Museology of Traumatic Memories and Democracy in Brazil

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After the Covid-19 pandemic and the profound grief caused by the loss of loved ones, the unfulfilled right to mourn and the global tragedy that isolated people worldwide, I expanded my focus beyond what I had been studying regarding the memories of the dictatorship in Brazil (1964-1985). I realised that the research methodology and the necessary sensitivity in addressing this topic could and should be applied to other traumatic memories, such as the pandemic itself and various social traumas that we often avoid confronting in Brazil with our characteristic approach to conflicts, the "Brazilian way of doing things".

In Brazil, the vaccine rollout against the virus was significantly delayed, not due to financial constraints but because the then-president, Jair Bolsonaro, a vaccine sceptic, took months to secure vaccines. Instances of overpricing were later uncovered during the procurement process, leading to investigations by the Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry on the pandemic.

Unfortunately, my mother did not receive the vaccine in time and passed away with severe lung issues, unaware of her infection. It took me a long time to process my grief and transform it into a call for action. Over time, I began to connect this personal experience with my work on memories of state violence, acknowledging that trauma is no longer confined to the realm of therapy and psychoanalysis. It extends across various disciplines beyond the social and human sciences.

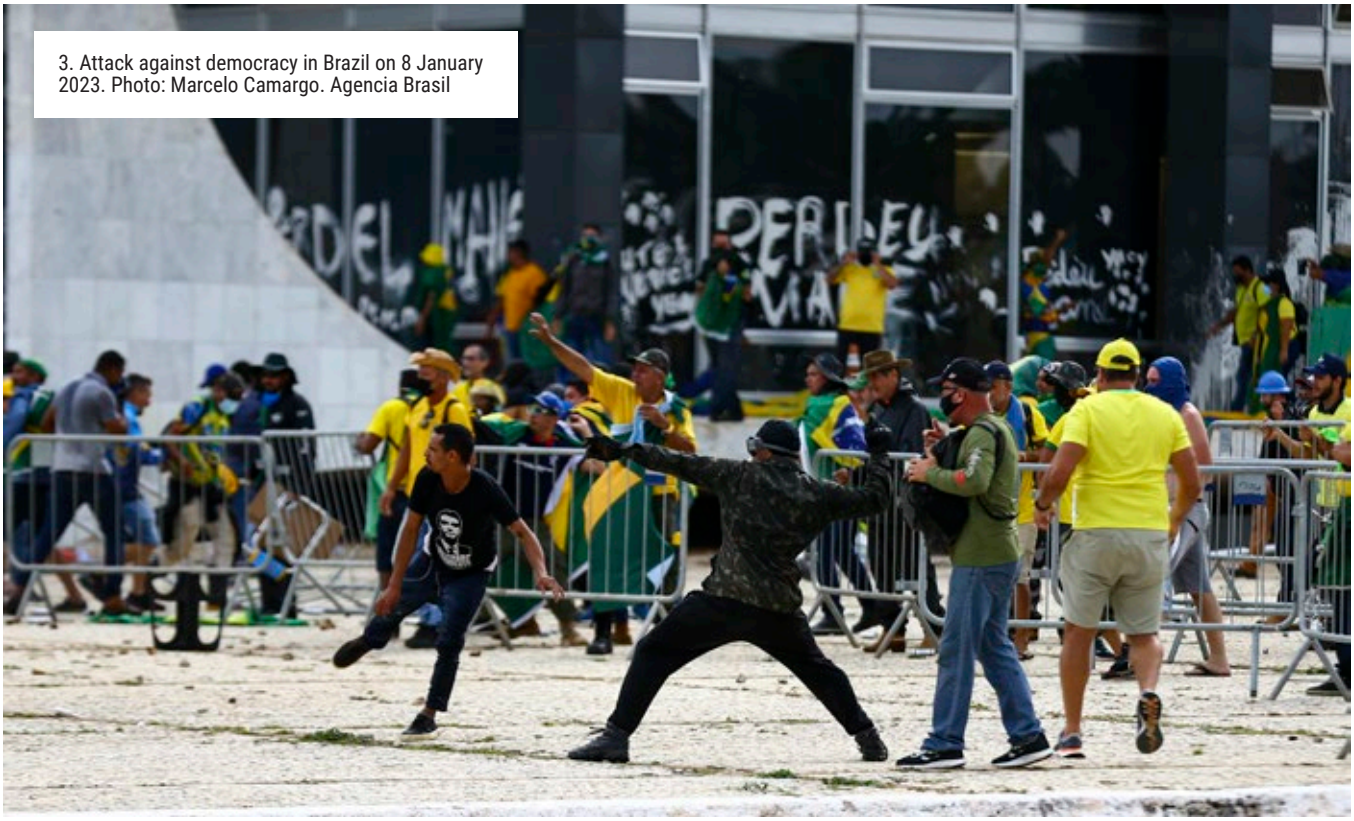
As I observed efforts to communicate and reinterpret traumatic memories of the dictatorship in Brazil, which received significant public investment since 2002, particularly with the establishment of the Amnesty Commission, I recognised that there are many other forms of violence that Brazil still refuses to address today. These include the genocides resulting from colonial invasions of native peoples, transatlantic trafficking, high rates of

