

Economic Modernization, Urbanization and the Rise of the Brazilian Feminist Press in Opposition to Authoritarian Politics

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Abstract

The mid-1960s marked the beginning of profound political and socioeconomic transformations in Brazil. The regime change that resulted from the 1964 coup d'état was the starting point of a process of industrialization, mechanization of agriculture, expulsion of millions from the countryside and intense urbanization – all necessary conditions for the military government to launch its new model of economic development. The new economic model generated several distortions, particularly marked social inequalities and explosive growth of several metropolitan areas, but, inadvertently, it also promoted the opposition against authoritarianism in the form of a new urban working class with the presence of female workers in significant numbers. It is within this context of authoritarian politics, economic hardships and unplanned urbanization that a multiplicity of society groups started to mobilize politically in the 1970s. Lawyers, labor union leaders, neighborhood activists, and human rights advocates, with the support of the Catholic Church, organized protests against the military abuses demanding political openness and social justice. The popular resistance also included a variety of women's groups, among them, female journalists whose opposition to the military is often neglected by the literature focusing on democratic transitions. This paper is an attempt to rescue the contributions made by the feminist press to ending the period of authoritarian politics in Brazil.

Introduction

Well-known and frequently cited explanations for democratic transitions in the developing world focus on a number of both endogenous and exogenous factors. The most relevant among the former are: regime's loss of legitimacy due to economic failure (Haggard and Kaufman 1995); and increased levels of urbanization and education leading to street protests with the potential to destabilize the regime. Among the external factors, emphasis is placed on instances when dictatorships lose international support due to human rights violations; and on to the so-called "contagion" or "spillover" effect, when democratization in a given country or group of countries forces other authoritarian governments to open the system (Huntington 1991). Without challenging these explanations, my goal in this paper is to add some elements to the complex issue of democratic transitions by arguing that state repression can trigger a society's unintended response. More specifically that state attempts to quell opposing voices and protest can lead to a backlash. This popular reaction to repressive government actions took place in several Latin American countries during the 1970s and the 1980s, including in Brazil where a number of social movements mobilized against the military (Hochstetler 1997). Among the protesters, Brazilian journalists ranked very high in their opposition to the regime and were particularly targeted by the military due to the high visibility of the press and its obvious impact on public opinion. Often neglected, however, is the role played by women journalists in the society struggles to promote regime change in Brazil. This paper, therefore, attempts to rescue the contributions made by the feminist press to ending authoritarianism in Latin America's largest country.

Situated in the 1970s, arguably the darkest period of the military dictatorship in Brazil, my research shows that as they were silenced by stiff governmental censorship that overtook the traditional news media, Brazilian journalists took the vanguard of the opposition movements and defied the regime by forming cooperatives to publish the so-called alternative newspapers.¹ Among more than a hundred of those alternate publications that emerged during the authoritarian period (1964-1985), this study places a particular emphasis on the feminist press, which emerged in Brazil's large metropolitan areas with a two-prong strategy: to defy the regime by demanding pluralism, and to challenge entrenched patriarchal norms by pressing for gender equality.

Women journalists rise against the military regime

In the most comprehensive study produced so far focusing on the emergence of alternative newspapers in Brazil as a reaction to authoritarianism and suspension of individual freedoms, Bernardo Kucinski (1991) analyzes the goals of 133 of those publications that were launched between 1964 (when a coup d'état overthrew a democratic government) and 1980 (when the military regime under stress, due to economic hardships, started a gradual opening of the system). Published by groups of journalists, working in cooperatives in different cities, the alternative newspapers, while united in their challenge to the regime, varied in their approach: some were satirical; others prioritized homosexual and black rights; and a few emphasized environmental issues. Most of them were published in a tabloid format; the newspapers worked as a vehicle for political action, in some instances in defense of minorities, and in all cases opposing the regime without links with the armed struggle (Araújo 2001).²

In that context, the alternative news media was particularly energized by the emergence of the feminist press which reflected the concerns of women journalists with the profession's limitations in times of authoritarianism, and also the need for women to develop their own channels to express their views.³ Between 1975 and 1980 nine women's newspapers were published with different degrees of readership. Cardoso (2004) lumps them together under what she calls the first generation of the Brazilian feminist press. The first-generation label applies to those pioneering publications that were characterized by an almost permanent editorial debate on whether women's issues or general issues would be the most effective approach to news coverage. Reluctant regarding what to do, the first-generation feminist press lived in an almost endless intellectual struggle between either prioritizing the items of the women's agenda or focusing instead on the leftist agenda of that time, that is, a focus on political pluralism, social justice, democracy and better living conditions for men and women.⁴

