the picnic table and the children play in the garden (FIT.47), of a large family happily harvesting oranges together (FIT.46), of a little boy running and laughing in a field of flowers



with his German Shepherd (FIT.127). The films sought to model the “national character,” the repertoire of behaviors the regime considered to be good, including a harmonious coexistence between couples, care for the elderly (FIT.101; PIS.53/1), appreciation for one’s parents (PIS.122/1; PIS.3/1; PIS.3/2), and love for one’s children (FIT.47; PIS.48/1; PIS.53/1; PIS.53/2). In addition, parents were taught not to fight in front of their children and, instead, “cultivate the home, the true family” (FIT.26). Young couples who “believe in love and in the future” were encouraged to marry and form a family, but only after the father of the bride-to-be granted his blessing (PIS.122/1). The productions enshrined patriarchal authority within the family and, without much extrapolation, we might recognize the state’s own patriarchal authority in the same images. As was the case in the “Great Brazil” frame, the productions carried an inflated optimistic tone, as if to profess that the country would indeed see prosperous families, happy and well-educated children, and cared-for elders, so long as everyone followed the behaviors modeled in the broadcasts.

A few productions contained more overtly political tones and combined the themes of family and nationalism, framing a harmonious family life as tantamount to Brazil’s prosperous future. The standard ending for AERP productions about family—“Brazil grows first within the family”—affirmed the notion that traditional family values were both compatible and necessary for the development of the nation. A 1976 *filmete*, for example, shows a middle-class family preparing to be professionally photographed in their living room.<sup>7</sup> The younger family members joke and laugh while their parents straighten their ties and listen to the photographer’s directions. The grandmother comes into the room and watches the scene take place, tears pooling in her eyes. A photo sequence takes us through the grandparents’ wedding day, their first child, their children’s First Communion, birthdays, and family outings. The film ends with the voiceover saying, “Peace is built with those who love the same soil” (FIT.20). The themes of national unity and social peace discussed in the “Great Brazil” frame return, but this time they are tied to romanticized images of the traditional family.

Much of the familyism depicted in AERP/ARP’s propaganda reinforced traditional notions of gender roles. Manhood was consistently associated with work outside the home, especially in manufacturing and white-collar jobs, and men were depicted as spearheading the nation’s progress and stability. Conversely, women’s contributions to society happened through motherhood and homemaking. Only three out of 115 *filmetes* and eleven out of 191 radio broadcasts had a female narrator or protagonist. When women were shown or heard in the productions, they were portrayed in their roles as mothers and homemakers. Even in the productions that did not focus on family, women were routinely linked to the domestic sphere: they were shopping (FIT.44; FIT.97), bargaining in farmers’ markets—in accordance with the regime’s anti-inflation campaigns—(PIS.54/2), sharing tips on how to manage natural gas usage at home (FIT.67), and hanging the laundry on the clothesline (FIT.75).

Yet, by far, the most frequent way in which AERP/ARP productions represented and addressed women was in their role as mothers. Women were shown preparing to

<sup>7</sup>While regime propaganda more frequently depicts middle-class families, 68.3 percent of the Brazilian population lived below the poverty line in 1970 (Rocha 2013).



give birth (PIS.46/2; PIS.46/3), vaccinating their children (PIS.17/1; PIS.46/1), taking them to school and waiting for their return at the gate (FIT.75), readying them for national holidays with patriotic yellow-and-green broaches (FIT.109), teaching their daughters to play with dolls (PIS.122/2), and breastfeeding (FIT.31; PIS.17/1; PIS.46/2). Productions about the latter typically included statements such as, “Give your love and your milk to whom you gave life” (PIS.17/1), along with instructions about how often and for how long a mother should breastfeed. The productions showed an idealized version of motherhood, as expressed in the lyrics of a 1971 AERP tune: “We forget the tiredness of each day and how much work they are, when they arrive happily to say, ‘How I love you, Mommy, I love you so much.’ It’s the purest and truest love, the first love, the tenderness that becomes larger than life. So much love in my son’s sweet eyes, my love...” (PIS.3/1). Female fertility was further celebrated through religious or mythical references. One radio broadcast described reproduction as God’s “most beautiful truth in life” and recalled the Greek myth of Hera’s breastmilk as the inspiration behind the Milky Way’s naming (FIT.31). Another told the story of a mother waiting until the early morning hours for her adult son to return home after a night out. The narrator declares: “She always waits for you. Her love is the first evidence of God’s kindness. Raising men, mothers build the future” (PIS.122/1). This type of propaganda circumscribed women’s social contributions to motherhood and drew a direct (and exclusive) connection between motherhood and women’s sense of fulfillment, joy, and peace. Crucially, in endorsing the idea that women’s central contribution to society is the bearing and caring of children, regime propaganda tied women’s bodies to the reproduction of the nation (Gal and Kligman 2000).

