

## **MEB under suspicion: the seizure of the booklet *Viver é Lutar* and the 1964 coup**

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**ABSTRACT – MEB under suspicion: the seizure of the booklet *Viver é Lutar* and the 1964 coup.** This article addresses the seizure of the booklet *Viver é Lutar* (*To Live is to Fight*), produced by the Basic Education Movement (Movimento de Educação de Base – MEB). It analyzes the event in two dimensions: in relation to the national political context, based on journalistic coverage and texts responding to the proceedings initiated by the Department of Political and Social Order (Departamento de Ordem Política e Social – DOPS); and its impact on the daily life of the radio schools, based on a set of letters written by monitors from Pernambuco. As a result, the study expands knowledge about the political tensions and contradictions involving the Movement in the pre-civil-military coup context of 1964, as well as the impacts on its activities with the establishment of the dictatorship.

**Keywords:** MEB. *Primer To Live Is to Fight*. 1964 Civil-Military Coup.

**RESUMO – MEB sob suspeita: a apreensão da cartilha *Viver é Lutar* e o golpe de 1964.** O artigo aborda a apreensão, ocorrida em fevereiro de 1964, da cartilha *Viver é Lutar*, produzida pelo Movimento de Educação de Base (MEB). Analisa o evento em duas dimensões: em relação ao contexto político nacional, com base na cobertura jornalística e nos textos respondendo ao processo instaurado pelo Departamento de Ordem Política e Social (DOPS) e em seu impacto no cotidiano das escolas radiofônicas, com base em um conjunto de cartas escritas pelas monitoras de Pernambuco. Como resultados, ampliam-se os conhecimentos sobre as tensões e contradições políticas envolvendo o Movimento no contexto pré-golpe civil-militar de 1964, bem como sobre os impactos em sua atuação com a instauração da ditadura.  
**Palavras-chave:** MEB. Cartilha *Viver é Lutar*. Golpe civil-militar de 1964.

## Introduction

In the 1950s, the developmentalist discourse that had been shaping Brazil's urbanization and industrialization began to encompass rural areas as well. This movement aimed to highlight the backwardness and neglect of the countryside and to advocate for productive restructuring. Among other measures, this restructuring required expanding elementary education for rural workers, as the longstanding issue of illiteracy was increasingly recognized as a significant barrier to national economic growth.

During this period, various initiatives sought to expand access to education for the Brazilian population<sup>1</sup>. Among them, the Basic Education Movement (Movimento de Educação de Base – MEB) can be considered one of the most comprehensive, innovative, and contradictory efforts. The MEB was created by the Catholic Church through the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil (Conferência Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil – CNBB) with the goal of developing an educational program via radio schools for populations in the considered underdeveloped rural areas of the North, Northeast, and Center-West regions of the country<sup>2</sup>. Although the Movement originated from an ecclesiastical initiative, it was financed by the Federal Government. The agreement was formalized with a decree signed by Jânio Quadros in March 1961<sup>3</sup>. The MEB was then coordinated by a Board of Directors chaired by Dom José Vicente Távora, Archbishop of Aracaju<sup>4</sup>.

The MEB also had a pedagogical coordination team operating in Rio de Janeiro, teams of state coordinators and instructor-broadcasters, and an extensive network of female volunteer monitors<sup>5</sup> responsible for accompanying the radio classes and assisting students in their daily tasks. To support the lessons, three primers were produced: *To Know to Live (Saber para Viver)*, MEB, 1963a) and *To Live Is to Fight (Viver é Lutar)*, MEB, 1963b) both in 1963; and *Community Task Force (Mutirão)*, MEB, 1965) in 1965. This movement and its educational materials have been the subject of academic studies, encompassing different perspectives<sup>6</sup>.

In this article, we aim to address an aspect that has received little discussion: the episode and repercussions of the seizure, in February 1964, of part of the print run of *To Live Is to Fight (Viver é Lutar)*, by order of the governor of Guanabara, Carlos Lacerda<sup>7</sup>.

In our analysis, we seek to perform a "play of scales," as conceived by Jacques Revel (1998, p. 14), who asserts that regarding micro and macrological approaches, neither scale should "have privilege over the other since it is their comparison that brings the greatest analytical benefit." We propose, therefore, to study the event from two scales. The first, macrological, considering its relation to the national political scenario in the pre-civil-military coup context of 1964. The second, micrological, examines the repercussions of this event on the daily functioning of the radio schools.

Continuing with the concept of scale, Bernard Lepetit (1998, p. 94) emphasizes that "the adoption of a scale is, above all, the choice of a point of view of knowledge." To illustrate this, Lepetit (1998, p. 102) presents the following image: "A city, a countryside—from afar, they are a city and a countryside, but as we get closer, they become houses, trees, tiles, leaves, grasses, ants, ant legs, to infinity." This passage helps us visualize our intent in this article: to bring our gaze closer by focusing on the event of the seizure of the primer, while comparing it both with the broader context of national politics and its impacts on the daily lives of those most directly involved in the work with the radio schools—the monitors and the students.

Thus, we initially aim to understand the circumstances under which the content of the primer *To Live Is to Fight* (*Viver é Lutar*) came to be interpreted as *communist* by the established political powers, leading the Movement to defend itself against such accusations. Additionally, we address the journalistic repercussions, seeking to explore the sociopolitical tensions and instabilities that preceded the 1964 coup d'état, as well as their impacts on the continuity of the Movement.

