



# Thinking Brazil

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## UPCOMING EVENTS

- Brazil's Higher Education Responses to the Global Challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

*Research Highlights from Brazil Institute Fellows and Scholars: John D. French*

## Brazil's President as Working Class Raposa (Fox) Understanding Lula the Politician

With his Workers' Party (PT) in stark disarray, the future of President Luis Inácio Lula da Silva depends, above all, on his formidable skills as both a politician and a vote-getter. After leading dramatic metalworker strikes in the late 1970s against the military regime, Lula's upward trajectory in Brazilian politics has been understood primarily through a mixture of wishful thinking and highly charged symbolic renderings. Far too little attention, however, has been paid to his skill



JOHN D. FRENCH

as a political operator, or to how he progressively built his appeal to the electorate over four presidential campaigns from 1989 to 2002.

Although he came to power after a lifetime of idiosyncratic apprenticeship in Brazilian politics, many were disillusioned when in 2005 it was revealed that Lula was indeed a Brazilian politician, in some ways just like any other; in Brazil, politicians are often referred to as *raposas* (foxes). While paying attention to class and cultural and linguistic capital, the Brazil Institute's May 10, 2006 Conference with Wilson Center Fellow John D. French explored Lula's leadership style in order to better understand his proven capacity for maneuver and the enduring nature of his appeal, even today after a corruption scandal.

The electoral success of the PT was not inevitable, but due in large part to Lula's leadership skills, argued *John D. French*. Without him, this leftist

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**JOHN D. FRENCH** is an Associate Professor of History at Duke University. He received his doctorate at Yale in 1985, under Brazilian historian Emília Viotti da Costa. Since 1979 he has been studying Lula's career as both a trade unionist and politician. An expert on Brazilian labor and politics, his monographs include *The Brazilian Workers' ABC: Class Conflict and Alliances in Modern São Paulo* (1992) and *Drowning in Laws: Labor Law and Brazilian Political Culture* (2004). He is the co-author of "Another World Is Possible: The Rise of the Brazilian Workers' Party and the Prospects for Lula's Government" (2005). French was the former Treasurer of the Latin American Studies Association from 2001 to 2003, and directed the Carolina and Duke Consortium on Latin American Studies from 2001 to 2005.

party's success in winning the Brazilian presidency would not have been possible. Brazilians have continually treated Lula as a trade union leader, disconnected from politics and thus seen not as a career politician but an outsider. His personal role in the party's rise has been downplayed as secondary to the party's institutional beliefs and principles by casting Lula as a smaller part of a greater movement. In reality, however, Lula has only worked for ten years in the trade union while he has spent 24 years as a politician. This has led French to conclude that it was Lula's political skills and extraordinary capacity to rule that account for the PT's historic success.

Lula has had a long political apprenticeship that has prepared him to lead a country. He has learned the statecraft of politics well,

French posits, but in a peculiar manner. In many ways Lula is like any other politician, except that he lacks the experience of former formal political positions. Prior to becoming president Lula held only one political office: one term in the Chamber of Deputies. In addition, he has rejected the traditional Brazilian leadership model of the arrogant, patronizing *coronel* or strong-man form of conduct. Nonetheless, to better understand contemporary developments, Lula must be understood as the politician that he is and always was.

Lula is extraordinarily pragmatic. He fashions a position for himself above the factions that naturally plague any political party. He is adept at not showing his preference for one side over the other, allowing him to remain above the vicious politicking on the ground while constructing the appearance that he is simultaneously on everyone's side. He refrains from being upfront to steer clear of internal conflicts. Like any good leader, Lula is adept at understanding mass consciousness, at figuring out how to touch on many different factors and address immensely diverse interests to speak to all. Such political dynamism, French argued, requires an enormous amount of personal attention and understanding of one's constituents.

The reason why this seemingly obvious understanding of Lula as a politician is so innovative is because he has been consistently cast in a different light. Lula the image is very distinct from Lula in reality. In Brazil there exists a cognitive dissonance between what Lula says and what the PT says Lula represents. Intellectuals interpret Lula's discourse for their own purposes. French explained in part how Lula became the imagined Lula that has been constructed

of him by explaining that the PT systematically mobilized the symbolic value of Lula for their mutual benefit. For example, Lula has vehemently denied ever being a Marxist revolutionary; however, this is exactly the image that the party has at times intimated he stood for, given his class-consciousness. Such a divergence between belief and reality has protected Lula from criticism of extremism while ensuring party principles.

Lula has also contributed to his own constructed identity by presenting himself as one of the *povo* or common folk. The self-made man image has always been a part of his discourse. By embracing his humble beginnings, Lula positively transformed the word *peão* (peon) from a pejorative term to a respectful one by proudly using it self referentially

in his rhetoric. Lula's pride in his perseverance despite all odds has struck a chord with ordinary Brazilians, many of whom hold a deeply ingrained perception of themselves as unjustly treated by those with money and power. Brazil's *povo* perceive themselves as weak. They have few illusions about poverty, and feel that the only way they can persevere and survive against the rich and powerful is through guile and cunning. This matches the qualities of a *raposa*; a small, opportunistic, wily hunter with a surprising capacity to survive. It is exactly this fox-like nature that the *povo* look for in their leaders, French concludes. Because Lula perfectly fits this mold, he is embraced as one of "them," as his political adeptness and savvy leadership skills are disregarded. ■



As a Woodrow Wilson Fellow, John D. French has worked on his book manuscript entitled *The Origin of Brazil's Lula: Building Movements in a World in Flux, 1950-1980*, in which he examines leadership, consciousness, and mobilization among metalworkers in the ABC region of São Paulo, Brazil. French explores the origins of the unexpected metalworkers strikes between 1978 and 1980, which catapulted a 32-year-old union president to international prominence and thus launched the career of Luis Inácio "Lula" da Silva. French examines the historical trajectory of ABC's workers, both before and during the military regime that ruled Brazil from 1964 to 1985, in order to better understand Lula's leadership capabilities and the self-fashioning that generated a public persona that has decisively shaped the country's politics for more than a quarter century.

In each of his four presidential campaigns, Lula gained increasing recognition and admiration for his ethics, practical policy-making, and pragmatic, consensus-building political style. Yet it was his unique profile, based on an admirable course out of dire poverty and, later, courage in the face of the military dictatorship, that would underlie the growth of his electoral appeal as it went from 3 percent of the national vote in 1982 to an unprecedented 63 percent in 2002, when he was elected Brazil's first working-class president.



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# Brazil Institute

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