Interestingly, CAMDE reproduced the traditional gender roles of AERP/ARP campaigns while also advocating for active participation in politics. This is made clear in a 1965 bulletin: “The presence of women in the electoral process of American countries has a disciplining function in the debates and campaigns.... Woman, intuitive by nature, has more vision of the future than man. Thinking about her children’s tomorrow, she knows more quickly what must be done” (PE.0.0.88/2: 42). Though championing women’s political participation, the publication advocated the notion that women have a patriotic duty to have children and serve as the moral shepherds of the nation. Their discursive strategy combined religious references and moralist statements to inspire support for the organization’s advocacy efforts, as well as to express their endorsement of the regime’s measures. CAMDE members were chiefly concerned with reviewing the type of education children received at school (PE.0.0.88/1: 30; PE.0.0.88/2: 54; PE.0.0.88/3: 60; PE.0.0.88/4: 73), censoring what they considered to be depraved cultural productions, and safeguarding the traditional Brazilian family. They framed support for the military regime’s “sanitizing measures” and its movement against subversion as a moral and religious crusade, leading campaigns in favor of the “moralization” of television and radio shows and a “war against vices” such as gambling and the use of psychedelics (PE.0.0.88/1: 20). Similarly, they commended the “noble crusade” to ban sexual education books for girls at school (PE.0.0.88/2: 28), the investigation into the distribution of contraceptives in the Amazon (PE.0.0.88/2: 82), and the Catholic Church’s condemnation of the mini skirt, citing the Vatican’s concerns over “scandal and excitement of base instincts” (PE.0.0.88/3: 89). They worked to protect the “systems of Christian and democratic life” (PE.0.0.88/3: 57). Supporting the military regime thus was framed not as a matter of political belief or ideology, but as a moral imperative for the wellbeing and integrity of the country.

The three components of the “model citizenship” frame—health and hygiene, obedience and hard work, religion and family—therefore illustrate how regime propaganda endeavored to define and disseminate a repertoire of acceptable habits and beliefs. This repertoire was undeniably gendered, moralistic, and classist, though it aspired to appear advantageous to all. Indeed, the paternalist and optimistic character of the regime’s propaganda, alongside repeated references to love, amicability, and peaceful home life, stand in stark contrast to its repressive apparatus. Yet, they granted the regime the tools with which to not only mold popular values and codes of conduct, but also shape new political subjectivities aligned with their vision of a “great Brazil” under military rule.

## Discussion

The evidence examined in this paper shows that propaganda was a powerful tool for the Brazilian military regime and its allied organizations to maintain and legitimize power. The three frames identified in this paper speak to political legitimacy claims (“defender of democracy”), a modernization project (“Great Brazil”), and the formation of political subjectivities that reflected the regime’s values and aspirations (“model citizenship”). These findings reaffirm the prevalence of certain discursive elements in authoritarian regimes—such as fear and the maintenance of order—and illuminate the specific ways in which the Brazilian military dictatorship sought to justify its power for more than two decades. In this section, I briefly summarize the three identified frames, locate my novel contributions to the literature, and discuss the implications of the dictatorship’s attempts to cultivate an apolitical front and to package its sociopolitical project as a collective endeavor.

The “defense” frame, common in authoritarian regimes, cultivated a façade of democracy that was important for both domestic and international legitimacy. It first sought to nurture fear about Brazil’s political and social situation and, second, to point to the military regime as the only entity capable of maintaining the order and ensuring stability. In presenting itself as a mere executor of the national will, the regime employed the very logic of democracy to legitimize its authoritarian power. The “Great Brazil” frame emphasized progress and harmony, contributing to a national myth of prosperity and social peace. Crucially, this soon-to-be “great Brazil” was not painted as the regime’s sociopolitical project, but as the nation’s divinely ordained destiny—a reality from which all would benefit when the time came. This idealized picture of Brazil’s future strove to naturalize the military regime’s position as the only route leading toward the promised age of prosperity. To belong in the reality of the “Great Brazil,” society also had to undergo a corresponding transformation. The dictatorship and its allies then engaged a frame of “model citizenship,” through which they endeavored to instruct the populace on a code of conduct befitting a “first-world nation.” Under the threat of chaos and moral decay, the regime attempted to inculcate a specific embodiment of Brazilian-ness, one that suited the new era that its leadership would install. Propaganda thus hid under the guise of education and entertainment to promote a conservative civilizing social program to mold Brazilian ideals, customs, and ethics in the regime’s image and likeness.

