

The Indestructible and Inscrutable Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva

O indestrutível e inescrutável Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva

John D. French*

“O EX-PRESIDENTE Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva é indestrutível,” the saudoso Wanderley Guilherme dos Santos observed in August 2017 after the parliamentary coup against President Dilma Rouseff. “Ele ascendeu àquela região em que a pessoa física continua vulnerável, mas o poder mobilizador permanece inalterado.” The comments by the eighty-two-year-old political scientist, however, also hinted at a certain discomfort that the Lula phenomenon caused among the highly educated of all political outlooks. “A direita e a esquerda de nariz torcido evitam reconhecer,” he wrote, “que a indestrutibilidade de Lula não é propaganda partidária, mas fenômeno sociológico.”¹ A petista collaborator during the 1980s expressed a related perception in 2014 when he spoke of Lula’s remarkable capacity, as a “repentista político,” to “criar um discurso desconcertante”.² A bookish but useful analogy was also suggested by a perceptive journalist who described Lula in 2009 as “uma espécie de Sancho Panza da política. É um homem do povo que simula uma simplicidade muito maior do que a que realmente possui.” “Prudente, esperto e lúcido,” Lula like Panza he was marked by an acute “ligação com a realidade,” which anchored him, while being simultaneously loyal

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1 SANTOS, Wanderley Guilherme dos. O fedor da força bruta. No blog **Segunda Opinião**, 21 ago. 2017. Reprinted at: <https://www.ocafezinho.com/2017/08/21/wanderley-ascensao-de-lula-e-o-recrudescimento-da-violencia-fascista/>.

2 RICCI, Ruda. **Se Lula fosse Presidente haveria manifestações de rua?** De esquerda em esquerda. 17 fev. 2014. Disponível em: <http://rudaricci.blogspot.com/2014/02/se-lula-fose-presidente-haveria.html>.

and courageous.³ A frank recognition of this disconcerting feeling appears as well in this round table when Chirio aptly comments that Lula's trajectory, personality, and power of seduction "parecem ter algo do mágico ou, ao menos de inacessível as ciencias sociais."

Over four decades, I have worked to address these empirical, political, and theoretical challenges to produce the scholarly biography commented upon here by talented intellectuals of different generations, disciplines, and thematic and geographical foci. Without abusing the reader, I will keep my comments to a minimum while looking forward to future personal dialogues with all who have engaged so closely with my work. I would be remiss, however, if I did not express my special appreciation to José Sergio Leite Lopes, an anthropologist of Northeastern Brazil whose 1988 book has long been referred to, informally among those in the field, as the Brazilian equivalent of E. P. Thompson's masterpiece *The Making of the English Working Class*.⁴ In his generous and extensive engagement, he establishes meaningful parallels across regions and between the rural and urban while offering not only a comprehensive interpretation of what I have done in the Lula biography but also of where it stands in relation to my own intellectual biography.

All three commentators note a temporal imbalance in that two thirds of the book is devoted to 1945 to 1980, half of whose pages cover his life to the age of twenty-three when he joined the São Bernardo metalworkers' union. As Leite Lopes rightly intuits, the books' goal was to understand the "genesis da trajetória política de Lula," viewed from below and before he was famous. Thus I do indeed feel that, with the end of the 1978-1980 strikes, I had completed my primary "tarefa de desvendamento da matriz social que proporcionou a força posterior de Lula." Moreover, the book is above all a study of "o estilo e prática de liderança singular e duradoura . . . [of Lula que] ja estavam cristalizados em 1978 . . . e continuariam inalterados pelas quatro décadas subsequentes." Moreover, the book offers a carefully specified definition of that leadership as "uma política de astúcia transformadora caracterizada por políticas additivas, executadas por meio de criação de espaços de convergência que transcendam as diferenças, e realizada via um trabalho corporificado feito com as palavras do vernáculo popular."⁵

Both Leal and Chirio raise questions about the relationship between Lula, ABC, and other social phenomena, movements, and tendencies. On the specific question of Marisa, I would explain that the book, as originally planned, was to have had a penultimate chapter—sacrificed at the insistence of my publisher—in what was to have been two volume work. It was to have been entitled "A Fearless Rebel Daughter" and would have traced Marisa from

3 ROSÁRIO, Miguel do. Caetano e os analfabetos. *Óleo do Diabo*, 6 nov. 2009. Disponível em: <http://oleododiabo.blogspot.com/2009/11/caetano-e-os-analfabetos.html>.

