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Past on Demand: Commercial and Political Uses of the Past by the Brazilian Extreme Right

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Abstract: This paper aims to study the production and circulation of commercial and political uses of the past by the Brazilian extreme right, based on two videos about the Brazilian civil-military dictatorship: one by the Brasil Paralelo Company and one by the YouTuber Felipe Castanhari. It is argued that the narrative elaborated by both videos promotes a conservative public history through a memory politics and what we call the “past on demand.” “On demand” because the idea of historical truth is reduced to a choice made by the viewer watching the video on YouTube. We contribute to analyzing memory disputes about the dictatorship in virtual environments, linking content to form.

Keywords: YouTube; Brasil Paralelo; Felipe Castanhari; Brazilian civil-military dictatorship; memory; past on demand

1 Introduction

YouTube, like other platforms, has established itself as a space for the construction of histories and memories concerning sensitive pasts and, consequently, as a political arena for disputes over representations of the past. Although there are some examples of public history conducted ethically, these initiatives do not possess the same reach and visibility as conservative initiatives, as we intend to demonstrate throughout this article. In Brazil, narratives about the past created by YouTubers, digital content

producers, and conservative influencers are rooted in Brazilian right-wing political culture. We chose to research productions made by conservative YouTubers because they have become a phenomenon in Brazil, commanding great audiences having a major impact on social media. Therefore, understanding the platform's functioning is crucial for considering the circulation and consumption of history in the public space, contributing to the concept of a past on demand. These narratives promote anti-communism, opposition to the ruling Workers' Party (PT), conspiracy theories, selective denunciations of corruption, and skepticism towards minority rights. The media products they create? are presented as the result of investigations, research, and interviews with experts, all purportedly in search of the truth. However, these narratives often neglect the principles of historical epistemology and do not align with the discipline of history. Instead, they neglect scientific methods and are supported by a manipulative interpretation of the past by those who present themselves as unbiased defenders of what they call “true Western History.”

In this article, we introduce the concept of “past on demand”¹ to describe certain ‘products’ that we believe exploit the past inappropriately. To support our argument, we will examine two examples from Brazil available on YouTube. The way these examples are presented is crucial to our analysis. YouTube has become a widely consulted platform for those seeking historical content for education, entertainment, or information. Alongside the rise of the platform, the figure of the YouTuber has emerged, challenging the traditional authority and legitimacy granted to historians when discussing the past. This shift has replaced scientific endorsement with metrics such as shares, likes, and followers.² We will discuss videos produced by the company

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1 C. Silveira Bauer and T. de Amaral Maia, “Os ‘entusiasmados praticantes comuns’ e o passado on demand: uma leitura do vídeo de Felipe Castanhari sobre a ditadura civil-militar brasileira,” *Confluenze. Rivista Di Studi Iberoamericani* 15, no. 2 (2023): 10–32, <https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2036-0967/17796>.

2 Anita Lucchesi, “História e historiografia digital: diálogos possíveis em uma nova esfera pública,” in *Anais eletrônicos organizado por XXVII Simpósio Nacional de História: Conhecimento Histórico E Diálogo Social. Anais eletrônicos* (Natal: ANPUH, 2013). https://anpuh.org.br/uploads/anais-simposios/pdf/2019-01/1548874925_2b1f92411cb733640b4eba32475c-ba43.pdf.

Brasil Paralelo and the YouTuber Felipe Castanhari, focusing on the Brazilian civil-military dictatorship established in 1964. We see these productions as examples of a conservative public history, according to the definition of “conservatism” presented in the introduction to this special section of *International Public History*.

2 1964 Brazilian Civil-Military Dictatorship

The Brazilian civil-military dictatorship was established after a coup on March 31, 1964. However, interruptions to democratic processes were common in Brazilian republican history, including during the dictatorship of Getúlio Vargas (1937–1945). The specificity of 1964 dictatorship (1964–1985) lies in the context of the Cold War (1947–1991) and its ideological bipolarization, as well as the implementation of the military strategy of national security for Latin America. It is also evident in the use of state terrorism as a form of political domination, particularly through the spread of practices such as torture and forced disappearances. The dictatorship lasted 21 years, ending with a political transition marked by continuities that left significant legacies for the democracy established in 1988, such as the silencing of the period and impunity of the perpetrators, facilitated by the 1979 amnesty law.