To this end, in the first section, we utilized part of the documentation produced, preserved, and made available by Osmar Fávero<sup>8</sup> during his coordination of the project titled *Memory of Youth and Adult Education* (1st phase 1947-1967)<sup>9</sup>, between 2006 and 2008. We based our work on a historical account written by Fávero, which presents the process of creating the primer, as well as three documents signed by the President of the MEB, Dom José Vicente Távora: a letter introducing the primer to the bishops of the dioceses involved in the Movement, a text distributed during a press conference following the seizure incident, and a testimonial letter in response to the proceedings initiated by the Department of Political and Social Order (DOPS) of Guanabara. Additionally, we included texts about the incident published in Rio de Janeiro newspapers—*Correio da Manhã*, *O Globo*, *Última Hora*, and *A Notícia*—as well as in newspapers closer to the MEB's area of operation—*Diário de Pernambuco* and the Northeast Edition of *Última Hora*.

On a micrological scale, in the second section, we discuss the impact of this event on everyday school life drawing on a collection of letters sent by monitors working in the radio schools of Pernambuco. These letters are part of the MEB Collection, housed at the Center for Documentation and Scientific Information at the Pontifical Catholic University (CEDIC-PUC/SP).

### **The MEB Responds to the DOPS: The Seizure of the Primer in the Pre-Coup Context**

On the morning of February 20, 1964, radio programs informed the population of the state of Guanabara that, acting on orders from Governor Carlos Lacerda, the DOPS had conducted a raid on a printing house in Lapa and made a significant seizure. In some accounts, it

was a book that proved the communist orientation of the Ministry of Education and Culture under João Goulart's government. In others, the seized material attested to the alarming degree of dissemination of subversive ideology in Brazil, as it was allegedly the work of "priests who are in cahoots with the government" (Chefe..., 1964, p. 2).

From an examination of media coverage and the measures taken by both the DOPS and the MEB to clarify the facts, a picture of the events can be composed. According to the account produced by Fávero (2013, n.p.), it can be deduced that, as the saying goes, Lacerda's government aimed at what it saw and hit what it did not see.

All indications suggest that the police action at the Editora Americana printing house was intended to seize the book *Careerist of Betrayal* (*Carreirista da Traição*) by Eptácio Caó—which exposed Lacerda's contradictions—and the newspaper *O Panfleto*, published by the Popular Mobilization Front, to which then-federal deputy Leonel Brizola<sup>10</sup> belonged. The fact that the DOPS agents encountered the primer *To Live Is to Fight* (*Viver é Lutar*), which appeared to them as a communist work, seems to have been accidental.

The MEB had contracted another company, Estúdio Gráfico Brasil S.A., which had subcontracted Editora Americana—already under surveillance by the DOPS—to produce part of the materials. During the raid, authorities found three thousand completed and boxed copies destined for the Diocese of Belém.

This was only a small portion of the total print run, as one hundred thousand copies were planned to be produced in two stages. Of these, forty-five thousand had already been delivered to the dioceses participating in the MEB. The quantity and potential circulation of this material must have alarmed Delegate Denizard Corrêa Pinheiro, who was responsible for the DOPS operation in the middle of that night

However, the DOPS agents were probably even more affected by the content. Since they were already searching for signs of communist ideology, it likely wasn't difficult for them to find such indications in this material. In the objectives of the work, the pedagogical coordination mentioned:

We sought to use language that would allow for real communication with the people. For us, this weighed more than some grammatical rules. We would like this work to always be considered in its fundamental intention: an auxiliary tool in the education of adults and adolescents, education that, being comprehensive, requires awareness (MEB, 1963b, p. 64).

This stance aligns with the resolutions of the First National Meeting of MEB Coordinators, held in December 1962. At this meeting, basic education was redefined to emphasize consciousness-raising. This change was due, among other reasons, to the fact that many of these leaders were also members of the Catholic University Youth (*Juventude Universitária Católica*, JUC), which at the time was aligning more closely with militants associated with the secular left

and participating more actively in the National Union of Students (*União Nacional dos Estudantes, UNE*) (Kadt, 2007). These transformations help explain the militant tone employed in the creation of the primer.

*To Live Is to Fight (Viver é Lutar)* is a sixty-five-page primer presenting thirty lessons, each composed of short texts and images depicting the living conditions of rural workers. Viewing the proposals, lessons, and images in the primer from an anti-communist perspective, it is likely that the DOPS agents and the Guanabara Security Department believed that with this seizure, they were providing Governor Lacerda with an even greater and more significant service than originally intended. The analysis by the Secretary of Security, Colonel Gustavo Borges, was presented in the press as follows:

The matter is very subtle. There is no direct insinuation, but if on one page they say that peasant struggle is necessary for their demands, on the next they display photos of laborers with sickles, pickaxes, shovels, and other tools, in an aggressive stance. The publication is not from the MEC because the MEC did not have the courage to publish it; it is from the priests who are in cahoots with them (Chefe..., 1964, p. 2).

Based on this understanding, an inquiry was initiated. According to the chronological sequence of events organized by Fávero, the following overview emerges: the heads of the printing companies were the first to be summoned to testify, during which it was clarified that the order had been placed by the MEB with Empresa Gráfica Brasil, not with Editora Americana. A few days later, in light of the case's repercussions, the President of the Board of Directors, D. Távora, traveled from Sergipe to Rio de Janeiro to closely monitor the unfolding events.

