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Introduction

HISTORY PROVIDES NO VACCINES

BRAZIL HAS A MOST PARTICULAR HISTORY, at least when compared to its Latin American neighbors. Nearly half of all enslaved Africans violently forced from their lands ended up in Brazil; and after gaining independence, Brazil, though surrounded by republics, formed a monarchy that enjoyed wide support for more than sixty years, thanks to which the country—the enormous size of which more closely approximates that of a continent—kept its borders intact. On top of this, because Brazil was a Portuguese colony, its inhabitants speak a different language from their neighbors.

Brazilian Authoritarianism dialogues, in part, with data and conclusions that appear in *Brasil: Uma Biografia* (2015; published in English as *Brazil: A Biography*, 2018), which I wrote with Heloisa Starling. I also make selective use of columns I have published since 2014 in the newspaper *Nexo*. As my aim is to give a general, not an exhaustive, view on a series of subjects that explain authoritarian practices characteristic of the country, some of which are not strictly part of my professional and academic specializations, I was only able to write this book thanks to the excellent books, reports, and articles written by academics, activists, and journalists on the subjects contained herein. As the circumstances of publication of the original (Portuguese) edition of this book did not allow for systematic use of footnotes or endnotes, a bibliography has been included at the end, in which I list details of works cited in the main text. (Bibliographical endnotes are instead provided, however, for the preface and afterword added for this English-language edition.)

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Brazil is also a very young and original country when it comes to a regular institutional life. A good number of its national establishments were created when the Portuguese royal family arrived in 1808, at which time the first schools of surgery and anatomy were founded in the cities of Salvador and Rio de Janeiro. In Spanish colonies, by contrast, the university system dates back much further, to the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries: the universities of Santo Domingo (1538), Lima (1551), Mexico City (1551), Bogotá (1580), Quito (1586), Santiago (1621), Guatemala (1676), Havana (1721), Caracas (1721), and Asunción (1733).

It was only with the arrival of the Portuguese court,[1] and the doubling of the population in some Brazilian cities, that the country would no longer rely exclusively on graduates of the University of Coimbra (in Portugal). The first Brazilian higher schools were the Royal Military Academy (founded in 1810), the Agriculture Course (1814), and the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture (1820), offering courses that earned one a professional diploma: one's ticket to privileged government posts and a highly restricted job market with its attendant social prestige. At the same time, the Royal Botanic Garden, the Royal School of the Sciences, Arts, and Crafts, the Royal Museum, the Royal Library, the Royal Press, and the Banco do Brasil were also founded—this last, according to witnesses, having been "bankrupt from the outset."

The Portuguese Crown also sought to transplant from Lisbon its enormous bureaucracy, a hierarchical structure that had previously been located at the Paço in the Portuguese capital, and which included the Government-General of Brazil, the captaincies, and the municipal assemblies. The judiciary had already established a presence in Brazil with the Tribunal da Relação (an appeals court), tied to the Casa da Suplicação—a royal higher court of appeals in the Portuguese capital; but this higher court also came in the prince regent's "baggage," along with other older Portuguese tribunals: the Desembargo do Paço, the highest court in this structure, and the Mesa da Consciência e Ordens (Board

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of the King's Conscience and of the Military Orders), linked to the archbishop of Brazil.

Political independence in 1822 brought few changes in institutional terms, but it established a clear objective: to build and provide the justification for a new nation that would also, as we have seen, be unique in the American context—a monarchy surrounded by republics on all sides.

It was no small task. There was the need to draft a new constitution, see to the health of the sick population, which had grown considerably, train engineers to secure the borders and plan new cities, bring proceedings that had previous been decided according to custom and regional power balances under the auspices of the judiciary, and, not least, invent a new history for Brazil, since until then the country's history was still largely that of Portugal. It is no wonder, then, that among the first institutions founded upon independence was the Brazilian Historical and Geographical Institute (IHGB), in 1838. Located in Rio de Janeiro, this center's purpose was clear: to create a history that could glorify the past and to promote patriotism through its various activities and productions. To identify the philosophy that led to the creation of the IHGB, one need only pay attention to the first civil service exam to be held there. In 1844, the doors were opened to candidates who were willing to hold forth on a thorny question: "How should the history of Brazil be written?" The prompt was clear; it left no room for doubt. It was a matter of inventing a new history *of* and *for* Brazil.