In 2014, the Datafolha Research Institute conducted a survey polling 2,614 Brazilians about their opinions on democracy and the civil-military dictatorship. With regard to regime preference, 16 % were indifferent between democracy and dictatorship, 14 % preferred dictatorship (compared to 11 % in 2008), and 8 % expressed no opinion. Concerning the dictatorship's legacy, 32 % could not assess whether its achievements were predominantly negative or positive. The margin of error was two percentage points.³

Currently, Brazil exhibits numerous examples of conservative public history, including those promoted by the administration of Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022) and Bolsonarism. Over the past decade, the rise of a militaristic far-right has fueled apologetic, denialist, and nostalgic uses of the past among those advocating military rule. Bolsonaro's election legitimized apologetic narratives about the dictatorship.⁴ However,

Brazilian dictatorship denialism predates Bolsonaro. Its origins can be traced back to the 1964 regime, which systematized misinformation through state-censored narratives of repression-related murders and practices like censorship, which suppressed economic data, and allegations of corruption.

These discourses, characterized by distortions and idealized rhetoric, typically justify and legitimize human rights violations rather than denying them. They enable civilians and military personnel directly implicated in such abuses to seek exoneration or impunity. It is crucial for academics, researchers, and policymakers to recognize and challenge these narratives, which reinforce authoritarianism and an impunity culture while perpetuating the dictatorship's silencing practices – controlling historical narratives by restricting access to information. In what follows we will analyze the producers and the content mobilized during this historical episode, arguing that these narratives constitute a “past on demand.”

3 Brasil Paralelo

Brasil Paralelo is a media company founded in 2016 that produces “alternative history” videos, or more precisely, documentaries promoting historical denialism and conservatively biased propaganda about Brazilian history, such as *Parallel Brazil Congress* (featuring testimonies from conservative Brazilian intellectuals) and the series *Brazil: The Last Crusade* (2017–2018).⁵ Their YouTube channel hosts nearly 4,000 videos and has over four million subscribers.⁶ The company produces content advancing far-right values, emerging during Brazil's conservative wave of the 2010s while positioning itself as offering a “connection to a parallel reality.” It aims to counter perspectives from mainstream Brazilian intellectuals and journalists, whom it views as left dominated.⁷

Historians criticize Brasil Paralelo for its denialism and anti-intellectual content, accusing it of distorting historical facts about the military dictatorship, slavery, and colonization. They also highlight its dissemination of conspiracy theories, describing its output as cyber-activist and historically

³ Datafolha Research Institute. “Democracia e Ditadura” Survey (PO813734). Available at: <http://datafolha.folha.uol.com.br/opiniao-publica/2014/03/1433561-brasileiros-prefere-democracia-mas-sao-criticos-com-seu-funcionamento.shtml>.

⁴ Caroline Silveira Bauer, “Jair Messias Bolsonaro e suas verdades: o negacionismo da Ditadura Civil-Militar em três proposições legislativas,” *Estudos Históricos Rio de Janeiro* 37 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1590/S2178-149420240207>.

⁵ See at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TkOIAKE7xqY&list=PL3yv1E7-IiXySpilepZSpHnrWGWbmryk9j>.

⁶ See at <https://www.youtube.com/@brasilparalelo>.

⁷ Murilo Cleto, “Anos Tenebrosos: a luta armada na obra da Brasil Paralelo,” *Locus: Revista De História* 30, no. 1 (2024): 114–37, <https://doi.org/10.34019/2594-8296.2024.v30.43946>.

distorted, with documentaries like *Brazil: Between Weapons and Books* labeled archaic and conspiratorial.⁸

This documentary seeks to reinforce narratives of the conservative groups behind Brazil's 1964 coup, redeeming the Armed Forces and redefining adversaries requiring confrontation. Spanning 2 h, 7 min, and 19 seconds, it deliberately constructs an "Other" as the root cause of Western societal ills. It interprets Brazil's political landscape from the late 1950s to 2014, culminating in the National Truth Commission report under Dilma Rousseff's presidency (2011–16). The film opens with a Cold War analysis, framing a binary dichotomy: American capitalism (democratic, freedom-oriented) versus Soviet communism (reduced to Stalinist totalitarianism). Voice-over narration dominates visuals, while selected images – photographs and archival footage – illustrate the narrative without contextual regard. Sound effects heighten suspense, gravitas, and viewer emotion.

The imagery and narrative advance a core hypothesis: Cold War-era communist threats to Brazil were thwarted by military intervention. As communism's political ambitions were countered, it allegedly shifted to cultural hegemony via Gramscian and Lukácsian strategies. This redirected communist expansion from politics to culture, framing today's 'cultural war' as a more insidious threat: ideological conquest through leftist imagination. Consequences include crises in Christian values, individual freedoms, and Western foundations. Within Cold War logic, military involvement in the coup and dictatorship was legitimized by civilians seeking to counter "communist escalation." While prolonged rule drew subtle criticism, it was excused as anti-communist necessity. Armed resistance movements were recast as communist revolutions, obscuring their role as opponents of dictatorship and justifying atrocities committed by the regime. This reinforced the "two demons" theory to be discussed shortly.