The appearance of the very first feminist newspaper during the last cycle of authoritarian politics in Brazil coincided with one of the watershed events in that particular political moment in the country. In October of 1975, in the same month that the torture and death of a journalist inside a prison in the city of São Paulo put in evidence, once more, the atrocities of the Brazilian military regime, a group of middle-class Brazilian women, also journalists, embarked on an innovative project aiming to mobilize their peers and women from all walks of life in Brazil to denounce the injustices of the system. The women journalists' goals were far reaching as they envisioned a medium that not only would condemn political repression and censorship, but also the country's socioeconomic inequalities and the women's low status as a result of a patriarchal social structure. Although very aware of the dangers, conscious of the risks, that group of women decided to launch the alternative newspaper - *Brasil Mulher* - which, even if short-lived, proved to be in the end an important tool through which a segment of the urban middle class could channel its discontent with the regime in its broad sense. In subsequent pages, this paper will explore the ways in which the publication (henceforth *BM*), in its language and editorial content, opposed the military regime and pressed for democratic freedoms and the rule of law, at the same time that it created a space for feminist expression.

The launching of *BM* coincided with the end of the armed struggle in Brazil that had been initiated in the mid-60s, soon after the 1964 military coup. Facing an extremely repressive regime that led to hundreds of deaths, numerous disappearances, and countless cases of torture (later documented in the indispensable *Tortura Nunca Mais*),⁵ the headless guerrilla groups disbanded, as their leaders were either dead, in prison, or had sought refuge abroad. Yet, the logic of the military system, or its survival, required a complete subjugation of the society, the silence of opposing voices, the elimination of any challenge. Thus, the system put in place several mechanisms of oppression. Most notorious were the brutal security forces and the clandestine cells, but also press censorship, suppression of free elections and several other forms of harassment to eliminate the opponents to the economic and political model in place at that time.

From the late 1960s to the first half of the 1970s the general Emilio G. Medici presided over the darkest period of the Brazilian military dictatorship. That time was also characterized by a process of intense urbanization, a result of government policies which sought to promote economic growth through the country's industrialization. Among the several consequences of unplanned urbanization, there are some pertinent to this discussion: on one hand, the decay of quality of life in cities, in the form of precarious housing, inefficient public transportation, and unemployment; on the other hand, the emergence of a working class, and of an urban, educated middle class, both groups whose interests would soon frontally collide with the right-wing government policies. Considering the regime's imperative, i.e., the elimination of any challenge, all citizens in a broad sense became targets of oppressive policies. In that context, journalists constituted a group of particular attention.

In October of 1975, the Journalists' Union of São Paulo was dealing directly with the repressive system, as at least 12 press professionals, in a matter of days, had been arrested for harsh interrogations, without a credible charge, except the vague and unsubstantiated authorities' allegations insinuating that all newsrooms were dominated by communists. Among the arrested was Vladimir Herzog, simply known by his friends as Vlado, at that time in the

post of news director of São Paulo-based public television, TV Cultura. Taken to a jail run by the Armed Forces, in the morning of the 25th of October, Herzog was dead by the afternoon of that same day. In a laconic note to the press, the Army ruled the death as suicide after a confession of communist activities. The announcement provoked a prompt reaction of the São Paulo journalists' union, which in a public note rejected the official version, and going beyond, accused the military as "responsible for the death of the journalist." Herzog's torture and death, as well as the nightmare of many in the hands of the Brazilian security forces, and the gross violations of human rights are well documented in the book *Dossier Herzog*, written by the journalist Fernando Pacheco Jordão (2005).

Contrasting with previous cases of arrest and torture, which were kept from the public, Herzog's death was a transformative moment in the country's politics, in fact a catalyst for change. Instead of instilling more fear, that depressing, gloomy event in the modern political history of Brazil had an enormous repercussion, impacted the military regime under the command of a new president, general Ernesto Geisel, and sowed the seeds of a process of political liberalization, with the incremental emergence of popular movements looking for democratic freedoms and for more specific interests, among them gender equality.

