

## THE MILITARY DICTATORSHIP AND INTEGRATION OF RURAL POPULATIONS: Mobral and its community social action (Brazil, 1970's)

Ditadura militar e integração das populações rurais:  
o Mobral e sua ação social comunitária (Brasil, anos 1970)

La dictadura militar e integración de la población rural:  
Mobral y su acción social comunitaria (Brasil, años 1970)

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**Abstract:** This article aims to discuss the Diversified Community Action Program of the Brazilian Literacy Movement in the purpose to create an organic integration of Brazil's rural populations in the context of the economic development project and the model of society built by the dictatorial regime imposed on the country after the civil-military coup in 1964. The aim of this programme was to create new forms of sociability, especially among the population of the interior areas, by mobilizing them as a community. This was done in partnership with local authorities and even with the Brazilian Army, revealing that it was also a strategy for social containment and a barrier to possible political activities contrary to the dictatorship.

**Keywords:** illiteracy; education in rural areas; political participation.

**Resumo:** Este artigo objetiva discutir a atuação do Programa Diversificado de Ação Comunitária do Movimento Brasileiro de Alfabetização na busca de uma integração de caráter orgânico das populações rurais do Brasil no contexto do projeto de desenvolvimento econômico e do modelo de sociedade edificados pelo regime ditatorial imposto ao país após o golpe civil-militar deflagrado em 1964. Tal programa visou constituir, especialmente entre a população das áreas interioranas, novas formas de sociabilidade através de sua mobilização enquanto comunidade. Tal intuito se realizou em parceria com poderes locais e mesmo com o Exército brasileiro, revelando também seu aspecto de estratégia de contenção social e barreira a possíveis atividades políticas contrárias à ditadura.

**Palavras-chave:** analfabetismo; educação no meio rural; participação política.

**Resumen:** Este artículo pretende discutir el trabajo del Programa de Acción Comunitaria Diversificada del Movimiento Brasileño de Alfabetización en la búsqueda de la integración orgánica de las poblaciones rurales de Brasil frente al proyecto de desarrollo económico y al modelo de sociedad construido por el régimen dictatorial impuesto en el país tras el golpe cívico-militar de 1964. El objetivo de este programa era crear nuevas formas de sociabilidad, especialmente entre la población de las zonas del interior, movilizándola como comunidad. Esto se hizo en colaboración con las autoridades locales e incluso con el Ejército brasileño, lo que revela el programa también como una estrategia de contención social y una barrera a posibles actividades políticas contrarias a la dictadura.

**Palabras clave:** analfabetismo; educación en zonas rurales; participación política.

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## INTRODUCTION

The dictatorial regime instituted in the aftermath of the civil-military coup that ousted João Goulart ushered in a prolonged and somber historical period in our country, distinguished by the incremental withdrawal of rights and the intensification of political repression directed at its adversaries.

Indeed, the 'years of lead' that burdened Brazilian society from 1964 to 1985 represent an undeniable antithesis to all that is associated with the term 'democracy'. Nevertheless, beyond their repressive and overtly violent aspects, which are extensively documented, the various military regimes that governed after 1964 also sought to secure support for an economic development agenda contingent upon enhancing the productive capacity of the national workforce.

Given that this capacity depended on the acquisition of expanded formal qualifications—namely, an enhancement of the educational levels within the population at large, particularly among those who could be mobilized by processes aimed at increasing productivity and efficiency—the realm of education emerged as a focal point for the military regime. This focus was intended to meet the demands arising from the economic base.

Furthermore, acknowledging the imperative of securing ideological allegiance to the regime from the majority of the nation's populace, a range of initiatives and strategies were devised within the sphere of social policies. These endeavors aimed to cultivate active engagement among the citizenry with the worldview espoused by the political actors who monopolized state power during this historical period.

As proposed by Antonio Gramsci, the growing complexity of Western societies that began in the late 19th century necessitated a corresponding evolution in the modalities of State action. As a result, the State is compelled to broaden and deepen its engagement with the population of a given country. Consequently, it became imperative to secure the allegiance of the masses to the worldview shared by the social classes that directly and indirectly exert control over the 'expanded' state. This concept encompasses the combination of the legally sanctioned repressive apparatus, which maintains a monopoly on the use of force, and the institutions within civil society that actively promote the ideological integration of subordinate classes in alignment with the dominant classes' perspective (Gramsci, 2010). In this context, the spheres of culture and education emerge as essential strategic domains for cultivating active allegiance among subordinate classes.

It is certainly inaccurate to claim that the state governed by the military after the 1964 coup sought to establish a genuine 'hegemony' of the classes that owned the means of production and thus formulated the ideological content underpinning their societal position. In essence, the fundamental demands of subordinate classes were

never adequately addressed<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, it was necessary to garner some degree of allegiance from these masses; that is, to provide individual opportunities for integration into the societal and developmental model put forth by the military regime. In a context of relatively stable parliamentary democracy, a certain equilibrium would exist between the use of repression and the pursuit of consensus, such that “[...] force does not significantly outweigh consent; rather, the intention is to make the application of force appear to be supported by the consensus of the majority” (Gramsci, 2004, p. 95). However, under a dictatorial regime like that which imposed itself on the country following the 1964 coup, force became the primary resource for exercising political power. This, however, did not eliminate the necessity for a minimal political-ideological identification with the new regime; without such identification, the very capitalist development project advocated by the dictatorial government would risk becoming unviable. <sup>2</sup>The coup that elevated Marshal Humberto de Alencar Castello Branco to the presidency was significantly bolstered by the active participation of business sectors and various civil society institutions and organizations. This was not merely a military insurrection against a constitutionally elected government that displeased the upper echelons of the Armed Forces. Rather, it indicates that the takeover of the state apparatus by individuals originating from the military occurred in close collaboration with civilian figures who had, in many cases, conspired since the early 1960s to dismantle João Goulart’s government.