On February 26, D. Távora met with the governor of Guanabara to discuss the case. The content of this conversation remains inaccessible. However, some of its effects reached the press through an interview he gave a day after his meeting with Lacerda. This version was also copied and distributed to all MEB teams and dioceses. The opening of the text refers to a communication from the CNBB, made on July 14, 1962:

No one is unaware of the clamor of the masses who, tormented by the specter of hunger, are reaching, here and there, the brink of despair [...]. Now, due to the worsening of successive economic, political, and social crises that have shaken the country, whether due to the ease of communication, the dissemination of ideas and events, or the growing organization of classes, the people of the cities and the countryside are beginning not only to become aware of the true causes of these evils but, above all, to understand that without participation in the life of institutions and society itself, they will never be freed from the state of ignominy in which they find themselves" (Távora, interview apud Fávero, 2013, n.p.).

Observing the tone and the period in which these words were originally published, one might conclude that D. Távora used them both to demonstrate that the MEB had the backing of the Brazilian ecclesiastical hierarchy—not merely a group of priests in cahoots with the Goulart government—and to highlight that the CNBB had long been concerned about social inequality and contradictions in the countryside. Thus, the MEB would represent a legitimate response from the Catholic Church to act in this context, rather than an aggravating factor.

In the interview, D. Távora further explains that the Brazilian bishops were adhering to the guidelines of the Church's Social Doctrine<sup>11</sup>. In his words:

The Bishops [...] cannot be indifferent or negligent in a task of the utmost importance, demanded by the very charity of the Gospel, which is to lend their cooperation to the social and cultural development of the people and the elevation of the general level of society (Távora, interview apud Fávero, 2013, n.p.).

In addition to linking the Movement to broader Catholic social aspirations, D. Távora appears to have seized the opportunity to transform the inconvenient seizure into a chance to present the MEB's work to the press. Thus, in the continuation of the interview, he explained how the agreement between the CNBB and the Federal Government was established and outlined the Movement's operational perspectives based on objective data:

In the year 1964, approximately 10,000 radio schools are expected to operate, serving 280,000 students [...]. In addition to training supervisors and monitors, [the MEB] constantly promotes courses and training for leaders, preparing them for development work in their communities, encouraging the organization of cooperatives, mothers' clubs, unions, and other similar activities. [...] An extraordinary fact can be highlighted: the MEB has about 10,000 monitors, people from the community, who work as unpaid volunteers, which represents an invaluable contribution, including economically, to the Nation's development (Távora, interview apud Fávero, 2013, n.p.).

It is beyond the scope of this article to revisit the MEB's relations with the national-developmental context<sup>12</sup>. However, if the press can be considered a privileged locus for disputes over the construction of public opinion, it can be assumed that D. Távora recognized the opportunity to promote the MEB as an ally in the necessary socioeconomic development of the country. This idea had been presented as a national consensus since the mid-1950s. The situation also proved opportune to reaffirm that “all of the MEB's work is of Christian orientation and carried out by individuals who are aware that a materialistic solution for Brazil will be a disastrous solution” (Távora, interview apud Fávero, 2013, n.p.).

The prelate concluded by stating that in his conversation with the governor, the incident of the primer's seizure was considered closed. However, Delegate Denizard Pinheiro continued to take

statements. Thus, on March 3, 1964, the Vice-President of the CNBB and representatives of the MEB appeared at the DOPS. On March 5, it was Osmar Fávero's turn to testify, and on March 9, a copy of the MEB's Statutes and the first lessons from the primer *To Know to Live* (*Saber para Viver*) were sent to the DOPS.

On March 10, D. Távora submitted his written testimony to the DOPS. This document was also copied and sent to all participating dioceses. In the lengthy text, the prelate provided extensive details about the socioeconomic context and the MEB's methods of operation. However, in several passages, a tone markedly different from that used in communication with the press is evident.

Probably, in D. Távora's assessment, the matter had dragged on longer than necessary, and the strain of having to provide explanations to individuals who seemed to have preemptively criminalized the Movement was becoming more pronounced. Thus, the tone of this writing was characterized by irony and barely concealed irritation. An example can be seen in the following excerpt:

[...] if I were to compile hundreds of expressions found in Pontifical Documents, from Leo XIII to Paul VI, condemning an entire historical situation in which the socio-economic or political conditions crush man, and published this research in a pamphlet, I would risk being considered subversive (Távora, testimonial letter apud Fávero, 2013, n.p.).

In another part, he states that, [...] due to my functional duties, and all the displeasures and constraints this episode has caused us, I have informed both Cardinal Dom Jayme de Barros Câmara, Archbishop of this Archdiocese, and the Central Commission of the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil" (Távora, testimonial letter apud Fávero, 2013, n.p.). He then clarifies:

[...] the constraints I refer to closely affect an educational work of great social reach by Archbishops and Bishops, upon which ideological doubt is cast, with suspicion even of serving communism. More than anyone, **we, the Bishops, who represent the Church, know how to distinguish between communism and Catholicism** (Távora, testimonial letter apud Fávero, 2013, n.p., emphasis added).

In the passages, and especially in the highlighted sentence, it can be inferred that D. Távora intended to demonstrate that the delegate neither had the competence to question the authority of the Brazilian ecclesiastical hierarchy nor the capacity to judge an educational project carried out by the high Catholic hierarchy, thus putting him, so to speak, in his proper place. However, the irritation present in the text may also reflect a certain astonishment on the part of the author at the exacerbation of the anti-communist discourse, which was increasingly becoming a risk to the fragile national democracy. The process related to the primer demonstrated that no one, not even the Catholic Church, would be safe from state violence. Yet, at that moment, it might not have been possible for the Archbishop to foresee how quickly the situation would devolve into a dictatorship that



would elevate the empowerment of agents like Delegate Denizard Pinheiro to new levels.