It is in that context that *BM* and several other alternative publications emerged, when the Brazilian mainstream press was under censorship, when the labor unions' leaders were under intense harassment, when thousands of Brazilians were living in exile, and hundreds were in jail as political prisoners. All those opposing the system didn't have a place to run for cover, except to seek the protection of the Roman Catholic Church of São Paulo, which also played an important role in the struggles against the military regime. In fact, for some time, the archbishop of São Paulo, Paulo Evaristo Arns, was among the very few publicly denouncing the abuses. In the end, the journalists from *BM* would find in him one of their greatest supporters.

Although it flourished in São Paulo, Brazil's largest metropolitan area, *BM* was born in Londrina, a relatively wealthy and sophisticated mid-sized city located in the state of Paraná, in the south of the country. The publication's conception, format and organization shared the common characteristics of the alternative press at that time: an anti-capitalist slant in which profits were not sought; a tabloid size, and self-managed operations. The newspaper's founder, journalist Joana Lopes, launched the inaugural issue, in Brazil simply called the *número zero*, covering the costs with her own salary, and counting on the political support of a newly created non-governmental organization: the very influential Women's Movement for Political Amnesty. The front page of that seminal edition, of October 1975, placed emphasis on amnesty and on gender equality which at that time were taboo topics, undoubtedly. The publication was also daring for its cover photograph of a poor, black woman, a shantytown resident, a powerful image that contradicted the claims of an economic miracle promoted by the military rulers. In its first editorial, *BM* was introduced as:

... not a women's newspaper. This is a work for men and women. We don't want to rely on biological differences to enjoy petty masculine favors; the State, a male institution, leaves us in a place that is reserved - comparatively - to the mentally retarded... We want to talk about the problems that are shared by all women in the world; but we want also to talk about solutions, taking into account the Brazilian and the Latin-American realities... Women around the world are burdened with a double journey; prostitution is also growing, as the only alternative for young women who move from rural to urban areas; and since the man went to the moon, nothing is more logical, therefore, than to expect more justice on Earth. We propose equality between men and women everywhere. Finally, Brasil Mulher will engage itself in the democratic press which, amid struggles, is emerging in Brazil.

Therefore, the "feminist press" label should be taken in its broad sense, that is, as a product of a social theory of feminism that encompasses struggles for the elimination of all kinds of oppression, including those specific to gender, and also the oppression of the society. The broader orientation, which in addition to gender, incorporated the claim for political freedom, was consolidated when the newspaper physically moved to São Paulo, a global metropolis, the place of an intellectualized middle class, and also the city where Joana Lopes would find sympathizers, most of them women, new graduates from journalism schools. One of the first enlisted was Marina D'Andrea, an upper-middle-class mother of three, divorced, who prior to her studies in journalism had been a public school teacher. D'Andrea, who became a *BM* reporter and member of the editorial council, narrated her involvement with the newspaper:

The newspaper was given to me, personally and symbolically, by Joana Lopes, as a graduation gift. The event counted with the presence of Therezinha Zerbini, the leader of the Women's Movement for Political Amnesty. The objective was to constitute a group in São Paulo to run the newspaper, which Joana would oversee from Londrina. The mission was to develop a work that would promote the politicization of Brazilian women.⁶

The subsequent issue, actually the number 1, went public in December of 1975. According to D'Andrea, the publication assumed a Marxist orientation, an approach that media studies tend to identify with an old European tradition, which emphasized the role of powerful economic elites in a subservient society. Thus, it seems plausible to assume that for *BM*, the women's struggles were also part of a large class struggle. Being the first Brazilian medium to demand political amnesty in a time when the mainstream press was violently censored, D'Andrea observed that the inclusion of that issue undermined the acceptance of the newspaper, considering the intimidating tactics of the regime. Juggling domestic tasks with her political activism, D'Andrea transformed her house into a newsroom, where a group of women journalists met regularly to make editorial decisions. In its trajectory, *BM* was produced with an irregular staff, but also with political cartoons delivered by Lila Figueiredo, a talented artist and political activist whose two children, a male and a female, both in their early 20s, were in jail for their opposition to the military.