These individuals represented the most dynamic sectors of the Brazilian bourgeoisie, particularly its industrial and financial components, thus emerging as their organic intellectuals (Gramsci, 2010) charged with tasks related to the organization of political dominance and the control of the state—conditions vital for safeguarding the long-term interests of the bourgeoisie. The same holds true for military personnel, many of whom possessed advanced academic qualifications, who constituted a significant portion of the bureaucracy serving the dictatorial state (Mathias, 2004). In this regard, these actors played a pivotal role in directing the institutions established post-1964, with the aim of facilitating the production of the active consensus among the populace in alignment with the political-ideological framework of the dictatorship. This consensus was a prerequisite for implementing a developmental strategy for the productive sector, which entailed intensified labor exploitation through enhanced productivity and the erosion of workers’ purchasing power.

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<sup>1</sup> According to Gramsci, in a classic hegemonic context, although the State ultimately serves the interests of the dominant classes to facilitate their maximum expansion, “[...] this development and expansion are framed as the driving force behind a universal progression, [...] the dominant group is concretely aligned with the general interests of the subordinate group” (Gramsci, 2004, pp. 41-42). Due to the limited scope of this article, a more thorough exploration of the motivations, implications, and consequences of the 1964 Coup will not be presented. For a more comprehensive analysis of the dictatorial period in question, refer to Toledo (1997); Ferreira and Delgado (2014).

<sup>2</sup> Considering the limitations of this article, a more in-depth examination of the motivations, implications, and consequences of the 1964 Coup will not be undertaken. For a broader analysis of the dictatorial period in question, please consult Toledo (1997) and Ferreira and Delgado (2014).

The establishment and effective implementation of the Brazilian Literacy Movement (Mobral)<sup>3</sup> reveal the involvement of these personnel—both military and civilian officials who formed an “[...] organic technobureaucratic elite” (Manzini-Covre, 1993, p. 318)—who worked to organize one of the most noteworthy initiatives aimed at convincing rural populations within the context of the military regime that emerged in 1964. It is important to note that the fact that this initiative resulted from a law enacted by the National Congress, rather than through an executive decree, indicates that, from the outset of its formulation, there was an effort to secure the support of local political representatives and other individual and collective actors represented in the parliament. Such adherence was deemed an essential condition for the success of the initiative, given that it was founded on the voluntary participation in the establishment of its local dynamic hubs.

To this end, a comprehensive action program was established, aimed at mobilizing populations in rural localities where literacy classes were implemented, with the intent of transforming these groups into ‘communities’ capable of autonomously addressing their own challenges<sup>4</sup>. This objective was not entirely unprecedented within the historical context of efforts to integrate rural populations into a specific economic development framework through the reduction of illiteracy rates. Indeed, several initiatives had been undertaken with the goal of eradicating illiteracy, fostering a similar intention to mobilize rural populations as cohesive communities. However, in terms of literacy outcomes, the enduring presence of a substantial contingent of illiterates within the Brazilian population in the early 1970's<sup>5</sup> underscored that the campaign strategies characterizing these initiatives ultimately failed to achieve their broader ambitions. Considering that Brazil's population in 1970 exceeded 93 million and that, according to the same census data, nearly 50% of this total resided in areas classified as exclusively rural—while the Southeast region, in its current delineation, was the only region where the urban population surpassed the rural population—one can appreciate the significance of having a 53% illiteracy rate among the rural population in 1980 (Scarlato, 2001). Within this framework, the establishment of a policy aimed at reducing illiteracy was not only necessary for addressing this critical issue but also served as part of the military regime's strategy to avoid the perception of insensitivity (Ribeiro, 2000), in addition to the economic motivations previously mentioned.

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3 Mobral was founded by Law No. 5,379 on December 15, 1967, and was officially dissolved on November 25, 1985, by Decree No. 91,980. This decree also established its successor, the Educare Foundation. Many authors have criticized the latter as a mere façade (e.g., Werebe, 1994). For a counterpoint to this perspective, refer to Lovisolo (1988).

4 Cunha (1981) even asserts that, in terms of the extent of its presence across the national territory, the Mobral had no rival except for the Catholic Church.

5 A publication endorsed by the Mobral cites 20 million illiterates among the population over the age of 15 (Faria, 1977).

Mobral was introduced as an unprecedented initiative in the country's history, distinguished by its asserted framework grounded in the principles of modern scientific management and exclusively predicated on technical criteria. This approach emphasized a purported objective rationality in decision-making, in stark contrast to the particularistic interests that had dominated up to that time<sup>6</sup>.

This analysis, therefore, proposes a perspective that underscores the nature of a strategy focused on achieving consensus, in the Gramscian sense previously articulated, rather than framing it solely as an ideological initiative aimed at persuading rural populations. The objective was not to convert them into passive defenders of the military regime or unwavering supporters of the candidates aligned with the dictatorship's party.

In this regard, I aim to establish a critical dialogue concerning the presence of this secondary perspective within several seminal works (Cunha, 1981; Cunha & Góes, 2002; Germano, 1994; Manzini-Covre, 1993; Paiva, 2003; Werebe, 1994) that analyze the period and, to varying extents, regard Mobral solely as an instrument serving the dictatorship's endeavor to generate voters and unskilled labor. In line with Michel de Certeau, who comments on the reasons for the "[...] prejudices that constrained the historiography [...]" of his time (Certeau, 2000, p. 42), I contend that the historical context of the historiographical production had a direct impact on that interpretation.

