

## Castello Branco against the "red menace": nationalism, realism, and development in the conservative thought of Humberto Castello Branco (1946-1964)

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### Abstract

Based on Michael Freeden's approach to political ideologies and Reinhart Koselleck and François Hartog's approach to the role of historicity in political modernity, this article aims to analyze the conservative thought of Humberto Castello Branco. The political actor became famous in Brazilian political history for being the first president after the 1964 coup, however, our hypothesis is that it is necessary to look in previous years for the set of political values that guided the military dictatorship. In this text we will seek to fill this gap through how Castello Branco dealt with his speeches and class notes at the Army Staff School. In our view, it is essential to understand how the military understood the notions of realism, nationalism and development and articulated it with his conservative and anti-communist worldview

### Keywords

political ideologies; Brazilian political thought; conservatism; military thought.

## Castello Branco contra a “ameaça vermelha”: nacionalismo, realismo e desenvolvimento no pensamento conservador de Humberto Castello Branco (1946-1964)

### Resumo

A partir da abordagem de Michael Freeden sobre ideologias políticas e das contribuições de Reinhart Koselleck e François Hartog sobre o papel da historicidade na modernidade política, este artigo pretende analisar o pensamento conservador de Humberto Castello Branco. O ator político ficou célebre na história política brasileira por ter sido o primeiro presidente após o golpe de 1964, entretanto, nossa hipótese é de que é preciso buscar nos anos anteriores o conjunto de valores de ordem política que orientaram a ditadura militar. Neste texto, buscaremos preencher essa lacuna através de como Castello Branco os tratava em seus discursos e anotações de aulas na Escola do Estado-maior do Exército. A nosso ver, é central compreender como o militar entendia as noções de realismo, nacionalismo e desenvolvimento e as articulava com sua visão

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de mundo conservadora e anticomunista. Como resultado da pesquisa, concluímos que se tratava de uma forma conservadora de entender o nacional-desenvolvimentismo e que, em contexto de Guerra Fria, buscava se alinhar com os EUA.

## Palavras-chave

ideologias políticas; pensamento político brasileiro; conservadorismo; pensamento militar.

## 1. Introduction

Humberto Castello Branco rose to prominence in our political history as the first president following the civil-military coup of 1964. Prior to this pivotal role, he held various significant positions within the military establishment. From 1945 to 1949, he served as the director of teaching at the Army General Staff Command School\*, steadily climbing the ranks until he assumed command in September 1954. His trajectory also included stints at institutions like the War College\*. By the time of the political turmoil preceding the coup between March and April 1964, Castello Branco had ascended to the position of Chief of Staff of the Army, which he had held since June 1963. However, it's crucial to recognize that the fundamental themes guiding the policies of the military dictatorship, such as National Security (FICO, 2001; REZNIK, 2000), anti-communism (MOTTA, 2020), and a conservative conception of development or modernization (REIS et al, 2014), were not new concepts originating solely from the post-coup era.

In this article, our objective is to delve into the analysis of how the military dictatorship's key issues were addressed prior to the coup, drawing insights from the perspectives of Humberto Castello Branco. Our examination is primarily based on the book "Marechal Humberto Castello Branco: seu pensamento militar\*", compiled by Colonel Francisco Ruas Santos. This publication comprises a compilation of lectures and classes delivered by Castello Branco during his tenure at the Army General Staff. The content of the book consists of original notes penned by Castello Branco himself, along with documents submitted to the Army Staff College\* (EME) and minutes sourced from military archives.

In our assessment, the post-1964 dictatorship marked the ascendancy of a particular vision of development and national agenda for Brazil, which had been subject to contention in preceding years. Drawing on the framework proposed by Michael Freeden (2006), we categorize this agenda as conservative. According to this British political scientist, conservatism entails the defense of maintaining established orders, a skepticism towards abstract intellectual concepts in favor of a focus on tangible reality – a perspective Castello Branco's writings capture through the term "anti-intellectualist

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\* T.N. Escola do Comando do Estado-maior do Exército

♦ T.N. Escola Superior de Guerra

• T.N. In free translation, "Marshal Humberto Castello Branco: his military thinking"

▲ T.N. Escola do Estado-maior do Exército

realism" – and advocating progress rooted in essential societal traits. In the context of our analysis, this aligns with the author/political actor's interpretation of the concept of Nation. Subsequent sections of this article will delve into how these themes manifest in Castello Branco's writings. We will first explore the interplay between anti-intellectual realism, nationalism, and development. Following that, we will examine how the author's conception of elites and hierarchies shaped his support for authoritarian projects. Finally, we will scrutinize how his anti-communist stance stemmed from a discourse advocating for the intervention of the Armed Forces in institutional politics.