From the media coverage, it is clear that the segment of the press opposing Lacerda also appeared shocked by the police actions. These newspapers were divided between jocular and reflective approaches to presenting the case. The newspaper *Última Hora*, for example, published an article titled “DOPS Falls into Ridicule: ‘Subversive Primers’ Really Belong to the Bishops” (DOPS..., 1964, p. 2), seizing the opportunity to ridicule the action and mock what was perceived as Lacerda's communist delusion.

In a more reflective vein, the editorial of the newspaper *Correio da Manhã* (Intolerância..., 1964, p. 6) referred to the issue as follows:

This latest police violence by the governor of Guanabara constitutes yet another blatant demonstration of his intolerance, of his total incompatibility with the democratic regime. He once again affirms his obscurantist purpose of destroying individual and collective freedoms as if the country were not prepared to defend them.

However, while the opposition newspapers predominantly condemned police violence and the restriction of press freedom, this was not the case with other outlets. Following the meeting between Lacerda and Dom Távora, the state government began to discredit the primer. On February 27, the evaluation prepared by the Institute of Educational Research (Instituto de Pesquisas Educacionais – IPE) of the State Department of Education of Guanabara was released. The following headlines highlight the nature of the consensus produced: In *Tribuna da Imprensa: Primer Does Not Serve Pedagogical Purposes* (Primer..., 1964, p. 4). In *O Globo* (The Primer..., 1964, p. 13): *Seized Primer Only Aims to Provoke Revolt and Dissatisfaction*, says IPE.

In the texts published in the pro-Lacerda press regarding the seizure of the primer, we observe a consensus around the idea that the country was under communist threat. Exemplary in this regard is the editorial from the newspaper *O Globo* (*The Psychological Trap*, 1964, p. 3) entitled *The Psychological Trap*. The text begins by explaining:

THE PRIMER seized by Rio police in a print shop in Lapa is yet another demonstration of the intentions and plans of the communists and their accomplices concerning the communization of Brazil. The didactic criterion applied within it is that of the infamous Freire method, conceived to subvert under the pretext of literacy.

And further on, it states:

THEY SAY that the publication was intended for a Catholic entity in the Northeast, which would be responsible for its distribution, **in millions of copies, in that region of the country**. If the news is confirmed, it will be yet another demonstration of the penetration and extent of communist infiltration in Brazil. It would not be the first case, nor will it be, unfortunately, the last, where one priest or another, and even one bishop or another, out of naive-



ty, misguided social zeal, or for any other reason, becomes an unwitting accomplice of the communists and an instrument of their subversive plans (The Psychological Trap..., 1964, p. 3, emphasis added).

In this excerpt, two points are particularly noteworthy. The first is the use of the phrase "THEY SAY," capitalized, which highlights the conflicting circulation of information about the episode, indicating a lack of commitment by the publication in question to verify it. The fact that the text is an editorial may justify its tone being much more opinionated than informative. However—and this is the second point to emphasize—even so, data is still presented, and in this case, the well-known strategy of inflating numbers to increase impact was widely employed, as can be observed in the highlighted sentence.

Press historians have long elucidated the active role of newspapers in history. Based on their perspectives, we understand that these outlets help shape the events they report, directly participating in the struggle for power—which is also the struggle over the formation of public opinion. Public opinion, as Pierre Bourdieu (1983) reminds us, does not exist a priori; it is the result of various forms of production or fabrication stemming from published opinion.

However, it is not merely a matter of acknowledging that the press holds *opinions*; we must also note, as Heloisa Cruz and Maria do Rosário Peixoto (2007) point out, that its actions establish spaces and construct adherence and consensus. In this way, the press, in addition to assimilating "interests and projects of different social forces, is itself a privileged space for articulating these projects" (Cruz; Peixoto, 2007, p. 257–258)

In the case of the project favored by the pro-Lacerda press—as exemplarily perceptible in this editorial from *O Globo*—we can observe that the episode of the primer's seizure was taken as evidence of the complexity of the strategies proposed by the communists. The passage reads: "The primer says that man must undergo certain training, certain courses, go to the union, surrender to the union, carry out the strikes that the union determines, become a slave to the union. Since the union is dominated by them, the conclusion is obvious" (The Psychological Trap..., 1964, p. 3).

Establishing the scope of this narrative and the extent of its commitment to the rhetoric of the communist threat would require an analysis of the sequence of editorials in the newspaper *O Globo*, a task that is beyond the intent of this article. However, specifically regarding the episode in focus and its repercussions on the MEB's activities, this editorial, considered alongside the documentation presented thus far, allows us to glimpse the enormous difficulties faced by the Movement following these events. This situation was exacerbated by the fact that the news spread to regions where the MEB was most directly active. For example, we observe what was published in the Pernambuco press and note that, although it apparently did not give the matter the same prominence as the Rio newspapers, the seizure was

used to promote criticisms and attacks against opposing political groups, revealing the conflicts present in the days leading up to the coup.

On March 1st, the *Diário de Pernambuco* published its first report titled *MEB Primers Will Be Returned*, in which it commented on a statement by Dom Távora after his meeting with Lacerda, followed by news about the seizure and the MEB's actions. The episode was also briefly mentioned in the conservative-leaning "Economic Information" column, signed by M.A.A. (Informativo..., 1964). The text addresses priests linked to the Catholic Left who collaborated "intensely with the program [...] of the Basic Education Movement, whose primer *To Live Is to Fight (Viver é Lutar)* was seized by the Rio police, in due course. [...]" (Primers..., 1964, p. 4). A week later, the article *Dom Távora Will Not Be Heard in Communist Primer Inquiry* draws attention by labeling the primer as communist, reaffirming its subversive character and exonerating the CNBB from responsibility:

The primer [...] containing in its text clearly Marxist and revolutionary ideas and expressions, was published by the Basic Education Movement, an entity that until recently had ties with the National Conference of Bishops. Now, however, it has its own legal personality and it was in this capacity that it published *To Live Is to Fight* (Dom Távora..., 1964, p. 12).