This was the first fundamental step taken toward establishment of the discipline that would come to be called, years later and without much thought, "History of Brazil," as though the narratives it contained had come ready-made or been the exclusive result of will or so-called destiny. We know, however, that in the vast majority of cases the opposite happens: founding moments seek to privilege a certain historical narrative to the detriment of others, and initiate a true rhetorical battle—inventing rituals of memory and classifying their own models as authentic (and any others as

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false); privileging certain events and obliterating others; endorsing certain interpretations and discrediting others. Such episodes are, therefore, useful for shedding light on the political artifice involved and its motivations. In other words, they help us to understand how, when, and why, at certain moments, history becomes an object of political dispute.

In the case just cited, the intention of the exam was to create a *single* history that was (of course) European in its argument, imperial in its justification, and centered around events that took place in Rio de Janeiro. Unseating Salvador, Rio de Janeiro had become the capital of Brazil in 1763—it would remain so until 1960—and needed, accordingly, to assert its political and historical centrality. Further, "the establishment" needed to reinforce the notion of its august origins, and to defend the composition of its membership, which consisted basically of local agrarian elites.

In this sense, nothing could have been more appropriate than the invention of an official history that could buttress what, at that time, appeared artificial and, furthermore, inchoate: an independent state in the Americas, but one whose conservative bent led to the formation of an empire (under a Portuguese monarch, Dom Pedro I) and not a republic. Further, there was a need to extol an emancipation process that had generated considerable distrust and to confer legitimacy upon it. After all, in contrast to its Latin American neighbors, the head of the Brazilian State was a monarch, the direct descendant of three of the longest established royal families in Europe: the Braganzas, the Bourbons, and the Hapsburgs.

The unusual nature of the IHGB competition was also reflected in its result and the announcement of the winner. First place in this historic dispute went to a foreigner—the well-known Bavarian naturalist Karl von Martius (1794–1868), a scientist of unquestioned importance who, nonetheless, was a novice when it came to history in general and that of Brazil in particular—who offered the theory that the country was defined by its unrivaled mixture of peoples and races. He wrote, "The focal point for the historian

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ought to be to show how, in the development of Brazil, established conditions are to be found for the perfecting of the three human races, placed here side by side in a manner hitherto unknown." Drawing upon the metaphor of the country's Portuguese heritage as a powerful river which would "cleanse" and "absorb the streams of the races India and Ethiopica," von Martius represented the country in terms of the singularity and scale of the mixture between people living there.

At that point, however, and after so many centuries of a violent slaveholding system—which took for granted the ownership of one person by another and created a rigid hierarchy between Whites who held power and Blacks who ought to submit, but not infrequently rebelled—it was, to say the least, complicated to flatly extol harmony. Further, Indigenous peoples were still being decimated along the coastline and deep in the heart of the country, their lands invaded and their cultures defiled. But this did not stop the Empire from seizing the opportunity to select a proposal that reconciled Brazil's past with its present and that, instead of introducing historical facts and thus demonstrating the prevailing cruelty in the country, presented a nation whose "happiness" was measured by its capacity to bring various nations and cultures together as one: a text, that, at its core, invoked an Edenic and tropical Brazilian "nature," exempt from all suspicion or denial.

Von Martius, who in 1832 had published an essay entitled "The Rule of Law among the Aborigines in Brazil," condemning Indigenous peoples to extinction, now opted to define the country according to a redemptive fluvial metaphor. Three long rivers would define a nation: one broad and roaring, made up of White populations; another, smaller, representing the Indigenous; and yet another, smaller still, pertaining to Black Brazilians. In the rush to write his work, the naturalist appears not to have had the time (or interest), however, to inform himself in equal measure of the history of the three peoples who were at the origins of the young autonomous nation. The section concerning the "White river" was the most complete, reassuring, and extensive. The remaining two

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sections were virtually figurative, demonstrating a clear lack of knowledge, though this shortcoming applied to what was anyway in truth "expendable," as the text had already accounted for everything that was really of interest: to tell *a* national history—the European—and show how it had "naturally" and without bloodshed imposed itself upon the rest.

