Historians out and about: historical practice in contemporary Brazil

Summary: In the past few years, Brazil has seen an increasing number of historians venture out of the academe to impart expert knowledge on different media, engaging directly with a much broader audience. While welcoming the enhanced participation of historians in the public sphere, the article asks whether historians are “making” or “doing” history when occupying a political position in public. The contemporary Brazilian context is critically analysed within the conceptual changes the discipline has undergone, recent technological and editorial advances, as well as the multi-faceted crisis the country is facing. Finally, some suggestions are made on how to develop the ‘boom of political participation’ phenomenon into a long-lasting culture within the historical profession.

Keywords: Brazilian historiography; engagement; public historians

 Authors: Guilherme Bianchi Gisele Iecker de Almeida
Email: guilhermebianchix@gmail.com gisele.ieckerdealmeida@ugent.be
Affiliation: Federal University of Ouro Preto, Department of History Universiteit Gent, Faculty of Arts and Philosophy, Department of History
Address: Rua do Seminário, s/n, Mariana, Centro, Minas Gerais - Brazil Sint-Pietersnieuwstraat 35, UFO 9000 Gent, Belgium

Brief biography
Guilherme Bianchi is a doctoral researcher at the Department of History at the Federal University of Ouro Preto, Brazil.
Gisele Iecker de Almeida is a doctoral researcher at the Department of History of Universiteit Gent, Belgium.
1. Introduction

It is increasingly common to find Brazilian historians out and about, engaging with an audience outside of academe\(^1\). Whether as guests in more traditional mass media using the latest means of communication, historians can be spotted not only imparting knowledge about the past, but also voicing their expert opinion on current affairs. Although historians did participate in Brazilian public life in the past, the breadth and depth of debate has never been quite like what we see today—and that is good news. To venture beyond the walls of universities offers historians\(^2\) the opportunity to reflect upon the importance of their research to the wider world, and ultimately may lead to a wider rejection of the study of history ‘for its own sake’ in favour of a knowledge of the past with a social purpose.

This article offers a broad overview of the developments that have resulted in the increased participation of historians in public debate and critically inspects the current state of the ‘boom of political participation’ by historians in contemporary Brazil. To conclude, we explore the conditions for historians’ sustained participation in public life in the years ahead; how to keep the momentum going and build a long-lasting space through which academic historians can expand the scope and continue to enhance the quality of public debate.

Academic history in Brazil is an extensive field, with an estimated ten thousand students concluding their undergraduate studies each year. Close to 70 postgraduate programmes are on offer—in 2012 alone, almost 1,000 masters dissertations and close to 300 doctoral theses were defended. Over 3,000 papers were given during the 2015 edition of the biennial national history convention. At present, there are almost 40 scholarly journals dedicated to the area, most of which are available online as Open Access.\(^3\) Outside the academia, it would not be an overestimation to claim we are witnessing a boom of historians’ engagement in the public

---

\(^1\) Guilherme Bianchi and Gisele Iecker de Almeida (BEX n. 1772-13-9) would like to thank the Brazilian National Council for the Improvement of Higher Education (CAPES) for supporting this piece of research. The authors also wish to express a special thanks to Jerome de Groot and Omar Acha for their comments on an earlier version of this article.

\(^2\) We define ‘historians’ as professional researchers (as opposed to untrained ‘amateurs’) who write critical studies about the past (as opposed to chronicles or timelines), carrying out work that is substantively different from that of other past-focused areas such as museology, archaeology or archival studies. Thus we are discussing a “teaching and writing of history as a certifiable profession of certified professionals” (Lukacs, p. 1), firmly embedded in Michel de Certeau’s notion of a knowledge constantly under revision, forged within a professional “place,” a disciplinary “procedure,” and the language or “text” produced therein. John Lukacs, *The future of history*, London, Yale UP, 2011; Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, New York, Columbia UP, 1988 (Original in French, 1975).

sphere and political discourse. Many Brazilian historians have made the effort to reach out to a non-scientific audience by publishing broader works tailored to the general public.\(^4\) The number of historians making guest appearances on TV and radio broadcasts is increasing, in addition to the already traditional opinion pieces in broadsheet newspapers.\(^5\) According to one estimate, more than half of the Brazilian population have internet at home, and 75\% of users are on Facebook\(^6\), making it now easier for academics to engage with a wider audience, inform and enhance public debate and disseminate offline practices. What may well have been a game changer in the relationship between historians and their audience is the fact that Brazilian historians have embraced self-publishing on websites, blogs, and social media, which has contributed to turning the web into “the virtual agora par excellence” foreseen a few years ago.\(^7\)

The new form of direct engagement with the public denotes a clear break from traditional academic history and the XIX century scientific model. The pretence of objectivity is abandoned, first by shifting the historians’ gaze to the present and giving in to social demands for history (fomented among other things by a rise in popularity of historically-themed cultural goods), and then again by the blurring of the fine line that separates the historian from the citizen within, partly due to the direct access the online community made possible. More than ever before, historians view themselves as historical actors, enmeshed in history, and conscious of the possible effects of their writing in shaping the world. Historians who have been persuaded by Howard Zinn’s exhortation that “you can’t be neutral on a moving train” must accept their perceived privileged position as intermediaries between the past and contemporary society and become mediators who bridge the divide between the past they research, the present they live in, and possible futures they would like to inhabit.\(^8\)

---


\(^5\) Some Brazilian newspapers that often print opinion pieces penned by historians include *Folha de São Paulo*, *O Globo* and *O Estado de São Paulo*.


\(^7\) Ann Rigney, “When the monograph is no longer the medium,” *History and Theory*, vol. 49, n. 4, 2010, p. 111.