In *Última Hora*, Northeast Edition, Stanislaw Ponte Preta published on February 26 the text *The Impressive Blunder of the Anti-Communist Crowd*, in which, in his characteristic style and maintaining the same line as the Rio edition, he satirized what he called the "professional anti-communism crowd," stating that they "made the biggest anti-communist blunder of the century" (Ponte Preta, 1964a, p. 7). A few days later, the columnist wrote a brief note criticizing the opinion issued by the IPE on the primer, according to which "the Department of Education tries to turn the case into a pedagogical vigil [...]" (Ponte Preta, 1964b, p. 8).

The subject continued to appear in the column of Octávio Malta, founder of the newspaper along with Samuel Wainer, who published two consecutive texts titled *The Bishops' Primer* (Malta, 1964a, p. 4) and *Continue Until It Changes...* (Malta, 1964b, p. 4). In the latter, he used a lesson from the primer to weave criticisms of the right and its inertia in promoting changes in the lives of the people.

The way the episode was treated in the periodicals reveals the political tension existing between supporters and opponents of João Goulart and demonstrates how groups linked to the Catholic Left and social movements were implicated in this debate by the press. According to Wagner Teixeira (2008, p. 121), "between the end of 1963 and the beginning of 1964, the political polarization led the right to see in the movements and their concepts errors, deviations, and threats." For him, the seizure of the material and the subsequent debate demonstrate

[...] the relationship between the movements of education and popular culture with the political context of the time. And how the content of the primer provoked a reaction from the more conservative sectors that were coalescing, at that very moment, around the coup plotting against Jango (Teixeira, 2008, p. 143).

With the establishment of the dictatorship, the MEB was the only one among the popular education movements existing until then that continued to operate. However, it was a profoundly restructured MEB, including its organizational structure. The national coordination was dismantled, and there was a decentralization of state programs, which came under the responsibility of the diocesan bishops. In 1965, a new primer called *Community Task Force (Mutirão)* was developed and distributed to the schools. This did not mean, however, that *To Live Is to Fight (Viver é Lutar)* was immediately abandoned. In the next section, in a change of scale, we will examine the issues related to the repercussions of this event in the daily life of the radio schools in Pernambuco, based on empirical evidence from the correspondence sent by the monitors to the MEB supervisors in that state.

### **“I Am Worried About the School”: The Seizure of the Primer in the Post-Coup Context**

In this section, we address the episode of the seizure of the primer *To Live Is to Fight (Viver é Lutar)* beyond its broader political and social repercussions, highlighting its impact from the perspective of the radio schools in Pernambuco<sup>13</sup>. We consider aspects related to the emotions, concerns, and hopes experienced by the individuals who participated in the MEB within the communities, utilizing letters as sources produced daily by ordinary people (Castillo Gómez, 2002).

Letters are privileged sources for narrating the episode from a micrological scale (Lepetit, 1998), as they allow access to the importance individuals placed on writing in that context, where the valorization and promotion of literacy were integral to the state's developmental project. Thus, the monitors, by using letters as a form of expression for their anxieties and strategies of resistance regarding their participation in the MEB radio schools, also demonstrated appropriations of written language as an exercise of subversion and affirmation of literacy. In this case, writing became a means of knowledge, communication, and insertion into Brazilian society (Alves, 2022).

Regarding the repercussions of the episode in the radio schools, the reports highlight the political instability and repression within the communities, where the primer emerged as a catalyst for associating the MEB with communism. In the letters, the monitors referred to the primers, or books, as reasons for such suspicions—or rumors, as they are described in the correspondence—even though these did not pertain to the seizure episode but to the collection of materials by the Army or local authorities, the arrest of MEB members, and the closure of radio schools.

In the first days after the coup, the monitors recounted the unsettling situations they experienced and requested information about the rumors surrounding the radio schools and the MEB's involvement with communism. They also asked for guidance on how to proceed regarding the collection of materials and the operation of the schools. The monitor of the Grossos school wrote on April 18 in a letter addressed to the supervisors: "[...] With this news about communism, some rumors have arisen that these radio schools will have some complications because of the books [...]" (Oliveira, 1964)<sup>14</sup>. Also in April 1964, the monitor of the Cupira school reported:

[...] I have encountered so many obstacles and rumors about this school concerning communists. The first rumor was from our representative here in Boa Vista, telling me that the primers were communist. My school is having low attendance because of these rumors, but I am always talking to the students and also the community; so many people have approached me about this matter. There was talk that Dom Antônio had been detained, and Father Mansueto as well because the school was communist and that these primers would be collected by the Army and the monitors would be arrested. [...] Now it is improving more because we have explained a lot about where this school comes from and who the leaders of these movements are. [...] (Machado, 1964).

In the letter, the monitor refers to Dom Antônio Campelo de Aragão, the Diocesan Bishop of Petrolina, and to Father Mansueto de Lavor, his advisor and Director of the MEB in Petrolina, who also worked at the radio station *A Voz do São Francisco* (Feitosa and Bitencourt, 2014), which broadcast programming for the radio schools of some systems in Pernambuco. The account highlights the repercussions of the episode for the maintenance of activities in the schools, in light of the suspicions surrounding the MEB and the fears of the monitors and students regarding their participation in classes, given that persecution and imprisonment of individuals were a reality.