## 2. Anti-intellectualist realism and nationalism

In his book "Marechal Castello Branco: seu pensamento militar (1946-1964)," Castello Branco (1968) introduces the concept of "anti-intellectualist realism" as a crucial method for military action. This notion first emerges in a text dated March 18, 1947, from a conference at the EME School on "work in command" (CASTELLO BRANCO, 1968, p. 23). The essence of Castello Branco's realism lies in the military's obligation to liberate itself from abstract theorizing and instead focus on practical means to achieve objectives, with the situation serving as the guiding criterion. Castello Branco argues against "[...] becoming stuck in the discussion of ideas, in which one never reaches the end, sometimes wandering into pessimism, sometimes into optimism." (Idem, p. 28).

The fusion of this perspective with nationalism and Brazil's imperative for development is further explored in other writings by the author. In his conference titled "O nacionalismo e o desenvolvimento nacional\*", Castello Branco presents a nuanced stance on the issue. While other conservative military figures of the time, such as Juarez Távora (1962) and Golbery do Couto e Silva (1952), viewed the nation as a concrete and ahistorical entity, Castello Branco developed a distinct intellectual framework. In Castello Branco's view, the concept of the nation only crystallized at the close of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, notably with the advent of the French Revolution, although he acknowledges earlier attempts by civilizations like the Hebrews and ancient Greeks in this direction. Central to his perspective is the notion that such a project hinges on the involvement of a sovereign community endowed with a "historical mission" (CASTELLO BRANCO, 1968, p. 197).

In modern times, two distinct forms of nationalism have surfaced: economic and political. The latter emerged earlier, spearheaded by nations like France, Germany, and the United States. Castello Branco acknowledges the positive role of American influence in tempering the more aggressive aspects of political nationalism. However, during his time, he observed the emergence of a new variant: economic nationalism. This strain aimed to assert national identity in order to compete with the dominant global powers of the previous century. This movement for emancipation manifested across Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Within his own continent, Castello Branco identified a tension

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\* T.N. In free translation, "Nationalism and National Development"

between two competing visions of nationalism. On one hand, there was a nationalism centered on “[...] affirming sovereignty and driving economic development.” On the other hand, there existed what he termed as “[...] a low, demagogic and empty nationalism guided by international communism[.]” (CASTELLO BRANCO, 1968, p. 201). In this context, he critiqued the positions espoused by the PTB Labor Party and the PCB Communists.

Castello Branco articulated his perspective on nationalism as the optimal approach to governance and fostering development during a 1962 conference at the Roberto Simonsen Forum<sup>2</sup>. Employing deductive reasoning, he begins with the premise that it is inherent for individuals to seek self-aggrandizement. From this foundational axiom, he posits that these individual interests naturally coalesce into collective national aspirations, which are perceived as the shared interests projected by public opinion. However, he notes a critical challenge: the extent to which people are aware of the country’s national aspirations is directly correlated with its level of cultural, civilizational, and political development.

The author's conclusion underscored the responsibility of national political leaders in delineating and organizing the objectives of the nation. By doing so, they unlock the inherent potential within the nation, allowing it to flourish. Castello Branco's perspective posits that Brazil possesses latent power, waiting to be harnessed and actualized through a deliberate development process. In Aristotelian terms (ARISTOTLE, 2001), he suggests that Brazil, as a potential power, must transition into Brazil in action—a state where its full potential is realized and manifested.

Embedded within his framework of historicity (HARTOG, 2013; KOSELLECK et al., 2013), Humberto Castello Branco adopted an evolutionist perspective on the historical trajectory. He proposed that the level of political and economic advancement within a nation directly correlated with the quality of its nationalism. Consequently, Castello Branco asserted that underdeveloped countries, which he viewed not as inherent conditions but rather as transitional stages, were more susceptible to what he perceived as the Soviet distortion of nationalism or the perception of Western nations as adversaries. This, in his view, was detrimental as it hindered global cooperation for peace.

Recognizing himself as part of an underdeveloped periphery, Castello Branco understood that nationalism held the key to transforming this reality, serving as the primary vehicle for progress that best suited the needs of the political community. Grounded in the belief that nationalism must “[...] stem from a comprehensive and realistic assessment” (CASTELLO BRANCO, 1968, p. 205), he delineates a method and explores three potential avenues for Brazil to overcome its underdevelopment. For Castello Branco, nationalism and development were intertwined, inseparable concepts constituting a unified stance. As he succinctly puts it:

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<sup>2</sup> The Roberto Simonsen Forum was a center for cultural and intellectual activities created in 1948 by the São Paulo State Industries Center (Centro das Indústrias do Estado de São Paulo).