4 LOPES, José Sergio Leite. *A tecelagem dos conflitos de classe na cidade das chaminés*. São Paulo/Brasília: Marco Zero/Editora Universidade de Brasília, 1988. Among my favorites of his work is his earlier study of rural and mill labor in *O vapor do diabo: o trabalho dos operários do açúcar*. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1976.

5 FRENCH, John D. *Lula e a política da astúcia: de metalúrgico a presidente do Brasil*. São Paulo: Editora Expressão Popular/Fundação Perseu Abramo, 2022. p. 43, 569.

her early childhood and adolescence, as part of generation of modernizing working-class girls, through the lives that Lula and Marisa shared together to end with the 2018 memorial mass celebrated by Lula with his supporters before reporting to jail.

I am very familiar with the broader working class context of greater Sao Paulo and especially rich and extensive literature and interviews available on the metalworkers of neighboring São Paulo and Osasco, especially the Oposição Sindical in São Paulo mentioned by both Leal and Leite Lopes. Putting aside the differing industrial and demographic characteristics, São Bernardo and Diadema stand out precisely because the core leadership, represented by Lula, was based on a diametrically opposed strategic understanding of the role of the union apparatus in working class struggles. Never having been part of the various “Lefts” within the labor movement, Lula in São Bernardo won over the leftist labor militants initially sympathetic to the views of the OMSP in 1978-79. While the union oppositions from São Paulo and elsewhere were fundamental to building the CUT and PT, the dominant strategic approach that ultimately prevailed was the union-centered vision most closely identified with Lula and his diretoria. To tell this story, including the exchange of union militants active in both arenas, would not have clarified developments in São Bernardo in the same way that the peculiarities of Santo André, Convergência Socialist, and Benedito Marcílio do not figure in the book.

Insights into Lula’s Leadership after 1980

CHIRIO AND LEAL identify vital questions in need of future investigation including, above all, the role(s) of Lula in the construction of the PT and the nature of political project identified with Lula and his party and how it evolved to and through reaching the Presidency.⁶ Leite Lopes does, however, capture a key point about the organized leftist formations mostly composed of radicalized ex-students and intellectuals (chapter 7 entitled “Anos Perigosos” on 1968 deals the most with this subject). While Lula as a mass leader never met their rigid expectations, Lula’s “presença no espectro de forcas de esquerda ja era muito forte” once the ABC strikes were over and the CUT had been constructed, illegally under a dictatorship, in 1983. Whatever their misgivings, which were many, Lula was “a própria encarnação da classe operária ativa sonhada pela esquerda” and more and more diverse people, movements, and groups came into “gravitacao em torno de sua pessoa.” I would add as well that it was not clear that the early PT, a veritable “saco de gatos,” would eventually emerge as Brazil’s largest, most coherent, and most electorally successful political part as well as one of the only leftist parties in the world to have progressed during four tough decades.⁷

6 The political scientist Margaret Keck has noted as well that the book is “about Lula as a leader and not about the party he led” while her fellow scholar Timothy J. Power also noted the book’s “fast forward” after 1980 before ingeniously applying the concept of Lula’s cunning leadership style to various political and electoral episodes after 1980. See Alfred P. Monteiro, “Symposium: Lula and His Politics of Cunning: From Metalworker to President of Brazil by John D. French,” *Latin American Politics and Society* 64 (1): 144-173.

7 I place Lula in the global history of socialist politics going back to the Second International in Germany in

As for Lula's role within the PT itself, fascinating insights are offered in Sandra Starling's self-published 2008 memoir. A founder of the PT and one of its on top national female leaders, Starling served as a PT state and federal deputy from Minas Gerais and she offers a compelling if somewhat acerbic description of the Lula she knew from 1979 till she dropped out in 2006 and renounced the PT in 2010. A university professor and former Trotskyist, she criticized a Lula "demasiado preocupado em não ser enrolado pelos intelectuais do Partido. . . Temia virar refém de quem quer que seja," including his shifting intellectual "anjos de guarda," although "sempre respeitou figuras como José Dirceu: sabia que não podia ficar sem ele, mas parecia ficar sempre armado", more comfortable with those of "origem sindicalista – que perdura até hoje, mesmo agora que é o presidente da República".⁸