\(^8\) Although the majority of historians might still operate in an objectivistic logic and seek a neutral position in their work, compared to the pre-narrativist turn, the “sets of virtues” that make up historiographical work can be said to have expanded so as to include some form of “historical awareness” and a sense of responsibility towards the (mostly self-regulated) definition of the parameters of their investigations, along with the political and ethical choices made in the process of selection and presentation of findings. For an account of this changeover, see Jorma Kalela, *Making History*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011; for an overview of the contrast of narrativist partisanship and objetivistic neutrality, see Anton Froeyman, “The ideal of objectivity and the public role of the
Exciting as this prospect might be, difficult questions must be raised about how Brazilian historians have so far responded to societal demands. Some tensions become evident when historians engage with the wider public. Interventions are mostly unrelated to historians’ own research, which are often very niche and not easily articulated with present concerns. Either for the sake of brevity and clarity or lack of rigorous thought, historical explanation and concepts are simplified, leading to shallow analyses that would not be acceptable within an academic context. Historiography has traditionally demanded time, both in the sense of time needed to do historical research and produce historical analysis, and in the sense of a “cooling off period” through which objects became “history” and could finally be handled by historians—the hindsight that gives historians the benefit of avoiding the pitfalls one might run into assessing situations when “right in the middle of it.” It is important to understand this temporal conflict and reflect on what could be historians’ main contribution to the fast-paced environment of current affairs. Historical accuracy and methodological rigour is to be expected, regardless of whether historians have gone on a foray outside their area of expertise or not.

The increased participation of historians in Brazilian public life is a result of at least three different processes: changes in the historical discipline, which include a more flexible understanding of historical distance and the establishment of *histoire du temps présent* as a field of study; along with the technological advances that have made knowledge production and dissemination widely available; and finally, the complex and multifaceted crisis Brazil faces has motivated many scholars to voice their concerns.

Although it is a positive development that Brazilian historians are being welcomed by a wider audience, their increased participation in public and political discourse must be thoroughly criticised if we want to see the continuation of this engagement in the future.

---


10 At this point, Rigney recalls Danto: “one has to already know the future in order to assess the historical significance of the present;” Rigney, “When the monograph is no longer the medium,” p. 116.

2. Historians as political subjects? The road so far

In the Brazilian context, the political positioning of historians cannot be considered unprecedented, nor is it possible to speak of the public participation of historians as a formative feature of the national historiography. The epistemological principle of distance between subject and object has long been responsible for separating professional history from politics, and temporal proximity was generally seen as an impediment to historical knowledge. The proximity of the historian to the present and its forms of representation (political, religious, institutional etc.) were deemed a barrier to the constitution of a discipline that intended to be objective, as can be observed in Hipólito José da Costa’s work. In the early XIX century, da Costa already dealt with the problem of the (temporal and personal) distance of historians in relation to their research topic, raising relevant issues in the relationship between historians and the public-political sphere. For example, with concerns about the “diversity of views due to the increasing speed of change” and “uncertainties as to authors’ ability to maintain impartiality” due to his view of the “audience as a decisive court”\(^\text{12}\). During the Brazilian imperial period, Lúcia Guimarães points out limitations on reflections about the present among members of the Instituto Histórico Geográfico Brasileiro (IHGB, “Brazilian Geographical Historical Institute”), demonstrated by the inexistence of systematic studies on the present in its publications. However, Guimarães herself notes that the absence of political positioning in the writing of “official” history was accompanied by a politicisation inscribed in informal areas of the Institute, such as minutes, reports and obituaries\(^\text{13}\). This shows that the political positioning of historians, concealed by their quest for objectivity, was already a complex issue long ago.

The XX century witnessed many inflections around the public participation of intellectuals in matters of political interest. The republican dynamic itself would open up a discursive space in which intellectuals became important figures of social recognition. One of the effects of this new dynamic was unveiled in Sérgio Miceli’s pioneering works, which investigate the intersections of intellectuals, political parties, cultural institutions and the State in the early XX century. Defining the sociological contours of intellectuals and their \textit{métier}, Miceli established the underlying interests of their agency amid the Brazilian republican \textit{ethos}\(^\text{14}\). For


historically-inclined intellectuals, the period known as Estado Novo (1937-1945) was pivotal for the rise of a politically-oriented knowledge, the development of a diversified and sophisticated political culture, and a more direct involvement of intellectuals in state affairs, said to have followed a reinterpretation of Brazilian history. Therefore, there was an interest in reconstituting the historical trajectory of the nation through a specific meaning, as if the nation’s past needed to be reorganised to establish the political goals of the Estado Novo: political centralisation and ‘developmentalism’, with republican ideals playing a leading role.

The shock of the 1964 coup d’état opened a new chapter in the relations we have been looking at. The intellectual dynamic was curtailed by the conservative nature of the regime: an undemocratic political order with increasingly severe censorship and political persecution. In this period, the biggest example of critical historiography that articulates a certain public function for historians is found in the controversy surrounding the editorial project of the “New History of Brazil,” created during the military regime but soon aborted for being deemed “of sectarian and subversive orientation, seeking to deny the authenticity of the great moral values of the national history and (...) distorting historical facts.” We are not looking to discuss the intricacies of the project, but only to point out that from this moment onwards, the use of history as a discourse and “place” of political confrontation was already a concern for some historians. A distinct attitude can be perceived in the work of certain historians during the period, in particular the group supervised by Nelson Werneck Sodré, consisting of a resistance through the writing of history which entailed fact-checking and debunking the historical manipulations and misappropriations of historical discourse promoted by the authoritarian regime.

