

Another World *Is* Possible: The Rise of the Brazilian Workers' Party and the Prospects for Lula's Government

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In October 2002 Brazil elected as president a former metalworker and founder of a socialist party, a man whose family had left the miserable northeastern hinterland five decades earlier to face prejudice and hardship in industrial São Paulo. The election of Luis Inácio “Lula” da Silva of the Workers’ Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, or PT) was a clear signal that deep changes were going on in a country marked by huge social inequalities and a contempt for manual labor engendered by almost four centuries of slavery. In the first round of the 2002 presidential election, the former trade union leader had received 46 percent of the vote and won in twenty-four of twenty-seven states. In the runoff election on October 27, Lula received 52.8 million votes, 61.3 percent of the nationwide total, and won in all but one state. With their vote, Brazilians had overwhelmingly supported a candidate and a party who were harsh critics of the procapitalist orthodoxies of neoliberalism and contemporary globalization. In doing so, Brazilian voters defied attempts by Washington, London, and the international financial markets to warn them away from this use of their democratic rights, an attempt at blackmail that failed even though the value of Brazil’s national currency went down by 40 percent between the beginning of 2002 and the October elections.

The vote for Lula was more than twice as large, in absolute terms, as the vote given to all other PT candidates for political office. Yet it would be misleading to label this triumph as only personal in nature, since one of the most surprising developments was the jump in overall support for the PT. Although the PT and its allied parties did not win control of the Chamber of Deputies, the PT did become, for the first time, the party with the largest number of deputies (91 of 513 seats) and the only one with representatives from all states, also a first. Thus the 2002 election was both a personal triumph of the candidate Lula and a PT party victory (it also doubled its senators), although the PT did less well in gubernatorial races (winning in only three states) and lost control of Rio Grande do Sul (an area of party strength).



Lula with presidential sash. Photo: Lula's personal archives

The election of the fifty-seven-year-old Lula to the presidency was a remarkable personal achievement for a man born in rural poverty in northeastern Brazil. Equally important, it was a sterling tribute to the Brazilian people's fight to end a military dictatorship that ruled their country from 1964 to 1985. It was in the late 1970s that the trade unionist Lula emerged as the symbol of working-class self-assertion and the fight for democracy. "Luis Inácio da Silva is to Brazil what Lech Walesa is to Poland," the *New York Times* noted in 1981. In 1979 Lula had joined with other trade union leaders to call for the creation of a new workers' party that brought together this new generation of labor militants with activists from other social movements, especially the followers of liberation theology.

Leader of outraged workers, close to the Catholic Church, and a vigorous proponent of grassroots mobilization from below, the PT was a pluralistic party that included Marxist-Leninist revolutionaries, practitioners of liberation theology, and New Deal-style social reformers. Eschewing ideological definitions, the PT was united by its radical devotion to a bottom-up style of participatory politics that rejected limited and formalistic notions of democracy. Running four times for president, Lula gained support from election to election with increasing recognition and admiration for his ethics, his practical policymaking, and pragmatic consensus-building political style. The PT's most enduring campaign slogan for Lula, adopted in 1989, was the enigmatic "without fear of being happy." The PT, all agreed, was clearly something new. The amazing story of the last quarter century of Brazilian history can be captured in two images of Lula. In 1980 his police mug shot showed a subversive who

was tried by military courts for violating the National Security Law during his leadership of an extraordinary 1980 strike by metalworkers. In 2003 the presidential portrait showed an older smiling Lula who now commands the very military men who had jailed and persecuted him.

