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## THE DAILY REPRESSIVE LIFE OF THE DOPS IN PERNAMBUCO: STRUCTURES, PRACTICES AND IMPACTS IN THE AUTOCRATIC AND BONAPARTIST PERIOD

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**Abstract:** This chapter offers a detailed analysis of the repressive workings of the Political and Social Order Police Station (DOPS) in Pernambuco between 1931 and 1956, highlighting the transition from the early republican period to the autocratic regime. Although the focus is on the work of the DOPS, it dialogues directly with the theme of legislation and the organization of the municipal police in the early Republic, showing how institutionalized repression took shape and gained strength in the context of the consolidation of the Brazilian state. The analysis reveals how the legal and political structures shaped the repressive practices of the police, integrating the DOPS into the strategies of social and political control in Pernambuco. The analysis integrates the trajectory of figures such as Adalgisa Rodrigues Cavalcanti, a communist militant who became a target of the repressive apparatus. This study contributes to an understanding of the evolution of police legislation, from its municipal character to its centralization in authoritarian regimes, exposing the mechanisms that transformed the police into an instrument of political repression.

### **HISTORICAL RELEVANCE FOR CURRENT POLICE LEGISLATION**

Studying the workings of the DOPS in Pernambuco offers valuable lessons for the present. Excessive centralization and a lack of oversight mechanisms demonstrate the dangers of a police system disconnected from democratic values. Furthermore, the political use of the police reinforces the need to protect the autonomy of the security forces and ensure that they serve the population and not political interests.

As Skidmore (1988) observes, contemporary Brazil still bears remnants of these authoritarian practices, visible in cases of police violence and lack of accountability. In Pernambuco, the DOPS study allows us to reflect

on how police forces can align themselves more with constitutional principles and less with the interests of governments.

Historical analysis shows that changes in police forces are not limited to legislative reforms, but depend on a cultural effort to restructure the role of the police in a democratic society. As Foucault (1999) warns, without active surveillance by society, power tends to perpetuate itself and abuse its authority.

### **TRANSITION FROM A MUNICIPAL POLICE FORCE TO A NATIONAL CONTROL TOOL**

At the beginning of the Republic, the municipal police forces in Pernambuco were mainly focused on maintaining public order in urban centers. However, with the strengthening of central power after the 1930 Revolution, these institutions underwent a significant restructuring, which culminated in the creation of organizations such as the Political, Order and Social Police Station (DOPS). According to Holloway (1997), the centralization of power under the Estado Novo transformed the police into “a direct instrument of central authority”, which resulted in a loss of local autonomy.

In Pernambuco, the municipal police gradually became subordinate to the criteria of the federal government, responding to the repressive directives of the Vargas regime. The creation of laws that expanded the powers of the police, such as Decree-Law No. 37 of 1937, gave the DOPS the freedom to act without strict limits, allowing it to persecute individuals considered subversive.

The transition from a municipal police model to a national repressive body weakened local oversight mechanisms and distanced police forces from their original function of protecting citizens. This reinforces Faoro's (2001) criticism that the Brazilian state has historically used institutions to protect centralizing and elitist interests, rather than prioritizing citizenship.

## **LEGISLATION AND REPRESSION IN THE PERNAMBUCO CONTEXT**

The repressive apparatus of the DOPS did not operate within a legal framework, but was supported by legislation that justified its actions. In Pernambuco, state laws were aligned with national regulations, such as the National Security Law (1935), which allowed for the detention of opponents without immediate trial.

Authors such as Fico (2001) point out that these laws were deliberately broad and vague, allowing interpretations that criminalized everything from political speeches to artistic manifestations. In Pernambuco, the DOPS used these legal loopholes to persecute union leaders and social movements. The repression was particularly intense in rural areas, where peasant leaders were frequent targets of surveillance.

The instrumentalization of legislation to provide for repressive practices highlights the political use of the legal system. As Carvalho (1993) observes, “legality” in Brazil during the republican period was shaped to legitimize abuses of power, which placed ordinary citizens in a constant state of vulnerability.

### **EVERYDAY PRACTICES OF REPRESSION**

The daily routine of the DOPS in Pernambuco was marked by systematic surveillance, censorship and torture. Historical documents analysed by Tavares (2006) reveal that DOPS agents infiltrated trade unions and cultural movements to identify leaders and disarticulate mobilizations. In addition, the use of torture methods and arbitrary detentions was a recurring practice to intimidate opponents.