The final years of the regime saw an exponential increase in demands for the political positioning of intellectuals, who were no longer mere representatives of a constituted state of affairs, but active critics of that order. Quite clearly, examples of intellectuals holding the opposite position also exist. Much as the intellectual spectrum found in the late XIX century France, the post-dictatorship moment saw intellectuals split in political disputes during the

country’s re-democratisation. The debate on “ideology” is a fundamental space for understanding the political positioning of historians at that moment. Writing about this process, Francisco Souza points out that “ideology was a tool to resolve the tensions and relationships between intellectual production and its context, or culture and the economy.” The arrival of works by (among other authors) Michel Foucault and E.P. Thompson to the Brazilian historiographical landscape revitalised the discussions around ideology and put the observer’s presumed privileged position in check. Faced with the contradiction of a present that demanded a political positioning and a specialist knowledge that constrained professionals from taking such positions, Brazilian historians started to use an “indirect political discourse”: “Historians’ answers to the present were not direct or programmatic answers (…), they were indirect and oblique (…). More than answers, historiography proposed questions.”

The 1990s saw a relative increase in historians’ concerns about the circulation and reproduction of academic knowledge, with aims to both broaden their sphere of influence and understand how the relationship between historians and the political order had been shaped in the country. The proliferation of university presses opened up a new space for the circulation of academic knowledge. The “emergence” of new subjects and social groups as research objects enabled the opening of historical knowledge to discursive fields beyond academic criticism. As Margareth Rago reminds us, “new social, ethnic and gender groups have come to participate in public life, raising their questions and demands, and at the same time broadening cultural and aesthetic forms of consumption.” From then on, it was clear that historians should aim to satisfy not only their peers, but also the larger set of rights-claiming subjects in the public sphere.

Parallel to the emergence of these new subjectivities, and in the context of the consecutive electoral victories of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT, “Workers’ Party”), a range of new questions and concerns about the radicalisation of Brazilian democracy have been raised. To name but two significant examples, issues such as positive discrimination in public

20 Souza, “Historiografias em tempos de redemocratização.”
21 Gomes, História e historiadores.
universities and the establishment of a truth commission to investigate human rights violations perpetrated during the military period helped consolidate a political and discursive space through which, as “connoisseurs” of the past, historians started to play a more central role in on-going political developments. In the “quotas” debate\textsuperscript{24}, historian Luiz Felipe de Alencastro was invited to present his views at the Federal Supreme Court. In scrutinising the proposed law, Alencastro offered a long-term perspective on the potential impact of racial policies in a nation that inherited traditions and values of slaveholding societies.

Brazil is by no means the only country where the borders between the public sphere and academic research became more permeable towards the second half of the short XX century\textsuperscript{25}. Many other societies across the globe have also sought to make amends after prolonged periods of injustice—think, for example, of the debates around the memory of fascism in Germany, Italy and Spain; Eastern Europe’s communism; France’s Vichy regime and colonial legacy; comfort women in Korea and Japan; South Africa’s apartheid regime; slavery in Europe and the U.S.; Aborigines and settler Australians; besides, of course, the reckoning with the many dictatorships across Latin America\textsuperscript{26}. Bearing in mind this international backdrop, we will now delve into an analysis of the transformation of the relationship between historians and society in contemporary Brazil, raising three essential aspects that led to the increased participation of historians in public life in this context. First, we critically analyse the conceptual changes in the historical discipline itself, which enabled a more nuanced attitude towards the present in which the historian is situated; second, we revisit the technological advances and editorial modifications that made self-publishing and participative forms of media widely available; and third, the increased participation of historians in public life is framed within the on-going complex crisis Brazil is currently facing.

3. The Contemporary Context

3.1 Conceptual Changes

\textsuperscript{24} Affirmative action which safeguarded a certain percentage of spots in federal universities for students coming from state-funded schools, low-income families and Brazilian of African or indigenous descent.
A number of commentators have argued that after the fall of the Berlin wall, our very relation to time has evolved, and a new experience of temporality, different from modernity, has come about. A somewhat dystopic temporality is said to have emerged, in which a supposed narrowing of the present’s “horizon of expectation” seems to accommodate a complete lack of future prospects\(^{27}\). The perception of reality as a flux of nows, that is, an inescapable presentism, follows the crumbling of the utopian horizon and the collapse of the grand narrative and the place of the “real” in the structure of historical discourse. All of these developments have proved unsettling to the field that once strove to build a permanent picture of human past, as it “actually happened.” Jean Baudrillard long ago warned us that “the acceleration of modernity (...) has propelled us to ‘escape velocity,’ with the result that we have flown free of the referential sphere of the real and of history,” grimly foreseeing that “we shall never get back to the pre-news and pre-media history\(^{28}\).” A caveat to this diagnosis seems to be required for non-Western or ‘peripheral’ contexts. As one commentator argues, the temporal dynamics of Brazilian politics for example, articulates a demand for development (future) through the incessant management of the “wreckage of the present”; generating a certain inability to imagine qualitatively different futures\(^{29}\).

The historical discipline has evolved with the times. Now perceived as historically determined, contingent and subject to critique,\(^{30}\) a major conceptual development enabling this shift has been a more flexible understanding of historical distance—which, as we have seen, has been a familiar topic among Brazilian historians since the early XIX century. Historical distance has entered the historical epistemology lexicon almost naturally, as if it were a given that some sort of temporal separation was necessary for historical work to take place. Associated with “adulthood”, maturity and clarity, historical hindsight has been deemed the very essence of what the discipline stands for, what separates it from present-


oriented fields such as social science and journalism: “the only way history could be written was having distance from its object.”

