

## CONTRACULTURA: ALTERNATIVE ARTS AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION IN AUTHORITARIAN BRAZIL

**Christopher Dunn** (author)

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Christopher Dunn's *Contracultura: Alternative Arts and Social Transformation in Authoritarian Brazil* is striking for its unconventional narrative on Brazilian military dictatorship (1964-1985). The book cover displays a photograph portraying a group of young, white and black hippies on a beach. The photograph, which will be referred to throughout the text, is exemplary of the book's original perspective. Through an immense variety of sources (press, music, literature, photography, correspondence, fashion, advertising, plastic arts, reports of the organs of repression), Dunn manages to portray the spirit of a taboo era in Brazilian history without falling into left-wing versus right-wing political polarity. Dunn's analysis includes social circles, musical groups, hippie communities, and the biography of dozens of characters, bands and youth movements, mainly middle-class, between the late 1960s and the late 1970s in Brazil. This is done through a transnational and intersectional look, crossing analyses of gender, race, class and sexuality, demonstrating paradoxes, ambiguities and contradictions in the behavior of Brazilian youth at the apex of military repression. The book aptly received both the Roberto Reis Book Prize (2017) from the Brazilian Studies Association and the Honorable Mention (2017) from the Brazil Section Award of the Latin American Studies Association.

Before *Contracultura*, Dunn had already published *Brutality Garden: Tropicália and the Emergence of a Brazilian Counterculture* (2001), *Brazilian Popular Music and Globalization* (2001) with Charles Perrone, and was co-editor with Idelber Avelar of *Brazilian Popular Music and Citizenship* (2011). *Contracultura* is, therefore, the result of more than twenty years of research and teaching in the area of Portuguese, Latin American and African Studies at Tulane University. The maturity of the work is also demonstrated by the deep knowledge of the Portuguese language, which allows the author to expose the various meanings behind words and phrases such as “desbunde,” “curtição,” “entendidos,” “croquetes,” “baianidade,” “deixar a desejar,” “bofe,” “bichas,” among others.

Dunn draws on the work of important researchers in the history of the period, especially Marcelo Ridenti, in Brazil, and James Green, in the United States. Surprisingly, Carlos Fico's scholarship is mostly missing (the author cites only *Reinventando o otimismo: ditadura, propaganda e imaginário social no Brasil*, 1997), although Fico is currently considered one of the most influential scholars working on Brazilian military dictatorship (he mainly focuses on the participation of the United States). The focus of the book, however, is neither the governmental power represented by politicians—military and civilian, nor the

armed resistance, nor the political, official or clandestine parties. And this is what makes the book so original. *Contracultura* shows how certain behaviors, tastes in fashion, everyday attitudes and the search for a personal identity may become alternative forms of resistance to a politically repressive and morally conservative regime.

The book is divided into five chapters, plus an introduction and an epilogue/conclusion. All sections include epigraphs evoking the main question raised in the chapter, which makes the book also a methodological example of writing a social history of culture. The introduction presents the definition and a historical overview of “counterculture” from a transnational point of view. Here, the author exposes not only the North American and the Brazilian context, but also reflects on the Hispanic-American contribution. At the same time, Dunn outlines the main events related to the Brazilian military dictatorship, which is essential for readers who are not experts on the subject. For the general audience, to whom the book is addressed, it is crucial to know the main historical episodes around this dictatorship, such as the 1964 *coup d'état*, the 1967 Constitution, the fifth Institutional Act (AI-5/1968), the presidency of Garrastazu Médici (1969-1974) or the Amnesty Law (1979). Although the chapters are thematic, in the introduction the author manages to establish a chronology that facilitates the understanding of the trajectory of the counterculture movements, from their apex to their decadence.

“Desbunde” is the title given to the first chapter and begins by positioning the object studied. The title corresponds to the verb “desbundar,” originally used by the left-wing armed movement to classify the militants who had abandoned their groups or fled from a guerrilla action. As Dunn remarks, “By the early 1970s, the term had acquired additional meanings to refer to countercultural attitudes and practices such as drug consumption, refusal of conventional employment, chronic itinerancy, and residency in alternative communities or communes” (38). The author focuses on those young, mostly middle-class and white Brazilians, who did not support the military government or the left-wing armed struggle, but who tried to resist the conservative moral codes of the dictatorship through individual attitudes. Among them, hippies, in dialogue with the international context, began to appear on the beaches of Rio de Janeiro, the epicenter of the movement in the early 1970s. At the same time that censorship would associate hippies with communists or repress them as vagabonds (a term frequently used by police repression in Brazil since the beginning of the 20th century), advertising knew how to create products for this target group and, thus, incorporate them into the consumer market. As examples of artists linked to counterculture, Dunn cites canonical singers of this era, such as Gal Costa and Raul Seixas, as well as the “Poesia Marginal” movement and the alternative press, especially in the person of Luiz Carlos Maciel (59-65).

