



Year V, v.2 2025 | submission: October 24, 2025 | accepted: October 26, 2025 | publication: October 28, 2025

Woman of Tomorrow: A Critical Reading of Dilma Rousseff's Political and Institutional Trajectory

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Summary

This study critically analyzes Dilma Rousseff's political and institutional trajectory, examining her historical relevance as a symbol of resistance in the consolidation of Brazilian democracy. The central question is to what extent her actions, from her activism against the civil-military dictatorship to her presidency of the New Development Bank (NDB/BRICS), reflect structural tensions between memory, democracy, and gender inequality. The hypothesis is that Rousseff's political experience expresses a process of ongoing resistance that, despite facing attempts at erasure and delegitimization, notably during the 2016 impeachment, reaffirms the role of memory as an instrument of institutional reconstruction. The qualitative and exploratory research is based on a bibliographic review and documentary analysis of academic, institutional, and journalistic sources. The results indicate that Rousseff's trajectory transcends the biographical field, constituting a narrative of democratic reconstruction and the reconfiguration of spaces of female power. It is concluded that the "woman of tomorrow" represents the permanence of political resistance as a form of active memory and the projection of a new paradigm of female leadership on the national and global stage.

Keywords: Dilma Rousseff; memory; democracy; gender; political resistance.

Abstract

The study critically analyzes the political and institutional trajectory of Dilma Rousseff, examining her historical relevance as a symbol of resistance in Brazil's democratic consolidation. The central question investigates what extent her actions, from militancy against the civil-military dictatorship to her presidency of the New Development Bank (NDB/BRICS), reflect structural tensions among memory, democracy, and gender inequality. The hypothesis adopted is that Rousseff's political experience embodies a continuous process of resistance which, despite attempts at erasure and delegitimization, particularly during the 2016 impeachment, reaffirms the role of memory as an instrument of institutional reconstruction. This qualitative and exploratory research is based on bibliographical review and documentary analysis of academic, institutional, and journalistic sources.

The results indicate that Rousseff's trajectory transcends the biographical field, constituting a narrative of democratic reconstruction and reconfiguration of female power spaces. It concludes that the "woman of tomorrow" represents the persistence of political resistance as a form of active memory and the projection of a new paradigm of female leadership in the national and global arenas.

Keywords: Dilma Rousseff; memory; democracy; gender; political resistance.

1. Introduction

Dilma Rousseff's trajectory occupies a unique place in Brazilian political history contemporary. His biography goes beyond the personal sphere to become a mirror of the transformations and ruptures that have marked the Brazilian democratic state in recent decades. From armed militancy against the civil-military dictatorship to the presidency of the Republic, Rousseff symbolizes the intertwining between political resistance, gender and institutional power, configuring itself as one of the most complex and emblematic figures of recent democracy. The analysis of their trajectory allows



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understand the persistence of authoritarian and patriarchal structures in the political field and how memory shapes the very idea of historical justice.

The study proposes a critical reading of Rousseff's trajectory from a political-political perspective. institutional, rescuing elements of its performance in the fight against the authoritarian regime, in the creation of National Truth Commission (CNV) and in the consolidation of a government project based on continuity of social inclusion policies. At the same time, we seek to examine the process of 2016 impeachment as an expression of tension between media and politics, in which notions of legitimacy and popular sovereignty were subjected to a process of institutional erosion widely denounced by intellectuals and international organizations.

Rousseff's career is also a gender narrative. Her presence in the highest office of the federal Executive exposed, in an unprecedented way, the fractures of the Brazilian political imagination, traditionally masculine and exclusionary. The reaction to this presence highlighted not only ideological divergences, but also the strength of the symbolic structures that delimit the spaces possibilities for female participation in the public sphere. As noted by Saisi (2014) and Moritz (2020), the media and public opinion often constructed their image through the prism of inadequacy, attributing it characteristics considered incompatible with political leadership.

The relevance of this study is not limited to the chronological reconstruction of facts, but to understanding the dynamics of power and resistance that permeate Rousseff's career. The coup parliamentary election in 2016, the promise of return and his recent role as president of Novo Banco de Development (NDB), of the BRICS bloc, indicate the continuity of a political project that reformulates in the face of adversity, reaffirming the capacity for reconstruction of leaderships that resist the attempt at historical erasure.