violence against young Black individuals in communities, discrimination against LGBTQIA+ individuals and the persecution and disappearance of human rights advocates. This reluctance to confront historical crimes is partly responsible for the continued growth of such issues, with the 1964 dictatorship being the largest and most discussed case so far.

During the presidencies of Fernando Henrique (1995–2003), Lula da Silva (2003–2011), and Dilma Rousseff (2011–2016), federal resources were invested in producing books, films, monuments, plays, signage for memorial sites, research funding and memorial construction, among other initiatives aimed at preserving and redefining memories related to the dictatorship. In 2014, the federal government received the National Truth Commission's findings in response to civil society's demands. Unfortunately, these efforts were not sustained during the presidency of Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022), who denied the dictatorship's existence, highlighting that Brazil had experienced memory policies driven by specific governments rather than enduring state policies on these memories.

1. Mother of Ana Paula with her daughter. Brazil, 1989. Personal collection.

2. Ana Paula demonstrating in front of a vaccine post against COVID-19, wearing a t-shirt bearing the word Luto/a and holding a photo of her mother with her daughter. Brazil, 2021. Personal collection.



3. Attack against democracy in Brazil on 8 January 2023. Photo: Marcelo Camargo. Agencia Brasil

Research on the Integration of Brazilian Museology with Dictatorship Memories

Considering this active engagement with traumatic memories of the Brazilian dictatorship compared to other human rights violations in Brazil, I investigated whether disciplines like museology have been actively involved in reflecting upon the memories of the dictatorship as portrayed in the Sites of Memory and Conscience (SMCs) scattered across various states, such as Ceará, Minas Gerais, Paraíba, Paraná, Pernambuco and São Paulo. Many other states also have ongoing projects in contention.

My initial investigation focused on works published after the delivery of the National Truth Commission Report in the fields of social and human sciences in national academic production. Within the field of museology and related disciplines (history, the social sciences and anthropology), I identified 22 works published between 2014 and 2022. My search encompassed dissertations and theses from museology graduate programmes, articles from academic museology journals, records from museology events, records from national events in museology-related areas and the central repository of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel of the Brazilian Ministry of Education. These materials included four PhD dissertations, three Master's theses, 11 articles and four essays/experience reports.

The central question of my research revolved around whether Brazilian museology had been proactive in analysing, reflecting on and contributing to regional efforts to memorialise the dictatorship. For more detailed information about the methodology and specific results of this research, I refer you to the repository of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, in the work titled "The Museology of Traumatic Memories" (BRITO, 2023), which delves into the dynamics of museology's engagement with this theme. In Brazil, there are undergraduate, Master's, and PhD programmes in Museology across the country. It is also important to mention the National Museums Policy, which provides conceptual foundations and legal regulations for the field, as well as the Federal Council of Museology, which regulates professional practice in the country.

Practical and Investigative Aspects of the Museology of Traumatic Memories

This strand of museological studies originates from reflections on the traumatic memories of the dictatorship, but extends beyond it. The Museology of Traumatic Memories is concerned with investigating, preserving, reframing, communicating and managing memories associated with traumatic historical events, including genocides, dictatorships, wars, internal armed conflicts, natural disasters and other impactful events for a community. Its objective is to engage with the social memories of historical traumas, fostering contemporary debates to strengthen the defence of human rights.