Development without nationalism is denatured work, detached from the primacy of the national interest. And nationalism that is not devoted to development is undoubtedly a policy of contemplation and speculation far removed from national reality. Nationalism and development go hand in hand and work for the well-being of a nation." (CASTELLO BRANCO, 1968, p. 210)

In his methodology, the initial step involves selecting one of three paths: Soviet nationalism, democratic nationalism, or "diversionary" nationalism (Idem, p. 204). While the first option is self-explanatory in its empirical reference, the latter two reflect the author's interpretations of alternative development approaches prevalent at the time. "Diversionary" nationalism, as described by Castello Branco, denotes a corrupted form of nationalism wherein legitimate agendas are manipulated into symbols of open conflict, both domestically and internationally. Internally, the author likely alludes to left-wing nationalism associated with parties like the PTB, while externally, it may reference decolonization movements in Africa and Asia, which gained momentum in the 1950s through events like the Bandung Conference (1955) and the Belgrade Conference (1961). In contrast, democratic nationalism represents a more moderate approach, rooted in cooperation with culturally akin nations and a commitment to the communal well-being. Castello Branco views this model as akin to the practices observed in the United States.

In our assessment, merely labeling the military thinking behind the 1964 coup as nationalist and developmentalist is overly simplistic. Castello Branco's writings reveal a nuanced interpretation of both development and nationalism, diverging significantly from the perspectives of left-wing intellectuals of the time. Intellectuals like Guerreiro Ramos (1960), Caio Prado Jr. (2014 [1966]), and Celso Furtado (1962) argued that defending nationalism necessitated solidarity with the struggles of Asian and African nations seeking liberation from colonialism. They attributed Brazil's subjugation to imperialism to its economic, political, and cultural dependence on Europe and the United States. Castello Branco, in contrast, viewed development as a means to bolster a nation with unique aspirations that warranted preservation, advocating for a cultural alignment with the West. Hence, we contend that Castello Branco's vision of nationhood and development wasn't merely nationalist but also conservative. We emphasize this distinction because literature on the conservative modernization of the military dictatorship (REIS et al., 2014) often portrays a perceived dichotomy between modernization and conservatism. However, we believe this oversimplifies the matter, as there exists a conservative approach to modernization distinct from other interpretations within the same historical context.

Humberto Castello Branco, a conservative nationalist aligned with the West and serving within the army's General Staff Command, advocated for State control over oil resources. While he welcomed both national and foreign private investment in its exploitation, he maintained that a realistic assessment revealed the risks associated with

leaving mineral and energy resources solely to the whims of free capital. Castello Branco warned that without regulation, these resources could easily fall under the control of powerful international conglomerates. "He argued that foreign capital, motivated by the interests of other nations, would not prioritize Brazil's imperative of national development. This, in his view, contradicted the national aspiration to overcome underdevelopment, which aimed at methodically transitioning the country from a state of backwardness to one of progress. (CASTELLO BRANCO, 1968, p. 206-207).

However, Castello Branco advocated against Brazil maintaining a State oil monopoly, since "economic nationalism cannot be suicidal, hostile to foreign collaboration in capital and expertise, or isolate itself from the international economy" (CASTELLO BRANCO, 1968, p. 207). His contention centered on the notion that exploiting oil and other energy resources was pivotal for national development, requiring State-led planning. While private enterprise could serve as a supplementary force, its autonomy should be curtailed by State directives. Nonetheless, recognizing the capital and technical prowess of private entities, Brazil could not afford to disregard their contributions. Moreover, Castello Branco underscored the importance of fostering cooperation with Western democratic nations, suggesting that restricting international capital would contradict the ethos of collaboration he sought to uphold.

### 3. Authoritarianism and the naturalization of hierarchies

Humberto Castello Branco's analysis begins with a diagnosis of the moral decay within the national elites, recognizing it as a significant obstacle since they are entrusted with guiding the nation. This sentiment is directly expressed in a lecture delivered by Castello Branco on September 19, 1955, titled "Os meios militares para a recuperação moral do país\*" (CASTELLO BRANCO, 1968, p. 271). In a tone tinged with disillusionment, the military figure laments the decline of the national elites, noting their influence on the erosion of middle-class values. He bemoans the paradox that those who should serve as examples are instead fostering national corruption. This leadership vacuum, he warns, will inevitably lead to the prioritization of the elites' interests over those of the people, relegating the latter's demands to insignificance in favor of the groups aligned with the elites. Drawing from the observations of fellow conservative military figures of the time, such as Juarez Távora (1962), Castello Branco attributes the nation's moral decline to the elites' narrow representation of "[...] the interests of limited sectors or clique groups" (Idem).

