

Strategic Visions: Volume 22, Number I

Serbin, Kenneth P. *From Revolution to Power in Brazil: How Radical Leftists Embraced Capitalism and Struggled with Leadership*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019.

Kenneth P. Serbin's *From Revolution to Power in Brazil: How Radical Leftists Embraced and Struggled with Leadership* analyzes how resistance members' ideas about the pursuit of democracy changed during and after Brazil's military dictatorship (1964-1985). Serbin's work joins others such as Benjamin Cowan's *Securing Sex: Morality and Repression in the Making of Cold War Brazil* and Victoria Langland's *Speaking of Flowers: Student Movements and the Making and Remembering of 1968 in Military Brazil* that examine twentieth-century Brazil from the perspective of those who fought against the regime.¹

Using more than three hundred hours of oral interviews, Serbin narrates the stories of nine former guerrilla members of the National Liberation Action (ALN), the main left-wing armed anti-military organization. Founded in 1967 and dismantled in 1974, this organization was formed by young adults who sought to fight the regime through armed combat. The nine former ALN members chosen by Serbin each later reached positions of power in the Brazilian government after the country re-democratized in 1985. They also went in different ideological and political directions in their careers, such as still-leftist Paulo Vannuchi, a minister of Human Rights during President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's administration (2005-2010), and now-centrist Aloysio Nunes Ferreira, Brazil's Minister of Foreign Affairs in the presidency of Michel Temer (2016-2018) and a Senator who represented the state of São Paulo in the Federal Senate (2011-2016).

The book is divided into three parts that chronologically address the trajectory of these nine activists. Part I, "Revolution and Repression," describes the days in which many of the interviewed took up arms. In Part II, "Resurgence," Serbin discusses the years these revolutionaries spent in exile or prison and how such experiences changed their perspectives concerning the pursuit of democratic reforms. The final section, "Rule," overviews how these nine former guerrilla members became major players in a re-democratized Brazil. The last two sections contain the work's main argument: nonviolence was and still remains key to promoting change. All of Serbin's interviewees—in their late sixties or early seventies by the time the book was written—stress that armed conflicts were not the best strategy to achieve social justice. As the author highlights in one of the names of his subchapters, activists transitioned "from bullets to ballots" as they reached prominent local or federal offices (183).

One highlight of the book is how Serbin narrates the interviews with the former ALN members. He walks with them while they are campaigning, resting on their private farms, having lunch with their families, or working in their political offices. As the author shadows these figures, he reveals details to the reader that demonstrate his interviewees' new ideologies and ways to do politics. Serbin mentions that he saw Senator Nunes Ferreira in his office taking a call to discuss Brazil's need for an antiterrorist law with the Tunisian ambassador. In another moment of the book, the author takes a ride with Vannuchi to the regional metalworkers' union headquarters in the countryside of the state of São Paulo. During the trip, the former cabinet member stressed that "socialism now" means

¹ Benjamin A. Cowan, *Securing Sex: Morality and Repression in the Making of Cold War Brazil* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016); Victoria Langland, *Speaking of Flowers: Student Movements and the*

Making and Remembering of 1968 in Military Brazil (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

Strategic Visions: Volume 22, Number I

“profound respect for democracy as a value, not as a political instrument to be manipulated” (321).

From Revolution to Power in Brazil over relies on oral histories to reach its main arguments. The book would benefit greatly from the use of secondary sources and other primary sources that offer critical perspectives on the strengths and weaknesses of Brazil’s re-democratization, such as the 1988 National Constitutional Assembly archives and additional newspaper articles concerning the 2016 impeachment process that removed President Dilma Rousseff (2011-2016) from office. The book was published in 2019, one year after the election to the presidency of far right-wing Jair Messias Bolsonaro, a former Army captain and congressman for seven terms who does not acknowledge that the military regime was a dictatorship and praised the use of torture against those who fought against the authoritarian government. In the end, it feels like Serbin’s work, his interviews, and interviewees overlooked the point that the Brazilian re-democratization process in the 1980s was not enough to contain the rise of political players who have relativized democratic values in the country to high ranking public offices.

Despite these issues, *From Revolution to Power in Brazil* is an important addition to the historiography of Brazil’s military dictatorship and the narratives of those who fought against it. The book’s argument concerning the importance of nonviolence as a way to achieve social reforms is still crucial today as certain Latin American countries still struggle with guerrilla movements (both leftists and rightists) and black block groups in the region.

Lucas de Souza Martins
PhD Student
Temple University