The film emphasizes Workers' Party (PT) ties to these movements, equating communism with "PTism" and shifting communism's perceived threat from one of state control (Stalinism) to one of cultural hegemony (Gramscianism). Like the 1960s, this framework positions current democracy as endangered by "Gramscian expansionism," thus targeting its cultural influence. The internal enemy is depicted as more elusive, infiltrating universities and other institutions to corrupt youth and erode Christian-

conservative values. Brazil's 1988 Constitution epitomizes this "leftist hegemony." It is accused of abandoning traditions, threatening freedoms by an overreaching state, and endangering private property. The documentary therefore articulates the conservative right's renewed transnational agenda: reinterpreting communism as a contemporary cultural adversary, framing the perceived crisis as pan-Western, employing digital media and manipulating historical narratives in order to reach broad audiences. These are all essential tactics in the "cultural wars." Outcomes go well beyond the normal expectations of well-funded media productions.

4 Felipe Castanhari

The second case we examine is Felipe Castanhari's Nostalgia Channel, which has 12 million subscribers and achieves significant viewership. In 2015, Castanhari expanded his platform activities by launching the Nostalgia-History Channel to produce historical content. His video *Military Regime*, posted on May 25, 2016, runs for 1 h and 3 min and has garnered over 12 million views and nearly nine hundred thousand likes.⁹ This period coincided with social movements advocating the return of military rule and hostility toward the work of the Brazilian National Truth Commissions, contexts which explain Castanhari's focus on the civil-military dictatorship.

Why is this video an example of conservative public history? Given space constraints, we highlight two elements linking it to "past on demand": the conceptualization of "dictatorship" versus "regime" and the revival of the "two demons theory" mentioned earlier.

Castanhari opens the video by addressing a frequent question: Was the 1964 regime a dictatorship or a military government? He concludes that both terms are valid, leaving the ultimate decision to viewers. This framing ignores the conceptual distinction between the terms, reflecting neoliberal rationality.¹⁰ The illusion of choice imposes individual responsibility for selecting "dictatorship" or "regime," and reduces intellectual engagement to a matter of personal preference rather than rigorous scholarship while also obscuring the social consequences of historical narratives.

The "two demons" theory was a narrative that explained the last Argentine dictatorship through the lens of the

⁸ For a definition of conspiracism related to the products of Brasil Paralelo, see Salles, D., de Medeiros, P. M., Santini, R. M., & Barros, C. E. (2023). The Far-Right Smokescreen: Environmental Conspiracy and Culture Wars on Brazilian YouTube. *Social Media + Society*, 9, no. 2, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231196876>.

⁹ See at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aCR_cbuB7sU&t=3s.

¹⁰ Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *A nova razão do mundo. Ensaio sobre a sociedade neoliberal* (São Paulo: Boitempo, 2016).

confrontation between the armed forces and the guerrillas. This theory, however, oversimplified historical reality by omitting the civilian sectors that supported the regime and equated the responsibilities of militants and military personnel to political violence. This interpretation was highly convenient for those civilian sectors who wished to claim that society was a victim of violence from both the right and the left (the “two demons”). As a political use of the past, this ‘theory’ was adopted in Brazil, attributing the violence of the period to both the military and the guerrilla movements.¹¹ State violence and guerrilla actions are equated at various points in the video. However, experts are unanimous in stating that it is not possible to equate the repressive actions of a state, with all its human and institutional resources, with the violence used by guerrilla groups. In addition to the disproportional use of force, the nature of violence committed by a state and a guerrilla movement is not comparable. According to the YouTuber, both the military and the armed struggle aimed to establish a dictatorship in Brazil, though the military aimed for a dictatorship of capital, while the armed struggle aimed for a dictatorship of the proletariat. This explanatory framework reinforces the merits of liberal democracy and thus configures a liberal memory with a conservative character.¹²

5 Past on Demand

When analyzing videos produced by Brasil Paralelo and Castanhari, we are not merely dealing with a narrative about the dictatorship presented in audiovisual format but with a video released through YouTube. Understanding the platform’s functioning is crucial for considering the circulation and consumption of history in the public arena,¹³ contributing to the concept of a “past on demand.” Subtle dynamics underpin YouTube’s operational logic. The data generated when users browse and consume videos on the platform can be processed and analyzed to create consumption profiles and identify content through behavioral prediction. Similarly, the algorithms employed by YouTube, which, although their exact workings are unknown,

contributes to our understanding of what we call “past on demand.” For instance, consuming Brasil Paralelo and Castanhari’s videos prompts suggestions for other content that the algorithm deems related, which reduces the space for dissenting perspectives, a fundamental aspect of a democratic public sphere. In other words, users can consume only the interpretations of the past they desire, whenever they want, based on specific objectives, and the platform will facilitate this.

