

## AN ETERNAL PRESENT? University Students' Perceptions of the 1964 Military Coup in Brazil

Um eterno presente? Percepção de estudantes universitários  
sobre o golpe militar de 1964 no Brasil

¿Un presente eterno? Percepción de estudiantes universitarios  
sobre el golpe militar de 1964 en Brasil

MARISA BITTAR

Universidade Federal de São Carlos, São Carlos, SP, Brasil. E-mail: [bittar@ufscar.br](mailto:bittar@ufscar.br).

---

**Abstract:** Having the military dictatorship as an object of research since my Master's degree, I present for this dossier a study conducted with students from a Brazilian federal university on their perception of the 1964 military coup. The methodology consisted of presenting a group of Mathematics, Chemistry, and Pedagogy students with the following question: "What did 1964 mean for Brazil?" With anonymity guaranteed, they were only asked to indicate their gender and age if they wished. All participants provided this information. As a theoretical tool, I use the conception of history as a living and contradictory process in itself, dependent solely on human conditions. Regarding the notion of time, I adopt the theory that past, present, and future coexist simultaneously, at the very moment each human action takes place.

**Keywords:** military dictatorship; past; collective memory; democracy.

**Resumo:** Tendo a ditadura militar como objeto de pesquisa desde o meu mestrado, apresento para este dossiê um estudo realizado com estudantes de uma universidade federal brasileira sobre a percepção deles do golpe militar de 1964. A metodologia consistiu em apresentar a um grupo de estudantes, entre veteranos e calouros de Matemática, Química e Pedagogia a seguinte pergunta: "O que 1964 significou para o Brasil?". Garantido o anonimato, foi solicitado apenas que, se desejassem, indicassem gênero e idade. Todas as pessoas indicaram esses dados sobre si mesmas. Como ferramenta teórica, empreguei a concepção de história como processo vivo e contraditório em si mesmo, dependente tão somente das próprias condições humanas. Além disso, adoto a teoria segundo a qual os três tempos – passado, presente e futuro – convivem, no mesmo instante em que cada ação humana é praticada.

**Palavras-chave:** ditadura militar; passado; memória coletiva; democracia.

**Resumen:** Teniendo la dictadura militar como objeto de investigación desde mi maestría, presento para este dossier un estudio realizado con estudiantes de una universidad federal brasileña sobre su percepción del golpe militar de 1964. La metodología consistió en presentar a un grupo de estudiantes, entre veteranos y estudiantes de primer año de Matemáticas, Química y Pedagogía, la siguiente pregunta: "¿Qué significó 1964 para Brasil?". Con el anonimato garantizado, sólo se les pidió que indicaran su sexo y edad si así lo deseaban. Todas las personas indicaron estos datos. Como herramienta teórica, utilizo la concepción de la historia como un proceso vivo y contradictorio en sí mismo, dependiente únicamente de las condiciones humanas. En cuanto a la perspectiva del tiempo, adopto la teoría según la cual los tres tiempos –pasado, presente y futuro– coexisten en el mismo momento en que se realiza cada acción humana.

**Palabras clave:** dictadura militar; pasado; memoria colectiva; democracia.

---

## INTRODUCTION

The higher the summit, the broader our horizon becomes and the better we perceive the whole.

Adam Schaff (1987)

In his book *An Introduction to History*, Ciro Flamarion Cardoso (1982) distinguishes historians from other social scientists by their primary concern with time, duration, change and resistance to change, transformations and permanence or survival. Similarly, Fernand Braudel pointed out the importance that permanence has on the historical process overcoming change. According to this historian, change is inherent to living in society, but often does not keep pace with our dreams and desires. Continuities, changes and the relationship between historical periods are the categories that inspired the writing of this article.

In the daily practice of our profession, whether teaching or researching, we are, in one way or another, always attentive to the relationship among past, present and future. If, on the one hand, historiography consists of critical reflection on the past; on the other, the past always has a meaning for us. History has an active relationship with the past insofar as “it helps us to better understand the society in which we live today, to know what to defend and preserve, and also to know what to change and destroy” (Chesneaux, 1995, p. 22).

I also take into consideration the conception of militant history, that is, one that presupposes action to modify the present and, therefore, interest in the future, as bequeathed by Marx and Engels, who stripped history of its supernatural attributes, rejecting idealistic explanations that characterized it, stating that “every previous conception of history has completely neglected the real basis of history or has considered it a secondary matter with no connection whatsoever with the course of history” (Marx & Engels, 1985, p. 50). When they elaborated their historiographical work, the two authors showed that it is possible to interpret events from “daily history”, from the “living everyday history of the time” and thus have “a clear understanding of events at the very moment in which they unfold” (Marx & Engels, 1985, p. 52). It is so possible to interpret the present historically that Jean Chesneaux, in *Du passé, faisons table rase?*, even reverses the signs.