In terms of the theoretical and methodological context underpinning this study, it is essential to acknowledge that any investigation of recent history is invariably influenced by the historical circumstances in which it is conducted. Regarding the period in question, and considering the enduring educational, social, and political legacy it carries, such influence remains a consistent presence throughout this work. However, in contrast to a perspective advocating maximal neutrality for the researcher within the scientific realm, I align with the understanding that the 'social determinations' that shape historiographical practice are integral to the methodological framework guiding the investigation of the research object. This study, therefore, aspires to offer an interpretation of the selected documentation, not with the intent of establishing "[...] immediate causes" (Ariès, 2013, p. 295) that correlate planned intentions with fully realized effects, but to foster a more profound understanding of an initiative undertaken by the Brazilian state under a dictatorial regime that aimed to create mechanisms of legitimacy, particularly concerning rural populations.

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6 For a deeper understanding of the impact of the military takeover on the education sector following 1964, refer to the works of, among others: Cunha (1981); Cunha and Góes (2002); Frigotto, 1989; Garcia, 1977; Germano (1994); Manzini-Covre (1993); Mathias (2004); Santos (1981) and Souza (1981).

## MOBRAL AND THE DIVERSIFIED PROGRAM FOR COMMUNITY INITIATIVE

The diagnosis developed within the institutions most directly associated with economic policy and technocratic planning identified the lack of efficient resource management and the neglect of the cost-benefit relationship regarding the effective utilization of literacy gains, particularly their impact on labor productivity, as the primary factors contributing to the failure of initiatives structured as 'campaigns'. This perspective resonated with the principles of what is known as Human Capital Theory, which came to shape the entirety of educational policy during the dictatorial period<sup>7</sup>. This 'theory' broadly posited that education was an economic resource, akin to raw materials or machinery; thus, investments in formal education would translate into future productivity gains<sup>8</sup>. In this context, educational processes could be quantified based on their results. Consequently, the Office of Applied Economic Research (Epea) was tasked with organizing an initiative to provide non-formal education for the urban and rural illiterate populations, guided administratively by the principles of resource targeting and economic return.

Having proposed the establishment of an Education Sector within the Office of Applied Economic Research (Epea) in 1965, economist and banker Mário Henrique Simonsen, who had previously been associated with the Institute of Research and Social Studies (Ipes)<sup>9</sup>, was appointed president of Mobral in April 1970. Two years later, he appointed Arlindo Lopes Corrêa as Executive Secretary, effectively placing him in charge of the day-to-day administration of the new agency<sup>10</sup>. Corrêa was an early collaborator in the formulation of studies and projects focused on education in the post-1964 context. He chaired the interministerial working group formed in 1967, which was tasked with defining the funding sources for the newly established agency. This group proposed allocating a percentage of the resources from the future Federal Sports Lottery (LEF) to finance the new organization, a proposal that gained legal force through Decree-Law 66,118 in February 1970. Considering that the LEF only became operational in April 1970—initially on an experimental basis in the state of Guanabara—it is plausible that the effective implementation of Mobral was similarly delayed due to the lack of available funding, notwithstanding other contributing factors. This was despite Decree 1,124 (also issued in 1970), which established that

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7 The Decadal Plan for Economic and Social Development, spanning the years 1967 to 1976, articulated in the sections on 'Education' and 'Labor' that the purpose of education should be to "[...] consolidate the country's human capital structure to accelerate the process of economic development." (apud Horta, 1982, p. 142).

8 For a more in-depth exploration of this topic, see: Frigotto (1989), Garcia (1977), Manzini-Covre (1993) and Santos (1981).

9 In October and November of 1968, the Ipes organized a series of conferences titled the Education Forum, wherein Simonsen participated as a discussant on the topic of 'Education and Economic Development,' and the keynote speaker was Roberto Campos, the Minister of Planning under the Costa e Silva administration, who was responsible for appointing him to lead the Mobral. For a greater understanding of the role this institution played during the 1960s, see Souza (1981).

10 Position held from 1972 to 1974, after which he assumed the presidency of the Mobral.



contributions made to Mobral would permit a 1% deduction from Income Tax (Manzini-Covre, 1993)<sup>11</sup>. As previously mentioned, Mobral emerged as an attempt to transcend the campaign model attempted in prior governments. While it retained several similarities to those earlier initiatives, this new agency was framed as a complementary component of regular education, rather than as an isolated, salvational endeavor. Its creation occurred within the broader context of the Continuing Education Plan for Adults, which was submitted to the National Congress in 1967 and outlined objectives that extended beyond the narrow focus of literacy in the strictest sense.

[...]

i) Integration of educational and professional practices across all literacy and adult education initiatives, focusing on fundamental issues related to health, labor, household management, religion, civic engagement, and recreation;

[...]

l) establishment of centers for social and civic integration to foster adult sociability and reinforce acquired habits and skills; (apud Souza, 1981, p. 182).

In its inaugural year of operation, Mobral received 6.75% of the revenue generated by the Federal Sports Lottery (LEF) to fund its activities. However, according to a publication assessing its seven years of existence, this percentage was gradually decreased in the following years (it had dropped to 5.4% by the next year) due to the increasing popularity of the LEF, which ultimately became a sought-after source of financing for various government programs in the social sector (Faria, 1977)<sup>12</sup>. By the late 1970s, its president—previously mentioned, Arlindo Lopes Corrêa—criticized the continuous reduction in financial resources, which hindered the broader expansion of Mobral (Corrêa, 1979)<sup>13</sup>. The initial programs launched under Mobral included the Functional Literacy Program (PAF) and the Integrated Education Program (PEI). The PAF focused on literacy through courses lasting 4 to 5 months, while the PEI provided the opportunity to complete primary education within 12 months. The law establishing these programs initially targeted the illiterate

<sup>11</sup> Souza (1981) additionally emphasizes that Simonsen's appointment was crucial for the successful functioning of the Mobral.