These findings build on the work of two primary works on regime propaganda in Brazil: Fico’s 1997 *Reinventando o Otimismo* (Reinventing optimism) and Schneider’s *Brazilian Propaganda* (2014). Though I draw from their insights about

the Brazilian regime, my analysis considers data not included in their studies (namely, the materials produced by CAMDE and IPÊS) and my conclusions differ from theirs at times. Firstly, Fico's (1997) notion of "military optimism" pinpoints economic prosperity, nationalism, and militarism as central messages of the dictatorship's propaganda in ways that overlap with my frame of the "Great Brazil." To an extent, this paper provides a systematic look into how these themes appeared in a variety of pro-regime propaganda, while Fico's analysis is focused on AERP/ARP productions. Nonetheless, the demarcation of distinct frames both facilitates more nuanced comparisons across authoritarian contexts and allows for a richer understanding of the military regime's legitimation strategies across the two-decade period. For instance, by locating distinct discursive frames in this paper, I observe that rhetorical devices varied to appeal to different intended audiences. Where IPÊS' short films emphasized threats to political and economic chaos to its business audience ("defenders of democracy"), CAMDE spread messages of Christian values and moral virtue to its largely female public ("model citizenship"). Similarly, by distinguishing between discourses of a national utopia ("Great Brazil") and defense against communism ("defenders of democracy"), I find the latter were scarcer after 1968. Changes in legitimating messages elucidate the dictatorship's evolving perception of its sociopolitical project, of the rhetoric that would most appeal to diverse segments of society, and of the most pressing threats, domestic and international, it had to manage.

Furthermore, though Fico (*ibid.*) discusses the regime's attempts to define a repertoire of acceptable behavior, the role of religion, family, and gender in regime propaganda is underexamined in his research. As I showed in earlier sections, Christian values figure most prominently in the "model citizenship" frame, but Christianity was also an inalienable part of the regime's promise to sustain a stable democracy ("defenders of democracy" frame) and to lead the nation into prosperity and peace (the "Great Brazil" frame). Regime propaganda also heavily promoted rigid gender and family norms, a discursive strategy that served the dual purpose of delineating the parameters of expected conduct, while simultaneously naturalizing the state's authority to regulate and intrude upon citizens' private lives. In other words, the regime's highly patriarchal rhetoric about gender and family was key to its broader attempts at transforming the boundaries of national belonging and state-citizen relations.

In Schneider's (2014) case, our interpretations of AERP/ARP productions often align, yet while her framework emphasizes the *style* of regime propaganda (i.e., aggressive, blunt, and subliminal), mine focuses on *content* and locates the legitimating messages disseminated through this propaganda. These are complementary analytical approaches that produce distinct findings but which unveil intersecting mechanisms of discursive authoritarian power. Indeed, my argument builds on Schneider's conceptualization of "subliminal propaganda" to showcase how the Brazilian regime attempted to uphold its sociopolitical project. As we have seen, radio and film productions in Brazil did not rhapsodize about fascist ideals or (explicitly) outline the regime's version of the New Soviet Man. Instead, they tried to appear lacking any ideology whatsoever. I confirm Schneider's initial findings in my study but extend them to unveil mechanisms of regime legitimation, as well as to pose questions about the authoritarian legacy. It was the modern, entertaining nature of this propaganda style that enabled the regime to communicate highly ideological content but to bury it in productions about seemingly benign topics, such as transportation, public health, or

family life. As regime propaganda promoted specific everyday habits, it also guided audiences away from other, supposedly less proper concerns—such as politics. It was a dual strategy of mobilizing individual behaviors according to regime values, on one hand, and depoliticizing the population, on the other.