The potentially electrifying worldwide impact of Lula's 2002 election would have been greater if it had not been muffled by the din of aggression and war. Yet the victory of Lula, the PT, and its allies offers living proof—to cite the slogan of the World Social Forum of Porto Alegre—that another world *is* possible, that another vision, another morality, and another politics not only can be imagined but can win power through elections. A truly unparalleled and immensely hopeful development, this unique historical experience requires the support of all who believe in democracy and equity, whatever their political outlook. Yet this dialogue between foreigners and Brazilians must be informed by real solidarity, that is, by a deep and mature understanding of the historical context in which this experiment is taking place and a sophisticated grasp of the complex history of Brazil and its popular movements. As a result of a peculiar combination of historical factors, Lula and the PT have been granted the opportunity—and challenged with the burden—of leading a nation of 176 million people toward development under the constraints of the current capitalist world system.

The PT, the Brazilian Left, and the Path to Unity

One can begin to understand the PT by contrasting it with the historical experiences of earlier leftist political forces, including those that are or have been contemporary to the PT, which was founded in 1980. In this regard, the Workers' Party bears an indelible mark as the first national organization of the Brazilian Left that was constructed in a period in which continuous legal political action was possible; in this regard, the only historical precedent was the fleeting experience of the Brazilian Communist Party (Partido Comunista do Brasil, or PCB), which was legal for two years after 1945 when its presidential candidate received 10 percent of the national vote. During the so-called populist period between 1945 and the 1964 military coup, the PCB was the leftist group with the greatest societal penetration and representativeness. Yet except for this brief postwar period, not only was the PCB banned as an illegal organization, but intervention in the unions it led and the imprisonment and torture of its cadre, even of its elected officials, was commonplace.¹ During this earlier semidemocratic period, the violence directed against the PCB was not similar to that which affects Brazilian social movements today, as in the countryside where they continue to suffer violent attack. After all, state repression in today's Brazil must be justified by attrib-

1. The practices mentioned appear repeatedly not only in the documentation of the political police but also in memoirs published by communist militants such as Elóy B. Martins, *Um depoimento político* (Porto Alegre: Edição do autor, 1989); and Joaquim Celso de Lima, *Navegar é preciso: Memórias de um operário comunista* (São Paulo: Diniz, 1984). See also chapter 7, "The Politics of Aphorism: The Social Question as a Police Matter (Caso de Polícia)," in *Drowning in Laws: Labor Law and Brazilian Political Culture*, by John D. French (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 122–50.

uting criminal acts to movement militants or by claiming to be acting to supposedly prevent such “crimes.” In the post-1985 democratic era, the Brazilian juridico-political universe no longer tolerates the criminalization of social militancy per se, as it did earlier, although social movements are required to maintain their forms of action within the limits of democracy.

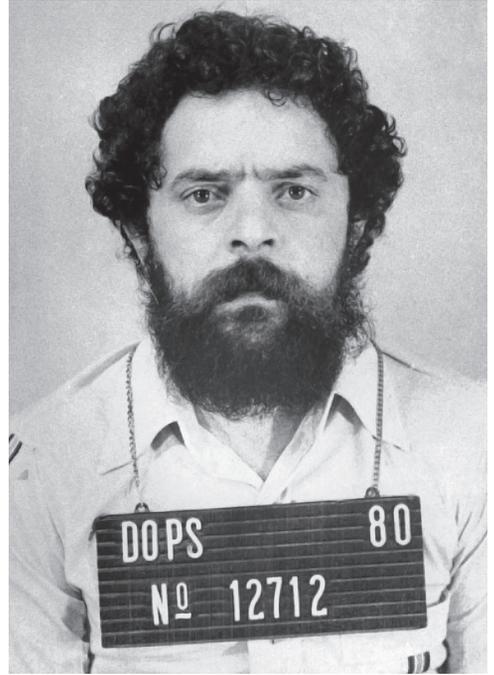
During the pre-1964 period, government officials used a broad array of repressive instruments without any twinge of conscience and most often without having to respond to any pressure from public opinion. After all, communism was illegal, and it was easy to establish real or imagined connections between popular mobilization and that banned ideology. Thus for social movements of that era, repression was almost a naturalized part of the environment in which social relations and political battles took place, and this generated the need for clandestine action even when the struggle itself merely sought reforms or the enforcement or expansion of already existing rights (as was generally the case).

