From Dictatorship to the Brazilian New Republic in Crisis: Understanding Lula's Political Leadership

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Political biography is said to be "the disciplinary poor relation to the study of political science more generally," and few would agree that, without biography, the discipline risks being "'a form of taxidermy" (Arklay 2006, 17, 15). Thus, it's an honor that *LAPS* editors Alfred Montero and Juan Pablo Luna judged my biography worthy of a roundtable with stimulating commentaries by political scientists whose work I admire and have long relied on.

If every biography, like every good picture, is a portrait of two persons—the writer and the subject—it makes sense to begin with a few words about myself as a Brazilian labor historian who has published on industrial and labor relatons, electoral politics, and working-class women (Koss 1973, 713). In exploring Lula's origin, roots, and evolution, the book lays out how his practice of leadership and distinctive discourse emerged in 1978, on the eve of the metalworker strikes, and carried through his subsequent rise from strike leader and radical politician to president and world statesman.

Why Biography and What's the Story?

The extraordinary strikes in the São Paulo industrial region known as ABC generated an abundance of journalistic coverage and documentation and a large and variegated body of social science research. Despite its enormous strengths, the rich academic production shied away from sustained analysis of the icon of those strikes. Curiously enough, Lula's particular role(s) and contribution(s) were also slighted in the vast literature on the New Unionism, the PT, and even his presidential campaigns, which focus on party strategy and platforms, internal ideological disputes, public opinion polling, political advertising, and voting patterns. Were it not for a handful of journalistic books on several of Lula's presidential races, we would know even less about his strengths and weaknesses during grueling campaigns—both his own and on behalf of others—that involved hundreds of thousands of activists over the four decades he has commanded the Workers' Party (PT) he founded in 1979.

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My book inserts Lula's story into the sweep of Brazilian history from the beginning of the Populist Republic in 1945, the year of Lula's birth, through the 1964–85 military regime and beyond, and does so in a user-friendly fashion, according to Timothy Power (in this symposium). Having emerged during the political opening overseen by military president Geisel in the mid-1970s, Lula and the metalworkers he came to lead, an unlikely group of regime opponents, would prove central to the reestablishment of democratic electoral rule in 1985. Lula's example also inspired an insurgent "New Unionism" and the political radicalism of the PT, which spoke to central issues for social scientists: the emergence of social movements, the impact of political party reorganization, and the sequence of redemocratization, institutionalization, and the legitimation of democracy under the New Republic. As Lula and the PT accumulated electoral support after his first presidential campaign in 1989, the distinctiveness of his party—and its ties to social movements—was also fundamental to debates about the rise of civil society, the country's multiparty system, issues of party cohesion, the creation of partisanship, and mass electoral behavior.

Lula's reputation as one of the world's most successful politicians—the Pelé of worldwide presidential electoral politics—comes from eight successive elections since 1989 in which either Lula or his chosen PT candidate won or placed second, including four in a row won between 2002 and 2014. The 13 years with the anti–status quo PT in the presidency (2003–16) provided political scientists with a laboratory in which to explore a new phase of presidential coalitional politics, accompanied by a national electoral realignment that has endured since 2006.

While scholars have devoted attention to the left-center government's policies of redistribution and recognition, these years also drove debate—the focus of contributions by Anthony Pereira and Marisa von Bülow—about the gap between what the PT was and what it became, as well as the moral costs—including toadyism, corruption, and a possible decline in internal party democracy—associated with the very real material and ideational contributions the PT presidencies made to popular well-being. Attention was also drawn to Brazil's enhanced global stature and its role as the lynchpin of the Latin American Left Turns or Pink Tide that, after electoral victories in Venezuela and Brazil, swept much of South America after 2002. The commodity boom linked to China no doubt played a role in leftist success, as Pereira observes, although one is reminded of the adage attributed to Napoleon: "I like my generals lucky."

As von Bülow notes, a heterogeneous and poorly understood upsurge in street protest in 2013 proved a harbinger of turbulent times, although Lula's protégé Dilma Rousseff squeaked by in her 2014 re-election bid. As democratic impasse moved toward crisis, the ex-president again occupied center stage—as a target and in rallying Dilma's supporters—during a massive backlash in the streets and suites that led to the legally dubious 2016 congressional impeachment and massive PT losses in that year's election. A central role was played by the much-lionized Car Wash (*Lava Jato*) task force of prosecutors and federal police, illegally coordinated by a lower-level judge, Sergio Moro, with doubtful jurisdiction over Lula's case. In the run-up to the 2018 presidential election, they prosecuted, convicted, heard an

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appeal, and imprisoned Lula in record time in a race where he was the leading contender by a long shot.