The commercial dimension of historical knowledge on YouTube differs from traditional forms historians use, such as the publishing market. YouTube operates under “platform capitalism,” where monetizing historical narratives through videos generates resources for content producers and the platform itself. This brings us to the notion of “surveillance capitalism.”¹⁴ Customizing and personalizing historical consumption ensures that, in addition to the fractal and fragmented experience characteristic of YouTube (where the past becomes a succession of listed videos), the content suggested or recommended to the user tends to align with their previous choices as identified by the algorithm predicted from data recording their virtual behavior. This “recommended for you” logic represents a trend in contemporary capitalism. YouTube’s algorithms allow for a personalization of the past and its representations, as the recommended videos align with the user’s consumption patterns. Thus, we can speak of a “past on demand,” where the past becomes a commodity, consumable through historiographical, memorial, and even denialist narratives.

Surveillance capitalism thus transforms human experience into raw material, translated into behavioral data. Companies operate in a market of future user patterns, specializing in predicting behaviors based on data analysis. Essentially, the platform suggests – and this is about anticipation – even before a person consciously decides to watch another video.

In this environment, it becomes increasingly difficult for individuals to encounter dissent in this new public sphere. It contributes to the construction of hegemonic historiographical or memorial narratives, not because of their quality or scientific and ethical-political commitments, but because of their dominance and frequency, creating a simulacrum of consensus.

This pervasive “past on demand,” facilitated by YouTube’s algorithms and underpinned by surveillance capitalism, fundamentally reshapes the experience of public history. Unlike some traditional public history engagements – such as

¹¹ Caroline Silveira Bauer, *Brasil e Argentina. Ditaduras, desaparecimentos e políticas de memória*, 2nd ed. (Porto Alegre: Medianiz, 2014).

¹² Marcos Napolitano, “Desafios para a História nas encruzilhadas da memória: entre traumas e tabus,” *História, Questões e Debates* 68, no. 1 (2020): 18–52, <https://doi.org/10.5380/his.v00i0.00000>.

¹³ Bruno Grigoletti Laitano, *Postando o passado. A difusão da memória da ditadura civil-militar brasileira na internet através do canal do YouTube da Comissão Nacional da Verdade. Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso – Licenciatura em História* (Rio Grande do Sul: Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, 2018).

¹⁴ Shoshana Zuboff, *A era do capitalismo de vigilância* (Rio de Janeiro: Intrínseca, 2019).

museums, documentaries with broad distribution, or published works encountering diverse audiences – YouTube constructs a deeply personalized historical encounter. The platform doesn't merely deliver historical content; it actively curates and predicts the kind of past a user is likely to consume, based on prior behavioral data. Consequently, the public sphere for history fragments into countless individualized streams. The historical experience becomes less about encountering challenging perspectives or a collectively negotiated narrative within a shared space, and more about the frictionless, on-tap consumption of a past tailored to pre-existing inclinations and predicted preferences. While this personalization seemingly offers convenience and relevance, it inherently restricts the serendipitous encounter with dissenting views or alternative interpretations, which is vital for a robust democratic historical culture. Paradoxically, this same mechanism also fosters a sense of community and belonging, elements essential to the formation of identities.

6 Conclusions

The implications of this “past on demand” model are profound for how historical knowledge functions in society. It transforms history from a potential space for critical dialogue and shared understanding into a personalized commodity, optimized for engagement and retention within the platform’s commercial framework. The hegemony achieved by certain narratives – be they historiographical, memorial, or denialist – stems less from their inherent scholarly rigor or ethical-political resonance, and more from their algorithmic amplification and the self-reinforcing cycles of recommendation. This creates a potent simulacrum of consensus within isolated user bubbles, where frequency

and dominance masquerade as legitimacy. Ultimately, YouTube’s operational logic fosters a public history landscape where the accessibility and immediacy of the past are unprecedented, yet its potential to foster critical historical consciousness and a genuinely pluralistic public sphere is significantly constrained by the very mechanisms that deliver it “on demand.”

The conservative public history disseminated by the far and extreme-right updates and reproduces elements of Brazilian political culture. Algorithmic and surveillance capitalism, which produce a “past on demand,” do not necessarily break with a reiterative logic characteristic of cultural circulation dynamics, but rather resignify it through technological change.

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