And so we had the three peoples who together had formed Brazil—three peoples who were one but (also) distinct and separate. Commixture was not (and never had been) synonymous with equality. In fact, it was in this commixture that a "self-evident" hierarchy took root, propped up—as exemplified in von Martius's article—by appeal to an immortal past lost to time. This narrative provided an ideal vehicle for inventing a history that was as peculiar (a tropical monarchy defined by commixture) as it was optimistic: the flowing waters represented the future of a country being molded by a great roaring river into which all small tributaries emptied.

It was at this time that the common refrain regarding Brazil's three foundational races, a concept that would continue to resonate as time wore on, gained traction. Several authors repeated, with minor variations, the same argument: Sílvio Romero in *Introdução à história da literatura brasileira* (Introduction to Brazilian literary history) (1882), Oliveira Viana in *Raça e assimilação* (Race and assimilation) (1932), and Artur Ramos in *Os horizontes místicos do negro da Bahia* (The mystical horizons of the Black man in Bahia) (1932). Later, in an ironic and critical idiom that nonetheless demonstrates the narrative's staying power, the modernist Mário de Andrade, in his 1928 work *Macunaíma*, would recite the formula in a well-known allegorical passage in which the hero Macunaíma and his two brothers decide to bathe in magical waters that had settled in the footprint of the Indigenous spirit Sumé, after which each emerges a different color: one white, one black, and the other "the new bronze."

It was Gilberto Freyre more than anyone who ensured this interpretation took hold, not only in his classic *Casa-grande &*

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senzala (*The Masters and the Slaves*) (1933) but, years later, in books on Lusotropicalism such as *O mundo que o português criou* (The world forged by the Portuguese) (1940). While anthropologist Artur Ramos (1903–49) might have been the one to coin the term "racial democracy" and apply it to Brazil, it was Freyre's role to be the great promoter of this expression, even beyond the country's borders.

The international resonance of Freyre's theory was such that it was not long before UNESCO came knocking. At the end of the 1940s, the institution was still reeling from the opening of Nazi concentration camps, which revealed the methods of state-sponsored violence and genocide and imparted a warning about the consequences of racism as practiced during the Second World War. It was also very much aware of apartheid in South Africa and the politics of hate that took root during Second World War and the Cold War. Buoyed, then, by the theories of the anthropologist from Recife, and certain that Brazil was an example of racial harmony for the world, the organization financed, in the 1950s, a broad survey with the intent to prove the absence of racial and ethnic discrimination in the country. However, the result was at the very least paradoxical. While the research in the Brazilian Northeast led by Americans Donald Pierson (1900–1995) and Charles Wagley (1913–91) sought to corroborate Freyre's theories, the São Paulo group, led by Florestan Fernandes (1920–95) came to exactly the opposite conclusion. For the sociologist from São Paulo, the greatest legacy of slavery—practiced in Brazil for more than three centuries—was not a unifying commixture but the reinforcement of a deeply embedded social inequality.

In the words of Fernandes, Brazilians have "a sort of reactive prejudice: prejudice against prejudice," since they prefer denial to recognizing and remedying the situation. It was also Fernandes who called the already traditional story of the three races the "myth of racial democracy," nonetheless giving renewed life to the narrative and the fallacies that led to it. It took Black activists to finally administer the *coup de grâce* when, starting at the end of the

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1970s, they began to show the perversion behind this type of official discourse, which threatened to outlast social movements struggling for true equality and inclusion. Despite their efforts, the image of the confluence of three rivers retained its impact across Brazil and maintained the ring of truth more than a century after its creation.

As we have seen, the history that Karl von Martius told in the early years of the nineteenth century had the features and form of myth: a national myth. It took the country's fundamental problems, such as an all-pervasive system of slavery, and recast them as harmonizing and positive attributes. For this very reason, the Martius text did not make reference to dates, specific locations, or well-known events; since it was crucial that the text make sense well beyond the time it was written, the absence of geographical and, above all, temporal specifics would confer immortality upon it and instill confidence in a grandiose version of the country's past and a still more promising future. It was the myth of "the golden age," which served to sustain certainty about the present and guarantee the continuation of the same order and hierarchy—as though these were eternal, because preordained.