When dealing with an essentially political issue such as the sixtieth anniversary of the military coup in Brazil, the attitude of knowing this past is not an end in itself, since this exercise implicitly involves the perspective of a social practice, an active and concrete engagement to avoid violent and authoritarian ruptures such as those of March 31, 1964. These threats are not banished from Brazilian history, as we know. This conception of militant history is controversial, as the appeal to action would transcend the strictly historiographical field, given that action itself contains

elements of a future situation—just as explained by the foremost Brazilian sociologist regarding the conception of history that “links past (both remote and recent), present in process and in becoming, and future (immediate or distant) in potential” (Fernandes, 1989, p. 28).

This perspective does not neglect the meticulous knowledge of the past, as Friederich Engels warned young people who used the phraseology of materialism to hide their lack of historical studies of their own. In a letter from 1890, he wrote: “The whole of history must be re-studied, the conditions of existence of the various social formations must be examined in detail, before inferring from them the corresponding political, legal, aesthetic, philosophical, religious, etc. conceptions. Little has been done in this regard to date, because few have seriously applied themselves (...) instead, the phraseology of historical materialism (everything can after all be reduced to phrases) only serves to enable many young Germans to hastily construct, from their relatively meager historical knowledge – for economic history is still in its infancy! – an entire system, and then appear to themselves as colossal” (Marx & Engels, 1985, p. 543).

The boundaries between the study of the past itself and engagement in political action to transform the present were addressed by Agnes Heller, who presented nuances between knowledge of the past (historiography) and knowledge of the past to modify the present (philosophy of history), in order to seek the dialectical relationship between past and present. She pointed out that, when we deal with the present with an eye to the future, although the topic of our interest also encompasses the past, that is, when our concern is the past, the present and the future, we are faced with a mode of theorizing called philosophy of history. For her, it is not the fact that the topic is the present or the past that differentiates one from the other, but rather whether this topic serves only as a means to deal with the problems of the present. Thus, the simple statement that historiography always deals with the past calls for another statement: historiography does not decide on its own the question of what is past. This is “an expression of a collective consciousness based on different aspects that follow: where does the past begin, does the present have only one past or several, and if it has several, how many does it have?” (Heller, 1992, p. 102). Seen from another perspective, the theme of historiography is constituted by the present, since the search for one or more pasts is always undertaken by today’s subjects, always from the perspective that “the historical past is not what is forgotten, but what can be remembered. In this sense, the past is, in fact, exclusively contained in the present” (Heller, 1993, p. 107).

This article also includes, albeit implicitly, my experience as a left-wing activist against the military dictatorship, a situation in which, as a member of the board of the Mato Grosso Movement for Amnesty and Human Rights, I was arrested in 1976. In Campo Grande, the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB), the main left-wing party in that city at the time, operated illegally and was the architect of the democratic front against the dictatorship in southern Mato Grosso. The thesis was that it could only be

defeated by a mass movement and broad alliances. Being part of this movement allowed me to add to my History course curriculum at the Faculdades Unidas Católicas de Mato Grosso the knowledge I acquired in study groups about authors who were banned at the time, whether from historiography, political theory or philosophy. In short, Marxism.

It is not only because of my political past that I consider the subject of the military dictatorship relevant to this dossier. For three decades, as researchers of the military dictatorship, Amarílio Ferreira Jr. and I, at the Federal University of São Carlos, have been assembling an archive with unpublished documents, as well as books and newspaper clippings. Our research has shown that, after 1985, the predominant theme in research on Brazilian education was neoliberalism. The military dictatorship was forgotten (Ferreira & Bittar, 1999; Bittar, 2006; Bittar & Ferreira, 2014). Ironically, it was the election of Jair Bolsonaro to the Presidency of the Republic in 2018 that finally sparked academic interest in the military dictatorship. The research we have conducted has allowed us to understand that this past has been erased for two reasons: 1) political history has ceased to be important in Brazilian historiography, making way to cultural history. This gave rise to new research themes focused on gender issues, representations, identities and subjective issues; 2) on the left, redemocratization (1985) coincided with the rise of the Workers' Party (PT), created in 1980, which was more interested in building its political hegemony on the national scene and less linked to the leading role of the democratic front. Anti-Marxist, the PT established itself on the left in opposition to the parties and political practices of the “past”, declaring itself the sole and legitimate representative of workers. The construction of this hegemony was built by looking forward, which was correct, but neglecting the rear-view mirror.

As a researcher and having been part of the democratic movement against the dictatorship, I propose, with this article, a reflection on what questions have been asked of this past and what aspects of it are being evoked by the subjects of the present. The reason for this is that the quality and validity of the answers always depend on the questions we ask them. What do we want to know about it that we do not yet know? Why, essentially, do we return to it?

Based on these assumptions, I present in this article the study I conducted with undergraduate students at a Brazilian federal university, the objective of which was to determine the level of knowledge they had about the 1964 *coup d'état* and its implications for the present. Sixty years after the establishment of the military dictatorship, I discuss here the perception of a portion of the student youth about the recent history of their own country. The conviction of bringing the military dictatorship into the debate is based on the theory that the past only exists for us if we summon it.

## A FORGOTTEN PAST?

Two theoretical questions motivated the decision to develop an analysis of the historical awareness of university students about the military dictatorship and its consequences for the political and cultural life of Brazil in the forty years that separate us from it, since in 2025 we will complete four decades of the conquest of democracy. To what extent has this achievement been consolidated and has it met our expectations? Does knowledge of the past help us in this understanding?