In top level PT meetings, she complained, Lula "raramente opinava, não entrava em bola dividida e usava muito de argumento de autoridade —e não da autoridade do argumento— para acabar com uma boa polêmica"; she valued the latter as an intellectual proud of her reputation as an "encrenqueira" with an "temperamento explosivo." When he did speak up, "a gente muitas vezes ficava sem saber qual era sua posição sobre questões muito importantes. Saía de fininho ou chegava atrasado nas reuniões mais empenhadas". Yet he was an expert in knowing how to "levar os outros a 'tirar a sardinha da brasa'. Não bate de frente com ninguém. Põe alguém para fazer esse papel ou então finge que não tem nada a ver com isso".⁹

On the other hand, "gostava de mandar e ver as coisas resolvidas" although he had a "verdadeira ojeriza a monitorar, no dia a dia, detalhes procedimentais, filigranas burocráticas, acertos políticos". which he left to others. Yet she warned that "que se enganam os que pensam que ele não governa, embora seja o presidente. Ele pode não gostar —e não gosta mesmo— de assinar papel, de conferir relatórios, de acompanhar o jogo político parlamentar, mas sabe muito bem para onde quer conduzir o barco". Moreover, "é indubitável que Lula possui uma intuição do cão e que, às vezes, tem iniciativas que até Deus duvida".¹⁰

Starling also speaks with genuine awe about Lula as an orator. "Lula é, sem dúvida, um encantador de serpentes, isto é, alguém que sabe a hora e como dizer aquilo que o público quer ouvir ou o que pode surpreender." In a 2019 jail interview, Lula illustrated this with a surprising non-sequitur when asked why the rich turned against the PT governments that had benefited them:

FRENCH, John D. Common Men, Exceptional Politicians: What Do We Gain from an Embodied Social Biographical Approach to Leftist Leaders like Germany's August Bebel and Brazil's Luis Inácio Lula da Silva?. *International Review of Social History*, 68, 1, p. 111-121, 2023. For a discussion of the parallels between authoritarian traditions in Germany and Brazil, including a discussion of Bolsonaro, see "Epilogue: Authoritarianism and the Specter of Democracy". Ibidem, p. 173-175.

8 STARLING, Sandra. **Uma eterna aprendiz no PT**. Self-published in 2008. Disponível em: https://kikacastro.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/aprendiz_pt.pdf. p. 32-34.

9 Ibidem, p. 23, 33-34.

10 Ibidem, p. 33-34.

É que não é só uma questão econômica, é uma questão cultural. É importante lembrar que este país faz pouco mais de 100 anos que acabou com a escravidão na lei, mas a escravidão continua na cabeça das pessoas. É por isso que quem é vitimado pela polícia são os negros, os mais pobres. É por isso que os negros ganham metade dos brancos e é por isso que a mulher negra ganha menos que a mulher branca. É por isso que é o negro que tem menos escolaridade. Por quê? Porque você tem na consciência das pessoas o escravismo ainda preponderante. É uma coisa grave, mas ela é verdadeira. Isso não termina logo. É uma questão cultural, é uma questão política, é uma questão sociológica.¹¹

This seemingly off-hand comment provides an excellent opportunity to speak to Chirio's desire for more information about "a evolução das convicções de Lula" and his relation with other social movements. This ties in nicely, as well, to Leal's perceptive observation about "a qualidade do conjunto de fotografias apresentado" that go well beyond, he says, being "meramente ilustrativos".¹² Indeed, more than half of the photos in the book had never before appeared in print and three were chosen to suggest the blindness that marks to much discussion of the famous peões do ABC who tend, then and later, to be rendered class-full and race-less (ie. white) when Black or mixed-race migrants were an overwhelming if unrecognized presence.¹³

This speaks as well to a deeper understanding of Lula strengths as a feeling person with a sensibility attuned to of his country's *injustiçados* (unjustly treated), each with their specific grievances, cultures, and increasingly their own movements. In an often overlooked part of his remarkable speech to the PT's national convention in 1981, Lula spoke of the question of racism and racial injustice in terms that would only become commonplace in the Brazilian public sphere in the 21st century.