Between an occurrence and the writing about it, there would supposedly be a moment when *Res Gestae*, the referent, is detached from its discourse, *Rerum Gestarum*. During that time present became past, polemics became uncontentious, the new became old, what existed was no more. In sum, what once was “hot” supposedly “cooled off.” Along this line, the present has been compared to a huge burning coal fire: post-1945, we have plenty of “hot” history, that is, unresolved parts of the past that despite having been through a cooling off period, remain contentious. That completely ruins it for historians, who normally behaved as if they could turn their backs to the present and devote their time to the “historical past,” which they saw as some foreign country to visit and tell others all about it. Well… that is no longer possible. Historians seem to not only have been forced out of their comfort zone, the “epistemologically neutral middle ground that supposedly exists between art and science,” but to also “have entered into a mediatized era of (…) instantaneous historicisation of the present” in which they are asked to “immediately provide posterity’s point of view.”

There have been at least three developments through which the historical discipline started to deal with the present, all of which have played a part in the increased participation of historians in public debate in Brazil. One is the rise of the field known to Francophone historians as *histoire du temps présent*. More widespread in Brazil than in Anglophone countries, the emergence of the history of the present as a field of research enabled historians to embrace the recent past in their research horizon—a development that potentially turned historians’ own lived experiences into a source for their historical investigations, yet another

---

37 For example historians Daniel Aarão Reis Filho and Dulce Pandolfi participated in the armed struggle against the Brazilian dictatorship, and later chose to focus on the period in their academic research.
clear break with the objectivist scientific model that separates subject and object of research and blurring of the distinction between the individual citizen and the historian.

A second development has been the rise of reparation politics, in which the very paradigm of a necessary temporal distance for the historiographical activity is ultimately put in check. Academic historians should address the political concern of repairing the past, as it affects the modern understanding of a radical separation of past, present and future to present us with a more nuanced view of history, in which the past can be said to be stuck to the present, or still present. A new dynamics of temporality emerges with the suspension of the paradigm that identified past and historical distance, giving rise to new forms of relating with the past: as presence, spectrality and the ‘irrevocable.’ Victims’ demands regarding the continuing presence of the past and the need to take such presence seriously, for example, requires a more sophisticated reflection of the ontological and epistemological nature of the past as a territory that is separate from the present and the future.

This new approach, remarks Marek Tamm, “no longer sees temporal distance from past events as a drawback but as an advantage insofar as it allows one better to understand the events’ various layers of meaning and impact on the present.” It is precisely because it allows a greater level of political action in the present that proximity is no longer perceived as a barrier to access the past, and “Anachronism is no longer a taboo that the historian must fear.” This raises the question of whether the barriers between past, present and future are merely a matter of observing differences a priori or, on the contrary, are products of a more active, creative or performative history, since these barriers are always temporal dimensions that respond to the demands of the social actors directly involved with such issues and pasts.

A third development has been the establishment of public history, or applied history, as an area of historical expertise, which widens the employment opportunities for historians who may employ their preservation and conservation skills in the heritage industry, organise exhibitions, etc. In Brazil, growing interest for public history encouraged the historical guild to press for a federal law regulating the historical profession. As the then-ANPUH president

40 The association, known to Brazilian historians as ANPUH (from its acronym for “National Historical Association” in Portuguese), garnered support for the proposed law n. 4699/2012, through which public sector history teachers and heritage professionals would necessarily have to hold a degree in History. Researchers working in other areas, such as art, science and architecture protested, and the wording was changed to include professionals in other academic areas doing historical research; Brasil, Proposed law n.
explained, “what is really under discussion is the need to adapt ourselves to the institutional traditions of Brazil […] in the tradition of the Brazilian state, the absence of a regulatory law implies professional disadvantages. Intense debate about the limits and scope of the historical craft followed, both among practicing academic historians (in history departments or not) and the wider society.

Even though we fundamentally disagree with the attempt to impose some sort of accreditation system for historical practice and the quest for the regulation of the profession spoke to a practical need to guarantee a rightful and safe space for institutional rather than political action, it was an important moment in the forging of a collective noun. This mobilisation saw Brazilian historians emerge for the first time as an organised group, defending their interests and acting as a collective in the political arena: the social status of the profession was defended and secured in the process.

3.2 Technological Advances and Editorial Modifications

The rapid advance in the telecommunications sector and popularisation of digital technology has had a decisive impact on the individual and collective ways of accessing reality and brought about new ways of engaging politically and historically in the world. New features and other possible forms of organisation, recognition and participation can be attributed to this impact on human communication. Possibly a symptom of what Manuel Castells called the “network society,” in 2006 Time magazine’s “person of the year” issue stamped the word “You,” and below it read: “Yes, you. You control the Information Age. Welcome to your world.” The magazine’s choice represents a time when the tools of cultural production and


43 In March 2015 the proposed law was unanimously approved in the Chamber of Deputies (Brazil’s Lower House). A final vote in the Senate is still required before the legislation is officially endorsed by the President and becomes law.

information are no longer merely offered to the consumers but produced and adapted by them. The role of large communication conglomerates can now be confronted: YouTube appears as a possibility of relative regulation of journalistic and cultural production; social networks like Facebook can disseminate autonomous information production; Wikipedia and Google search, in turn, can be seen as to represent a popular form of history-making in the digital era.

