

**UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL
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Florida International University
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Doctoral Dissertation Defense

Abstract

Shaping Faith and Politics: The Rise and Decline of Progressive Catholic Lay Movements
In São Paulo (1950s–1990s)

by

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This dissertation examines the rise and decline of Progressive Catholic Lay Movements (PCLMs) in São Paulo, Brazil, from the 1950s to the 1990s, within the broader context of the Latin American Cold War and Brazil's military dictatorship (1964–1985). Focusing on three key movements—the Catholic Labor Youth (JOC), the Young Catholic University Students (JUC), and the Ecclesial Base Communities (CEBs)—the study argues that their expansion was driven by a rigorous and strategic intellectual formation of socially engaged lay leaders, supported by a cohort of progressive bishops.

The dissertation also contends that three main factors contributed to the eventual decline of PCLMs. Existing scholarship has emphasized two external forces, such as 1) the repressive dynamics of the military regime—framed by Cold War geopolitics—and 2) the conservative turn within the Catholic hierarchy. This work examines these two external forces and, in addition, brings to light a third, equally decisive but underexplored dimension: internal crisis. Generational divides, ideological tensions, and leadership fatigue—often exacerbated by those same external pressures—led to significant fragmentation within the movements.

Employing a social history methodology, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of twentieth-century Brazil by demonstrating how religion functioned both as a site of resistance and as a mirror of broader political and cultural transformation. It further highlights how Catholic lay engagement intersected with processes of democratization, authoritarianism, and ecclesial reform during one of the most turbulent periods in modern Brazilian history.

Date: November 13th, 2025.

Time: 11:00 a.m.

Place: MM Campus, Labor Center (LC) 309, Zoom:
Zoom Meeting ID: 540 422 1648 (No Password Required)

Department: History

Major Professor: Dr. Okezi Otovo