Lula, Lifelong Learner?

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John French's new biography of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva is an impressive achievement. Because the story of Lula is also the story of Brazil's long transition from authoritarianism to democracy, the book does double duty as a holistic analysis of Brazilian politics and society. The text is characterized by painstaking attention to detail, contextual sensitivity to Brazilian reality, and creative articulation of comparative and historical generalizations. *Lula and His Politics of Cunning* is a remarkable step forward in the scholarly literature on Brazil in English, and in fact it is very hard to think of any other book in Latin American studies quite like it. Our bookshelves hold many serviceable biographies of Latin American political figures, but none comes to mind that can match the sociological sophistication of this one—by which I mean that the author knows the country inside out, and the connections between Lula's trajectory and Brazil's national trajectory are sharp, compelling, and always user-friendly.

The richness of the book invites a longer symposium than these pages can provide. A social-scientific reviewer like me is tempted to engage with the high concepts that pop in and out of Lula's story: populism, corporatism, *coronelismo*. French takes each concept in turn, dusts it off, and makes sure we understand it. I greatly enjoyed the excursus on Weberian charisma, for example (267–70); French points out correctly that this concept has been misused and disfigured. Part of me would like to extend French's discussion of charisma to discuss the challenges of "charismatic transfer," which remains my favorite section of Weber's *Economy and Society* (1978, 1123–47). As Weber and Monty Python have taught us, charismatic transfer usually fails (witness the fate of the sandal and the gourd in *The Life of Brian*). But transfer is routinely attempted throughout Latin America: for a case study, simply pick a prominent political surname and add *-ismo* to it: *brizolismo*, *quercismo*, *malufismo, bolsonarismo*, etc.[1]

The succession of Lula within the PT, endlessly postponed, could lead into a useful discussion of Weber's three types of legitimate authority: traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational. The legal-rational variety has turned out to be less important within the PT than most of us imagined during the heady days of party building in the 1980s and 1990s, and it has gradually been displaced by a reverential delegation of personal authority to Lula. This deference has been a problem for the party ever since Lula stepped down as president in 2010, and it shows no signs of abating before the 2022 election, when Lula is almost certain to run again. Many observers have noted that Lula will be seeking a third term in office in his sixth pres-

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idential campaign; fewer, however, remind us that he will also be completing 43 years as the de facto leader of his party. Another Lula victory could strengthen the PT in the short run while weakening it in the long run: Weber himself would become more and more confused (as I am) about what really makes this party tick.

Lula's Evolving Skill Set

It is the sheer length of Lula's career that brings me to my only criticism of French's book, which is that the central framing device—"the politics of cunning"—is staked too heavily on Lula's early years in politics. This is an artifact of the book's uneven historical coverage. We see a massive amount of attention dedicated to Lula's formative years, his entry into union politics, and especially the labor unrest of the 1978–80 period. Then there is a conspicuous "fast forward" to Lula's unsuccessful presidential bid in 1989 (302–10), and then another quick jump in time to his breakthrough victory in 2002 (310–19). Lula's eight eventful years in the *Palácio do Planalto* receive only two short chapters, and very shortly (357) we have already arrived at the painful 2016 impeachment of Lula's designated successor, Dilma Rousseff.

This, to my mind, is an unnecessary compression of historical time in the book—a crucial period of democratic politics in which Lula's skill set continued to be honed, sharpened, and deployed to great effect. In other words, my criticism is not about the content of Lula's "politics of cunning" (as French cogently shows, Lula's skill set is a heady brew of pragmatism, dialogue, moderation, compromise, and even misdirection or deceit), but rather with its temporally imbalanced application to Lula's long career. I find French's account of Lula's skill formation to be excessively front-loaded in historical terms, resulting in the unnecessary starvation of his own brilliant argument as Lula enters mainstream politics in the 1980s and 1990s.

French follows disciplinary convention in connecting politics to history via the life story of a prominent leader, but his innovation here is to unveil the origins and development of that leader's tactics. If we accept his contention that politicians or historical figures have distinct skill sets—in Lula's case, the politics of pragmatism and guile—we should also accept that the relative value or potency of these skill sets may rise or fall depending on the macropolitical environment. When a political system is fully closed, the value of the skill set portrayed by French is generally low; when a political system is gradually opening, its value rises; and when a political system is fully pluralistic, it reaches a very high potential value. French focuses most of his attention on the second scenario (corresponding to the *abertura* years of the 1970s) with some attention to the first. But the third scenario, corresponding to robust pluralism and multipartyism, is actually far longer and more variegated than what is portrayed in the book. I am referring here to 1989–2002 in particular, but actually most of the 1980s were competitive in Brazil, as were all of the 1990s. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that there are two "lost decades" in French's book, and these two decades are perhaps just as important to Lula's prepresidential political formation as were the days of union struggle.