The second chapter, “Experience the Experimental,” analyzes the “Cultura Marginal” movement and its relationship with, on the one hand, counterculture and/or, on the other, with the *concretistas* of the 1950s. Among all the chapters, this one seems to me the densest

and the most centered on some of the main characters of the period. The first of these characters is the artist and writer Hélio Oiticica (1937-1980). In 1968, Oiticica named one of his installations “Tropicália,” which is the same name used, in the same year, as the title of one of the albums that launches the Tropicalista movement in Brazil, with singers such as Caetano Veloso and Gilberto Gil. Oiticica deepens his belief in the participation of the public through his experimental expositions in London in 1969. Moreover, in 1970, he moves to New York, where, among other things, he starts writing art criticism. Another important figure Dunn mentions is the journalist Torquato Neto (1944-1972), who is not exclusively associated with marginal culture, Gilberto Gil and Caetano Veloso, but is involved in numerous musicals, cinematographic and artistic projects as well. Oiticica and Neto are thus mentioned from their relations with *tropicalismo*, but Christopher Dunn explores their trajectories beyond this movement, highlighting original personalities of counterculture in Brazil.

The third chapter, “The Sweetest Barbarians,” focuses on the city of Salvador, in the state of Bahia, and its importance as a reference for young people linked to counterculture in the early 1970s. Dunn makes an excellent analysis where he explores the ambiguity of the state policy. On the one hand, the governors were interested in promoting *baianidade*, representing a life style marked by the sea, the beaches, leisure, tranquility, as a discourse to increase the tourist inflow to the city, especially in the carnival season. On the other hand, the state needed to eliminate those people considered “undesirables,” such as vagabonds and hippies. First, they were expelled from Salvador in organized police actions. An important hippie community settled in the village of Arembepe, 30 miles from the capital, but most members were dispersed in 1972. In this chapter, Dunn also focuses on the tour “Doces Bárbaros” carried out in 1976 by musicians who were already successful at the time, including Caetano Veloso, Gilberto Gil, Gal Costa and Maria Bethânia. For Dunn, the group “synthetized the confluence of symbols and discourses that aligned Candomblé (African-Brazilian religion) with the counterculture under the sign of *baianidade*” (144).

“Black Rio” seems to me the most innovative chapter. Christopher Dunn tries to demonstrate the connection between soul music *bailes* (parties) in the northern part of Rio de Janeiro in the 1960s and 1970s and the counterculture. In dealing with a black majority culture, Dunn discusses the ambiguities of the racial question in Brazil, where the affirmation of black identity could be criticized as an importation of a model of North-American segregation, alien to the Brazilian context. For instance, songs that dealt with the affirmation of black identity could sometimes be perceived as threatening to the Brazilian ideal of “racial democracy” and were, therefore, censored (159). Other songs, including “Zumbi” by Jorge Benjor (1974), instead, as they celebrated black national warrior heroes, were not censored. Even the very singers more representative of the time had different positions on the issue. Tim Maia, for instance, did not have militant lyrics of his own, while Wilson Simonal, Jorge Benjor, and Toni Tornado explored black identity in their songs. Despite the different

political involvement of the musicians, their music was played at the soul *bailes*, which were meeting places for black militancy.

“Masculinity Left to Be Desired” analyzes the authoritarian moralism of the military regime and its confrontation by some artists who did not necessarily assume themselves as gays, but questioned the classical definitions of masculinity. Singers and groups such as Caetano Veloso, Gilberto Gil, Dzi Croquettes and Secos e Molhados are examples of an androgynous aesthetics that can dialogue with current queer theories. At the time, these artists did not declare themselves militants in the gay cause, but positioned themselves in favor of sexual freedom and against the classic definitions of *macho*, so dear to the military institution. Finally, the epilogue begins with a short story by the writer Caio Fernando Abreu, titled “The Survivors,” where a couple discusses, melancholically, the past decade while smoking and drinking. The epilogue serves to connect the rest of the book to the present in a parallel with the short story by Abreu, which shows the blues of young people from Brazilian dictatorship. After having tried everything in order to escape from a difficult time (voyages, drugs, sexuality, love, militancy and even suicide), they have survived but still feeling defeated.

The author was lucky enough to finish his book before 2016, so not to be forced to update the countless twists and turns of Brazilian politics and society since then such as political and economic crisis, the impeachment of the president Dilma Roussef, the Car Wash investigation, the election of a far-right president, and the self-exile of artists and congressmen, among others issues. For Dunn, finishing his narrative in 2011, with the establishment of the National Truth Commission to investigate human rights abuses carried out by the dictatorship: “As Brazil ‘turns to memory’ . . . it is also important to remember the experiences of those Brazilians who largely avoided confrontation with the military regime but instead were inspired to embark on quests of self-critique and personal transformation” (206).

*Contra cultura* talks about alternative cultural attitudes during the Brazilian military dictatorship, where arts, writing, journalism, sexual liberation and drugs could serve as escape valves from political repression, censorship and moralism. Christopher Dunn’s book thus contributes to the memory of a taboo time that continues to affect the present of Brazilian history.

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