<sup>12</sup> According to Souza (1981), the budget allocated for the Mobral in 1970 was projected to be thirteen million dollars, a substantial amount for that time. Werebe (1994) notes that this figure represented 28% of the federal resources, equating it to the funding allocated for primary education.

<sup>13</sup> This contradicts the perception that the Mobral has consistently relied on substantial resources from the LEF for its financing, as stated by authors such as Cunha and Góes (2002).

population aged 15 to 35; however, in 1974, this age range expanded to include individuals aged 9 to 14 as well (Cunha, 1981)<sup>14</sup>.

In the evaluation that Arlindo Lopes Corrêa provides regarding Mobral in the late 1970s, it is noted that the expansion of its initial programs focused on transforming rural populations—perceived as amorphous and inactive in their contributions to the country's economic development—into proactive communities striving to enhance their living conditions. The ideology known as Community Development had already been present in Brazil since at least the 1950s, coinciding with the increased involvement of international organizations (particularly American) in policies targeted at rural populations during the Cold War era. Its fundamental premise was that organizing groups of individuals into a community - essentially a collective that collaborates to improve its living standards through enhanced work practices, behavioral habits, and formal education - would ultimately foster the development of the country as a whole. While this approach was also applied in urban areas, it was primarily designed to organize rural populations<sup>15</sup>. According to the then-president of Mobral:

[...] by June 1973, the Institution had successfully reached all municipalities in Brazil, solidifying its role as a powerful instrument of national integration. Its characterization as a municipalist movement, fundamentally community-oriented, was already well established; the diversification of its activities was taking place at the level of the Municipal Commissions - voluntary groups endowed with considerable autonomy and flexibility - aligned with the principles of decentralization that characterized the Organization.

[...] In 1973, partnerships were formed with professional training entities to support graduates of literacy and integrated education programs. By the end of that year, MOBREAL Cultural was launched, signifying a pivotal moment in the Institution's "humanistic evolution". From this point forward, all new MOBREAL programs were characterized by a strong emphasis on community involvement, infused with a rich humanism, as participants - known as mobralenses - began to play a critical role in shaping the direction of the Organization (Corrêa, 1979, p. 21, emphasis added by the author).

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<sup>14</sup> The allegation that children under the age of 9 were attending its classes was even the subject of investigation by the National Congress, a fact that was acknowledged by its president (Corrêa, 1979; Faria, 1977). For a synthesis of the more strictly pedagogical activities carried out by the Mobral, as well as a more recent bibliographic review of studies related to its literacy efforts, see Prado and Neto (2019).

<sup>15</sup> For a more in-depth analysis of the topic, see Ammann (2009).



As the preceding statement indicates, in each municipality where Mobral commenced its operations, a Municipal Commission (Comun) was established, comprised of volunteers<sup>16</sup> tasked with securing facilities for literacy classes, recruiting students, enlisting literacy instructors, and overseeing other local activities conducted under the Organization's auspices. The central governing body, headquartered in Rio de Janeiro, was responsible for disbursing the funds allocated for compensating those engaged in literacy work, as well as supervising these activities in collaboration with state and territorial coordinators (Castro & Almeida, 1979).

However, the enhancement of the minimum educational qualifications of the illiterate population was perceived by Mobral's leaders as insufficient for integrating these individuals into the country's social and economic development project, as well as into the conservative ideology characteristic of the military regime. Particularly concerning rural populations—regarded as especially vulnerable to the influence of ideas deemed 'subversive' due to their generally precarious living conditions—Mobral established its first program in 1971 to complement the Functional Literacy Program (PAF). This program already aimed to effect a transformation in the mindset of students and their families through class activities, seeking to instill new behavioral patterns:

We prefer that at home, the adult student discusses and reflects with their family about everything that occurred in class, thereby functioning as a 'multiplier' by bringing new information to their family, thus enabling them to benefit, in some capacity, from the experiences they have gained in class (Brazilian Literacy Movement [Mobral], 1972, p. 116, emphasis added by the author).

Designated as the Community Development Program (Prodac), its primary goal was to foster the engagement of students in initiatives that would contribute to material improvements within their local communities. To this end, during literacy classes and other activities conducted with participants, content highlighting the importance of collaboration and collective initiative in addressing community issues was also presented. In the description of the members of the Mobral leadership team responsible for organizing this program, the following is noted:

This program suggested activities aimed at simultaneously facilitating communication among individuals and groups, utilizing leisure hours to foster a spirit of community engagement (through games, celebrations, and excursions), raising awareness of

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<sup>16</sup> A study conducted by Mobral in the Northeast region found that the majority of the members of the Communities were women with an average age of 32 years, and regarding education, there were two extremes represented by those who had not completed the four grades of Primary Education and those who had reached, but not necessarily completed, the then 2nd Degree of education (Castro & Almeida, 1979).

collective responsibility concerning hygiene and health, promoting changes in dietary habits (including the establishment and maintenance of household and community gardens), developing skills, and encouraging handicrafts, among other initiatives. (Costa et al., 1979, p. 336).

However, this initial effort failed to provide each individual with the 'opportunity to develop their potential.' According to the program's evaluators, the reasons for its failure were rooted in the deeply ingrained tendency among Brazilians to cling to an individualistic perspective instead of embracing what constitutes the common good. This was coupled with the prevailing expectation that it was solely the government's responsibility to make decisions and resolve the nation's problems. Such factors fostered an attitude of complacency and conformism that compromised both the implementation of and the investments in the program (Costa et al., 1979). Nevertheless, this obstacle was likely more attributable to ignorance than to any active resistance to those teachings. Consequently, it could be effectively addressed through community-focused training initiatives.