My conclusions also contribute to the broader literature on political propaganda by challenging stereotyped perceptions of twentieth-century authoritarianism. Specifically, they enable us to recognize propaganda that extends beyond images of military tanks, marching armies, and totalitarian leaders addressing large crowds. By avoiding the bluntness of early twentieth-century totalitarian regimes, the Brazilian dictatorship produced a more insidious type of propaganda, the effects of which may have long outlasted the military's stay in power. I find that this ostensible "apoliticalness" was crucial to the dictatorship's legitimacy claims, for it painted the regime's desired social order and repertoire of behaviors as mere reflections of the population's own values and aspirations. The symbiotic quality of this propaganda blurred state and society, military and civilian. Instead of an affront against democracy, a military dictatorship would be its highest form, for the Armed Forces was an extension of the people—they were *o povo fardado*, or "the people in uniform" (not coincidentally, echoes of this narrative continue to appear today in many pro-Bolsonaro demonstrations calling for a new military coup). Therefore, through a "discourse of occultation" (Lefort 1986: 196), propaganda masked the regime's viewpoint of power while presenting its doctrine as the public will. Claims of regime legitimacy did not rest only on the military's supposed natural authority over the country as the sole entity capable of leading Brazil into a prosperous and moral democracy. They also framed the regime as the embodiment of foundational Brazilian values: order, discipline, progress, religion, and family. With the interests of the people and the regime appearing thus concordant, redefining social norms would contribute not only to regime legitimation but also to the dissociation of regime doctrine from the regime itself, propelling the dictatorship's nation-building project beyond its formal rule.

## Conclusion

This paper adds to the scholarship on authoritarian legitimation by examining the propaganda disseminated by the Brazilian military regime and its allied private organizations. Through an ethnographic analysis of propaganda materials, I argue that the regime sought to construct, organize, and gain support for a particular social order, one in which it could intervene across all areas of social life. Specifically, I show that propaganda campaigns relied on three discursive frames: "defenders of democracy," "Great Brazil," and "model citizenship." I show that, together, these frames endeavored to furnish the regime with the authority to impose a national sociopolitical subjectivity centered around military authority, economic progress, and conservative family and religious values. In other words, regime propaganda sought to socialize audiences into a specific embodiment of Brazilian-ness, in a type of re-imagining of the national community. In so doing, it also endeavored to redraw the parameters for belonging in the new nation the regime was supposedly creating.

The findings in this study raise important questions about the lingering effects of supposedly "benign" dictatorships, and the discursive strategies that allow such

perceptions to be formed. By emphasizing economic prosperity, national pride, family life, and social harmony in its legitimating messages, the Brazilian regime cultivated an image of benevolent control, its violent, repressive, and antidemocratic tactics notwithstanding. Part of this image survives today, with repeated demonstrations in congress and in the streets calling for a return of military rule. Paired with a façade of benign control, a perceived intertwining of regime doctrine with Brazilian values may also have an enduring legacy on national politics today. Echoes of the regime's values and its civilizing mission, diffused through propaganda, likewise abound. For example, former President Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022) coopted the fascist slogan, “God, Fatherland, and Family” to launch his new political party—a clear parroting of the dictatorship's nationalist, conservative values. Damaris Alves—Bolsonaro's Minister of Women, Family and Human Rights—similarly reiterated the paternalist gender order of authoritarian regimes in declaring that women “were born to be mothers” and should not leave the home to work elsewhere (Saconi 2018). Their discursive strategies may differ, but there are unmistakable overlaps between the dictatorship's familyist and religious rhetoric and that of Bolsonaro and his supporters. These observations speak to the legacies of authoritarian socialization. Studies have observed a correlation between spending formative years under authoritarian rule and higher levels of nostalgia and weaker democratic support later in life (Neundorf and Pop-Eleches 2020). Additionally, whereas repression generally produces stronger rejection of an authoritarian regime following its collapse, indoctrination often engenders long-term support for the previous regime's belief system (Dinas and Ball 2019). The extent to which the regime's legitimation claims and image of benevolence may have permeated social values and political attitudes in Brazil remains to be investigated. Nevertheless, the findings in this paper may shine a light on the historical processes that have led to rising authoritarianism, growing militarization, and the return of the far right to contemporary Brazil.

Finally, it is worth noting that the three discursive frames identified in this paper and their use for authoritarian legitimation are by no means unique to Brazil. These frames can serve as heuristic devices, designed to be tested, applied, expanded, and modified across other empirical case studies, and capable of yielding insights about varying demagogic contexts. Importantly, this comparative value is not restricted to authoritarian regimes, as historical recurrence of these discursive frames can be observed in both autocracies and democracies. Democratic governments today could easily engage adaptations of these discursive frames to serve their own nation-building endeavors and mold political subjectivities in their own image and likeness. In fact, many already do, but their practices are not recognized as propaganda or civilizing programs. It seems, therefore, that a reevaluation of the features and functions of political propaganda is in order, so we may better understand the discursive strategies available to democracies and autocracies alike in the exercise and legitimation of state power.

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