In a letter to Father Mansueto on April 20, the monitor from Serrita commented:

[...] I am anxious for your presence here in Serrita regarding the radio classes. I have not been teaching since the 18th due to the rumors and the primers [...] I was helping 21 students every night, but the judge learned of this, perhaps from the street gossip that the primers are communist, and I was prohibited; the radio, all of this material is at the parish house, collected to be delivered. Therefore, I ask you to send João to fetch the radio along with all the materials, and here are my apologies (Almeida, 1964).

The monitor from Verdejante wrote to the supervisors about the situation in her school, mentioning the news of Dom Antônio's arrest:

This is to inform you that by order of Father Domingo from Salgueiro, the teachers asked to collect the books that are communist, and here is news that the bishop is imprisoned. I am almost going crazy; I am afraid, but I feel sorry to leave my school because I love it; I take great pleasure in it. The students are sat-

isfied, but with this news, they will become sad. I ask that when you receive this, please let me know what we should do, as I will stop until I receive instructions. The books from Salgueiro were not distributed because the teachers and the priest did not deliver them, saying [illegible] they were communist. I am already feeling like a person without reason because the people are saying this, and I do not believe it; I will stop today, but I hope for news from you (Dantas, 1964).

In Açude-Quebrado, also in the Salgueiro region, the monitor commented:

I am worried about the school; there is little light, we are out of batteries for the radio, and also the rumors from the people that make the students believe many lies. To make matters worse, they took the books; I still do not know at whose command, as the Mayor was in Recife and knew nothing. I will take steps to ensure that the books return to my hands. Some students do not believe that the school is Catholic, but I am fighting to overcome this; and I will succeed if God wills. [...] (Carvalho, 1964).

In the same letter dated April 18, the monitor from the Grossos school continued:

[...] I received an order from the mayor to collect the books and send them to the city hall. I collected them, but I did not send them, as I received them from your hands and will only deliver them to you, or rather, to your orders. Am I right or not? The students are frightened; some have already stopped attending classes. Many rumors have also emerged, and I am very worried about everything that is happening. Please let me know as soon as possible to help calm the situation. [...] (Oliveira, 1964).

The monitors used expressions such as “a person without reason,” “I am afraid,” “frightened,” “worried,” and “to calm down” to convey how they and their students felt in light of the orders to surrender materials, as well as the military’s actions in collecting primers and arresting individuals who were somehow associated with communism, even if they were ecclesiastical authorities.

The students also expressed their fears regarding the situation and the continuity of classes. In a letter to supervisor Raimunda Coelho from the Petrolina team, a student stated that he felt sad about the dropout of his classmates and the risk of the school closing:

[...] due to ignorance, they are not coming because they are saying that this school is linked to communism, and they also said that the army is still pursuing all these schools because Miguel Arraes published it. Madam, I want you or any of the other lady teachers or even a priest to give us a thorough explanation [...]. I myself am not believing these rumors, but because of this, many people are struggling to remove us from the school [...] (Alencar, 1964).

The dropout of students and the threat of closing radio schools emerged as immediate consequences of the rumors surrounding the primer and the MEB, as well as the orders to collect materials from the communities. Such events gained traction in the radio schools follow-

ing the coup, rather than from the confiscation itself, as reports began to emerge in letters written in April 1964. Furthermore, the letters reveal that the episode was used by local authorities, such as mayors, judges, and military personnel, to suppress MEB activities by ordering the monitors to collect materials and, in some cases, to close their schools:

I have to inform you that, here in Salgueiro, there is a captain from the army. He received a telegram from a general in the army, asking him to seize the books from the radio school monitors. While I was at the City Hall [...] he summoned me, showed me the telegram, and a few books from group B. He asked me to take mine, saying [...], that this school is communist. So I replied to him, how is this school communist when the ones connected to it are the priests and the more religious people?

Because of this news, I am not teaching yet. I still have the primers. I am not someone who can take on a responsibility and not be able to handle it. [...] (Silva, 1964b).

Regarding the persecution and arrest of MEB members in the days following the coup, “the main actions of repression against the movement occurred” (Teixeira, 2008, p. 193), including the arrest of monitors, the closure of schools, and the persecution of community leaders, such that “military repression primarily targeted the grassroots of the movement,” generating fear and insecurity. Emanuel de Kadt (2007) mentions threats and arrests of monitors, the departure of supervisors in light of accusations made by civil and military authorities, and pressures from bishops themselves to remove members perceived as more radical.

Despite the repression from supporters of the coup and the interference of civil and military authorities regarding the primer and the operation of the schools, the accounts highlight the engagement of the monitors in MEB activities, as they collected the materials but refused to hand them over to anyone who was not a representative of the Movement. The writing of letters communicating the events to the responsible teams and requesting explanations on how to proceed indicates that they could initially yield to the authorities' advances in a context of repression, but sought clarification from MEB leaders about the facts and the decisions to be made.

According to Kadt (2007), the coup led to a complete halt of MEB activities in almost all systems, for periods ranging from one week to three months. This was the case in Caruaru, where the return of radio broadcasts was authorized without the use of the “subversive” primers, in a document signed in July 1964 by Colonel Aldo Pereira (Ministry of War, 1964). The accounts indicate the definitive or temporary closure of schools; however, they also highlight the existence of others that continued to operate. Furthermore, in a letter written in mid-April by the monitor from Cabrobó, which belonged to the Petrolina system, it is evident that programming continued to be broadcast daily by the station *A Voz do São Francisco*:

We have not felt any changes regarding the rumors; both on my part and that of the students, I have never suspended classes because I have confidence in the people I work with [...]. The mayor himself asked me if I was continuing with the school, as there were rumors that various places had suspended their schools. So I told him that [...] classes were broadcast every day on the radio. If there were any doubts, the radio was the first to provide news (Barros, 1964).