Thus, following the failure of this initial initiative, a new educational strategy was devised. Named the Diversified Community Action Program (Prodac), this strategy was guided by the metaphorical conception that the country was an immense puzzle that needed to be assembled through the correct fitting of its individual pieces (Costa et al., 1979).

Launched in 1975, Prodac was conceived as an umbrella program designed to encompass all other initiatives undertaken within the framework of Mobral across nearly four thousand municipalities where it was present at the time. In its initial phase, the program was implemented in 79 municipalities from all regions of the country. Its primary objective was to launch the program in up to five municipalities in each state or territory (selected based on the population of the municipal seat, with three having up to ten thousand inhabitants and two ranging from ten to fifty thousand inhabitants). It was divided into subprograms across the following areas: Education; Health and Sanitation; Professional Development; Nutrition; Housing; Production Activities; Nature Conservation; Sports; and Research (Costa et al., 1979). During the implementation phase of Prodac in the municipalities, courses and lectures were offered on each of these areas. According to the publication assessing Mobral's activities up to 1979, the Production Activities subprogram provided courses on establishing gardens, which included lectures on cooperativism, the benefits of the Funrural program, rural credit, minimum pricing, and the use of agricultural pesticides. Seeds were distributed, and training was provided on garden formation and horticulturist registration. In the Sports subprogram, football teams were organized to compete in inter-district tournaments. Within the Professional Development subprogram, in addition to vocational courses, training in brick and cement

production was offered (in one locality, a school was even constructed). In the Housing subprogram, ten houses were renovated and eighteen new ones were built. Finally, the Nutrition subprogram involved lectures on food and nutrition and the distribution of food to students in literacy courses (Costa et al., 1979).

Created in accordance with the principles of business planning, with clearly defined general and specific objectives and the belief that a well-organized execution process would guarantee success, Prodac was set to unfold in three stages: mobilization, group organization, and work maintenance. Prior to these stages, the aim was to secure support from entities actively engaged, either directly or indirectly, in the social sphere, as well as from the mayors of each municipality. The program's evaluation report indicates that initial skepticism regarding the receptivity of these entities was the standard. According to the authors of the referenced document, this attitude shifted once the presence of Mobral was established. Evidence of this transformation is seen in the participation of the following national entities in Prodac's initiatives: the Brazilian Association of Rural Credit and Assistance (Abcar); the National Department of Works Against Drought (Dnocs); the Foundation for Public Health Services (FSESP); the Rural Worker Assistance Fund (Funrural); the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE); the National Institute of Social Security (INPS); the National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform (Incra); the Brazilian Legion of Assistance (LBA); the Base Education Movement (MEB); the Intensive Labor Force Preparation Program (Pipmo); the National Service for Industrial Training (Senai); the Social Service of Industry (Sesi); and the Superintendency of Public Health Campaigns (Sucam). At the state level, collaboration was provided by the Secretariats of Agriculture, Education, Health, and Labor, as well as the Departments of Highways and Roads (DER). Lastly, at the municipal level, efforts were made to engage service clubs, newspapers, hospitals, city halls, municipal councils, Masonic lodges, social centers, spiritist centers, churches, mothers' clubs, youth groups, cooperatives, and labor unions.

Regarding the mayors, there was an indication of enthusiastic acceptance, as the presence of Prodac could prove to be an important political asset and an opportunity for continuous engagement with the municipal electorate.

The mobilization phase, identified as a continual element throughout the implementation of the program, would encompass extensive initial outreach utilizing all available channels to encourage participation from individuals "across all economic, social, and cultural strata of the community" in a preliminary survey conducted by the Municipal Commissions of Mobral. The survey itself was anticipated to evoke a mobilizing effect and stimulate active engagement within the Program:

Following the organization of the data, a preliminary diagnosis of the situation is produced and presented to the community in meetings held at both the municipal headquarters and in rural

areas. This allows the community to become informed about the survey results, engage in discussions regarding them, and, in a reflective manner concerning the community's issues, take responsibility for their solutions. Participants discuss not only the problems but also the proposed solutions and available resources, identifying what is prioritized and feasible for resolution, as well as the appropriate courses of action (Costa et al., 1979, p. 340).

It is evident that the encouragement of participation is situated within the confines of what is local and immediate, promoting the “[...] development of a critical consciousness [anchored] in the here and now.” (Costa et al., 1979, p. 337).

Following this initial phase, the initiative would focus on enlisting individuals identified as community leaders to collaborate with Mobral personnel. This potential leadership capacity would derive from their familiarity with the local context, their affiliation with existing organizations, or their interest in engaging in community activities. Additionally, efforts were made to ensure the participation of local entities and the less affluent segments of the population through "special incentives." Once this stage was completed, working groups would be organized into two types: the Community Action Group (GAC) and the Local Action Group (GAL).

GAC would be responsible for coordinating, planning, executing, and expanding PRODAC from the municipal headquarters, composed of volunteers. Conversely, the GAL, comprised of volunteers residing in rural areas of the municipality, would focus on implementing activities aimed at local development.

It is noteworthy that the texts and documents produced by Mobral consistently exhibit a style that could be described as “militarized,” particularly regarding efforts to cultivate the community as a self-sufficient entity seeking “[...] solutions based on municipal resources and within its possibilities” (Costa et al., 1979, p. 341). Accordingly, the GAC was tasked with developing the Integrated Action Plan (Planai), which should outline the activities conducted by the GALs. In turn, the GALs were responsible for formulating the Local Action Plan (Planal). Both the GAC and GAL would be coordinated by the community responsible for Mobral's Prodac<sup>17</sup>. It is evident that the architects of this initiative understood that the language employed—imbued with terminology related to technical planning and thoughtful organization—would likely engender a perception of undeniable rationality in governmental actions manifested within rural locales, reinforcing the intention that the presence of the State be evident in all corners of the country.