The PT is also distinctive because it is the first leftist group that owes its origins to the initiative of organic leaderships that emerged from a new configuration of the Brazilian working class, specifically the so-called New Unionism identified with the metalworkers’ strikes of the ABC region of Greater São Paulo from 1978 to 1980. This group of trade union leaders, which included Lula, was not tied to earlier leftist organizations or to political movements of an international character. It was these individuals who played a decisive role in defining the character of the party they set out to create in 1979–80.

Recent historical research on labor and the Left in Brazil has shown that a parallel can be drawn between the emergence of the PT and certain moments in the history of the PCB, which had long been Brazil’s largest and most influential leftist movement. Founded in 1922, the “partidão,” the “big party,” as it was sometimes called by its critics on the Left, had emerged in the mid-1920s as a space for political action by leaderships from an emergent working class in Brazil’s urban centers. The PCB would also play a similar role, once again, for a new generation of popular leaders who emerged during the postwar political effervescence.² On the other hand, it is

2. Chico de Oliveira has called attention to the mistaken notion that the PT is the first working-class party in Brazil. See Francisco de Oliveira, “Qual é a do PT?” in *PT: Caráter e identidade*, ed. Emir Sader (São Paulo: Brasiliense, n.d.). See also Alexandre Fortes, “*Nós do quarto distrito*”: *A classe trabalhadora Porto-Alegrense e a era Vargas* (Caxias do Sul: ANPUH-RS/EDUCS, 2004); Paulo Fontes, *Trabalhadores e cidadãos: Nitro química: A fábrica e as lutas operárias nos anos 50* (São Paulo: Annablume Editora, 1997); John D. French, *The Brazilian Workers’ ABC: Class Conflicts and Alliances in Modern São Paulo* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Hélio da Costa, *Em busca da memória: Comissão de fábrica, partido e sindicato no Pós-Guerra* (São Paulo: Scritta, 1995); Marco Aurélio Santana, *Homens partidos: Comunistas e sindicatos no Brasil* (São Paulo/Rio de Janeiro: Boitempo/Unirio, 2001); Fernando Teixeira da Silva and Hélio da Costa, “Trabalhadores Urbanos e Populismo: Um Balanço dos Estudos Recentes,” in *O populismo e sua história: Debate e crítica*, ed. Jorge Ferreira (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2001), 205–72; Antonio Luigi Negro, *Linhas de montagem: O industrialismo nacional-desenvolvimentista e a sindicalização dos trabalhadores* (São Paulo: Editorial Boitempo, 2004).

Lula mug shot. Photo: Victor Soares,
Agência Brasil



necessary to recognize that these working-class and popular militants never achieved primacy in defining the policies of their party.

Thus, putting value judgments aside, one must recognize the depth of the organic link between the PT and the Brazilian working class, as well as the singularity of the political context within which the party was constructed. In summary, the PT has been simultaneously the fruit of, and key actor in, the most profound and durable process of democratization yet seen in Brazilian history. The continuous functioning of the PT as a legal party thus represents a qualitative difference with the pre-1964 period, and its construction as a legal party has contributed enormously to another of its distinct characteristics. After overcoming the initial skepticism about its viability as a national political force, the party became a place of convergence for a broad array of forces from the Left, with many distinct origins.³ Thus the creation of the PT has been accompanied by the progressive incorporation of groups and platforms from other tendencies on the Left. This began to reverse a long process of fragmentation initiated in 1962 with the creation of the Maoist Communist Party of Brazil (PC do B) and the Catholic student group Popular Action (AP), a splintering process that intensified after the military coup and greatly weakened the previous hegemony of the PCB on the Left.

3. On the emergence and early history of the PT, see Margaret E. Keck, *The Workers Party and Democratization in Brazil* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).