Dilma Rousseff thus remains a limiting figure. Between the authoritarian past and the democratic future. Between the silence imposed by torture and the word taken up by history. Analyze his trajectory means revisiting Brazilian democracy itself and recognizing that, in the political field, resistance is, above all, a form of active memory.

2 Theoretical Framework / Results

The proposed analysis is anchored in theoretical frameworks that address the relationship between memory, democracy and gender. According to Hannah Arendt (1973), politics is the space where plurality human being manifests itself, with action and resistance being essential dimensions of freedom.

As Nora (1984) states, the construction of national identities is deeply linked to the preservation and activation of "places of memory" – material or symbolic entities that sustain collective memory. This notion dialogues with the creation of the National Truth Commission,

instituted in Brazil during the Dilma Rousseff government, as an attempt to reconstruct the narrative democratic.

Furthermore, the perspectives of feminist theory and contemporary political theory (Pateman, 1988; Young, 1990) offer tools to understand Dilma Rousseff's role in deconstruction of gender barriers and tensioning of power structures dominated by men.

Thus, the theoretical framework combines elements of democratic theory, gender studies, such as which of the institutional analyses, articulating them to understand the political meaning of the trajectory of Dilma Rousseff in the context of Brazilian and global democracy.

3. Material and Method

The methodology adopted in this study is characterized as qualitative research, of a exploratory and descriptive, based on bibliographical review and documentary analysis. The choice this approach arises from the historical-political nature of the object of study that demands both interpretation of theoretical texts as well as critical reading of official documents and historical records.

The bibliographic review was conducted with the aim of gathering and examining productions academics that address the multiple dimensions of Rousseff's trajectory, from her activism politics to its performance in international organizations. Research platforms were used scientific institutions such as the Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO), Google Scholar, the Library Brazilian Digital of Theses and Dissertations (BDTD) and journals specialized in social sciences and law, prioritizing articles of an analytical and critical nature (PINTO, 2011; PEIXOTO; RENNÓ, 2012; PINHEIRO, 2014; SANTOS; COSTA, 2016; MOREIRA; MOURA, 2021).

Document analysis, in turn, involved the examination of primary sources and institutional, such as the Report of the National Truth Commission (BRAZIL, 2014), speeches official statements made by Rousseff in the Federal Senate and in the context of the New Bank of Development, in addition to journalistic records from official portals and the national press (Agency Brazil, Folha de S. Paulo and Chamber of Deputies). These documents were selected for their political and historical relevance, as well as the authenticity of the information presented.

The research development was structured in three sequential stages: (i) survey and bibliographic and documentary selection, with the mapping of works, articles and documents that make up the analytical corpus; (ii) content analysis of academic, institutional and journalistic, seeking to identify the central thematic axes such as political resistance, construction institutional, gender and power; (iii) critical interpretation and synthesis of data, articulating the perspectives



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theoretical and empirical in order to allow a broad reading on the historical and symbolic impact of Dilma Rousseff's trajectory in Brazilian and international politics.

Based on Sá-Silva et al. (2009) and Marconi & Lakatos (2017), the bibliographic review constitutes a scientific method that allows us to understand social phenomena in light of other theories, providing rigor and consistency to the analysis. Thus, the research seeks to offer a critical reading of Rousseff's political and institutional trajectory, articulating the historical, legal, political and gender in an interdisciplinary dialogue supported by primary and secondary sources.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Dictatorship and Resistance

Dilma Rousseff's youth was marked by resistance to the civil-military dictatorship established in 1964. An activist in revolutionary organizations, Dilma was arrested in 1970 and subjected to torture for more than twenty days, an experience that became a symbol of state violence and political repression in Brazil. Her story is part of the narrative of women who dared to politicize existence in a regime that denied the right to exist politically. Thus, as Souza-Lobo (2021), "analyses have often ignored that the main actors in the movements popular were, in fact, actresses."

The analysis of the sources of the project *Memórias da Ditadura* (undated) shows that the suffering of Rousseff was incorporated into the collective memory, transforming her personal experience into a reference for debates on human rights and state accountability. The symbolic dimension of this resistance reinforces the idea that the memory of oppression should not remain relegated to silence, but act as an instrument of surveillance and institutional criticism.