The repressive actions were not limited to isolated individuals; often entire families were affected by the persecution, creating an environment of generalized fear. In Pernambuco, intellectuals and artists were also targeted, especially those linked to the modernist move-

ment, whose production challenged the cultural norms imposed by the regime.

These practices demonstrate the complete deviation from the functions of a police force, which should ensure public safety. As Hobsbawm (1995) points out, systematic state repression not only stifles dissenting voices, but also undermines trust between society and institutions, generating a cycle of fear and alienation.

### **SOCIAL AND CULTURAL IMPACTS OF REPRESSION**

The DOPS repression had profound consequences for Pernambuco society. Artistic and cultural movements, such as regional cinema and protest music, were widely censored. Many artists used metaphors and anonymity to circumvent surveillance, but self-censorship became a common reflex.

On the other hand, the repression also generated resistance. Grassroots movements, trade unions and intellectual groups set up clandestine networks of mutual support. In Pernambuco, the strong literary and cultural tradition became a means of denouncing abuses, albeit in a veiled way.

Despite oppression, cultural creativity in Pernambuco flourishes amid adversity. As Candido (2006) observes, art under repression often finds subversive ways to survive, becoming a space of symbolic resistance. However, it is undeniable that repression hindered the full development of many cultural initiatives.

## **THE CASE OF ADALGISA RODRIGUES CAVALCANTI AND THE REPRESSION OF CIVIL RIGHTS**

The story of Adalgisa Rodrigues Cavalcanti, along with that of numerous militants from the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB) and various left-wing associations, highlights a dark chapter in political repression in Brazil. Between the 1930s and 1960s, these figures were the target of constant surveillance, relentless persecution and situations of extreme embarrassment, culminating in forced disappearances, arbitrary arrests and, in some cases, the annihilation of their lives.

This study, which stems from my master's thesis defended at PUC-SP in 2009, is based on an analysis of DOPS (Delegacia de Ordem e Política Social) documents, newspaper clippings and bibliographies on the PCB. From these sources, it is possible to understand how discussions on gender emerged within a reality marked by state repression. Women's movements were particularly affected, facing both cultural and internal debates and the brutal surveillance of the DOPS, which classified them as threats to the "social, political and moral order of the family and good customs".

The analysis highlights the complex relationships between the ideological struggles of the women's movements, the PCB's internal debates and the police discourse on the role of women in society. Between 1934 and 1964, the demands revolved around essential social rights, such as equal pay, nurseries, schools and hospitals. Women were fighting for survival, facing immediate issues such as the cost of living and working hours. These movements sought to articulate the experiences of the domestic sphere with the demands of the public sphere, challenging the restrictive view that assigned them a role exclusively linked to the home.

In the context of repression, organizations such as the Women's Union and the Women's Committee for Democracy emerged as spaces

of resistance, challenging patriarchal culture and authoritarian institutions. Despite this, gender prejudice was a significant barrier: for DOPS agents, the presence of women in the public space was seen as an inversion of the natural order, feeding the discourse that women should be restricted to the domestic environment.

Adalgisa's career exemplifies the intersection between political repression and gender oppression. Her militancy, associated with the PCB, put her in the sights of the authorities from 1934, making her the target of arrests, constant surveillance and attempts at public demoralization. Even so, Adalgisa was resilient, standing out as one of the most prominent female leaders of her time.

### **REPRESSION AND GENDER: ANALYSIS AND CRITIQUE OF THE ROLE OF DOPS IN THE OPPRESSION OF WOMEN (1930-1960)**

From the documents produced by the Political and Social Order Police (DOPS) in Pernambuco, it is possible to understand how the state's repressive apparatus not only aimed to control political movements, but also to perpetuate a gender culture that limited women's activities in the public arena. Women who took part in political activism were the targets of a double prejudice: one that focused on ideological opposition and one that aimed to reinforce traditional gender roles.

From the 1930s to the 1960s, the hegemonic social idea assigned women a role limited to the private sphere: looking after the home, the family and the children. Any deviation from this standard was seen as an affront to the moral order and the foundations of society. This prejudice was evident in the DOPS' own formulations. The entry of women into political movements was seen as an additional nuisance. As Bretas (1997) points out, women

could be both a pillar of stability and a threat to social order. In this context, police control became a tool to repress their insertion into the public sphere.