Further, there was a certain rhetorical indeterminacy to the text that ensured it a prolonged reception: history becoming myth, and vice versa—the social myth transformed into history. An important detail is that myths do not necessarily work as "lies." As the ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss showed, because myths are concerned with deep contradictions within a society, they retain their power insofar as they operate beyond rational arguments or data and documents that seek to deny their veracity. After all, it often is easier to live with a false truth than to face reality.

During the nineteenth century, the IHGB would fulfill its mission, advancing the project that von Martius had begun. Well financed by the Empire, the center sought to popularize a grandiloquent and patriotic history, even if, at times, it had to sacrifice more impartial research in favor of texts that served as State propaganda. The metaphor of the three races would define, for a long

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time, the essence and the foundation of what it meant to write a history *of* and *about* Brazil; or, more precisely, of a given Brazil, a particular utopia, which remains with us to the present day, as though it were reality.

To grow accustomed to inequality, to run from the past, is characteristic of authoritarian governments, which not infrequently resort to "whitewashed" narratives as a way of promoting the State's power and their own. It is also a formula applied with relative success among ordinary Brazilians, however. Besides acquiescing in the fallacy of the three races, Brazilians are accustomed to shaking off the immense inequality in their country, and without much difficulty transforming a reality defined by the intense concentration of power in the hands of landowners into the ultimate proof of an aristocratic past.

As forms of understanding of the past, history and memory are not always aligned, or even complementary. History not only bears within it certain lacunae and misunderstandings vis-à-vis the past, but also frequently manifests as an arena for disagreement, debate, and dispute. For this reason, it is inconclusive. Memory, meanwhile, invariably brings a subjective dimension to its analysis as it translates the past into the first person and is devoted to the very act of remembrance that produces it. In so doing, memory recovers "the present from the past" and so ensures that the past, too, becomes present.

We will see that there is no way entirely to overcome the past, but the intention of this book is to "remember." Such is the best way to rethink the present while not forgetting to imagine the future.

Every nation constructs for itself certain basic myths, which together have the ability to evoke in its citizens a sense of belonging to a single community that will remain unchanged—"forever lying in splendid cradle," as Brazil's national anthem proclaims. Stories with a clear impact and importance within context take on a whole

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new meaning when they break free from the moment at which they were born and are filtered through the logic of common sense or transformed into national rhetoric.

By becoming myth, these discourses are stripped of their critical potential, to instead be subjected to a single reading or interpretation—that which exalts a glorious past and a single ennobling history. Such a form of State utopia tends to envisage, besides the misleading representation of Brazilian racial commixture that we have explored up to this point, an idyllic patriarchal society, with a hierarchy as deeply rooted as it is virtuous. This is a form of narrative that fails strictly to adhere to the facts, since it begins by choosing its overriding message, and only then conceives of a good argument to justify it.

Nor was von Martius alone in producing this type of narrative. It was a sanctified model of historical practice around the beginning of the nineteenth century, when a primary preoccupation of those in power was the aggrandizement of the past, and not so much the authentication of documents and the story that these had to tell. The historian's job, in fact, was to stitch together edifying examples from the past and thus confer dignity upon the present. This is also the concept of "true romance," as proposed by Paul Veyne to explain the role of the historian as a sort of orchestrator of events, in the sense that it is the historian who organizes them, chooses them, and endows them with meaning.

In one form or another, historical narrative always leads to battles over the monopoly on truth. However, history becomes particularly fertile not only during changes of government or regime, as in the case of the work of our German naturalist, but also at moments of economic crisis. In such cases, when a significant portion of the national population falls into poverty, inequality grows, and political polarization divides the public—encouraged by feelings of fear, insecurity, and resentment—it is not uncommon to go in search of faraway explanations for problems that impact us closely. Further, it is in such periods that the people become more vulnerable and predisposed to believe that their rights have

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been infringed, their jobs stolen, and finally, that their own history has been taken from them.