Experiencing extreme authoritarianism provided Rousseff with a deep understanding of democratic fragility, which would later be reflected in the creation of the National Truth Commission and in their uncompromising defense of the rule of law. Resistance, therefore, presents itself as the ethical and symbolic of the entire political trajectory that will follow.

4.2. Memory and the State: The National Truth Commission as a Political Act

The creation of the National Truth Commission in 2012, sanctioned by Dilma Rousseff, is a milestone in the consolidation of institutional memory and the promotion of historical justice in Brazil. The official report of the CNV (BRAZIL, 2014) shows that the commission registered human rights violations humans during the dictatorship, as well as legitimizing the recognition of victims and accountability moral and political of the State. Dilma, through the CNV, took on the task of transforming memory into instrument of substantive democracy, confronting decades of omission and silence from the State and



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reaffirming the right to remembrance as a central element of transitional justice (BRAZIL, 2014; MINAYO; VILLA, 2016).

The impact of NVC goes beyond mere historical documentation, highlighting the centrality of political leadership in the construction of public and institutional narratives. By formalizing the investigation into torture, disappearances and repression, the commission provided a space for visibility and symbolic reparation for victims, reaffirming the right to memory as an element transitional justice center (BRAZIL, 2014; MINAYO; VILLA, 2016).

In this process, Rousseff can be understood as the protagonist of a policy of memory that articulates past and present, highlighting, in light of the concepts of places of memory de Nora (1984), the importance of democratic institutions capable of confronting their own legacy authoritarian.

4.3. From Resistance to Power: Presidential Ascension and the Rupture of the Political Imaginary

The 2010 election and Dilma's rise to the presidency reveal the complex intersection between gender and politics. The media debate about her leadership highlights that the female presence in the most high office of the Brazilian Executive challenged deeply rooted symbolic paradigms, creating tension between tradition and political innovation (PINHEIRO, 2014).

Upon assuming the presidency, Rousseff encountered political and media resistance, which arose countless questions about their "ability to lead," which they often carried implicit gender criticism, highlighting historical patterns of female subordination.

The disqualification of Dilma by the media and her opponents was a persistent tactic, focused on constructing an image of unpreparedness and intellectual incapacity. This discursive strategy, which included the widespread dissemination of memes and jokes about his speeches, aimed to delegitimize his political and moral authority.

As pointed out in analyses of sexist discourse during its development process, impeachment, terms like "crazy" and "stupid" were used to question the competence of the former president, resorting to misogynistic perceptions that suggest that women are not capable of occupying a position of power (SUDRE, 2020).

This derogatory association was so explicit that a prep course company even used the image of the former president in an advertisement with the slogan "How to stop being stupid and overcome difficulties in studying", an act that the court recognized as "extremely offensive to honor" and which resulted in compensation (ÉBOLI, 2020).



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The attack on his image, by undermining his authority and competence in the eyes of public opinion, worked as a media and social preparation, paving the way for the 2016 impeachment process and fostering the perception that his continued presidency was unsustainable and inappropriate.

4.4. The Impeachment Coup: “We will be back!”

During the impeachment trial, Dilma Rousseff starred in one of the most emblematic of recent democratic history: he remained for more than fourteen hours responding to questions from senators, reaffirming his innocence and denouncing the political nature of the process.

The episode, analyzed from a legal-political perspective, cannot be reduced to an evaluation technique of fiscal standards, as suggested by the official speeches supporting the process; it highlights the instrumentalization of law in terms of political disputes (MOREIRA; MOURA, 2021). Santos and Costa (2019) qualify impeachment as a historical injustice, a true coup that exposes the structural fragility of the Brazilian democratic system.

Rousseff's defense in the Senate (BRAZIL, 2016) presented a detailed and an appeal to institutional memory and the legitimacy of the popular vote. His interventions were a gesture of political resistance, showing that the process transcended the individual sphere, affecting the Brazilian democracy as a whole.

Reflection on the 2016 impeachment, often framed by its critics as a "coup" due to the absence of a crime of responsibility and the weakness of the accusations (BRAZIL IN FACT, 2022), finds in Dilma Rousseff's farewell speech a manifesto of promise policy.