Its foundational principles emphasise acknowledgment of conflicts and disputes regarding official public memory and underscores the significance of democratising historically marginalised memories to promote civic awareness, particularly from a decolonial perspective. It is important to recognise that working with memories of human rights violations affects both researchers and the researched subjects. Claiming neutrality in research on crimes against humanity is untenable, given the multidimensionality of social memory. Therefore, it is essential to acknowledge and navigate divergences and disputes surrounding the public recording of official memory, using these discussions as an intergenerational catalyst to combat hate speech and prevent future crimes.

In Brazil, the "escrevivência" (term referring to the writing that is born from the life experience of the author and his people), promulgated by the Afro-Brazilian linguist and writer Conceição Evaristo, has gradually been well received in the Academy. For Evaristo (2016), writing springs from the experiences and memories of the individual who writes.

Some recurrent themes in the works examined contribute to a broader understanding of the field, highlighting nuances specific to museology. For instance, most museological institutions addressing traumatic memories often emerge from social demands but retain little or no institutional memory. Challenges in handling testimonies, designing exhibitions, facilitating educational interactions and managing these institutions are also critical aspects explored in the research. Some pertinent questions include:

On exhibitions: Is it mandatory for memory institutions dealing with historical trauma to list the names of victims, and how should they select which names to include when the list is extensive? How can these institutions effectively explain these crimes to different age groups and should they allow immersion in violent content? What are the primary considerations in exhibition design (expography) and should curatorship be collaborative and dynamic rather than permanent?

The experiences documented in the research suggest that the text is often not the most significant expographic element in an exhibition. Instead, an exhibition focused solely on presenting trauma-related content may be perceived as insufficient. Many Sites of Memory and Conscience have incorporated spaces for reflection and hope following immersion in distressing content. These observations represent a bridge between theory and practice.

Regarding educational mediation, which plays a pivotal role in visitor engagement, managing conflicts and memory disputes that arise during exhibitions or are brought by the public requires ongoing training and development. Additionally, questions about the role of emotion in processing traumatic memories and how educational programmes can strengthen individuals' rights to memory and freedom of expression merit further exploration. These inquiries contribute to the broader dialogue within the field, particularly as museums work towards decolonisation.

The field of museology also grapples with the concept of participatory management. While participatory management can enhance institutional sustainability in various dimensions, it is essential to consider the boundaries and potential risks associated with involving social actors in decision-making processes especially direct

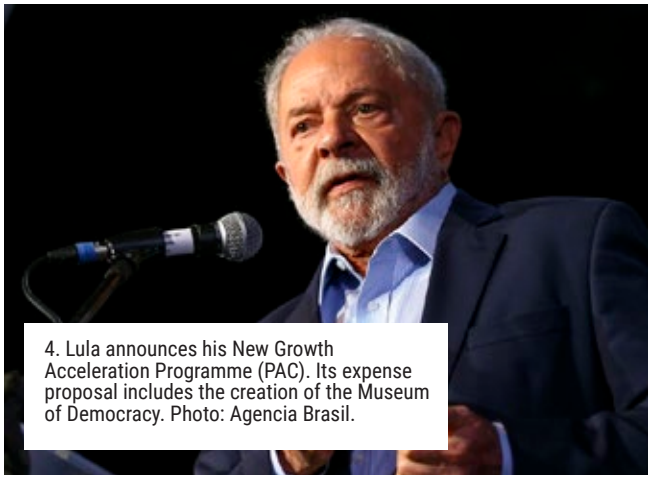
victims. This includes determining the extent to which a museological institution should engage in historical reparations in consideration of long-term consequences.

Many provocations in the research underscore the importance of examining musealisation experiences related to historical traumas individually. While each experience is unique, collective reflection on these experiences contributes to a broader body of knowledge that can advance the cause of democracy.

The pedagogue Paulo Freire (1987) once argued that "men are not made in silence but in words, in work, in action-reflection". His words inspire us to generate knowledge with an active and hopeful approach, one that transcends mere observation and instead motivates action. Freire reminds us that "hope is born from the verb 'to hope'". The Museology of Traumatic Memories can serve as a powerful tool for societies to address enduring issues that span generations and risk being exploited to promote forgetfulness and impunity for heinous crimes. This movement has long called upon museology in the Ibero-American region, as evidenced by discussions at the Santiago Round Table (1972).

Strands of research such as New Museology, Critical Museology, Social Museology and Sociomuseology have significantly enriched the field's understanding of its potential. However, there is still much work ahead to transition from contemplation and emotion to effective action as a society.