To do this, we must first consider the tendency to erase certain pasts. This is not a tendency exclusive to the present, since in history, at any time, certain pasts have been preserved and exalted, in contrast to others, which have been relegated to oblivion. Why do human societies adopt such a stance? Why are certain pasts of interest and others not? This question must be answered with another question: to whom are they of interest? For each and every past exists only for us, and not in the abstract; that is, it exists if we bring it up to the present. In this regard, the historian François Dosse (1992), when taking stock of French historiography in the 1990s, exposed elements of the criticism and self-criticism that New History was undergoing regarding its rejection of political interpretations. Politics, he recalled, has been its noble core since history was established as a discipline. Under positivism, it privileged established power and elected heads of state, kings and queens as its protagonists. Because of its origins, it began to be rejected in historiographical interpretations that elected other spheres of human activity as more important, such as ethnography.

For Dosse (1995), the consequences of the virtual abandonment of studies on political history and the emergence of new problems that gained hegemony in Western historiography in the 1990s required a critical examination due to the urgent need to resume political interpretations. In the French case, this urgency was clear in the face of the tendency to erase from its history the collaborationism with Nazism during the Second World War. This tendency, according to Dosse (1995), was very serious even considering the fact that the country had a solid history education, based on a strong positivist historiography, that is, a historiography in which such collaborationism was recorded and which bequeathed, through the French education system, facts and dates that were generally known to the population. Incidentally, what tourist, when visiting France, does not come across a chronological line in every church, in every museum, in every public institution, showing that specific place as part of the chain of events in the country?

In the Brazilian case, the problem is aggravated because, here, history teaching has been hampered by a political deficit since the military dictatorship, a period during which the curricula expected to reach, at most, the study of the 1930 Revolution. At the time, references to the present, that is, to the dictatorship itself, were censored in higher education history courses, as was the case in mine. As a student, I witnessed how this fundamental page of national life was erased. This led

to a lack of knowledge about our contemporary history, a situation later worsened by the rejection of political history due to its association with positivism—an error that reduced political history to merely “kings and queens, fanfares and trumpets” (Braudel, 1983, p. 126), as if it could not and, above all, should not also be about workers, women, and people erased from the collective memory. A conception of political history like this was sorely missed.

Furthermore, after the military dictatorship ended, it did not become an important subject of research in the following decade, since cultural history was on the rise. Combined with this change in theoretical perspective at *Oficina de Clio*, there was a certain rejection of viewing a dramatic period that ended in a way that preserved structural elements of the past. The military dictatorship’s conclusion through a democratic front politically led by conservative sectors resulted in the subject being largely rejected by leftist academic circles that had opposed this approach. However, it was the mass politics of the democratic front that generated the mobilization for *Diretas-Já*, the largest popular mobilization in the history of Brazil. And, even so, the Dante de Oliveira amendment that would have restored direct elections for President of the Republic was rejected by the National Congress in April 1984. With this defeat, the end of the dictatorship was only possible through the indirect election of Tancredo Neves (PMDB) in alliance with José Sarney (PDS), a politician who had been one of the bulwarks of the military regime. The conservative side of the transition from military to civilian power would become clearer and more consecrated due to an unusual event, as between the indirect election and the inauguration on March 15, 1985, Tancredo Neves would lose his life, a fact that then made José Sarney the first president of the redemocratization.

At the same time as the trend towards erasing the past had been taking hold, since the 1990s, the effects of the technical-scientific revolution were growing stronger, the results of which manifested themselves, among other aspects, in the speed at which information is disseminated, in addition to the so-called social networks, which have created their own languages. Their frenetic pace brings with it the false idea that only current information is valid, and with it also occurs a change in the way we view the past. For most people, dependent on what is transmitted by communication channels and social networks, history is limited to exactly what they transmit. In fact, the very idea of history is nullified by this hegemonic form of current communication, a fact that is much more serious than Eric Hobsbawm predicted when, in the 1990s, he analyzed this and other phenomena of the “short 20th century,” stating that we were no longer able to learn from history and that one of the reasons for the break with the past was the extremely advanced technology that characterized consumer societies. The loss of historical reference was expressed by him as follows: “This technology produces a way of perceiving the world that is an eternal present. What counts is what you see on TV. There is no longer an organic connection with the past. Most people, especially the younger ones, live in this eternal

present. 'Yesterday' is no longer a reference, except for personal biographical purposes" (Hobsbawm, 1995, p. 07).

If this analysis was a reflection of the 1990s, what can we say about today, when even TV has been replaced by cell phone screens? This reality is essential for understanding the youth who are in universities and were born in the 21st century. It was from this group that I sought the data for this article.