On May 11, the monitor from Sangue-Suga wrote to report on a Mother's Day celebration, discuss problems with the radio, and request that the MEB hold a mass on Easter Sunday. At the end of the letter, she commented:

People always tell me that this radio school is communist, but no one can beat me because I will die saying it is not. They also say it will come to an end, but I trust in Almighty God that it will never end. [...] To make it even better, the mayor [...] is providing batteries for the radio [...] (Callon, 1964).

The monitor from Matias, in her letter, commented on the low attendance of students who were currently working in the harvest. She added that the attending students were "making good use" of the classes and requested that the teacher explain again about the union and sing the hymn "Hallelujah," so they could learn and sing it during the May novena. At the end, she remarked: "As for the rumors, many have circulated. There was even one that they were coming to arrest me. But the more rumors, the more our enthusiasm" (Costa, 1964).

The monitor from Janguadinha reported: "Regarding the rumors that people were talking about, we here are calm, trusting in God and in the MEB team who explain everything to us nicely; then Father Mansueto always giving explanations, we are satisfied." (Rodrigues, 1964). The writing, with the use of expressions like "we are calm," "trusting in God," "explain everything to us nicely," and Father Mansueto "always giving explanations, we are satisfied," demonstrates confidence in the work performed by him, which was largely sustained by faith in God and in the ecclesiastical leaders of the MEB, as well as feeling informed and confident that he could explain his activities if compelled by any authority.

In the letters, one notices the use of the past tense to refer to the rumors and events. Both were written on May 1st, two months after the seizure of the primers and one month after the coup, which may have contributed to the rumors losing momentum in some localities, especially since some schools continued operating and the MEB's radio broadcasts were not interrupted in all areas, as was the case with the radio station *The Voice of São Francisco*, which in the first quarter of 1964 transmitted programming to the systems of Petrolina, Juazeiro, Floresta, and Cajazeiras (PB) (MEB, 1964b).

Regarding the continuation of MEB activities in the region of Nazaré da Mata, an area closer to the capital Recife, whose programming was transmitted by Rádio Olinda—which, in addition to the Nazaré system, also broadcast to Palmares and Olinda—a monitor



wrote in mid-May to the supervisor, mentioning the interruption of radio programming and the continuation of classes, even with news about the persecution of monitors:

Dear Gilvaneta, please nail this note here to read the news of the classes. It's been 3 weeks without school and I don't know why she doesn't say why, and besides, I am teaching by my own initiative, they told me that there was a monitor who was being beaten because the radio school is ending. [...]. When classes start I want you to reply to this letter saying why we spent those days without school. (Silva, 1964a).

In the same region, the monitor from Macaparana wrote to the supervisor Gilvaneta on April 14th to request a visit:

[...] I am anxious for you to appear here, as we have serious matters to discuss; a girl came to hand over the school saying that this school was communist, these are the cases we need to talk over with her, and there are others saying that many people are advising them to leave because this book talks about the peasant is communist. [...] (Ramos, 1964).

The Zona da Mata, where the two schools were located, is a region of sugarcane production in large estates. The organization of rural workers into unions, following the MEB's own directives (Fávero, 2006), and the struggle for access to land were realities in the years preceding the coup (Koury, 2010). Once the regime was established, repression was intense, with the arrest of agrarian reform militants and union leaders (Carneiro; Ciocari, 2011). The proximity to Recife is an element to consider when dealing with the repercussions of the primer's seizure in the schools of this region which, as indicated by the letters, experienced suspended class broadcasts and reports against the schools, although some continued to operate.

The lack of access to education and the religious character of the Movement are elements that contribute to strengthening the rejection of the idea of a communist school, giving shape to a transcendental educational experience that sought to value humanity and social justice, based on religious values constantly affirmed by the MEB: "It is not intended to give catechism classes, nor to indoctrinate those to whom we address through the Radio School. [...]" but rather "[...] knowledge that makes them grow in conditions worthy of human nature, similar to God, and in coexistence with other human beings" (MEB, 1962). For these individuals, the MEB was, above all, a movement of the Church:

[...] As you already know, there are many rumors here, but I didn't listen to them, I was warned to lock the radio because the judge had seized the books because they had some communist parts and it was no longer to teach, but I didn't listen, I continued every day attending the classes, I wasn't afraid at all, I was trusting in God and in Petrolina, for I am sure there is no confusion there, since I have already received over the radio the words of the Reverend Father Mansueto and of our dear and very virtuous Bishop Dom Antonio. Here in the region, lies are more believed than the truth, I really wish that Father Mansueto would

come to celebrate in the chapel here to clear up the confusion of many people (Neto, 1964).

The study of the letters invites us to listen to the voices of the monitors, who denounce the lack of access to education and literacy—a condition for political participation through voting. In the struggle for rights, these educators mobilized around the Church as a form of organization and a possibility for improving life, which certainly contributed to the fact that the State's repressive action assumed its own legitimacy in the radio schools. These perspectives and testimonies are also fundamental in highlighting the role of women in the MEB, aiming to break with hierarchical views of gender relations, placing them as agents and not as instruments of this process of which they were a constitutive and active part—through their participation, voices, and writings—as forms of struggle for equality, for guaranteeing their rights, and for insurrection against established authorities.