Há, em nosso País, uma discriminação racial genericamente velada. Um negro, porém, sabe o quanto essa discriminação, que para os brancos pode parecer velada, é real, agressiva, profunda. Ele a sente na pele. Por isso, devemos apoiar a organização dos negros por seus direitos em nossa sociedade, ainda que isso venha a descobrir, à luz do sol, o racismo que carregamos nas entranhas. Desde os escravos, os negros lutam, no Brasil, por sua libertação. Por isso, defendemos o direito de os negros manifestarem sua cultura, sua palavra, seus anseios.¹⁴

11 Glenn Greenwald entrevista Lula: "Bolsonaro é a velha política, eu sou a nova." **Intercept**, 21 maio 2019, 9.

12 Leal is the only scholar among dozens of reviewer or commentator to have called attention to the photographs. Indeed, my current book length research project, well underway, will focus precisely on thousands of negatives of the strike rallies taken by dozens and dozens of photographers in 1979 and 1980 with particular attention to the listeners not Lula on stage.

13 French, Lula, 433, 498. For more on the race, Lula, and the racial and classed dimension of the struggle of metalworkers' as a *categoria*, see *Ibid.*, 118-19 and FRENCH, J. D. (2021). "The Future of Progressive Politics in a Post-Fordist World," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History* 18 (2021), 72-73 and "Toward a Social History of Politics: An Exceptional 'Common' Man's Path to the Presidency in Brazil," *American Historical Review* 126 4 (2021): 1589-91.

14 Luis Inácio da Silva, Discurso de Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva na 1ª Convenção Nacional do Partido dos Trabalhadores, em 27 de setembro de 1981, Brasília, DF. Disponível em: <https://fpabramo.org.br/csbn/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2017/04/03-discursodelula1convecao.pdf>.

In *Becoming Black Political Subjects* (2016), U.S. political scientist Tianna Paschel took up the question of how Lula came to ever more powerfully “committed to an anti-racist agenda” and she rightly credits it “to his personal relationships with black comrades within the PT.” When Lula declared in a 2002 presidential debate that “we have to pay our country’s debt with black people,” Lula was reflecting the decades he had spent working alongside the many Black founders of his party, Black elected petistas like Benedita da Silva and Paulo Paim who championed the Black cause, and thousands of rank-and-file PT-aligned Black activists. Together, they had battled their way “through his three devastating, unsuccessful presidential campaigns of 1989, 1994, and 1998” and Lula, at the very outset of his presidency, delivered symbolically with the creation of a racial equality ministry, a national mandate to teach African and Afro-Brazilian history, and the appointment of five Black cabinet members and eventually Brazil’s first Black Supreme Court justice. Substantively, his government’s programs of economic redistribution would benefit non-whites disproportionately but the most decisive victory for Brazil’s diverse Black movements and activists was the establishment of a mandatory system of admission quotas, including the African-descended, in the high-quality tuition-free federal universities as well as the private for-profit sector.¹⁵

LET ME END as I began with a pair of observations by quite different contemporaries of Lula. The military regime’s former economics minister Delfim Neto, a Constituent Assembly deputy like Lula, explained that he had “gotten along well with Lula since 1982.” Calling him “an uncut diamond,” he 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.¹⁶ In less happy times in 2019 when Lula was jailed, the seventy-six-year-old pop star Gilberto Gil, Lula’s Minister of Culture although not a PT member, was asked by a reporter what feeling Lula aroused in him. The Black musical genius from the northeastern state of Bahia replied that “o Lula me inspira compaixão. Sempre foi assim, desde que se tornou porta voz do homem comum.” For me, Lula is a man “em busca de uma solidariedade irrecusável, de uma irremediável comunhão com a trágica condição humana, de um entregar-se ao ímpeto de soldado destemido na luta pela quimera da emancipação. Lula, é uma pedra bruta, não lapidável”.¹⁷

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15 PASCHEL, Tianna S. **Becoming Black Political Subjects**: Movements and Ethno-Racial Rights in Colombia and Brazil. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016. p.p. 173-75, 217, 273, 275. See VAN DIJK, Teun A. *Antiracist Discourse in Brazil: From Abolition to Affirmative Action*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2020. p.p. 123-202. For an exposition of the congressional interventions on racism, quotas, and the fight for racial equality by Black deputies, mostly from the left and especially the PT.

16 CARVALHO, Luíz Maklouf. **1988: Segredos da Constituinte**: os vinte meses que agitaram e mudaram o Brasil. Rio de Janeiro: Record, 2017. p.p. 61, 164, 192, 230, 234, 244, 262, 293, 356.

17 KACHANI, Morris. Gilberto Gil: “Bolsonaro me inspira a oração.” **Estado de São Paulo**, 14 maio 2019.