

**Censorship dispute and the cry for silence**

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Reimão, Sandra (2011)  
 Repressão e Resistência: Censura a Livros na Ditadura Militar.  
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**Abstract**

*Repression and Resistance: Books Censorship in the Military Dictatorship* focus censorship processes against fiction books during the Brazilian military regime. Besides the literary evaluations conducted by State censors, the study also presents letters that were sent by members of the civil society recommending the censorship of books considered to be offensive or asking for the release of forbidden works. This documentation allows a fruitful analysis of censorship capillarity, its broad and flexible regulation, and the discussion of its legitimacy in a period when the government repression even sought to control the very visibility of its censorship practice.

**Keywords:** communication, censorship, free speech, books

Even after state oppression from the military was left behind, the debate about censorship in this period remains fresh, as a repressed trauma in the social reality which symptoms continue to emerge, demanding analysis and resolution. Almost three decades after the end of press and book censorship in Brazil, a new study helps to bring to light some of the darkest moments in which the State assumed a tutelary control of Brazilian literary production.

Sandra Reimão's *Repression and Resistance: Books Censorship in the Military Dictatorship* (2011) shows that fiction books censorship was not made without the support of civil sectors of the population eager to support a broader control over expressions and conducts which differed from the moral code and the dominant ideology of those times. In this sense, the analysis is not only based on the extensive documentation from the Public Entertainment Censorship Department [*Departamento de Censura e Diversões Públicas*] (DCDP), preserved in the National Archive in Brasília; the book also presents, in its appendix, censor reports which forbid literary works and some letters from Brazilian citizens offended by books considered obscene or subversive, demanding more state censorship. These raw materials, published along with a historical contextualization

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drafted by Reimão, are crucial to understand how the Brazilian society suffered, supported and even collaborated with artistic and literary censorship.

Even though the study consolidates in chapters articles previously published in different magazines and books, Reimão's work is embodied precisely because it unites case analysis in a common scenario of cultural background interpretations, basing its analysis in the documents of censor reports and letters. Starting with a discussion about the roots of the military regime and its censorship apparatus consolidation, Reimão initially states some hypothesis to evaluate not only state control practices, but also its effects during the paradoxical dialogue between society expression and a censorship organization. As Reimão points out, if the 1960s some tension points were brought to the public space of theater stages, movie screens and newspaper pages, in the following decade the literature assumed this central role in taking the debate over social themes to reading rooms of Brazilian homes (p. 62). In this sense, it's no surprise that book censorship increased in the second half of the 1970s (p. 33), when many newspapers and magazines were set free of previous restraints (p. 56).

The author defends that a political censorship in the period gave way to a broader control of moral perversions, such as erotica and violence – in a response to medium class' fears of what was seen as threats to traditional values. Besides that, prohibitions also found echoes in practices of self-censorship, imposed by fearful authors who wanted to avoid writing works that could be apprehended. However, the hypothesis which is most innovative – and better founded by the documents presented by Reimão – involves the very need of the censorship apparatus to “present itself as necessary for the system” (p. 56), anchoring itself in a red-tape wall of reports which demonstrates how books could threaten national security and Brazilian moral. This line of argument helps to understand the role of all the letters which transmitted readers' request for a broader control and the prohibition of offensive works. This is a kind of populist *a la carte* censorship suited to attend the customers' taste in order to answer demands of specific sectors from the society which felt threatened by new values and practices that contradicted their systems of beliefs. The documents in the appendix confirm Reimão's hypothesis: in a report to Justice minister Armando Falcão, the director of DCDP

comments censorship results in 1976 and states that it would be impossible to previously control the Brazilian vast editorial production, estimated in this document in over 9,000 titles alone in that year. This way, the state red-tape apparatus justified its intervention in cultural expressions in order to attend a demand of the public itself, answering the letters requesting more control and written by “teachers, booksellers or local authorities” – and the director even complains about the reduced effects of the prohibition of only 74 books, “less than 1% of the works published in 1976” (p. 159).

Since the censorship is open to accept complaints from the population, this control process is complicated due to its institutional capillarity: before the centralization in the DCDP, the Federal Police was responsible for censoring artistic works, but there was also the possibility for other authorities from different organs and public hierarchies to assume to themselves the power to forbid cultural expressions which were considered inadequate, offensive, subversive or even inconvenient (p. 25). This diffusive censorship attribution encouraged a vigilance culture which made the power accessible to forbid a vast amount of people, which considered themselves as responsible to determine what others could say, hear or think. Considering how some broad criteria could be used to cause and justify censorship, any kind of prohibition could be allowed:

Considering the censored books’ themes, it is clear that DCDP made the expression “texts which focus sex, public morality and good practices” to have a broad enough sense to comprehend practically anything that was not in the government’s interest to be publish (p.36)<sup>2</sup>