In the current Brazilian experience, the virtualisation of public debate and cultural production open new possibilities between social actors and the public sphere. By amplifying the means of access to the historical past, this process also affects history making. Academic history cannot renounce the task of understanding the logic of what constitutes history in the public domain. In what follows we critically assess how new articulations between academic history, politics and popularisation of the past in the contemporary Brazilian context are produced. This point will be important to later understand the current forms of engagement of Brazilian historians in the public sphere, forms that permeate these new dimensions of political action but often reproduce the ingrained “old” logic of control exerted by the disciplines, imposing limits over who is authorised to transmit history and promote a representation of the past—blissfully unaware of the fact that everyone has the means and the right to engage in historical research.

At the end of 2016, a quick search on Facebook revealed the high popularity of historians, their projects or pages of historical interest in Brazil. A good example is Café História, a “historical social network” that operated between 2008 and 2017. It was founded by historian and journalist Bruno Leal with the aim of disseminating historical knowledge and current research to the general public and reached an audience of over 340,000 individuals on Facebook.45 Followed by over 350,000 individuals, historian Marco Antonio Villa’s readership concentrates those of a particular political inclination. Famous for his lenient view of the Brazilian dictatorial period and conservative revisionism, Villa was one of the few advocates for the infamous 2009 editorial by Folha de São Paulo that sought to mitigate the violence of the military regime by using the term ditabranda (“soft dictatorship”). Finally, Leandro Karnal, a historian of a more progressive persuasion who, like Villa, is also a

45 Bruno Leal Pastor de Carvalho, “Faça aqui o seu login: os historiadores, os computadores e as redes sociais online”, Revista História Hoje, v. 3, n. 5., 2014, p-165-188.
commentator in Brazilian broadsheet newspapers, TV shows and a sought-after speaker in
events around the country, has more than 900,000 followers on his Facebook profile.

At first glance, the high popularity of these historians could be brushed off by claiming that
their academic status had little if any importance, as they share their media space with other
commentators who do not have an academic background, but the fact is that whether it is on
their webpages, marketing material, newspaper columns or TV captions, the label “historian”
always appears next to their name, conferring a “degree of authority” that precedes their
political positions. Jerome de Groot already noted that “As a consequence of the explosion of
interest, the historians involved became a hybrid combination of television personalities,
media figures, and cultural gatekeepers.” The academic or disciplinary origin of their
activities quickly blends into other facets of their public persona: from popstar to a possible
“hero of the future,” the complexity of their activities is unavoidably multiplied manifold the
moment they step out into the public sphere.

Partially delivered by professional historians via the media or social networks, the increased
societal demand for access to representation of the past requires various responses. On
Brazilian television, countless history-inspired soap operas and short series have been
produced. As for the publishing world, the success of historical bestsellers and large
circulation of magazines focused on events and characters of the past is a latent cultural
phenomenon. Jurandir Malerba remarked on the business factor that encompasses and
replicates the demand: “Publishers, advertisers and media men in general have discovered that
the past can be a good deal.” Nevertheless, with the development of the interactive “Web
2.0,” the communication and production of historical content has reached a more horizontal
phase in which the boundaries between “producers” and “consumers” is very narrow. On
YouTube, for example, historical channels with original content produced by amateurs
proliferate—to give an idea of the visibility of these initiatives, no longer than six months
after it was first posted, the video “Ditadura / Regime Militar” of the “Nostalgia” channel had
more than 2 million views.

It is only possible to talk about “popular historians” because there has previously been a
“popularisation of history.” The democratised access to multiple versions of the past seems to

46 de Groot, Consuming History, p. 19.
47 Jurandir Malerba, “Acadêmicos na berlinda ou como cada um escreve a História?” História da
Historiografia, n. 15, 2014, p. 29. Translated by the authors.
give the public the sensation that previously inaccessible dimensions can now be revealed according to certain logics of socio-political interests. At this moment of quantitative and qualitative growth in demand for history, public sphere historians\(^48\) started to appear around the country.

However, if the openness of the past to the public cannot be detached from political interests, the dynamics of popularisation also carries certain contradictions. A large part of contemporary history best-sellers voice very conservative perspectives about the past. Recent publications include Villa’s *Ditadura à brasileira. 1964-1985: a democracia golpeada à esquerda e à direita* (2014)—which as the title suggests, looks at the undemocratic dimension of the dictatorial period, reproducing the “theory of the two demons” prominent in post-dictatorial Argentina; and writings by Leandro Narloch, who claims to offer a historical account devoid of the “ideological veil” that in his view taints the more well-known publications dealing with the same contentious events\(^49\). The privileged editorial space given to conservative or right-wing revisionist histories and the existing appetite for this type of historical research illustrates the fact that the popularisation of history has the power to disseminate an array of political views within society.

History teaching in schools has also become a topic embroiled in heated debate. A movement to institutionalise the “political neutralisation” of teaching in schools has been gaining ground in the country. It derives from a supposedly “left-leaning indoctrination” of students being carried out by teachers. Projects around the country have been launched under the banner of *Escola sem Partido* (“Schools without Political Parties”). This worrisome development is a backlash to the same logic of openness to the past: parents would rather control the historical perspectives their children come into contact with. Regardless the reason, a return to history being done by the privileged few, “behind closed doors” as it were, would never give control of the appropriations of the past in everyday life back to historians (or parents). On the contrary: as we have seen, the democratic dynamic gives way to the circulation of un- or even anti-democratic interpretations, it also opens space for dissent—the establishment of open.

\(^{48}\) By “public sphere historians” we are referring not only to academics and public historians, but also to all of those who are engaged in the relation of the public with the past such as archivists, museologists, journalists, archaeologists etc. (including amateur practitioners). W.D. Rubinstein, ‘History and “amateur” history’, in P. Lambert and P. Schofield (eds.) *Making History*, London: Routledge, 2004, pp. 269–80. See also: de Groot, *Consuming History*.