The resolution to this predicament also requires a similar approach: enhancing the process of elite selection to prioritize national interests. In a conference held at the Roberto Simonsen Forum between April and May 1962, Castello Branco went as far as suggesting that established power could be revoked from elites if they failed to serve the "general welfare" (CASTELLO BRANCO, 1968, p. 194). He contended that by

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\* T.N. In free translation, "The Military Means for the Moral Recovery of the Country"



prioritizing personal gain over the collective good, elites would forfeit their legitimacy. Despite this caveat, Castello Branco expressed a nationalist and conservative perspective during the conference, affirming the inherent value of elite formation and social hierarchies (FREEDEN, 2006; VINCENT, 2013). To underscore this stance, he referenced the biblical adage "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's," advocating for the separation of temporal and spiritual authority and endorsing that "every man should be subject to the legitimate authorities" (Idem, p. 192). His discomfort was not with the existence of elites or hierarchies as such, but with the state in which the elites found themselves. What was needed was their improvement so that they could properly fulfill their function as an enlightened group that exercises power and guides the political community towards progress.

#### **4. Anti-communism and the legitimation of military intervention**

Within the realm of military and conservative intellectualism, the rejection of communism as an external ideology is coupled with a strong inclination toward fostering ties with the United States of America. Given the backdrop of the Cold War, aligning with American power as a partner in combating communism was a predictable choice. Notably, Humberto Castello Branco emerges as a prominent advocate for closer ties with the USA. He perceives the nation as embodying a democratic framework conducive to development and as a model of nationalism to be emulated, viewing it as a peaceful manifestation of the ideology necessary to overcome Brazil's backwardness. In contrast, he portrays Soviet-style nationalism as the antithesis, characterized by conflict and the fragmentation of national groups—a doctrine he believes ultimately aims to dismantle the nation itself. In his own words:

American nationalism consists of preserving the national heritage intact and also has the sense of decisively throwing its national power into the hands of others wherever possible, in any part of the world, first to maintain its self-determination and then to safeguard Western democratic principles.

Soviet nationalism is an imperialist force that wants to impose a regime and that has already assimilated the economies of other countries. (CASTELLO BRANCO, 1968, p. 201)

In a conservative interpretation of nationalism (VINCENT, 2013), the apprehension that Soviet communism instills in Castello Branco is primarily rooted in the doctrine's internationalist nature and its class-based societal division. He perceives communism as fundamentally incompatible with Latin America's path to development. Given its advocacy for a global proletarian revolution, Castello Branco views political and economic autonomy as obstructive to this agenda. When assessing Yugoslavia, he regards it as an impediment to internationalist communism. However, while its call for "national communism" (CASTELLO BRANCO, 1968, p. 200) might resonate with underdeveloped nations like Brazil, this realization hinges on Soviet international

backing, to which Yugoslavia, despite its ideological affinity, remained closely aligned. In a discourse typical of ideological disputes over concepts (FREEDEN, 2006), Castello Branco interprets "national communism" as a form of nationalism lacking true national essence. From his conservative standpoint, a doctrine that promotes intra-national conflict and employs nationalist rhetoric merely as a tool against perceived US imperialism cannot genuinely embody nationalism. He views such an association as perilous, as communist parties' allegiance lies more with Soviet interests than their own nation's welfare. Consequently, the USSR emerges as an adversary to the "[...] legitimate nationalism of sovereign nations" (CASTELLO BRANCO, 1968, p. 200).

During a lecture delivered at the Army General Staff Command School on December 15, 1961, titled "O dever militar em face da luta ideológica"<sup>♦</sup>, the Chief of Staff displayed heightened concern regarding the issue at hand. Drawing a distinction between two prevailing regimes of the modern era – democracy and totalitarianism – he delineated democracy as a concerted endeavor to harmonize well-being and freedom, contrasting it with totalitarianism, an ideology seeking to subsume individuality under State control. This model, epitomized by one-party dictatorship, systematically stifles any semblance of freedom under the guise of purported equality.

Later in the text, the author proceeds to correlate these regimes with specific nations. He identifies the United States of America as the primary representative of democracy, while equating communism, which he synonymizes with totalitarianism, with the Soviet Union. This external threat from beyond the Western sphere was intensifying its confrontation with the USA and infiltrating various countries' territories—including his own—not only through clandestine party cells but also via universities and other intellectual circles (CASTELLO BRANCO, 1968, p. 216). In his perspective, the Brazilian communist is perceived as an internal threat, masquerading as a member of the nation but embodying an external enemy. This adversary must be confronted in the escalating global conflict. Given the wartime context, the army is tasked with intervening as the guardian of democracy, fulfilling its obligation to preserve peace and counter the external totalitarian menace.