After this introduction, Reimão discusses, in the following three chapters, four censored books published in the 1970s which are representative cases of the national fiction control: Rubem Fonseca’s *Feliz Ano Novo* [“Happy New Year”], and Ignácio de Loyola Brandão’s *Zero* [“Zero”]; Aguinaldo Silva’s *Dez Estórias Imorais* [“Ten immoral stories”]; and Renato Tapajós’ *Em câmera lenta* [“In slow motion”], a unique case in which the censored book also resulted in the author’s prison. The last chapter analyses two censored short stories which won the literary contest from *Status* magazine, Dalton Trevisan’s “Mister Curitiba” [Mr. Curitiba] and Rubem Fonseca’s “O cobrador” [“The taker”], both published afterwards in books, paradoxically without attracting the censors’ attention then. Interviews made with Ignácio de Loyola Brandão

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<sup>2</sup> Original quote: “Pelos temas dos livros censurados percebe-se que o DCDP fazia a expressão ‘textos que verssem sobre sexo, moralidade pública e bons costumes’ ter uma abrangência bastante ampla e atingir praticamente tudo que não fosse do interesse do poder divulgar” (p. 36).

for Reimão's research present a surprising side-effect of self-censorship when this author reveals that his book *Zero* was inspired in cases which the author failed to publish as a journalist (p.67) – but that eventually were also responsible for his novel prohibition.

In Reimão's final considerations, she emphasizes how great Brazilian authors such as Jorge Amado and Érico Veríssimo tried to resist censorship by publishing critical manifests. Several authors continued to pursue ways to publish their works, and some readers were not intimidated in a time when “even buying, carrying around or storing a few books could be dangerous” (p. 120). However, in the same way as these authors and readers resistance persevered even after their books were censored, Reimão's fertile research continues to instigate its readers after her work is over. The documents published in her study's appendix invite the reader to continue the author's analysis, reflecting the popular cry in favor or against censorship practices: among this precious findings, it is ironical to find a censor report which, in April 1970, justified the prohibition of a book that tried to “discredit the [military 1964] revolution by implying that in Brazil there is no freedom” (p.147).

A report in November of the same year is also revealing since it identifies a potentially critical metaphor in a book about a fictional South-American country called Alhambra, with a dictatorship that tortured its opponents and oppressed its people. Evaluating this book, the censor denies it may be about Brazil, since it does not “resemble the national reality”, but he recommends its prohibition anyway since he considers the work “vulnerable to mistaken interpretations about the current regime” which may feed the “campaign that has been distorting the Brazilian image abroad” (p.143). This report exemplifies how the censors had limited interpretative readings, unable to identify such an evident criticism to our own national reality poorly disguised in the book under evaluation; on the other hand, this report shows how broad criteria could justify the prohibition of a work considered to be “vulnerable” to unwanted interpretations.

The letters which requested the control over books or that try to justify their liberation reveal a side of censorship that still needs to be exhumed. These documents prove the participation of individuals and organizations of the civil society among state censorship apparatus. From Reimão's selection emerge requests such as a letter sent in

1974 by a citizen from Lençóis Paulista (SP) to the minister of Justice to forbid books such as Henry Miller's *Quiet Days in Clichy*, considered to be "a real attempt against chastity, but it is accessible to any teenager in our City Library" (p. 162). Another citizen from São Paulo requested, in 1977, the prohibition of magazines such as *Manchete*, *Status* and *Homem*, which explored an "immoral carnival". This same citizen questions the minister of Justice about the "existence of laws on the circulation of obscene works", and asks "why it is not applied to restrain these magazines dramatic abuses" (p. 165). But there were also defenses of forbidden works, as exemplified by a letter written by the dean of the Methodist University of Piracicaba (SP) in 1984 in which he defended the liberation of a film: "I cannot witness in silence the use of such a spurious instrument as the political censorship in a moment which we are trying to implement democracy", because it is necessary to criticize "our sad recent past, marked by misunderstandings, despotism and violence" (p. 167).

Studies as Reimão's may help dissolve the vastly disseminated impression that from the late-1960's to 1970's censorship was a process imposed by simple military arbitrary resolution against the will and denying the voice of Brazilian society, that could only swallow the bitter pill of silence in exchange of the defense of national security and good practices. Documents published by Reimão suggest that several civil society sectors wanted censorship and also considered this control too soft, demanding to take part in the process by denouncing the works which were considered to be offensive – in other words, they considered themselves qualified to give opinions and to participate in this control system. At the same time, the censorship also strengthened itself, amplifying its efficiency among this net of voluntary censors and justifying its existence since it was seen, by the public and inside the State, as necessary means of control. This way, the supposed opacity of the censorship apparatus – which even tried to control its own visibility – starts to reveal its access points and its roots which fed of the fears from conservative sectors of the society, echoing demands for a broader control of cultural practices that were central to the ideological debate of that time.