In Brazil, the first Sites of Memory and Conscience related to the dictatorship resulted from civil society groups, mainly former political prisoners and the relatives of victims who recognised the importance of honouring democracy's struggles. Over time, these sites expanded to encompass a broader range of voices, social actors and interpretations, all contributing to a heightened cultural awareness that nurtures the democratic spirit of society.



4. Lula announces his New Growth Acceleration Programme (PAC). Its expense proposal includes the creation of the Museum of Democracy. Photo: Agencia Brasil.

The Strength of the "Young Girl" of Brazilian Democracy and the Promise of a New Museum

Perhaps we must strive to view democracy as a living entity that requires daily care and attention, extending beyond legal frameworks and institutional norms. This perspective allows us to focus on the wounds and legacies left by systematic violence in democratic societies.

Democracy in Brazil is relatively young, like a young girl, with her most recent rupture occurring in 1964 and persisting until the adoption of the current Constitution in 1988. However, on 8 January 2023, terrorists from various regions of the country attempted to overthrow the young girl of democracy by invading the federal capital's three branches of government. Their attempt was unsuccessful.

If we consider the historical records and narratives surrounding this 35-year-old democracy's birth, we can surmise that her inception was fraught with pain, akin to a difficult childbirth that spanned 21 years. We can imagine a delivery room filled with tension, with many members of the healthcare team unable to fully assist in the birthing process. Historians recount that the delivery did not occur as society had envisioned, but rather through the only feasible means to ensure a healthy birth.

What the terrorists in Brazil on 8 January failed to realise is that the young girl of democracy has now grown into a woman. A woman is inherently

resilient and Brazilian democracy has withstood the polarisation that divided the country during the last presidential election in 2022. This period witnessed intense political rivalry that ignited hatred and even led to violence and murder in various parts of the country. Debates about whether Brazil experienced a dictatorship or a military regime, among other contentious topics, persist among progressives and conservatives.

Memory preservation practices and strategies have also played a role in this polarisation. Notably, the Association of Relatives of Victims of 8 January has protested against the arrests of terrorists by the Federal Police. Some municipalities, such as Porto Alegre, attempted to declare 8 January "Patriot Day", but this effort was suspended by the Federal Supreme Court.

A heated public debate surrounds these issues. The federal government announced plans to establish a Museum of Brazilian Democracy immediately after the attack, seeking approval from the National Congress for a budget of R$40 million to support this cultural institution, which aims to explore the evolution of democracy in the country, including the events of 8 January. Some musealisation efforts related to the attack, such as the exhibition "Reflections of the Senate – 100 Days of the Invasion", have already been initiated by the government.

In 2014, the National Truth Commission recommended the creation of a museum of memory to continue the work initiated during the commission's investigations. However, no federal museum dedicated to this topic has been established yet. It remains unclear whether the proposed Museum of Brazilian Democracy will collaborate with the idea of a museum of memory focused on human rights violations investigated by the commission.

With the recent recreation of the Ministry of Culture, an inter-ministerial working group has been formed to plan the Museum of Brazilian Democracy's establishment. In September 2023, a seminar will convene at the Government Palace to engage with the public and gather input on expectations for this new national memory institution.

The federal government has demonstrated a willingness to address traumatic issues from the past that continue to impact the present and shape the nation's future. Other commitments include the creation of a Slavery Museum, which is proposed to be located at the Cais do Valongo archaeological site in Rio de Janeiro, recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

In this context of struggles and disputes, a discussion on the museology of traumatic memories emerges. It is discussed in a country that selectively chooses which trauma memories to confront publicly, illustrating a wider oscillation that is not unique to Brazil but experienced across the region. Neighbouring countries in Latin America and the Caribbean also grapple with political difficulties when confronting traumatic memories and human rights abuses, often relying on museology as a vital tool for addressing these issues.

I conclude with a passage from the song by Gozanguinha (1945-1991): "Memories of a time when fighting for your right is a deadly defect". In Brazil in 2023, it is both possible and encouraged to engage in conversations about traumatic memories and human rights violations. This was not always the case, and it remains challenging in many other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean today. Now I speak directly to you. Where are you reading this from? Are you reading these words I wrote from a free country? If so, what have you been doing with that freedom? If not, I hope this text can embrace you and, in some way, strengthen you. While memory alone does not guarantee a future free of atrocities, it does empower society to pursue active hope together.

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