Not coincidentally, regarding this phenomenon, an active partnership with the Army was sought to unify efforts aimed at the ideological integration of rural populations within the framework of Brazil's capitalist development project,

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<sup>17</sup> The use of terms specific to the military lexicon as a characteristic of the period, particularly in the field of education, has already been pointed out by Cunha and Góes (2002).

addressing the need to eliminate political resistance and maximize the profitable utilization of the labor force<sup>18</sup>. Beginning in July 1976, Prodac aligned itself with the Civic-Social Action (Aciso), the Army's principal program within its Community Action framework, which aimed to establish a presence in the social and welfare sectors of this military force across various regions of the country<sup>19</sup>. This collaboration initially resulted in a project named Mobral/Aciso, which was later rebranded as Prodac/Aciso (Costa et al., 1979). Aciso was characterized by the organization of targeted events designed to present a more humanized image of the Army to the populations in impoverished regions of both urban and rural areas. The Army's Community Action, established by Ordinance No. 069-EME on December 31, 1975, sought to “[...] cooperate with communities to improve their living conditions, thereby contributing to the strengthening of National Power” (apud Costa et al., 1979, p. 348). The objectives of this program were:

[...] Primarily, to foster civic engagement and provide various forms of support to economically disadvantaged groups. Additionally, ACISO should not pursue its goals solely through temporary material achievements, but more importantly, by instilling a sense of community spirit in citizens, which is one of the fundamental pillars for the enhancement of the democratic system. (Costa et al., 1979, p. 349).

The partnership with Prodac would thus represent the opportunity for this initiative to assume a lasting character. For Prodac, it signified the potential to benefit from the material resources and logistical support of the Army, as well as to secure a vital political ally in the competition for funding for the program. According to the central leadership of Mobral, the symbiosis between the two programs, Prodac and Aciso, was justified because:

The [Army's] Instructions delineate several objectives for community action, including: 1) to enhance the strengthening of community bonds through participation in associations and a variety of civil activities; 2) to encourage the organization of the community for coordinated action by continuously fostering a communal spirit among authorities and civil organizations; and 3) to collaborate in the socio-economic development of the community (Costa et al., 1979, p. 348).

<sup>18</sup> The Army already had an indirect connection with Mobral to the extent that it provided, in many rural areas, War Shots, Barracks, and other facilities for conducting literacy activities (Mathias, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> Within the scope of this article, the hypothesis is raised that this program may have also aimed, at some point, at regions considered, either actually or potentially, prone to the actions of individuals or organizations contesting the dictatorship. At least in the case of the Vale do Ribeira, there was the activity of armed resistance groups against the dictatorship, and this fact certainly motivated the state government to significantly increase its engagement in social policies in the region, as shown by Silva (1983).

This project initiated its activities in 19 cities<sup>20</sup> across the regions of Campinas, Itu, Lins, and Pirassununga in the state of São Paulo, linking it to the operational areas of Army units already engaged in initiatives within Aciso. The subsequent 'operation' was conducted in the Vale do Paraíba, characterized as "[...] one of the least developed regions of the state of São Paulo" (Costa et al., 1979, p. 350), encompassing four municipalities within that region<sup>21</sup>. Following these initial endeavors, Mobral/Aciso was established in eleven municipalities in Rio Grande do Sul<sup>22</sup>. This third phase involved a heightened presence of military personnel within Prodac, likely due to its organization stemming from the III Army rather than from local military units. This participation integrated officers assigned to the program's operational area throughout all stages of implementation, adhering to the same hierarchical structure present in the military at each level of decision-making. In total, regarding these initiatives, it was reported that 213 Action Groups were established in rural areas and 811 in urban settings across the selected municipalities, with a cumulative involvement of 4,840 participants in the groups. The direct impact of the actions undertaken was stated to have reached approximately 150,000 individuals (Costa et al., 1979, p. 351).

With the positive assessment of these experiences, they were proposed as a strategy for integrating populations in the border regions of the northern part of the country, reflecting concerns about their detachment from central authority and the perceived risk of their susceptibility to ideas propagated by militants or political organizations opposed to the regime. This was based on the understanding that these populations, euphemistically, "[...] experience a social process that is not aligned with the development framework proposed in the country." (Costa et al., 1979, p. 352).

Established in seven locations across five municipalities in the Amazon<sup>23</sup>, Prodac/Aciso's primary objective was to "[...] engage the resident populations in their settlement on the land—where they should seek solutions to their challenges" (Costa et al., 1979, p. 352)—as part of a broader effort to rationalize the resources allocated to the region and to expand the activities of socially-oriented organizations.

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<sup>20</sup> Aguaí, Boituva, Cafelândia, Campinas, Capivari, Casa Branca, Getulina, Guaimbê, Itu, Jaguariúna, Lins, Morungaba, Pirassununga, Porto Feliz, Porto Ferreira, Sabino, Salto, Santa Cruz da Conceição and Santa Cruz das Palmeiras (Costa et al., 1979, p. 349).

<sup>21</sup> Lagoinha, Natividade da Serra, Redenção da Serra and São Luiz do Paraitinga (Costa et al., 1979, p. 350).

<sup>22</sup> Alecrim, Barra do Ribeira, Candelária, Dom Pedrito, General Câmara, Itaqui, Rosário do Sul, Santo Ângelo, São Francisco de Paula, São José do Norte and São Nicolau (Costa et al., 1979, p. 350).