## WHEN THE PAST IS REPLACED BY THE ETERNAL PRESENT

The results of the study I present are from data collected to analyze the phenomena related to the acceleration of history, which Hobsbawm defined as the "eternal present". Respecting anonymity and ethical principles, I took as a reference a historical event of great relevance to the history of Brazil and, considering that it is not situated in a distant past, I sought to verify whether it is understood, and in what way, by a portion of the Brazilian population that has access to information broadcast by the media as well as to public higher education, in this case, a federal university. Considering that the majority of young Brazilian students at this level of education are enrolled in private institutions, I considered that the favorable social situation of this portion that benefits from public higher education would provide them with a clearer knowledge of this historical past. For this purpose, I collected 68 testimonies from students of Mathematics, Chemistry and Pedagogy courses, whose class composition comes, for the most part, from the middle classes. These courses are offered during the day and at night, which means that few young people are working students. The methodology consisted of presenting a question about the meaning of 1964 and asking them to write freely about what they knew about this historical event and its implications for Brazilian society. The question presented was "What did 1964 mean for Brazil?". Identification was not required so as not to inhibit responses.

To analyze their content, I classified the testimonies into the categories indicated in the following table:

**Chart 1** – Classification of statements by Mathematics, Chemistry, and Pedagogy students on the meaning of 1964 for Brazil

They don't know	They think there was a dictatorship	They think they know, but they are wrong about the event.	They know there was a <i>coup d'état</i>	They know a little more than the coup itself	Total
10	07	10	21	20	68

Source: prepared by the author.

In the answers categorized as “don’t know”, there are justifications such as “I don’t remember at the moment” or, simply, “I don’t know”. In the second group, the answers were almost all “I think it was the military dictatorship”. The third group includes answers classified as “I know what 1964 was about”, but which, however, contained errors that showed a lack of knowledge about the fact itself. In the group of those who “know that there was a *coup d’état*”, there are occasionally explanatory texts in addition to the pure and simple statement.

I will now comment on these statements and, to begin, I would like to highlight the statement by a student who fits exactly Hobsbawm’s explanation of the loss of the meaning of “yesterday” in our lives. He wrote: “I don’t know if it was the era of Getúlio Vargas or the beginning of the military regime. I don’t remember! I, like many friends, don’t remember many dates and years in which we didn’t live” (Freshman student of Mathematics, 22 years old) (Bittar, 2023). It is worth noting the reference to “many friends” who, like him, do not remember dates they did not live. In theoretical terms, this answer fits the common sense that we only understand facts in which we participated. However, to contradict this, I would like to highlight a freshman student of Pedagogy (67 years old) who states: “I only remember that there was a revolution. I was a girl and my relatives were apprehensive because they were afraid that a war would break out. Other than that, I don’t remember. Was it a fight to end militarism? I don’t know” (Bittar, 2023). This answer comes from a Pedagogy student whose age differs from the majority, which occurs in some night courses. She remembers what happened, probably from what she heard, and the apprehension of her relatives who feared “a war would break out”. However, despite having lived through the coup, even though she was a “girl”, she herself does not know if it was “a fight to end militarism”. This statement demonstrates, like others, conceptual confusion between *coup d’état*, revolution and war.

In another response, a student states that there were “riots,” but does not explain or contextualize them. One of the few to use the concept of *coup d’état* and the Institutional Acts decreed by the military regime was this other student from the Pedagogy course: “It was a *coup d’état* that removed João Goulart from power, who had replaced Jânio Quadros, who resigned. The military coup was harsh because it implemented several Institutional Acts, namely AI 1, AI 2, AI 3, AI 4, AI 5. The latter was the harshest” (freshman student, 28 years old) (Bittar, 2023). The knowledge demonstrated by this student would be what we could expect from all students, since, regardless of the higher education course they are in, they should have learned history in their previous education. Knowing at least that there was a *coup d’état*, that the elected President, João Goulart, was deposed by the Armed Forces and that, subsequently, a series of arbitrary Institutional Acts were instituted in the country, would be the type of basic knowledge even classified as positivist, which the entire Brazilian population should have.

Conceptual confusion was a characteristic present in almost all the testimonies. What I reproduce below, in addition, reveals a lack of knowledge about the extent of the dictatorship itself, summarizing it as a “year full of tension”: “It was a year of revolution between the military and the opposition. (...) There were many kidnappings, extraditions, deaths, armed struggles, people sent out of the country, a year full of tension” (Freshman student of Pedagogy, 22 years old) (Bittar, 2023).

The students also failed to distinguish between military dictatorships and civilian dictatorships. Of the responses that indicated “knowing something other than the coup,” only eleven mentioned the name of President João Goulart. In the category “they think they know, but indicated historical errors,” six related 1964 to President Getúlio Vargas and one to President Juscelino Kubitschek. This data contradicts a survey conducted by the newspaper *O Estado de São Paulo* in 1994 on the same topic. In an article published in this media outlet, alluding to the thirtieth anniversary of the coup, it was found that 37% of the people interviewed stated that it victimized President Juscelino Kubitschek (Políticos são..., 1994). The responses that I present here also show the same confusion, a fact that leads us to consider that this error has its origins in the teaching of history in elementary schools, which neglected the study of our recent past. Another student stated: “It was a time of military rule, the beginning of one of the most repressive methods of government adopted by Brazil, the military dictatorship that began shortly after the suicide of Vargas, the national president” (Freshman student of Mathematics, 18 years old) (Bittar, 2023). In turn, a Chemistry student responded: “It was a time of social and cultural repression imposed by a military dictatorship that culminated in the suicide of the then President Vargas” (Freshman student of Chemistry, 27 years old) (Bittar, 2023). This response was in the category of those who declared to know about the significance of 1964.