\(^{49}\) In one of his self-proclaimed “clean historical accounts,” Narloch goes so far as to say that “the indigenous themselves killed most of the Amerindians.” Leandro Narloch, *Guia politicamente incorreto da História do Brasil*, São Paulo, Leya, 2011.
confrontations the past. The risk of ending up with multiple perspectives of the past is intrinsic to democracy.

Claude Lefort has already shown that the “democratic invention” that sprang up between the Old Regime and the totalitarian state by dis-incorporating the unity of power in the name of its multiplicity, stands as a manifestation of society as a place of indeterminacy, where significant degrees of freedom and access to knowledge coexist\(^{50}\). However, the conflict of memories that results from the democratisation of the past through the internet in itself is no reason to celebrate. In fact, as explored in part 3.3, such conflicts, embedded as they are in “ethical intention” and political positioning\(^{51}\), can lead to anti-democratic logics of hate, denial, and resentment.

The new content-generation Web 2.0 dynamic radicalises the indeterminate nature of the parole and emphasises the historical trait of identity-forming entities in which the subject/object relation is established in an active way. This process has been characterised by the public involvement as active participants in the production of historical representation—as Vivian Sobchack put, “history can’t happen without us”\(^{52}\). Still according to Sobchack, however individuals decide to use history in their daily lives and articulate themselves in relation to it, the historical expands as it takes place in the public sphere, transforming the forms of recognition and the way in which history is “consumed”\(^{53}\): the appropriation of the past is collectively produced and distributed according to the interests and motivations of historical agents. Many possibilities are opened up by the consolidation of an active, non-monopolised relationship between the historical subject and object, including the denial or rejection of historical factuality. This means that the democratic public sphere is by definition always open to politically-motivated, ethically conflicting, readings or manipulations of the past borne out of conflicting interests in the present.

---


At the time of writing, Brazil faces a severe crisis compounded by unprecedented economic and political volatility. The situation has posed a challenge to anyone attempting to predict which faction will end up on the “right side of history” in the future. The crisis has seen Dilma Rousseff impeached, and comparisons drawn with the 1992 impeachment of Fernando Collor. Further to this, the extreme polarisation of public discourse at the present time paves the way to ideological and partisan considerations. The demise of the PT has divided the country between those who see the impeachment procedure as a symbol of the strengthening of democracy, and those who consider it a democratic failure. The latter condemn the process as a ‘parliamentary coup’ and draw direct comparisons to the 1964 military coup. The idea that history might somehow be repeating itself has played a part in raising public interest in historical affairs and historians’ expert opinions.

Although internationally the political demand for historical knowledge might not be a particularly new development\(^{54}\), the current Brazilian moment presents interesting new characteristics. Engaged historians find themselves in the wake of a technological democratization of access and production of knowledge, just as the most severe socio-political economic crisis in a generation erupted in the country—offering a unique rallying point and backdrop for the consolidation of the public engagement of historians.

Emerging in this wake, the movement Historiadores pela Democracia (“Historians for Democracy,” henceforth HfD) is a prime example of a certain ethos of political engagement to emerge from the current Brazilian situation. Established in 2016, the movement brings together history researchers, professors and students who recognised the unfolding impeachment of Dilma Rousseff as a “coup.” In a video-manifesto posted on social media\(^{55}\), dozens of historians condemned the parliamentary process, pointing out that this undemocratic development would lead to the loss of socio-economic rights obtained in recent decades. Intellectuals are called upon to “dispute the narrative” of events. Let us unpack in more detail what the HfD stands for.

\(^{54}\) The upward trend in public demand for historical knowledge has been noted decades ago. Some indicators are the sales of historical books and biographies, growing number of history graduates and constant release of new period films and series. For a discussion on the “historical craze” or “appetite” for history, see Lukacs, The Future of History, p. 63; and Margaret MacMillan, Dangerous Games, New York: Modern Library, 2008, p. 3-11. For an early discussion of how best to address this growing interest in the past, see Howard Zinn, The Politics of History, Boston, Beacon Press, 1970; and François Bédarida, “The Modern Historian's Dilemma: Conflicting Pressures from Science and Society,” Economic History Review, n. 150, 1987, p. 335-348.

The language used by members of the HfD will be familiar to anyone acquainted with the classic imagery of the engaged intellectual. They express the defence of a certain “sense of history.” In the first testimony of the video-manifesto, historian Laura de Mello e Souza claims that “history will do justice to this [Roussef’s] government.” Historian Iris Kantor warns “future historians” that their study of the political events of 2016 would necessarily have to take into consideration alternative media, as the mainstream media has obfuscated the “real implications and motives” behind the impeachment. The message of the manifesto derives from a shared image of the future, and defines the group’s members not only by the fact that they belong to a certain professional category, but, above all, by their positioning in relation to the events of the day, the symbolic epistemic universe in existence in the present.

Sustaining that history is repeating itself and Brazilian democracy is threatened by a coup, HfD members have taken it upon themselves to educate the population about this turn of events. One could ask whether historians who joined the group are “making” history by advancing a public agenda, or “doing” history by promoting historiographical knowledge. Is theirs a political, or a historiographical behaviour? In our view, the development of groups such as HfD has the potential to articulate both instances, as it presents historians with an opportunity to use their epistemic apparatus and skillset to reinforce political arguments.

This is not the only use of the past found in Brazil today: groups from a wide range of political backgrounds have resorted to the past to explain, illustrate and present their take on the woes the country faces at present. HfD is not the only group to have used social media, other left-leaning groups have also used to disseminate their view on how the events of 2016 and 1964 may compare, and denounce what is in their view a return of authoritarianism.