## Final Considerations

The episode of the seizure of the primer *To Live Is to Fight* (*Viver é Lutar*) is revealing of the political tensions that preceded the 1964 coup. In the first section, we addressed the event in its correlations with the conjunctural situation of the MEB in 1964. Based on the proceedings initiated by the DOPS, the documents produced by the Movement's coordination, and the journalistic repercussion about what occurred, we observed, on the one hand, the forms of constructing a consensus around the existence of the threat of a communist uprising underway in the country. Such a threat would be linked to the mobilization of the student movement and rural and urban workers, as well as to the Basic Reforms proposed by the Goulart Government. This consensus also reached the sectors considered more progressive within the Catholic Church, who were repeatedly dubbed *pink bishops* and *red priests*, allowing us to perceive that any mention of national developmentalism and better living and working conditions for rural and urban populations could quickly be transformed into adherence to communism, even among members of an institution that, by definition, would be anti-communist.

On the other hand, the way the episode was treated in the periodicals reveals the political tension existing between supporters of the Goulart government and its opponents, and demonstrates how groups linked to the Catholic Left and social movements were implicated in this debate by the press. Thus, based on the action of the Department of Security and the DOPS of Guanabara and the media repercussion of the event, we can glimpse, on a macro scale, the enormous difficulties in maintaining the rule of law in the country and, on a micrological scale, the consequences for the MEB's activities after the implementation of the coup on March 31, 1964.

Regarding the measures taken after the establishment of the dictatorship, the letters analyzed in the second section allow us to per-

ceive that the episode was used by local authorities—in the figures of mayors, judges, and military officers—to repress the MEB's activities, ordering the monitors to collect the material and, in some cases, to close their schools.

However, the missives also reveal the resistance on the part of the student monitors. Among them were conversations with the community, defense of the MEB before the authorities, and even refusal to hand over the primers and close the schools. Furthermore, they demonstrate the existence of bonds of trust from the community toward the monitors, as well as from the monitors in relation to the MEB and its Catholic leaders, based on the affirmation of the religious character of the Movement.

To conclude, we would like to highlight, in agreement with historian Ranajit Guha (2002), that narrating the history of a country marked by social inequality, land concentration, and the dichotomy between urban and rural areas requires listening to the voices of people who have historically been excluded from basic rights, including access to education. With this article, we hope to have contributed both to the analysis of little-known aspects of the political tensions and contradictions in the context of the 1964 coup d'état and to a better understanding of the daily experiences of the people who lived through the dictatorship then established, thus expanding their space of recognition in historiographical production.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For example, initiatives such as \*Learning to Read Barefoot\* (\*De Pé no Chão Também Se Aprende a Ler\*), implemented by the City Hall of Natal; the Center of Popular Culture (Centro de Cultura Popular – CPC) of the National Union of Students (União Nacional dos Estudantes – UNE); the Popular Culture Movement (Movimento de Cultura Popular – MCP) of the Pernambuco state government; Paulo Freire's Literacy System, CEPLAR; and the National Literacy Program (Programa Nacional de Alfabetização – PNA).

<sup>2</sup> The CNBB offered the National Representation of Catholic Broadcasters (Representação Nacional das Emissoras Católicas – RENECA) to the Federal Government. Created in 1958, it managed to oversee 32 radio stations across the national territory (Fávero, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> The issue of public funding for a Catholic initiative in an officially secular state was analyzed in Bilhão and Klafke (2021).

<sup>4</sup> The issue of public funding for a Catholic initiative in an officially secular state was analyzed in Bilhão and Klafke (2021).

<sup>5</sup> The feminine form is used because the majority were women aged between 15 and 25 years old, according to Alves (2022).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Santos (2014); Silva (2020).

- <sup>7</sup> With the relocation of the capital to Brasília, the former Federal District became the state of Guanabara, considered a federative unit from 1960 to 1975. The first elected governor was Carlos Lacerda.
- <sup>8</sup> Fávero was part of the national coordination of the MEB from 1961 to 1966. Over the years, he became an important scholar of both the MEB— the subject of his doctoral thesis—and youth and adult education, as well as popular education in Brazil. He is an emeritus professor at the Fluminense Federal University.
- <sup>9</sup> He cataloged, digitized, and made available the material related to the history of literacy and popular culture movements of the period, including the MEB.
- <sup>10</sup> The book published by Caó in 1959 compiled texts written by Lacerda, aiming to expose his contradictions (Antonio; Chaves, 2021). The newspaper \*O Panfleto\*, from the Popular Mobilization Front (FMP), supported Brizola, criticizing João Goulart's government for its policy of conciliation and demanding the implementation of basic reforms (Szatkoski, 2008).
- <sup>11</sup> The encyclical *Mater et Magistra*, from 1961, sought to read the "signs of the times" and respond to temporal problems. Several of its ideas were adopted by the Second Vatican Council (October 1962 to December 1965), which addressed issues related to the aggiornamento (updating) of the Catholic Church's relations with the contemporary world.
- <sup>12</sup> Issue addressed in Bilhão and Klafke (2020).
- <sup>13</sup> In 1963, the MEB had 1,298 radio schools in Pernambuco, distributed across 11 systems that reached 91 municipalities. The largest systems, with more than 100 schools, were Afogados da Ingazeira (301), Caruaru (227), Nazaré da Mata (200), Petrolina (163), Recife (147), and Garanhuns (112). It had a team of 101 people and 40,000 enrolled students (MEB, 1963–1964; MEB, 1964a).
- <sup>14</sup> To convey the richness of the prosody of the writings and maintain the fluidity of reading, the original spelling of the letters and the characteristics prior to the 1971 Orthographic Reform have been preserved in the transcriptions. In translating these letters into English, efforts were made to reflect the original style and level of literacy of the authors.

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Availability of research data: the set of data supporting the results of this study is published in the article itself.

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