Below, I will transcribe another answer that expresses knowledge about the military coup, but establishes a comparison with the Vargas dictatorship, which, compared to the military dictatorship, would have obtained “a certain consensus”: “Undeniably, it is a year that greatly marks our contemporary history. From then on, the Brazilian people began to experience their first moment of restriction of freedom, in a completely involuntary way (in the Vargas Era there was a dictatorship, but with a certain popular consent)” (Freshman student of Mathematics, 21 years old) (Bittar, 2023). This text stands out from the set because it is one of those that presents the most historical elements with the intention of explaining 1964, believing that the “first moment of restriction of freedom” was that year, but ignoring or diminishing the past of authoritarianism that was significant in the history of Brazil, since, for this student, the Vargas dictatorship had “a certain consent”. It is unlikely that he was using the concept of consent in the Gramscian sense to explain that, in any regime of force, there is always a portion, or a social segment, that consents, that is, that supports the dictatorship. If he had used it, he would have had to state that in 1964 there was also consent from the middle class, since part of it took to the streets to

march “with God, for freedom.” This is not the case with the answer I am quoting, since it simply contrasts the Vargas dictatorship with the military dictatorship, believing that only in the latter “did the people experience their first moment of restriction of freedom, in a totally involuntary way.” The term “involuntary” is used to distinguish the period in which there was “consent.”

The loss of historical reference among university students is confirmed by the fact that, of the total of 68 responses, only four indicated that the end of the military regime was in 1985, demonstrating that this “yesterday” has little meaning for them. One of the responses in this category was: “The people (the affected masses of people who demonstrated in marches) had to follow the dictatorship that lasted from 1964 to 1985.” (Senior student of Pedagogy, 21 years old) (Bittar, 2023). This text also draws attention to the fact that the author designates only the “popular masses” as “people,” excluding the other social classes from the composition, a recurring cultural characteristic in the history of Brazil. Unlike other countries, “people” in Brazil is a word generally used to refer to the poor social classes of our population and not to the population as a whole. This response, however, presented a piece of information that was rarely cited, that is, the political term “exile”: “It was a time of great repression, the people lost their right to vote and many politicians and artists were exiled.” Regarding the exile of President João Goulart, a student stated: “In 1964, there was a military coup against the João Goulart government and he was exiled outside of Brazil” (Senior student of Pedagogy, 20 years old) (Bittar, 2023).

Another aspect that draws attention is a certain idealization expressed in several testimonies about students and their rebellious role, in addition to their being seen as those who “suffered the most” under the military dictatorship. It is not possible to say to what extent this leading role attributed to young people is remembered by today’s youth because of some demonstration that took place after 1985, such as the “caras-pintadas” (“painted faces”) that took to the streets against Fernando Collor de Mello in 1991, a president who was impeached in 1992. I reproduce two of these testimonies below: “(...) students and artists organized themselves for their rights, living in a climate of anguish and persecution (...) it was a time when universities and students organized themselves and stood up for a political ideal” (Freshman student of Pedagogy, 22 years old) (Bittar, 2023). Or this one: “The country went through a series of turbulences with the military coup, thousands of young people took to the streets in protest” (Freshman student of Chemistry, 20 years old) (Bittar, 2023).

The younger students were not limited to idealized expressions such as “climate of anguish”, “cruel time”, “painful phase”, “dark times”. The more academically mature students also did not mention the structural reasons that triggered the military coup of 1964, its economic determinations, the interests of the Brazilian ruling classes allied to the ideological bipolarity of the Cold War, that is, the dispute between the two superpowers of the time, the United States of America and the Soviet Union. The most apparent aspects, such as repression, prevailed in the answers. The

essence of the military dictatorship, a class dictatorship, as occurs in historical processes of this nature and, in this case, with the purpose of reaffirming Brazil as a country that is part of global capitalism, is not included in any of the answers. A senior student, for example, expressed herself as follows: “The military dictatorship was very bad for Brazil. Several intellectuals, educators, politicians, and students ‘disappeared’, were murdered, arrested, beaten, and exiled. It was, therefore, a bad and painful period” (Senior student of Pedagogy, 20 years old) (Bittar, 2023).

Cultural repression, an aspect that is more evident in the media and more widely known to the public, is also more noticeable among university students. Amidst the various texts that referred to artists, I selected this one: “The musical productions of Chico, Caetano and the entire MPB were never more critical and inspired than at that time. Perhaps because today is a reflection of so many dark times without being able to reflect and express oneself freely. And in cultural production, perhaps because artists felt, with democracy, little encouraged to awaken a critical spirit in the population” (Senior student of Pedagogy, 20 years old) (Bittar, 2023).