Beyond the PT itself, its growth also made possible a relatively stable alliance between it and the other parties of the Brazilian Left. This would even prove possible with those leftist groups that had, for a long time, stayed within the orbit of the old Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (MDB), the legal opposition group allowed by the military regime that subsequently became the Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (PMDB). This growing interparty unity on the Left was especially important, because it helped overcome, at least partially, the rifts within the Left that had led to particularly sharp battles during the administration of President José Sarney (1985–89), which was supported by leftist parties such as the PCB and the PC do B and vigorously opposed by the PT.

Thus the past twenty-five years has seen two linked processes of convergence on the Left that led, for the first time in Brazil's history, to the establishment of an autonomous national political presence by the Left, both from an electoral point of view and in terms of its relations with social movements, the state, and other segments of Brazilian society. It is extremely difficult to imagine how this could have occurred without both a democratizing process in the political arena and the construction of the PT as a point of convergence characterized by an absence of doctrinal rigidity and a high social density.

Lula, the "New Unionism," and the PT's Electoral Success

Lula's emergence as a charismatic personality of unquestioned moral authority was linked to the events of May 1978, when workers first struck the foreign-owned automobile assembly plants in the ABC region of Greater São Paulo (named after the municípios of Santo André, São Bernardo do Campo, and São Caetano do Sul). This wave of industrial militancy, which originated among the most highly paid manual workers in Latin America, quickly spread to millions of other Brazilian workers over the next three years.

As the first mass strikes since the military coup of 1964, the massive work stoppages of 125,000 autoworkers that occurred in the ABC region in 1979 and 1980 captured the Brazilian imagination. With 1.5 million residents in 1980, this Latin American Detroit stood out as an extreme example of industrial production on a hitherto unknown scale. The massive Volkswagen plant in São Bernardo, for example, employed between thirty-five and forty thousand workers in a single complex.

In 1978 Brazil was in the tumultuous phase of redemocratization, and the sheer scale and intensity of mobilization in ABC excited awe. To accommodate the as many as sixty thousand workers who attended its general assemblies, the metalworkers' union had to use a local soccer stadium. And in 1980, the workers stayed out on strike for forty-one days despite the occupation of the region by the army, the closing of their union, and the arrest of their leaders—a degree of solidarity achieved without a single picket line!

The strikes in ABC also catapulted the thirty-two-year-old president of the metalworkers' union of São Bernardo do Campo and Diadema into national and

international prominence. By the late 1970s, mass participation in strikes had reached into the millions, and the charismatic Lula came to personify the combative grass-roots-oriented "New Unionism" that emerged as the majoritarian current in the Brazilian labor movement. Over the next decade, the newly dynamized trade unions proved capable of conducting truly national general strikes for the first time in Brazilian history. It is estimated that 2 to 3 million workers and employees participated in the 1983 general strike, a number that rose to 10 million each in 1986 and 1987, before finally peaking at 22 million on the first day of the 1989 general strike (10 million still stayed out on the second day!). In that year, it is estimated that a startling 37 percent of the urban wage-labor force had joined the first day of the general strike.

Yet this capacity to launch protest strikes at a moment of severe economic instability does not tell us if or how organized workers achieved broader influence in Brazilian political life. Declaring its socialist identity in 1981, the PT's labor-led project of social and political transformation demonstrated a surprising long-term capacity for growth under Lula's leadership. The PT's electoral success was all the more striking because mass electoral participation in Brazil dated only from the elections of 1945 when the PCB and the populist Partido Trabalhista do Brasil (PTB) swept urban voting. Although more diffuse, the impact of workers continued to grow during the subsequent Populist Republic as the urban population expanded more and more rapidly.

As the political sequel to the new unionism, the PT got off to a fragile start with a disappointing performance in its first elections in 1982, when it received only 3 percent of the national vote (Lula got only 9 percent of the vote for governor in the state of São Paulo). An electoral breakthrough began to occur only in 1988 when the PT won the municipal governments in Brazil's largest city (São Paulo), two other state capitals (Porto Alegre and Vitória), and several medium-sized cities including the port of Santos. Altogether some 15 million Brazilians, about 10 percent of the population, came under PT rule.