Adalgisa Rodrigues Cavalcanti, a PCB activist, became an emblematic example of the gender repression carried out by the DOPS. One of the police reports from 1964, which documents one of her arrests, shows how gender prejudices permeated the police arguments. The document points out that Adalgisa, on joining the PCB in 1945, had “relegated domestic life to a secondary plane”, justifying her militancy by the fact that she had no children and had a “nice” husband who did not hinder her political activities.

The repression of women in the public sphere during this period was not limited to individual cases. DOPS documentation shows a systematic pattern of surveillance, arbitrary arrests and moral delegitimization. Women who joined the militant movement were seen as double transgressors: they challenged state control and established gender roles.

However, it is important to note that these practices were not limited to state repression. They echoed a patriarchal culture that permeated all social spheres. As the delegate’s speech shows, the attempt to delegitimize Adalgisa was not only based on her political opposition, but also on the notion that she had abandoned her “natural” role as a wife.

The DOPS’ approach also reveals how the repressive apparatus used gender issues to reinforce its agenda. The insistence on associating Adalgisa with the Soviet Union, or with the idea that “Moscow needed her services”, shows how machismo and anti-communism were allies in delegitimizing women activists. Furthermore, the description of her actions as an affront to the family order reinforces the idea that repression was as much a political issue as a moral one.

## **POLICE REPORTS: STIGMATIZATION AND SOCIAL CONTROL**

In the police reports, the discomfort with the figure of an active and politically engaged woman is evident. Adalgisa is described as a figure who, at the age of 60, should be “knitting and listening to soap operas”, instead of actively participating in the PCB State Committee. The opposition between public and private space emerges as a central argument to justify her arrest. The delegate suggests that her militancy not only disrespected her place as a woman, but also caused suffering to her husband, a “seventy-year-old diabetic” who needed care.

Within the abundant documentation of Adalgisa’s medical records, we will highlight an excerpt transcribed from her medical record No. 5.306, dated October 29, 1964, which forcefully exemplifies the structural machismo and the attempt to delegitimize her as a woman and former deputy in Pernambuco:

“ADALGISA RODRIGUES CAVALCANTI,” she herself confesses in her autobiography, “joined the ranks of the Communist Party in 1945 and never left. Since she had no children to look after and her good-natured husband didn’t hinder her political activities, Adalgisa began to devote herself solely and exclusively to the interests of the Party, not least because this question of home and family are bourgeois sentiments according to communist theory, which is why Adalgisa relegated her domestic life to a secondary plane. Moscow needed her services more. [...] Acquiring the necessary trust of the Communist Party leaders, Adalgisa went on to rise to positions of importance both when the Party was legally registered and in her illegal life. Thus, in 1947, she was elected to the state legislature under the Party’s banner, standing out among her peers in her defense of Bolshevik postulates. When her mandate was revoked because the CP became illegal, Ms. Adalgisa’s struggle became more intense. She was arrested several times, took part in congresses, visited her homeland

- Moscow - and always featured in all the leftist campaigns and alongside those who were trying to reorganize the Communist Party under the most simulated formulas. [...] Dona Adalgisa, now approaching her sixtieth birthday, could be at her husband's side, looking after the good old man, knitting and listening to soap operas, but she'd rather be out and about, plotting against everyone and everything."

This document reveals how the authorities not only sought to highlight political connections as a factor in criminalization, but also used patriarchal constructs to undermine the legitimacy of women activists. The expression "Moscow needed their services more" reinforces the imagery of an international conspiracy, while the references to the domestic role indicate the limited view that state agents had of the role of women in society.

The argument that Adalgisa, in her 60s, should have been looking after her seventy-year-old diabetic husband is emblematic and shows an attempt at moral culpability. The description of militancy as a selfish and deviant choice is a discursive strategy to minimize the relevance of her political activity.

This narrative highlights the militant's attempt at moral culpability. The police perspective is not limited to delegitimizing her political ideas, but also seeks to reinforce cultural patterns that subordinate women to the home and family. At the same time, the insistence on associating her actions with "damage" to the moral order highlights how machismo was used to justify state violence.