The idea that there is less “critical spirit” in a democracy is contradictory in itself and makes us wonder about the reason for this understanding among the youth who have access to the best Brazilian universities. I have discussed Brazilian popular music in another article, but I cannot help but refer to this aspect of the aforementioned statement because it reminds us of the cultural richness that the lead years, contradictorily, brought to the surface. Part of this musical heritage was born under conditions of censorship that were circumvented by means of metaphors that generated beautiful poetic verses. In 1966, for example, Geraldo Vandré wrote that “gado a gente marca, tange, ferra, engorda e mata; mas com gente é diferente” (“the cattle we brand, drive, shoe, fatten and kill; but with people it is different”) (Vandré & Barros, 1966). In 1978, a single phrase by Chico Buarque in the song “Apesar de você” would become the motto of democratic resistance: “tomorrow will be another day” (Holanda, 1978). The beauties and subtleties of a remarkable song, unknown today to young university students.

It is also worth highlighting another aspect of this study: no statement, except that of a student who referred to Paulo Freire's work produced outside Brazil, mentioned even a single name of the best-known leaders of the fight against the military dictatorship. Only one student referred to “the hunt for communists”, and it was the same one who mentioned the “consent” to the Vargas dictatorship. Finally, no statement determined the reason and meaning of 1964 and the type of development adopted by the regime imposed by force at the cost of the suppression of democratic freedoms. The concentration of income, the deepening of class contradictions, dependence, and the authoritarian modernization carried out by the Brazilian State in order to integrate Brazil into global capitalism were aspects ignored.

In these testimonies, if someone was murdered during the dictatorship, that person was always an artist, a politician or a student. Workers, who were the first to lead strikes against wage cuts during the military regime, do not make up the memories of these young people about resistance to the dictatorship. Another noticeable fact in the answers was the lack of knowledge about the process that ultimately ended the military dictatorship. The leading role of the democratic front was not mentioned, that is, the rapprochement between the progressive sectors that had fought the military dictatorship since the beginning of the 1970s and the conservatives who, after the *Diretas-Já* (1984) movement, began to want it to end. And why would it have been important for this fact to be remembered? Because it is emblematic of the way politics is carried out in Brazil: with permanence prevailing over ruptures. The ignorance regarding this aspect of Brazilian history leads to mistakes and romantic idealizations, a kind of magical thinking that obscures how complex and contradictory it really is.

On the other hand, not even the most emblematic names of those who died fighting the military dictatorship were remembered.

In the relationship between present and past, for the youth researched here, there were no Edson Luiz de Lima Souto (1968); Carlos Lamarca (1971), Alexandre Vannuchi Leme (1973); Vladimir Herzog (1975). They do not exist for them, but, even so, they existed. How, then, should we think about this past? According to the theory I employ here, what is not remembered does not constitute the past for those who do not remember it, but, even so, it happened and, therefore, it is a truth that is part of the historical process.

In a similar way, we could do a historical comparison exercise to clarify this aspect. The fact that a portion of German society, after the Second World War, declared that they did not know that Nazism existed, does not mean that it did not, in fact, happen. It happened regardless of whether it is remembered, and the Nuremberg Tribunal, established by the Allied forces in 1945 to judge the crimes committed by the Nazis, was the conclusive proof of this truth.

## THE HISTORICAL PAST IS WHAT CAN BE REMEMBERED

Especially for those who dedicate themselves to studying the history of Brazil, the data presented here generate concern and remind us of the author Adam Schaff, who warns of the risks of presentism and relativism: “each person has their own historical truth” (Schaff, 1987, p. 127). Accepting such relativism would be the same as agreeing with the premise that, what this generation believes to be true, is in fact historical truth itself. In this case, we would be complicit in the erasure of history. However, this is not the theoretical position of the author of this article.

Since collective consciousness is the result of the daily living conditions of a given society, its needs, interests and expectations, including the struggle for survival, ideas, opinions, representations, illusions and representations, it is a cause for concern that we are completing 60 years since the military coup, a past that is still recent and almost erased from collective memory, although elements of that past are largely contained in our present. There are many traces of permanence from that regime that are still ingrained in us, Brazilian society. In these 40 years since the conquest of democracy, we have experienced, at the same time, great cultural and political changes, and, at the same time, we maintain structural elements of that past.

The lack of historical reference and the loss of meaning of “yesterday” are legitimized in the study presented here, since the testimonies revealed almost exclusively elements that make up the psychological-everyday level, that is, what was heard about, or what is vaguely remembered, and almost nothing of the historical-theoretical level. Paradoxically, in the academic environment, where philosophical sense, curiosity and criticism about our historical past should prevail, common sense prevails. This is an observation, not a moral judgment. If our youth know little about their historical past, this has to do with the set of issues discussed throughout this article, mainly with the teaching of history in high school and with the fact that we are living in the era “of speed, digitalization, fragmentation, individualization, profusion of subjects, serial demands and claims, mobility and movement” (Nogueira, 2023, p. 66). According to Nogueira, we have maintained an electoral democracy, essential in any democracy, but, at the same time, we have not been able to overcome polarities, we distrust politics and, by not building minimum consensus, we contribute to the emergence of the “demons of anti-politics” (Nogueira, 2023, p. 138).

## FINAL REMARKS

To present my conclusions, I return to the central question of this study: what is the level of perception of university students about the significance of 1964 for Brazil? The answers presented here express little knowledge about the regime of force that lasted twenty-one years and left its mark.