Until August of 1977, the *Sociedade Brasil Mulher*, under the leadership of Lopes and D'Andrea, published nine *BM* issues, all characterized by innovative language, sharp and open, which clearly conveyed the necessity of gender equality and women's emancipation, both tied to a change in politics. The content of the articles indicates that women's liberation and democratization were considered two parts of a whole, or integral parts of each other. This new proposal was summarized by Maria Paula Araújo (2000), who has described the feminist newspapers that emerged in Brazil during the dictatorship as "an attempt to unite the public with the private; to make political what was until then considered only personal, intimate and subjective; to politicize the emotions, feelings and the familial relations." Another scholar, Rosalina de Santa Cruz Leite (2003) asserts that *BM*, as well as a slightly later publication, *Nós Mulheres*, corresponded to a period in which great emphasis was placed on subjectivity and on the individual, indicating, according to her, "the politicization of the daily lives of women" who were in search of new forms of expression and mobilization, and were severe critics of the bureaucratic and vertical practices of the traditional left.

Lacking steady financial support, the work in *BM* took place on a voluntary basis. There were no salaries, and printing costs were precariously covered by individual contributions and the sale of the newspaper from hand to hand in front of movie theaters, churches, and university campuses. In 1975, the labor union leader, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, currently Brazil's president, met Marina D'Andrea to express his willingness to buy a number of newspaper copies and distribute them free of charge to the female metalworkers affiliated with the union. Although the project did not materialize, Lula was nevertheless instrumental in the completion of D'Andrea's article "Maria Salário-Mínimo" (Maria Minimum Wage), which gave a great deal of visibility to the newspaper. The news piece denounced the harsh realities of Brazilian working women at that time, in the form of low salaries, limited access to education, and the fear of layoffs in case of labor strikes, the latter a practice that was subject to penalties during the years of military rule.

A content analysis of the nine issues reveals the breadth of the publication: human rights; the suppression of political rights; students' movements; the problem of clandestine abortions; domestic violence; women's limited access to education; the plight of the domestic workers; socioeconomic inequalities; gender discrimination inside big corporations; the lack of free elections; poverty in the Brazilian countryside; and even an article, occupying an entire page, denouncing a common government practice at that time of denying passports to Brazilian citizens living in exile. In its editorial of June, 1977, the newspaper asserted that "passport is a right, not a favor," and condemned the abuse that was transforming innocent citizens into stateless people. The content analysis also reveals that for its language, style and selection of topics, *BM* strived for a popular orientation in the sense that the newspaper and its journalists sought to mobilize women, particularly those residing in the periphery of metropolitan areas, around specific gender issues. Further, *BM* also was an attempt to raise awareness of the country's reality and to organize women to join the political struggles. Therefore, the significance of *BM* should be analyzed and understood in the context of civil society initiatives at that time to energize social movements in Brazil as part of the democratization struggles.

Conclusion: The dilemmas of the feminist press during the democratic transition

For reasons that go beyond the scope of the present study, yet essentially related to power disputes inside the Brazilian left-wing groups at that time, the newspaper's original founding group left the publication in 1977. Under new leadership, *BM* survived until 1980, with a total of 16 regular issues and 4 special editions since its inception. The demise of the alternative publication, in addition to marking the end of the first generation of the feminist press, coincided with the beginning of the Brazilian process of political liberalization that five years later would culminate with the end of the military rule.⁷ The collapse of the dictatorial regime as an explanatory variable for the death of the alternative news media cannot be disregarded: democratization did free the mainstream media, and removed the *raison d'être* of the alternative papers. Yet in his pioneering study of the so-called dwarfing press, Kucinski

(1991) suggests that other factors may also explain the disappearance, in the early 1980s, of dozens of small publications that had precariously survived during the military regime. From his perspective, the dictatorship explains only partially the rise and fall of those vibrant and irreverent newspapers. He argues that having emerged in response to the Brazilian left's need to have its own channels of communication, the small publications lost their appeal when the leftist groups, starting in the 1980s, were again able to organize themselves in political parties, and thus were entitled to obtain seats in legislative houses at municipal, state and federal levels.