Even so, this narrative reflects a discourse that sought to delegitimize her work, associating it with the absence of responsibilities considered "natural" for women. In addition, her militancy is linked to a supposed loyalty to the Soviet Union, reinforcing the anti-communist discourse by associating her actions with the service of foreign interests. This strategy not only criminalized her actions, but also reinfor-

ced an exclusionary nationalist agenda, which saw the role of women as essentially domestic.

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The excerpt from medical record no. 5.306 is a didactic example of how the repressive discourse of the time combined political criminalization with the perpetuation of gender roles. This document doesn't just accuse Adalgisa Rodrigues Cavalcanti of political subversion; it uses her personal life and her choices as a woman to delegitimize her as a public figure and activist. Structural sexism is evident in the attempt to reduce her political performance to a moral or social failing, anchored in the exclusion of traditionally expected female roles.

## **DELEGITIMIZATION BY THE GENDER ROLE**

The document presents a narrative that links Adalgisa's militancy to neglecting domestic duties. It claims that, because she had no children and a "good-natured" husband, she chose to dedicate herself exclusively to activism. The use of the term "goody-goody" is condescending and seeks to justify her public performance as the result of male permissiveness, reinforcing the prejudice that women should not exercise autonomy outside the domestic context.

The phrase "Moscow prefers more of your services" is emblematic of the anti-communist narrative, which associates militancy with alignment with foreign interests. This accusation not only reinforces the imagery of international conspiracy, but also feeds the idea that Adalgisa betrayed her "natural function" as a woman by prioritizing a political ideology over caring for the home.

## **MALE SUFFERING AS A JUSTIFICATION**

Another central element of the medical record is the description of Adalgisa's husband's condition. By pointing out that he was "seventy years old, diabetic" and needed care, the document tries to paint Adalgisa's militancy as a selfish choice that abandoned her wifely duties. This construction seeks to blame her morally and suggests that her dedication to the PCB was not only a confrontation with the state, but also with the family order. This narrative reinforces the idea that the public space was not meant for women and that her leaving represented a moral breakdown.

## **THE MORAL DIMENSION AND INSTRUMENTALIZED MACHISMO**

The passage "she could be at her husband's side, looking after the good old man, knitting and listening to soap operas" is a caricature of what was expected of a woman at her age. This view reduces women to a passive role and reinforces the opposition between the private sphere (associated with the home and care) and the public sphere (seen as dangerous and disruptive for women).

At the same time, the text shows that machismo was used as a tool to explain state violence. Adalgisa's militancy is not only described as a political threat, but also as a moral deviation. This approach allowed the state to create an image that it was not only fighting ideological enemies, but also protecting society from women who "disrespected" its position in the family.

## **RELATIONSHIP WITH SOCIAL CONTROL**

DOPS police reports repeatedly used gender stereotypes to undermine and respond to women engaged in politics. In Adalgisa's case, her arrest and surveillance are justified not only by her political actions, but by her transgression of cultural gender expectations. This intersection between political repression and gender oppression exemplifies how social control was exercised in a broad manner, affecting not only actions but also people's identities.

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This case illustrates how the Brazilian state's repressive apparatus during a period was not limited to ideological repression. It was sustained by a patriarchal culture that saw women who challenged traditional roles as threats to the social order. At the same time as fighting left-wing movements, the state reinforced social norms that confined women to the domestic sphere, creating an alliance between political authoritarianism and social conservatism.

## CONCLUSION

The story of Adalgisa Rodrigues Cavalcanti and the actions of the Pernambuco DOPS highlight how state repression relied on cultural structures to justify its actions. By associating female militancy with social disorder, the DOPS not only sought to stifle oppositional movements, but also to reinforce gender norms that supported the status quo.

This analysis invites us to reflect on how repressive practices can be combined with structural prejudices to consolidate a system of control. Adalgisa, like so many other women activists, not only bore the brunt of state repression, but also the weight of a culture that tried to stifle her voice and restrict her actions. These historical cases remain relevant because they reveal the roots of the intersections between politics, gender and power, many of which still persist in contemporary societies.

However, it is important to note that these practices were not limited to state repression. They echoed a patriarchal culture that permeated all social spheres. As the delegate's speech shows, the attempt to delegitimize Adalgisa was not only based on her political opposition, but also on the notion that she had abandoned her "natural" role as a wife.

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