The end of the dictatorship, which occurred through a process that defeated the popular movement of *Diretas-Já* (1984), imposing the transfer of military power to civilian power through indirect means, demonstrated a persistent feature of the Brazilian historical process, which consists on arrangements made “from above”. This type of policy is a practice exercised by the forces that hold hegemony in order to avoid structural ruptures and maintain the conduct of the political process in the new order that will be established. The way in which the military dictatorship ended can be understood from this perspective, which political theories explain as an arrangement that excludes, in the new order to be established, the forces that participated in the

process and were eager for social rupture. It adds to two other classic endings of political regimes in Brazil: 1) political independence, in 1822, decreed by the son of the King of Portugal, and which maintained in the new political order structural features of the Brazilian historical formation, such as slavery and monarchy; 2) the Proclamation of the Republic in 1889 by a military man, an act that dispensed with the Republican Party, whose justification for existence was the Proclamation of the Republic. In the case of the military dictatorship, its end ensured that the first civilian president would be a politician who had supported and sustained it during the twenty-one years of its existence, a process that guaranteed elements of continuity in the new political order established in 1985.

Returning to the past that took place forty years ago and that left such a mark on Brazil is valuable and indispensable to us. In history, we understand the past better the more we distance ourselves from it, because only this distance allows us to know the effects of events. When they are in process, no matter how hard we try, it is impossible to know about their consequences, because, at the time they are happening, all we can do is predict future scenarios, viable hypotheses. However, we will never know, in advance, which of them will come true.

Today we are living in the future of a regime that ended in 1985. At the time it was taking place, it was not even possible to have an exact perspective of how long it would last. This is also true for any historical event. When we apply this theoretical exercise to the present, we realize that we are living in a moment that can only be fully understood once its related events have matured – that is, when time has revealed and brought into focus all of its developments. Therefore, historical times are always related to each other. The future of 2024, for us, when sixty years have passed since the military coup, is limited to scenarios and perspectives. As happened with the military dictatorship, this future is drawn in the form of projections and hypotheses, because it is still our present. Since it is present, we cannot be sure which of the hypotheses will actually become the future, because if we knew this in advance, History would not be a process, it would already be given.

If historical times – past, present and future – are always intertwined in human action, what should we think of collective memories translated into the eternal present? As it has been demonstrated, if the past forty years since the conquest of democracy is not known by the subjects of the present, what future are we building? This concern is pertinent in view of the theory of history employed here because the subjects of the present are the only ones capable of summoning the past to project the future. Therefore, the three stages are always interconnected, even if we, in our daily lives, are not aware of this. None of us lives in the present without thinking about the future because, as human beings, it is impossible not to make projections and create expectations for our lives. We cannot forget that each moment of the historical past was at the same time a future and a present.

However, the technical-scientific revolution, with societies connected in networks and communicating intensely in real time, worsens the tendency and the feeling that we live in an eternal present, obscuring the importance of the past and diminishing belief in the future. That the future of humanity will always be uncertain is a lesson that history teaches us. Nothing is determined, we have no certainty about the future. However, uncertainties have never been greater than they are today. In addition to the geopolitics that have been rapidly changing relations between countries, establishing a new global logic and calling into question Western values, the speed with which communication is determined by the technological revolution gives the feeling that the prospect of the future is impossible.

Given this observation, how should we deal with our past, sixty years since the military coup, which is so little known to our students? The testimonies collected for this study leave us with a conclusion in the form of a question: has history become peripheral in this networked world? Given the facilities offered by the technological revolution, would we be in a position to give up history? I don't think so. As Roy Lowe wrote, without history, without knowing our past, we human beings would be eternal children. Not knowing what happened before we were born makes us innocent, childish beings, alienated from our own condition as human beings. Without history, we run the risk of repeating mistakes, and without history, we allow our own past to be misused for the interests of the present.

The leading role of Brazilian society in the consolidation of democracy is currently facing challenges that were unthinkable in 1985, when the dictatorship was defeated. We live in a completely different society than that. On the one hand, we can say that the Brazilian political system is solid even though alarming social inequalities persist in the country. On the other hand, we cannot ignore the fact that, in hypermodern societies, with a predominance of digital life, in which participation has been transferred from political parties to the “digital agora” as Marco Aurélio Nogueira wrote, the “political us” which is the essence of democracy, “has given way to disorganized movement (...) in which a multitude of loose individuals move without concern for cohesion” (Nogueira, 2023, p. 123).

As we complete sixty years since the military coup, noting the lack of knowledge among our university students about the regime imposed in Brazil in 1964, three commitments are fundamental: to our generation; to the people of the past – especially to the people of neglected pasts –; and to the truth. As Richard Aldrich wrote, our first obligation as historians is to record and interpret the events of the past for our contemporaries and for future generations. The commitment we must have with our generation, he states, is the same as we must have with the people of the past, to research, record, and to the interpretation events of the past as completely and accurately as possible. For this historian, social history is not dead, time is not a fictional construction, and the world is not limited to text. If we are scrupulous, careful, and self-critical, we can discover how the past happened and reach

sustainable conclusions about it. These conclusions would therefore affect the present and, consequently, influence the future. A future that is under construction even with a lack of knowledge of the past by young university students.