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Several memorable episodes in this period could have undoubtedly strengthened French's argument about political learning. A case in point is Lula's debut in electoral politics, in 1982, when he ran for governor of São Paulo, a campaign that is referenced only once in the book (293).[2] In 1982, as the terminal crisis of the military regime got under way, Lula's PT was little more than two years old, had no representation in Congress, and was perceived as utopian and radical. As a candidate, a stiff and inexperienced Lula made no effort to reach the median *paulista* voter, relying heavily on slogans forged in protests and internal party meetings. He wore a T-shirt to the only televised debate, where his defiant final statement consisted of "*vote no três, o resto é burguês*."[3]

This slogan neatly encapsulated Lula's approach to electoral politics at the time, which was to seek votes exclusively from the working class. What were the consequences of this choice? Lula finished in fourth place with 10.7 percent of the vote, predictably losing badly to the moderate center-left forces led by PMDB candidate Franco Montoro, and Lula's absence from the proportional elections for the Chamber of Deputies meant that the PT lost a real chance to elect more federal legislators (the party won eight seats, five of them in São Paulo). The script of the 1982 election—a narrowcasting appeal to the working class, a moralizing rejection of interparty alliances, and a dismal defeat—could actually be used as a benchmark to understand everything that Lula sought to avoid in later years.

A second key episode in Lula's political learning, also fundamental to understanding the transition to democracy in the 1980s, was the *Diretas Já!* (Direct Elections Now!) campaign that ran from January to April 1984. With Brazil still under military rule, the Chamber of Deputies took up a constitutional amendment that would have restored direct presidential elections. Although few believed that the amendment could muster the necessary two-thirds vote of a chamber wherein the proregime Partido Democrático Social (PDS) still controlled nearly half the seats, the opposition parties went ahead with a series of energetic public rallies in support of direct elections. *Diretas Já* was supported by artists, intellectuals, social movements, and virtually all political parties save the PDS. Lula's enthusiastic engagement in this campaign no doubt reflected his party's calculus that its fastest path to power would be via presidential elections, but his decision to engage in multiclass coalitional politics—sharing the stage with figures such as Franco Montoro, Ulysses Guimarães, and Leonel Brizola—was a sharp break with his gubernatorial strategy in 1982, yielding immediate payoffs for his public reputation. The *Diretas Já* campaign was Lula's first experience with "broad front" interparty politics, and it would not be the last.[4] In fact, most of the ensemble cast of the *Diretas Já* rallies would return the favor five years later, standing behind Lula when he surprisingly reached the presidential runoff in 1989.

In 1986, Brazil held elections for a Congress that would serve simultaneously as a National Constituent Assembly in 1987–88, drafting the country's current constitution. Many prominent politicians were tempted instead to run for governor that year, and many of the elected executives would go on to have major impacts on Brazil's current democracy (Fernando Collor, Orestes Quércia, Alvaro Dias, Tasso

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Jereissati, Moreira Franco, Miguel Arraes). Others sought and won prestigious Senate seats: the two victors in São Paulo (whom Lula would have faced in a bid for the upper house) were Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Mário Covas. However, learning from his failed gubernatorial race four years earlier, Lula set aside his personal ambitions and reluctantly stood for federal deputy in São Paulo. This was done for two reasons: first, to benefit from Lula's coattails in the PR race and expand the PT's numerical presence in the Constituent Assembly; and second, to have the PT's caucus led by its most prominent figure.

Although depriving him of a more obvious stepping stone to the presidency (e.g., Collor leveraged his governorship of Alagoas to great effect), Lula's unwilling candidacy for federal deputy in 1986 had major payoffs. Lula set a national record by receiving more than 650,000 votes in São Paulo, helping to elect several other PT candidates on the statewide list (of the party's 16 representatives to the Constituent Assembly, half came from São Paulo). Beginning in 1987, he led the PT's small, energetic, and disproportionately influential caucus in the constitutional convention, joining forces with other parties of the left—and notably with the progressive wing of the PMDB when necessary—to secure major advances in social and economic rights (Martínez-Lara 1996). Lula also did as much as anyone in Congress to hold presidents José Sarney and Fernando Collor to account, in particular spearheading legislative opposition to Collor's disastrous economic shock plan in 1990. These four years in the Chamber of Deputies were a long slog for Lula, especially for someone interested in direct action and immediate policy results. But in "taking one for the team" during this period, Lula continued to consolidate the political skill set described by French, interacting daily with both allies and adversaries and gaining experience in logrolling and legislative compromise. This is a critical interlude between Lula the union leader and Lula the presidential candidate, although it receives short shrift in the book.