In her youth, Rousseff was part of the armed struggle against the regime, an aspect of her biography that proved very divisive. On the one hand, pro-impeachment protesters used images of a defiant young Rousseff to denounce her ties to extremism, conflating their negative views of her past with a critical take on present events. PT supporters, on the other hand, used the same images—only this time to highlight the narrative of a leader who overcame the trauma of being arrested and tortured by the military to become president of Brazil. The same image of her past was used to promote opposing political viewpoints (see figures 1 and 2 below).

This goes to show that the past is constantly used as a tool of political struggle. In a scenario of deep uncertainty about the future, the crisis itself (in its various meanings, as we shall see) nourishes the different possible uses of the past by requiring its constant reinterpretation.
Different views of the role of the historian have also been conveyed by the crisis. Rodrigo Patto Sá Motta, for example, states that, “at moments of crisis, the historian’s role is to help understand and decipher what is happening.” For Motta, the need to engage in the public sphere is a possible political strategy to “influence the construction of identities” and “inspire individual agents in their choices.”

Figure 1 Writing on image reads: “There won’t be a coup #StayDilma”
“Act against the impeachment process” (Rio de Janeiro, 04 April 2016) by Fernando Frazão/Agência Brasil, used under CC BY

Figure 2 Writing on image reads: “Dilma Out, Impeachment Now” and “Dilma 100% misleading advertising”
“Fora Dilma 02” image by Eduardo Caetano via http://vaderetrobestafera.blogspot.co.uk posted on 17 Aug. 2015

Figures 1 and 2 – Different uses of Rousseff’s Past

From a curious exchange in the Brazilian press, another perspective of the past-in-the-present imbroglio emerges. Only a few days after Rousseff’s suspension from office, the broadsheet O Estado de Sao Paulo published an editorial criticising historians, especially the HfD, for their “rush to anticipate the history that will be written in the future.” The piece warns that historians were trying to pre-establish a certain narrative of the facts, and that this action could in the future undermine any criticism of the impeachment process that contradicted their view of events. Towards the end of the piece, Marc Bloch is summoned: “If future historians follow the advice of the great master of their profession, Marc Bloch, who asked colleagues

56 Rodrigo Patto Sá Motta, “A história e os historiadores em tempos de crise,” Uberaba, paper delivered during the XX Encontro da ANPUH/MG, 26 July 2016, p. 7. Translated by the authors.
57 Motta, “A história e os historiadores em tempos de crise.” Translated by the authors.
for their ‘honest submission to truth,’ this ruling already has a verdict: the absolute demoralisation of *lulopetismo* 59.” In an open letter to the newspaper, Bloch’s granddaughter, Suzette Bloch and Brazilian historian and HfD member Fernando Nicolazzi, voice their condemnation of “all political instrumentalisation of Marc Bloch.” She asks: “Can you imagine my grandfather’s reaction watching the scene provided by the deputies who voted for Dilma Rousseff’s suspension in the name of their wives, children, God, or a torturer?” Nicolazzi concludes, harshly criticizing the editorial: “The piece intended to define what historiography should be, but we only got an inconsequential use of history and the misuse of the writing of a historian who knew better than most to write about his *métier* 60.”

Yet, there seems to be a contradiction here. Are historians in a position to define the use given to their writing, or is it for their readers to interpret their words and visions of the past? Are ‘historians’ the only ones able to interpret ‘history’ and represent the past? The age-old question of authority sits at the heart of the controversy surrounding the *Estadão* editorial. And the same problem seems to remain unanswered as we reflect on the deeper meaning of the words used by members of HfD. Basically, in establishing from the present time which sources “should” be consulted by “future historians,” it seems that not only do they project some sort of future retrospective view of the present, but also elect those who are apt or not to talk about the current moment.

Finally, another plausible objection is the fact that many historians who disagree with the arguments put forward by the group also believe that they are “democrats” or “pro-democracy”. This raises the problem that the name of the group seems to obstruct the debate and erect a virtual barrier between the “historians for democracy” and the “remaining historians”. Despite their remarkable effort to politicise the Brazilian historiographical debate and produce new perspectives and models for political action, HfD’s choice for the lowest common denominator prompts an oversimplification of the concept of democracy that could result in the production of new divisive and authoritarian logics, making it difficult or even undesirable to generate dissent and disagreement—that is, debate—within the historiographical field 61. Even though historians against democracy may exist, to inhibit

59 *O Estado de São Paulo*, “O lugar de Dilma na história.”

60 The letter was submitted to *O Estado de São Paulo* as a reply to the editorial, but was never published by the newspaper. It can be found at: http://cartamaior.com.br/?/Editoria/Politica/Neta-de-Marc-Bloch-responde-a-editorial-do-Estadao/4/36437, accessed 17 Dec. 2016. Translated by the authors.

61 The point was originally raised by Pedro Telles da Silveira, whom the authors would like to thank for providing the basis for this argument.
debate risks alienating historians and other intellectuals who perceive the present moment as an institutional crisis, rather than a coup\textsuperscript{62}; some of whom were denouncing anti-democratic episodes even before Rousseff was impeached\textsuperscript{63}.