## REFERENCES

- Aldrich, R. (2003). The three duties of the historian of education. *History of Education*, 32(2), 133–143. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00467600304130>
- Bittar, M. (2006). O estado da arte em História da Educação Brasileira após 1985: Um campo em disputa. In J. C. Lombardi, D. Saviani, & M. I. M. Nascimento (Orgs.), *Navegando pela história da educação* (Vol. 1, pp. 1–24). Campinas: HISTEDBR.
- Bittar, M., & Ferreira Junior, A. (1999). História nova e historiografia brasileira no contexto do regime militar. *Fronteira: Revista de História*, 5, 9–26.
- Bittar, M. (Organizadora). (2023). Percepção de estudantes universitários sobre o golpe militar de 1964 no Brasil [Compilação de depoimentos orais]. Disponível sob solicitação.
- Braudel, F. (1983). *O Mediterrâneo e o mundo mediterrânico na época de Filipe II*. São Paulo: Martins Fontes.
- Cardoso, C. F. (1982). *Uma introdução à história*. São Paulo: Brasiliense.
- Chesneaux, J. (1995). *Devemos fazer tábula rasa do passado?* (M. A. da Silva, Trad.). São Paulo: Cortez Editores.
- Dosse, F. (1992). *A história em migalhas: Dos Annales à Nova História* (D. A. S. Ramos, Trad.). Campinas: Editora da Universidade Estadual de Campinas; São Paulo: Ensaio.
- Dosse, F. (1995, julho). Palestra apresentada na Associação Nacional de História (ANPUH), Recife.
- Fernandes, F. (1989). *Marx/Engels – História*. São Paulo: Ática.

- Ferreira Jr., A., & Bittar, M. (2014). O coronel Jarbas Passarinho e a ditadura militar: O último intelectual orgânico. In J. R. Martins Filho (Org.), *O golpe de 1964 e o regime militar: Novas perspectivas* (2ª ed., pp. 201–223). São Carlos: EdUFSCar.
- Heller, A. (1993). *Uma teoria da história* (D. B. F. F. Lima, Trad.). Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira.
- Holanda, F. B. (1978). *Apesar de você* [Canção].
- Hobsbawm, E. (1995, abril). Entrevista. *Revista Veja*. São Paulo: Abril Cultural.
- Lowe, R. (2002). Do we still need the History of Education? Is it central or peripheral? *History of Education*, 31(6), 491–504. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0046760022000020695>
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1985). *Obras escolhidas* (T. III). Lisboa: Edições Avante!
- Nogueira, M. A. (2023). *A democracia desafiada: Recompôr a política para um futuro incerto*. Rio de Janeiro: Ateliê de Humanidades.
- Políticos são categoria mais rejeitada do país. (1994, julho). *O Estado de São Paulo*.
- Schaff, A. (1987). *História e verdade* (M. P. Duarte, Trad.; 4ª ed.). São Paulo: Martins Fontes.
- Vandré, G., & Barros, T. (1966). *Disparada* [Canção].

**MARISA BITTAR:** Full Professor of History, Philosophy, and Education Policies at the Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCar) since 1993. Holds a degree in History (Faculdades Unidas Católicas de Mato Grosso) and a Ph.D. in Social History (University of São Paulo – USP). From 2011 to 2012, she completed a postdoctoral fellowship in History of Education at the Institute of Education, University College London (UCL). She has been a CNPq Research Productivity Fellow since 2008. From 2019 to 2025, she coordinated the Working Group “Observatory for the History of Education” at ISCHE. Together with Amarílio Ferreira Jr., she published *A educação sociética* (EdUFSCar, 2021).

**E-mail:** bittar@ufscar.br  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3990-3210>

**Received on:** 2024.07.30

**Approved on:** 2025.03.13

**Published on:** 2025.05.01

**NOTE:**

This article is part of the dossier 'Education in Times of the Dictatorship'.

**RESPONSIBLE EDITORS:**

Eduardo Lautaro Galak (UNLP, Argentina)

E-mail: eduardo.galak@unipe.edu.ar  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0684-121X>

Elizabeth Figueiredo Sá (UFMT)

E-mail: elizabethfsa1@gmail.com  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5861-7535>

Rosa Fátima de Souza Chaloba (Unesp)

E-mail: rosa.souza@unesp.br  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3905-7317>

**PEER REVIEW ROUNDS:**

**R1:** three invitations, no reports received.

**R2:** three invitations, no reports received.

**R3:** two invitations, two reports received.

**HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:**

Bittar, M. (2025). An Eternal Present? University Students' Perceptions of the 1964 Military Coup in Brazil. *Revista Brasileira de História da Educação*, 25, e374. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4025/rbhe.v25.2025.e374en>

**FUNDING:**

The RBHE has financial support from the Brazilian Society of History of Education (SBHE) and the Editorial Program (Call No. 30/2023) of the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq).

**LICENSING:**

This article is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 (CC-BY 4) license.