<sup>23</sup> Benjamin Constant and Tabatinga, in the municipality of Benjamin Constant; Vila Bittencourt, in the municipality of Japurá; Ipiranga, in the municipality of Santo Antônio do Içá; Estirão do Equador and Palmeira dos Índios, in the municipality of Atalaia do Norte; Cucuí, in the municipality of São Gabriel da Cachoeira. Seventy entities and 142 professionals from various specialties participated in this 'operation,' including doctors, agronomists, veterinarians, engineers, social workers, and agricultural technicians. Regarding resources, in addition to Mobral itself, they came from the following entities: Funai, Incra, LBA, and Sudepe/Senar (Costa et al., 1979).



After conducting a preliminary diagnosis<sup>24</sup> of the living conditions, challenges encountered, and available resources in each locality, Mobral, the Army, and other involved entities developed a list of initiatives aimed at addressing both the precarious living conditions of the populations and the extent of Mobral's efforts to contribute to the "[...] settlement of individuals in the region and the enhancement of their quality of life" (Costa et al., 1979, p. 353). Among these initiatives are community gardens; basic techniques and resources for pig farming, poultry farming, and cattle ranching; vocational training programs; the implementation of the Community Health Education Program; the construction of water treatment facilities; the equipping of cultural and sports organizations; the establishment of health clinics and postal offices; the creation of cooperatives and food resale outlets for the Brazilian Food Company (Cobal); the establishment of Sudepe outposts; and the provision of documentation through Incra for land legalization (Costa et al., 1979).

Reflecting the idea of permanence in one's place of origin, Mobral integrated the intention to offer some form of basic vocational training alongside traditional literacy from its inception. In rural areas, this training would be provided in a more streamlined fashion compared to urban settings, considering the immediate demands of economic production, thereby adopting a utilitarian focus. As noted, "[...] in smaller communities, the courses will be directed toward semi-qualification." (Mobral, 1972, p. 43).

As a broader ideological orientation, these community organization initiatives aim to emphasize an interpretation of reality that is exclusively immediate in nature. The priority lies in resolving specific, practical issues, for which effective techniques and meticulous planning can consistently provide solutions, grounded in the immediate and objective conditions present. Thus, it seems futile to aspire to a future that has not yet come into being:

Based on the experiences and observations gathered, we can assert that the process of community development will always entail a relativity that incorporates both the history of the community and its members, as well as the willingness to engage in exploration and inquiry. This dynamic is exemplified by the "here" and "now," in which individuals position and affirm themselves as agents of their own transformation (*ex ducere*). In doing so, they also become catalysts for the transformation of their community, their country, their continent, and ultimately, the world (Costa et al., 1979, pp. 353-354, emphasis added by the author).

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<sup>24</sup> Cunha (1981) highlights this striking characteristic of the post-1964 Military Regime, which is the frequent and numerous diagnoses concerning all aspects of reality that became the focus of the actions of the dictatorial state during that period.

In this context, the community assumes the role of the fundamental unit of society, transcending everyone<sup>25</sup>. An individual's existence as a citizen is fully realized only to the extent that they dedicate themselves to serving the community. Within this framework, the community is conceptualized as a natural embodiment of a supposedly universal and transcendent human nature:

The community acts as the essential instrument for the realization of human nature, guiding individuals away from individualism and egocentrism toward a progressive engagement that manifests through their assimilation of both the community and the broader universe. This transformative process enriches the human soul, enabling it to embody a synthesis of all creation (Costa et al., 1979, p. 354).

In this context, the concept of 'progressive participation' posits literacy as a fundamental prerequisite for exercising citizenship, particularly as voters<sup>26</sup>, where such participation was feasible. Although this intention was undoubtedly present, the initiatives implemented addressed much broader dimensions regarding the ideological formation of rural populations, often encountering resistance from various stakeholders involved in the programs. Furthermore, the anticipated mass electoral engagement did not materialize during the electoral contests held throughout Mobral's existence, particularly in light of the notable gains made by the Brazilian Democratic Movement (MDB), the recognized opposition party.(Fausto, 2006).

Beyond this provisional connection, an active integration was also expected, even under the significantly constrained conditions that it might entail. The principle underscored was that individuals must first meet their obligations to both the local and national community as a prerequisite for the right to aspire to recognized rights.

As a member of a community, the student has responsibilities toward that community and can only claim their rights insofar as they commit to fulfilling these obligations. In this context, it is essential for the educator to guide their students in discovering and understanding their own community, including its challenges, shortcomings, and potentialities, so that they may become aware of their responsibilities (Mobral, 1972, p. 45).

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<sup>25</sup> There is certainly a critique here, explicitly stated, against what is defined as 'individualism' of a classical liberal bias that overlooks concern for the 'common good.' This, in fact, is a characteristic trait of the authoritarian regimes that prevailed in Brazil throughout the 20th century.

<sup>26</sup> Among the criticisms directed at Mobral, there is the assertion that its main and sole objective was to increase the number of voters for the regime's party, the National Renewal Alliance (Arena). Hence, the use of literacy as an ideological conformity mechanism for its participants (Cunha, 1981; Cunha & Góes, 2002; Manzini-Covre, 1993; Paiva, 2003; Werebe, 1994)

In this interpretation of citizen participation, duties were emphasized over rights. Among these rights, the most fundamental was seen as the right to work. In other words, contributing productively to the nation's development was viewed as a source of personal fulfillment stemming from individual initiative, rather than an obligation of the state toward its citizens. Indirectly, it was expected that productive integration in their place of origin would encourage rural residents to remain rather than aspire to life in major cities, where they would swell the ranks of urban peripheries. In such circumstances, they would face the risk of becoming societal outcasts:

It is a prevalent phenomenon for individuals from rural areas to migrate to urban centers, particularly from smaller towns to larger cities, in search of enhanced opportunities. However, in this pursuit, they often encounter limited employment prospects due to the selective dynamics of the labor market. Consequently, they find themselves marginalized within the development process. The favelas serve as a tangible manifestation of this marginalization. (Mobral, 1972, p. 46).