Such moments tend to dissolve into disputes over the best version of the past, which becomes something of a rigged competition whose outcome is determined by the present and its pressing questions. At this point, history is transformed into something of an exercise in justification—not unlike a chant sung by a sports team's most dedicated fans.

The construction of an official history is not, therefore, an innocuous or unimportant undertaking: it has a strategic role in State policy, exalting certain events and minimizing problems that the nation experienced in the past but prefers to forget, yet whose roots extend into the present. By the same token, the process permits only a single interpretation, focusing on certain specific actions and forms of socialization while obliterating others. The goal is, as the von Martius example demonstrated, to make peace with the past: to create a mythical past, lost to time, replete with harmony, and founded on the naturalization of frameworks of authority and obedience.

This kind of paradigm, which includes much imagination and projection, frequently functions as a sort of mortar for various "common sense" theories. In Brazil, everyday history tends to derive support from four assumptions, as pivotal as they are erroneous. The first is that Brazil is a uniquely harmonious country, free of conflict. The second, that Brazilians are impervious to any form of hierarchy, resolving conflicts, as a rule, with considerable ease and fairness. The third is that the country is a full democracy, free from racial, religious, or gender prejudices. The fourth, that the country's natural beauty is such that it guarantees Brazil's status as a paradise. After all, until proven otherwise, God (too) is Brazilian.

Far from being unimpeachable narratives, these are models resulting from agendas that are both deep-seated and deeply equivocal, and which, for this very reason, summon their strength from the absence of rebuttal and continued silence. When silence

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persists, it is undoubtedly because elsewhere there is too much noise. Noise, and social unease.

The problem is that this practice of history, reliant as it is on national myths, is so deeply ingrained that it tends to survive the most stubborn reality. How could one ever possibly assert that Brazil is a peaceful country, if for centuries enslaved men and women filled the land, and the country tolerated for more than three hundred years a system that presupposes the ownership of one person by another? Let us not forget that Brazil was the last country in the Americas to abolish such forms of forced labor—after the United States, Puerto Rico, and Cuba—having received 5.85 million Africans out of a total of 12.52 million who were forcibly removed from their own continent in this immense Atlantic diaspora, the largest in modern times. If we take into account only those who survived the journey, the total, according to the website Slave Voyages (https://www.slavevoyages.org), was still 10.7 million, of whom 4.8 million made it to Brazil. In place of an idyll, the enslaved experienced violence in its many forms and in a variety of contexts: while masters imposed control by force and cruelty, enslaved men and women themselves responded to this violence with all manner of rebellion.

Another question: How is it possible to describe a country in terms of an idea of purported amity, shared among its citizens, when it is still a world leader in social, racial, and gender inequality—a fact supported by research that demonstrates the routine practice of discrimination against women, Indigenous groups, and Black people, as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, cross-dressing, and other queer individuals?

It is also worth asking why, at intervals, and especially at moments of political crisis, Brazilians fall prey to the delusion of the "serenity" of the military dictatorship, as though it had been a charmed period that brought with it the magical solution to our most fundamental problems. Why is it, moreover, that they refer continually to the lack of hierarchy in their social relationships when their past and present give the lie to this idea? It is not

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possible to gloss innocently over the fact that Brazil was an exploitation colony, or that its territory was almost entirely divided into vast single-crop estates where wealthy landowners deployed immense authority and violence while maintaining economic and political monopolies. Indeed, though Brazil is an increasingly urban country, a certain mindset stubbornly persists, one forged on the large estates, whose owners became the kingpins of the First Republic (1889–1930), and some of whom still hide behind their castle walls in their respective states, acting as political and electoral rainmakers. In the context of such regional and personalist forms of immense power, the country developed patrimonialist practices that imply the use of the State to personal ends. Granted, during the last thirty years Brazil has forged more robust institutions, but today these nevertheless show signs of weakness as they waver in the path of certain political winds. And this is not to mention the practice of corruption, which, as we shall see, whatever the various forms it has taken and the names used to designate it over time, was already common in the colonial and imperial eras and grew like a weed after the country adopted a republican form of government, devouring Brazilians' rights and privileges.