The first statement, "I would not like to be in the place of those who consider themselves winners. The history will be relentless with them", transcends the momentary defeat, elevating the conflict to a higher court: that of memory and History. In prophesying the "relentlessness" of History, the ex-president sought to delegitimize the victory of his opponents as an ephemeral achievement and morally reprehensible. This sentence not only denounces the institutional rupture of 2016, but also signals that the "winners" of that process would, in the long run, be marked by the stain of democratic violation, confirming the feeling that the act was not just political, but a breach of regulations that would have dire consequences for the country's future – a sign that many associate to the political and social crisis that followed.

The second statement, "We will return. We will return to continue our journey toward a Brazil in which the people are sovereign" (ROUSSEFF, 2016), acts as an act of resilience in the face of the interruption of the mandate, the promise of "return" highlights the ideological nature of the dispute,

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positioning impeachment as a mere hiatus, not an end point, in the struggle for sovereignty popular.

Thus, Dilma's speech, simultaneously bitter and hopeful, consolidates the vision of 2016 process not as a legal setback, but as a political coup that failed to defeat the totality of a movement and an idea.

4.5. From Coup to Reconstruction: International Leadership in BRICS

After her impeachment, Dilma Rousseff remained active in the international political scene. In 2023, he assumed the presidency of the New Development Bank (NDB), a financial institution of the BRICS economic bloc, composed of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. His appointment marks a new stage in its trajectory, shifting its protagonism from the national sphere to the international context (AGÊNCIA BRASIL, 2023; NDB, 2023; GOV.BR, 2025).

The exercise of NDB leadership represents the resilient continuity of its political project, now transposed to the global arenas of power. His performance at the head of the institution, focused on financing the sustainable development and infrastructure of countries in the Global South, demonstrates a strategic role of Brazil (CORSO DUVAL; ANDREIS, 2021). The former president herself highlights the organization's focus on the needs of emerging countries, stating that the adopted model breaks with traditional paradigms by being "guided by the demand of member countries", without imposing "political or economic conditionalities" and, above all, respecting their "sovereignty" (ROUSSEFF, 2025).

Such a geopolitical stance, which seeks a more equitable global financial architecture and challenges the hegemony of Western financial institutions (CNN BRASIL, 2023), highlights the capacity of Rousseff to transform national political adversity into action with global reach.

His appointment symbolizes the international recognition of his career and reaffirms his role as a female leader in historically male-dominated global spaces. The position reinforces Dilma's image as the "woman of tomorrow": resilient, diplomatic and committed to the construction of a multipolar and more equitable world order.

Final Considerations

Dilma Rousseff's career emerges as a metaphor for the recent history of Brazil, strained between authoritarianism and democratic consolidation. Overcoming torture in Military Dictatorship is the founding act that gives moral authority to its subsequent agenda, culminating in the establishment of the National Truth Commission. By creating this "place of memory"



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(NORA, 1984), the PT government fulfilled a historical imperative and demonstrated a commitment radical politician in confronting the legacy of state violence, vital to the health of the Republic.

Rousseff's rise to the Presidency, however, showed the fragility of the structures democratic in the face of a political and media assault. The disqualification campaign and the subsequent 2016 rupture – widely interpreted as a "coup" by sectors of the progressive camp (BRASIL DE FATO, 2022) – it was not a mere power struggle, but an attempt to ban the inclusive and sovereign development project led by the Workers' Party. To challenge the process with the sentence "History will be relentless with them" (ROUSSEFF, 2016), the leader personalized the resistance, invoking the judgment of History to expose the illegitimacy of the maneuver and protect the memory of the political project he represented.

The final chapter of this journey is the most eloquent: the presidency of the BRICS NDB. Far from being a mere political exile, this strategic position consolidates the PT's foreign policy vision, focused on multipolarity and South-South cooperation. Dilma turns domestic defeat into a global projection platform, where it defends a development model that respects "sovereignty" and does not impose "conditionalities" (ROUSSEFF, 2025). Its presence in the NDB is materialization of resilience, proving that, even in the face of trauma and betrayal, the political project of a sovereign and socially just Brazil has found a new arena to flourish, ensuring that the voice and vision of this movement would never be silenced.

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