During a lecture delivered at the conclusion of the revolutionary war course, while serving as the chief of staff of the army, on December 9, 1963, Castello Branco underscored the significance of "Educational action against revolutionary war" (Idem, p. 224). He stressed that education played a crucial role in fostering both military and civilian comprehension of the imperative nature of the struggle against communism, which, in his view, "must be approached as a potential war scenario and as a conflict that has implications for national salvation." (Ibidem, p. 224). Demonstrating his alignment with conservative ideology, Castello Branco expressed concern in the text over Brazil's lack of orderly evolution towards development, resulting in the increasing allure of communism among the populace. He contended that the "democrats" not only needed to combat communism but also to steer the nation's development towards an improved

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<sup>♦</sup> T.N. In free translation "Military Duty in the Face of the Ideological Struggle".



standard of living. Consequently, it fell upon them to assume responsibility for the development process, which the political elites were evidently unable to manage.

The final text in Humberto Castello Branco's collection of works from the army's General Staff Command places particular emphasis on the issue of National Security. In a circular dated March 20, 1964, the institution's head addressed recent events in national politics during the João Goulart government. He stressed that the Armed Forces would not be deployed to defend government agendas and, even less so, would they serve as a tool for propaganda. Instead, their role would be to uphold constitutional powers, ensure their proper functioning, and enforce the rule of law (CASTELLO BRANCO, 1968, p. 304). Castello Branco viewed this as diametrically opposed to the trajectory of national politics. He interpreted the proposed constituent assembly, deemed necessary for implementing fundamental reforms, as a "revolutionary objective" aimed at dissolving Congress and establishing a dictatorship.

The General Workers' Command \* (CGT) posed a particularly concerning threat to National Security, as it aimed to disrupt Brazil's functioning in order to incite a "public calamity" (Idem, p. 305). The armed forces, viewed as a patriotic and nationalist institution, could not afford to remain "[...] omissive or in cahoots with the command of subversion" (Ibidem, p. 305). Hence, it was imperative to prevent this severe national crisis that posed a direct threat to democracy itself, which these unionist and communist groups intended to overthrow. His conclusion was that the threat of communism to National Security and democracy would justify military intervention to ensure that Brazil remained connected to its own national interests and not those of Moscow. In his words, his enemies were mobilizing for a revolution to establish a dictatorship, while the army would defend democracy:

Insurrection is a legitimate resource for the people. One might ask: are the Brazilian people asking for a military or civil dictatorship and a Constituent Assembly? Apparently not yet. Are the Armed Forces entering a revolution to hand Brazil over to a group that wants to dominate it in order to command and rule, and even to enjoy power? To guarantee the fullness of the pseudo-union group, whose leadership lives on subversive agitation that is increasingly costly to the public coffers? To perhaps submit the nation to Moscow's communism? Now that would be anti-country, anti-nation, and anti-people.

No. The Armed Forces cannot betray Brazil. (CASTELLO BRANCO, 1968, p. 304)

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\* Comando Geral dos Trabalhadores (CGT). The CGT – The General Command of Workers – was an autonomous labor and trade union organization built by workers. It emerged in 1962 during the IV National Workers' Trade Union Congress in São Paulo and remained active during Jango's government until the 1964 coup. Source: <http://cnv.memoriasreveladas.gov.br/m/outros-destaques/348-ato-sindical-relembra-repressao-ao-comando-geral-dos-trabalhadores-em-1964.html#:~:text=O%20CGT%2D%20O%20Comando%20Geral,at%C3%A9%20o%20golpe%20de%201964>.

## 5. Final considerations

In our article, we endeavored to delve into Humberto Castello Branco's mindset in the years leading up to the 1964 coup. Through a thorough examination of his speeches and class notes, we discerned that the foundational elements subsequently embraced and solidified by the military dictatorship—such as tenets of National Security, anti-communism, and a conservative approach to development or modernization—had already permeated the rhetoric and writings of Armed Forces members since at least the advent of the Republic in 1946. We contend that the ideological underpinnings of the first president-general of the dictatorship were not solely nationalist but also deeply rooted in conservatism. This perspective shaped his understanding of development and the role of elites in national politics in a distinct manner, setting him apart from other political figures of his era. This divergence was closely tied to his staunch anti-communism, leading him to openly endorse the Armed Forces' actions against democracy and the establishment of a dictatorship—a regime that, whether by design or circumstance, endured for 21 years.

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