However, for this mindset to be adopted by the attendees of the Functional Literacy Program - who represent the local population with the potential for mobilization and transformation into an active community - it is imperative that the educators<sup>27</sup> from Mobral engage in sustained efforts to cultivate a sense of belonging among their students:

The educator can endeavor to engage community members by fostering an understanding of the necessity for unity and the collective responsibility each individual bears toward their community. In this context, the teacher may seek to inspire local leaders, influential figures, and youth. By employing group techniques within the classroom, the educator can facilitate practical experiences that underscore the values of unity, participation, and collaborative labor, thereby encouraging students to apply these principles in their lives outside of school. It is telling that the literacy materials incorporate foundational concepts such as unity, community, love, work, and faith (Mobral, 1972, p. 51).

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<sup>27</sup> A study commissioned by Mobral itself indicates that women aged between 15 and 34 years, with an average age of 28.5 years, almost completely comprised the teaching staff. Furthermore, it points out that their level of education was low, with many not having even completed primary school, and only a small portion having reached the 2nd Degree of education, often without completing it; however, this condition did not prevent about two-thirds of the literacy instructors from teaching in the first four grades as their primary professional occupation (Castro & Almeida, 1979).

The structure of compensation for those directly engaged in teaching as a bonus, contingent upon the number of students who remained enrolled for at least four of the five months of the course, effectively mandated that educators undertake continuous efforts to persuade the local illiterate population about the importance of advancing their education. Furthermore, it required them to enlist the support of individuals who could contribute to this objective. This model was deemed optimal not only for ensuring consistent attendance in classes but also for fostering an environment that encouraged the preservation of high-quality instruction:

As teachers are not compensated based on the number of students they successfully alfabetize, they are naturally inclined to adopt stringent approval criteria while also making significant efforts to retain their students in the classroom—actively working to prevent dropouts—since absenteeism leads to salary deductions. In wealthier municipalities, where the compensation offered by Mobral is regarded as inadequate, local governments often supplement these salaries with their own resources, thereby enhancing the motivation of educators<sup>28</sup> (Faria, 1977).

In essence, this initiative constitutes a project aimed at the comprehensive reorganization of rural populations' lives through an ongoing process of persuasion that commences in literacy classes. Ideally, this process should extend to mobilizing individuals who possess varying degrees of influence within their communities. Consequently, Municipal Commissions and those directly tasked with literacy efforts emerge as pivotal political agents within a framework that aspires to establish a society where the fundamental unit is the community, rather than the individual. The individual derives meaning and value primarily through their integration into the community.

## FINAL REMARKS

Founded with the declared objective of eradicating illiteracy in Brazil, Mobral was anchored in the belief in the efficacy of the civil-military technocracy, which was presumed capable of deploying its expertise to solve a problem that previous democratic administrations had ostensibly failed to address. Consequently, Mobral became the primary initiative of the post-1964 dictatorship regarding policies directed at rural populations in Brazil. Despite its presence in urban peripheral areas throughout the 1970s, the organization increasingly extended its influence over various aspects of rural life, aiming to integrate these communities into the overarching socio-economic development project promoted by the state.

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<sup>28</sup> It is worth noting that this almost certainly did not happen as a general rule; it is no coincidence that the work at Mobral was complementary to another teaching occupation.

Through the implementation of its Diversified Community Action Program, Mobral effectively served as an institution that progressively sought to amplify its influence among urban and rural populations throughout the country. Notably, within rural areas, Mobral assumed a strategic role in cultivating ideological alignment with the societal vision proposed by the military regime. This alignment was sought through proactive mobilization efforts, in which rural communities participating in Mobral's initiatives - beginning with literacy and fundamental educational training - were encouraged to take responsibility not only for their educational advancement but also for the enhancement of their living conditions.

Established against the backdrop of the so-called 'economic miracle,' Mobral traversed a period characterized by a crisis of legitimacy arising from the failures of the economic policies implemented by military governments. It was widely expected that Mobral would function as a countermeasure to the growing discontent beginning to seep into rural areas from the dissatisfaction among urban populations. However, it is not possible to assert with certainty whether this role was effectively realized. What remains indisputable is Mobral's failure to achieve its primary objective of eliminating illiteracy in the country. Likewise, its intended aim of fostering a loyal electorate did not produce the anticipated results.

Nevertheless, various additional aspects can be highlighted as significant regarding Mobral's role in its interactions with rural populations. Its program, which aimed to cultivate a sense of community among rural residents, promoted a set of behavioral norms and modes of integration within the local societies inhabited by its students. These individuals experienced a transformation in status as they began to perceive their illiteracy not as a lingering stigma, but as a condition that could be transcended; they identified themselves as 'Mobralense.' This designation afforded them a newfound visibility as individuals actively participating in the much-lauded national development initiatives.

Without overlooking the myriad factors that contributed to Mobral's failure in fulfilling its primary objective—namely, the drastic reduction of illiteracy rates in Brazil—this analysis posits the possibility that the Diversified Community Action Program may, to some extent, have succeeded. On one hand, it functioned as a mechanism for the ideological and political integration of rural populations deemed susceptible to influences that challenge the prevailing social and political order. On the other hand, it provided a channel for articulating demands and aspirations within the framework of the political domination that characterized the 1970's. Course participants often found themselves dissatisfied with the minimal education provided to them, prompting their pursuit of further study, occasionally re-enrolling in courses when continuity options were unavailable. This pursuit was driven by the desire to express their identities among their peers and to expand the horizons of their life experiences, which were typically defined by the daily struggle for survival.

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