Toward the Presidency

Lula's historic presidential campaign in 1989 (while he was still a sitting federal deputy) receives good attention from French. However, the book does not adequately reflect important changes within the family of the Brazilian left during this period. In the Constituent Assembly, the largest left party was not the PT, but rather the PDT of presidential frontrunner Leonel Brizola (who, in contrast to Lula, abstained from the 1986 elections entirely in order to lay the groundwork for his presidential bid). Brizola polled ahead of Lula for most of the 1989 campaign and was overtaken only in the final days, when Lula surprisingly advanced to the runoff against Collor. A switch of only 227,000 votes from Lula to Brizola in November 1989 (0.3 percent of the valid votes) might have very well changed the historical trajectory of Lula and of the PT, and we might instead be dissecting the first English-language biography of Brizola. But the skills and pragmatism honed by Lula during his years on the Congressional floor served him well in the December 1989 runoff, allowing him to assemble a much more inclusive coalition in the runoff than would have been possible in the mid-1980s.

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Relationships matter, and by this time (circa 1990), Lula had built a large number of cross-party political relationships. These were acquired using skills that had germinated in his union years (marvelously depicted by French in the book) but that continued to evolve in important ways in the 1980s. These skills were largely perfected in the 1990s, another decade that is somewhat underanalyzed in French's book. While French touches briefly on Lula's unsuccessful presidential campaigns of 1994 and 1998, a deeper investigation would have revealed that Lula deployed his pragmatic "skill set" in two new ways in the 1990s. First, he brought together the family of left parties in ways that would have been impossible with his sectarian 1982 discourse. The PT's hegemony within the Brazilian left—still unchallenged today—was consolidated only in 1994, when Brizola agreed to be Lula's vice presidential running mate.

Second, beginning in the late 1990s, Lula began to seriously consider the possibility of forming political alliances with actors outside the left, something that finally crystallized in 2002, when Lula invited José de Alencar of the center-right Liberal Party (PL) to be his running mate. In doing so, Lula did something that he had never tried before: he exploited dissensus within the mainstream center-right by talking directly to one of its factions. After the 1999 devaluation of the real under President Cardoso, the governing center-right coalition had become split into *financistas* (supporters of Cardoso's fiscal orthodoxy) and *desenvolvimentistas* (supporters of a return to growth). A cunning Lula saw a chance to "pick off" the latter, which he did to spectacular effect in his 2002 breakthrough presidential victory.

French's book picks up the story of Lula as president with two well-constructed chapters, and follows those with a long discussion of the fractious Dilma years and the rise of anti-PT sentiment over the last decade. However, I contend that the central thesis of the book—that Lula is uniquely equipped with a remarkable skill set, the "politics of cunning"—could have been made even more forcefully with greater attention to the decades of the 1980s and 1990s. The interlude between the labor politics of the ABC and the bully pulpit of the presidency was a very long one indeed. In that period, Lula's political socialization continued apace, going from a utopian gubernatorial bid to a workmanlike exile on the floor of Congress, to three unsuccessful presidential campaigns (1989, 1994, 1998) that were all very different in their discourse and outreach. That being said, French's analysis of Lula's personal trajectory and attributes hits the nail on the head—what sets Lula apart from other left-wing leaders is not charisma but guile.

With greater attention to the 1980s and 1990s, a case could be made that Lula is a lifelong learner—at least for the first seven decades of his life, the period covered by John French's landmark study. However, the jury cannot reach a final verdict until we see Lula's expected presidential bid in 2022. The case will hinge on the degree to which Lula incorporates lessons learned in his postpresidential years, a period in which Brazil soured on his party, if not necessarily on him.

Notes

1. In Brazil, personalism works just fine on a first-name basis too: *getulismo*, *janismo*, *adhemarismo*, and *carlismo* all come to mind.

2. An oft-forgotten fact is that Lula's running mate in that campaign was the late jurist Hélio Bicudo (1922–2018), who would go on to co-author the articles of impeachment against Dilma in 2015.

3. "Vote for number three, the rest are bourgeoisie" (Lula's candidate number on the gubernatorial ballot was 3). The debate is available on YouTube by searching for Debate na Band: Governo de São Paulo 1982.

4. While the *Diretas Já* movement failed to achieve its immediate stated objective (approval of the constitutional amendment), it succeeded in dividing the ruling PDS, leading directly to the transition to democracy a year later (Mainwaring 1986; Smith 1987).

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