This incident illustrates that the minefield upon which the historical discipline is built can no longer be characterised merely by a dispute into the meaning of the past; as increasingly it has to deal with contrasting narratives that shape the present and the future, as well as manage internal disputes concerning the political properties of the profession. Questions such as how should the present be told in the future, which sources will future historians be able to rely upon, or how to avoid “undue” political (ab)uses of the past are some of the problems that come into place when the political impact of the discipline is scrutinised. Other meanings of history come to the fore in the present context, a past that is not the historical past of the historians, but perhaps something closer to Hayden White’s practical past\textsuperscript{64}. Beyond the study of the past “for its own sake” (a classical feature of “professional” historical writing), another possible attitude is to relate to the past in more creative and imaginative ways. Openness to other epistemes and narrative modes are required to forge a practical engagement with the past that is capable of addressing certain desirable futures. Such relation with the past recognises that the plural nature of the present historicity is not inherently positive or negative\textsuperscript{65}.

4. Conclusion

The inter-connected, “network society” world we live in and its continuously broadcasting newsrooms show no signs of abating, much to the contrary: we are witnessing the ever-faster, instantaneous historicisation of the present. New readings, information and conclusions, new historical representations are tailored with each news story. The time to reflect and research is


\textsuperscript{64} Hayden White, The Practical Past, Evanston, Northwestern UP, 2014.

\textsuperscript{65} As Wendy Brown points out, “As the past becomes less easily reduced to a single set of meanings and effects, as the present is forced to orient itself amid so much history and so many histories, history itself emerges as both weightier and less deterministic than ever before.” Wendy Brown, Politics Out of History, Princeton, Princeton UP, 2001, p. 5.
shortened, and, as history is being made, so are the narratives through which the present time will be remembered.

This article has examined the particular moment of heightened participation of Brazilian historians in public life as commentators both of historical themes and history-related topics, as well as current affairs. The width and breadth of this engagement—in terms of the scope of topics and audience historians can now reach—is a very positive development, particularly as it highlights the growing interest in historical affairs and in the expert opinion of historians, a welcome change to the social status of the profession. Brazilian historians have risen to the occasion and are engaging with the world beyond the academe on an unprecedented scale; enhancing public debate by publishing works that are accessible without being shallow, devoting time to communicating their work in self-publishing new media, as well as appearing on traditional media. To conclude, we will focus on what could be done to keep up the momentum generated by the boom of political participation by historians in the broader society, so that in the future historians continue to be in a privileged position to contribute to public life and democratise historical knowledge.

To ensure the durable participation of historians in public life requires that the historians who engage in public and political discourse see themselves both as free agents and historical actors; citizens who, when occupying a political position in the public debate—be it tweeting, or posting something on Facebook, creating video blogs or sending their manuscripts to newspapers and participating on TV shows—do so in full conscience that they will also be perceived by the public as members of a professional order, one that trades information and knowledge of the past. Ethically responsible intellectuals, aware of their social responsibility as historians to foster democratic values and pluralism, will seek to make the world intelligible by raising critical questions that can bring about new insights to pressing issues in the present. They will articulate in their answers relevant and accurate information (a prerequisite) obtained from a variety of sources and representing varied voices and perspectives, in order to enhance public debate and lead others to develop their own point of view.

In order to ensure the current level of engagement with the social sphere is more than a passing fad, a culture must be developed within the historical profession. A change in the current model of academic production has the potential to contribute to the creation of an environment in which the dissemination of knowledge follows a democratising logic rather than a capitalisation model that quantifies knowledge and turns it into a product. Such
paradigmatic change could bring about a transformation in the modes of connection between public opinion and science along the lines imagined by Isabelle Stengers: “Another science (...) requires what today is to scientists a ‘waste of time’, (...) open themselves up to others’ preoccupations, to their knowledge, to their objections. We (...) need scientists to be able to participate in the collective understanding of issues.\textsuperscript{66}"

The amplification of the political and ethical impacts of historiography in society requires that historical organisations and history departments at universities provide the necessary support so as to make historians feel confident in their augmented professional role. Training in communication and media should be incorporated in undergraduate courses and offered as professional development to staff; also, outreach activities and interaction with the civil society must be rewarded in academia, both as part of a programme of incentives attached to the tenure process and as workload reduction.

Public engagement is the best (and possibly the harshest) form of feedback academia could ever ask for, as it provides an answer to the question: “is this work relevant?”—both in terms of the individual research, and the discipline as a whole. Thus, the current Brazilian situation is an opportunity for conducting research on the articulation of the societal need for historical explanation and the conclusions historians have generated. As the case illustrates, pro-active initiatives such as HfD have the potential of starting the necessary dialogue between historians and civil society but, as with any group advocating “democracy,” it must be wary of the danger of reducing the meaning of the term to only just “a form of society\textsuperscript{67}.” The biggest challenge for groups that promote a particular historical perspective is to exercise self-criticism and open up to democratic dissent.

Historians clearly need to be able to juggle different sets of skills to act beyond the confines of academia, and find the right balance between maintaining historical accuracy and rigorous thinking while making complex problems intelligible to a wide audience, or commenting on events that happened a short while ago; operate in the intersection of past and present by enhancing understanding of the latter while being able to present an archaeology of the issues at hand. Finally, they need to feel confident outside the comfort zone of their field of expertise, in full awareness that they are entering a stage where the stakes are much higher:


the cultural, political and social life beyond the walls of university, where history and historian can prove their value by putting forward a proposal of “what people ought to want, what democracies need, what a habitable human and planetary future cannot do without”—potentially shaping the future itself.

Bibliographical References


Bruno Leal Pastor de Carvalho, “Faça aqui o seu login: os historiadores, os computadores e as redes sociais online,” *Revista História Hoje*, v. 3, n. 5., 2014, p-165-188.


---


__________, “A história e os historiadores em tempos de crise,” Uberaba, paper delivered during the XX Encontro da ANPUH/MG, 26 July 2016.


“Rethinking Historical Distance: From Doctrine to Heuristic,” History and Theory, vol. 50, n. 4, 2011.