Von Bülow pays close attention to the rise of ideological right-wing voices—citing her recent work on their active web presence—which occurred on a scale never seen before.[1] As Margaret Keck suggests, the "radical polarization that has wracked Brazil since 2013" is limited in my book to its impact on Lula during a period of "visceral hatred" in which "supporters and opponents" could no longer be friends, leading to the antiparty and especially anti-PT sentiment that "goes a long way to explaining the victory of Bolsonaro in 2018." Yet even that loss by a substantial margin still demonstrated Lula's surprising electoral sway under extraordinarily adverse circumstances. Despite the ex-president's much-anticipated "demise," as Lucio R. Rennó has written in this journal, Lula "led the race from jail, something unheard of in Brazilian history—and perhaps even the world—until he was officially declared ineligible to run for office by the Electoral Superior Court and prohibited from running, just one month before the first round." When he was replaced by his vice presidential candidate, Fernando Haddad, a former PT minister and mayor of São Paulo, observers wondered "if Lula would be able to transfer his electoral capital to Haddad, who was unknown in most of the country, in that short, one-month period" (Rennó 2020, 6). Although he ulitmately lost, Haddad not only made it to the second round but in the end gained 46 percent of the national vote.

After 580 days in prison, the 75-year-old Lula was released in 2019. There followed a surprising turn of events, with the public discrediting of the *Lava Jato* operation, whose core focus was the assault on Lula and the PT with forbearance for the opposition PSDB (Duarte 2021; Greenwald 2021). Due to a public-spirited hacker, the entrails of the operation were fully exposed, leading to an unimaginable outcome: Lula's convictions were overturned by the very Supreme Federal Court whose members had earlier sustained those very abuses. With dozens of prosecutions subsequently abandoned, Lula was free to run for president again with a substantial lead in the polls in an election scheduled for when this roundtable will appear!

A Biographical Study of Political Leadership

Margaret Keck describes *Lula and His Politics of Cunning* as "about Lula as a leader and not about the party he led." Indeed, she laments the "relative neglect of the PT's importance" in what I would call Lula's third defining apprenticeship: the first in becoming a skilled machinist, the second a trade union leader, and the third a radical leftist and eventually a successful politician. While "always the face of the party and sometimes the glue that held it together," Keck adds that his later "political sophistication" was due in good part to "the political education he received . . . inside and outside the party," between his unsuccessful 1982 gubernatorial campaign and his election as president 20 years later. Agreeing with Keck, Tim Power suggests "it is only a slight exaggeration to say that there are two 'lost decades' in the book." Given the "sheer length of his career," I would agree about a certain unevenness of coverage,

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considering the massive attention to his formative years followed by a "conspicuous 'fast forward'" and then another "quick jump" in the final chapters.

Yet Power finds great value in my concept of Lula's politics of cunning but suggests that "its temporally imbalanced application" leads to an "unnecessary starvation of [my] own brilliant argument as Lula enters mainstream politics in the 1980s and 1990s." Like Keck, he highlights these decades, in which "Lula's skill set continued to be honed, sharpened, and deployed to great effect." Even in 2002, as Keck correctly observes, Lula may have insisted that his campaign be "freed from the strictures of party control," but it was "still built on party foundations." In her words, he won in part because "he [had always] surrounded himself with people who understood organizational power, in the party and later in the presidency." Timothy Power, in turn, brilliantly operationalizes my insight and provides compelling examples from those decades. If we accept that a politician has a distinct skill set, he suggests, then the person's "relative value or potency . . . may rise or fall depending on the macropolitical environment"—when it is fully closed, low; when opening up, rising, and when "fully pluralistic, it reaches a very high potential value." By recognizing degrees of political skill, one avoids von Bülow's suggestion that those who draw a contrast between Lula and the capable, hard-nosed administrator Dilma Rousseff, who had never run for election, are being "simplistic at best (and misogynist at worst)."