In retrospective, the degree of influence exerted by *BM* and other alternative publications on the process of democratization of a huge and complex country must be understood by taking into account both the objective and subjective conditions prevailing in the 1970s. The oppressive political climate obviously shaped the newsroom dynamics. An archival research of some of *BM*'s internal documents reveals the apprehension, the conflicting emotions and even the clashes of personality that emerged as the journalists tried to construct the news. Their craft was also affected by an almost permanent identity crisis that haunted the newspaper in the form of two distinct lines of action: one, proposed by the founding group, which defended a pluralist publication in which all democratic forces would be represented; another, proposed by a more dogmatic group, who believed that the newspaper should essentially foster the platform of the Communist Party of Brazil, the so-called PCdoB.⁸

Unquestionable was, in fact is, the courage of those women journalists who took the newspaper to the streets, despite numerous threats. Also the interviews with some participants (from the founding group)⁹ show that as new graduates from journalism schools, they took the task with an invigorating enthusiasm, guiding their craft by the cherished journalistic principle of accuracy of information and decided to fulfill what is perceived to be the essential media role: presenting the reality as it is, without governmental and commercial filters. For them, *BM* also represented the possibility to achieve what is denied to those working for the mainstream media in non-democratic countries: take in full the role of government watchdog, by setting their own agenda, in terms of selection of topics and approach to news coverage.

That freedom, however, was tempered by the vicissitudes of the times, including the financial hardships. With an irregular periodicity and a circulation that never went beyond 10,000, *BM*'s readership did not differ, in essence, from those who produced it: urban, middle-class professionals, labor union leaders and community activists. Despite its popular orientation and declared intention to reach women dwellers in the city periphery, in an attempt to organize them in social movements, the newspaper collided with the objective conditions of a country where levels of illiteracy were still high, and where, above all, newspaper readership was confined to the elite and the professional middle class, whereas most of the population got their news from radio and TV.

Yet, *BM*'s significance is perhaps better measured qualitatively, rather than by numbers. In addition to providing important insights to the understanding of a critical juncture in Brazil's politics and social relations, the newspaper, as well as other alternative publications, became relevant for what they were: a cry for freedom. Professor Flávio Aguiar, from the University of São Paulo,¹⁰ expressed that relevance very well when, referring to Brazilian media during the military regime, he said that "in the history of the Brazilian press, never the so-called big media had been so small in their 'unlove' for freedom; and never, on the other side, the struggle for freedom waged by the dwarfs had been such a big source of mistakes and certainties."

Endnotes

1 Alternative newspapers were most known in Brazil as the *imprensa nanica* or the dwarfish press to distinguish themselves from the mainstream print media. The term dwarfish was also related to the tabloid format of the publications, in comparison to the conventional newspaper size. [Return](#)

2 Between the late 1960s and 1974, several armed groups were active in Brazil, in the form of both urban and rural guerrillas. [Return](#)

3 The literature on gender and politics emphasizes that the 1975 First World Conference for Women, sponsored by the United Nations, was a crucial event that pushed women towards collective forms of protest (Montecinos 2001). The emergence of a variety of women's movements in Brazil during military rule is well documented by Alvarez [1990]. [Return](#)

4 The feminist press second generation (1981-1988) focused almost exclusively on gender issues (sexuality, domestic violence, family planning) and the creation of organizations to promote the study of gender issues (Cardoso 2004). [Return](#)

5 A seminal document, produced by the Archdiocese of São Paulo, denouncing the regime's brutality. [Return](#)

- 6** I am honored and feel privileged by having been a friend of Marina D'Andrea with whom I had innumerable informal conversations in her house in São Paulo, as well as when she visited me in the United States in 1994. Starting in 2000, we held several meetings to discuss her participation in *Brasil Mulher*, after which she opened to me the newspaper's archives. D'Andrea died in October of 2007 after a series of brain strokes; she is sorely missed by all her friends and fellow journalists, men and women, who saw in Marina a source of courage, inspiration and solidarity. [Return](#)
- 7** In 1985, negotiations between the military rulers and the opposition culminated with a legislative election in which a civilian emerged as president, officially ending the 21-year period of authoritarian politics. That first civilian government set the basis for a full electoral process which took place in 1989; with a new constitution in place, as well as a dynamic multiparty system, millions of Brazilian in that year elected a new president, Fernando Collor de Mello. Since then the country is holding periodical elections at municipal, state and federal levels both for the legislative and executive branches. [Return](#)
- 8** According to Marina D'Andrea this split created a bitter environment inside the newsroom, leading to a number of conspiracies theories; as a result, the founding group departed. [Return](#)
- 9** Based on interviews I conducted in São Paulo. [Return](#)
- 10** As it appears in Kucinski (1991). [Return](#)

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