It is said that to question is a form of resistance. I am of the mind that a critical historical practice is one that knows how to "de-normalize" that which seems ordained by biology and is consequently presented as immutable. There is nothing in Brazilian blood or DNA to indicate that the problems outlined above are immune to humane and civic-minded action. Nor is it beneficial to adopt the alternative approach of relegating to the past and to "others" who came before them responsibility for everything that bothers Brazilians about their country today: "somebody else" is racist (not me); patrimonialism is a legacy of the country's prior history; inequality is a result of slavery—period. The blame for all of the country's current ills cannot be laid on a distant and inaccessible past. Ever since the colonial era, on through the Empire and later the republican era, Brazil has practiced an incomplete and failed form of citizenship, characterized by bossism, patrimonialism,

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diverse forms of racism, and sexism, discrimination, and violence. Though the country has experienced, since the ratification in 1988 of the People's Constitution, the most extensive period of rule of law and democracy since it became a republic in 1889, it has yet proved incapable of combating inequality or institutional racism against Black and Indigenous groups, or of eradicating gender violence. The present is full of a great deal of the past, and history is no consolation prize. It is crucial to face the present, not least because this is not the first time that Brazilians have returned to the past with questions forged in the present.

Therefore, for those who, to this day, cannot understand why we are living through such an intolerant and violent period; for those who express surprise at so many expressions of authoritarianism or the spread, unchecked, of discourses that openly undo a catalog of civil rights that until recently appeared guaranteed; for those who have watched from the stands the growth of a politics of hate that takes opponents and transforms them into enemies: I invite you all on a voyage through Brazil's history, past and present.

Currently, a conservative wave is sweeping through countries such as Hungary, Poland, the United States, Russia, Italy, and Israel, upending the international order and bringing with it new battles over the "true" story. There is nothing novel in this approach. In the former USSR, the Communist Party newspaper *Pravda*, whose name translates as "truth," was unequivocal: it defended authoritarianism as the only conceivable narrative. Even countries known for their liberal tradition tend to slide when they need to remember a past that they prefer to "forget." This was the case in France with regard to the Vichy regime (1940–44), during which local elites collaborated with Nazism, and currently is so in Spain, which has not managed to settle the score with the violent era of its Civil War (1936–39) that divided and still divides its population.

The elimination of "places of memory"—to use Pierre Nora's wonderful phrase—is, as a result, a widespread practice. However, this approach is still most common of all within societies where history plays a direct role in political struggle, becomes a form of

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nationalism, and soon glosses over or eliminates entirely the traumatic events of the past that it deems best forgotten. Brazil is "surfing" a conservative wave. Demonization of gender issues; attacks on minorities; a lack of trust in institutions and political parties; the adoption of dualities such as "us" (the righteous) versus "them" (the corrupt); campaigns against intellectuals and the press; the justification of order and violence, whatever the regime ultimately responsible for it; attacks against the constitution; and, finally, the insistence on a mythic past: these are all part of a longstanding narrative, but one that continues to exert an enormous impact on the country's current situation.

The aim of this short book is to identify some of the roots of authoritarianism in Brazil, which flourishes in the present but is nonetheless intimately tied to the country's five hundred years of history. The myths I have mentioned thus far amount to examples constituting a window that allows us to understand how authoritarian ideas and practices took hold there. Their examination also helps us to see how history and certain national myths are "weaponized": in these cases, unfortunately, they are often transformed into mere propaganda, or a crutch to support easy answers.

The influential myth of racial democracy affords us an opportunity to understand the process behind the emergence of authoritarian practices and ideas common to Brazil. But there are other important windows onto this issue, too: patriarchy, bossism, violence, inequality, patrimonialism, and social intolerance are stubbornly present throughout the country's history and continue to resonate in the present day. The purpose of this book is this: to build connections, often unexpressed, still less linear, between the past and the present.

History gives us no prescriptions for short- or long-term fixes. It can help us, however, to remove the veil of reverence and instigate a more critical discussion about Brazil's past, its present, and Brazilians' dreams for the future.

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