Insights into Lula's Leadership After 1980

In Sandra Starling's self-published 2008 memoir, the PT founder and state and federal deputy from Minas Gerais describes the Lula she knew from 1979 until she dropped out in 2006 and renounced the party in 2010. A university professor and former Trotskyist, she criticizes Lula "as being excessively preoccupied with not being played [*enrolado*] by the intellectuals of the party." He feared "being hostage to anyone," including his shifting intellectual "guardian angels," although he "always respected José Dirceu; he knew he couldn't do without him but always appeared wary" (*armado*), more comfortable with "those of trade union origin, even as president."

In top-level PT meetings, she complains, Lula "rarely spoke up, didn't enter into debate *em bola dividida* and was given to argument by authority—not the authority of argument—in putting an end to a good polemic," something she values as an intellectual, citing her reputation as a "troublemaker" (*encrenqueira*) with an "explosive temperament." When he did speak up, "we often didn't know what was really his position," while he was inclined to slip away at the end or arrive late in the hottest of meetings, being more interested in the political negotiations going on offscreen. Yet he was an expert in knowing how "to get others to resolve a tough situation" (*tirar a sardinha da brasa*) and never "entered into frontal conflict with anyone." He "would put someone else up to play that role or pretend he had nothing to do with it." On the other hand, "he liked to give orders and get things

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resolved," although he "had a real aversion" to following up on the details, which he left to others. Yet Starling warns that those who "think he doesn't govern as president are fooling themselves." Although he really doesn't like paperwork, "he knows very well where he wants to take the boat . . . [and] possesses a dog's intuition and, at times, takes initiatives that even God might doubt" (Starling 2008, 23, 32–34).

Starling speaks with awe about Lula as an orator: a veritable "snake charmer . . . who knows when and how to say what the public wants or what might surprise" an audience. In a 2019 interview in jail, Lula illustrated this with a surprising non sequitur when asked why the rich turned against the PT governments that had benefited them.

> It's not just an economic question, it's a cultural question . . . [in a] country that only abolished slavery by law less than 100 years ago [*sic 1888*]. But slavery continues in the heads of people. That is why those who are victimized by the police are the *negros*, the poorest. That's why *negros* earn half of what whites do and that's why *negras* earn less than white women. It's because of this that the *negro* has fewer years of school. Why? Because *escravismo* (enslavement) is still preponderant in the consciousness of people. It's a very grave thing, but true. And it won't end soon. . . . It's not an economic question. It's a cultural question, a political question, a sociological question." (Greenwald 2019, 9)

Lula and His Politics of Cunning has proposed "a very specific understanding of politics as relationships and leadership as embodied work done with words" (12). We must be prepared to take into account a dimension beyond institutions, issues, or the correlation of forces between contending sides. The point is well made by a recent collection of interviews with members of the Constituent Assembly of 1986–88. With only 16 *petistas* out of 559 members, the PT was recalled by those interviewed as a "little shitty party" with no influence. Several did, however, warmly recall humorous exchanges with Lula while several discussed the "sacred" Tuesday morning soccer game they shared with him.

For his future opponent, Aécio Neves, Lula was a good guy, also "a snake charmer," although bad at soccer, he added maliciously. Although a charismatic and captivating guy, Neves added, Lula didn't have the patience to line up votes on some matter, as even a PT deputy admitted. Yet Neves emphasized that Lula did bring people together (*agregador*), was always disposed to go out for a beer or a party, and built personal relations that would serve him well. The military regime's former economics minister, Deputy Delfim Neto, said he had "gotten along well with Lula since 1982." Calling him "an uncut diamond," Neto described Lula as possessing an "intuition, intelligence, and a wisdom that has nothing to do with education. I used to joke" with him, he added, that all his talents would have been ruined if he had graduated from the University of São Paulo (quoted in Carvalho 2017).[2]

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Notes

1. The most striking precedent for Bolsonaro's right-wing politics with a popular touch was the surprising defeat of the national referendum to ban the sale of guns. Bolsonaro was one of the few national politicians who played a role in the successful campaign to defeat it (Soltis 2012).

2. It's worth recalling that four of the members of the Constituent Assembly went on to become Brazil's president: Itamar Franco, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Lula, and Michel Temer.

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