During the presidential election of 1989, Lula won 12 million votes in the first round of the elections (16.5 percent of the national electorate); his vote total rose to 31 million (43 percent) in the second round, where he lost to the candidate of the Right, Fernando Collor, by only 6 percent. In the 1994 presidential election, Lula lost to Fernando Henrique Cardoso, a former leftist who was the candidate of a coalition of the Right and Center-Left, but Lula's vote total in the first, and only, round had still increased to 17 million (27 percent of the national electorate). In 1998 Cardoso was reelected on the first round, thus beating Lula, whose support was stable.

Across this quarter century, the PT has played a vital role in increasing the number of working-class men and women, both rural and urban, in the legislative and executive branches, including an unprecedented number of Afro-Brazilians, women, and labor and community leaders. Indeed, the profile of elected *petistas* has broadened the social composition of those elected to office, a significant change in Brazilian politics. Furthermore, the PT has played an active role in reshaping notions

of class. For example, it helped popularize the idea, explicitly upheld by the party, that a worker is not merely someone who uses a screwdriver or hoe but also someone who wields the pen, a claim whose credibility has been reinforced by the sustained mobilization of important unionized white-collar sectors such as bank workers and teachers. In and of itself, this shift marks an important change in the relations between manual laborers and intellectual workers (the salaried middle classes) that were not captured by earlier schematic and static models of social stratification. In consolidating this new emerging consciousness of class since the 1980s, the PT has accelerated the slow erosion of the barriers that denied the subalterns of Brazilian society access to and a place within the public sphere. It has also served to break up and weaken the hierarchical and deferential relations that characterized the authoritarian pattern so long dominant in Brazilian social relations.⁴

In the past, a well-established *petista* discourse about its own history sometimes left the impression that “Brazil was discovered in São Bernardo do Campo,” in the words of Hamilton Pereira, the current president of the Perseu Abramo Foundation, the party’s think tank. This tendency in the PT to reject past experiences on the Left in toto has fostered an ignorance of history while leading to the arrogant idea, as Pereira notes, that “we hold the correct political conception and our future is thus assured.”⁵ The truth is that history has been generous with the PT up to now. Counting the movement leading up to its foundation, the process of the party’s construction has now reached twenty-five years—a biological generation. Despite the conflicts, crises, and transformations inevitable for such a collective undertaking, the PT unquestionably has been successful. The new conceptual and organizational principles that were elaborated in the late 1970s to define the party’s rupture with the history of the Left has succeeded in guiding the PT to the stunning conquest of the country’s highest political office.⁶ Yet one might ask whether these ideas will prove capable of confronting the new and unknown challenges ahead for the PT. Thus it is necessary that there be a more solid reflection on the PT’s relation to other historical experiences of the national and international Left, including a self-critical analysis that compares the results achieved in light of the limits and problems that have been faced.

4. On the relation between social movements, struggles for rights, and public space in Brazil, see Maria Célia Paoli, “Trabalhadores e cidadania: Experiência do mundo público na história do Brasil moderno,” in *Estudos Avançados* 3, no. 7 (1989): 40–66. For a useful overview of the Latin American region, see Sonia E. Alvarez, Evelina Dagnino, and Arturo Escobar, eds., *Cultures of Politics, Politics of Culture: Re-Visioning Latin American Social Movements* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1998).

5. Another peculiar myth associated with the origins of the PT—that the social movements would progressively besiege the state until taking it—is examined in Marco Aurélio Garcia, “Tradição, memória, e história dos trabalhadores,” in *O direito à memória: Patrimônio histórico e cidadania* (São Paulo: Departamento do Patrimônio Histórico, 1992).

6. On the ideological and programmatic evolution of the PT during its first two decades, readers should consult PT, Diretório Nacional, and Secretaria Nacional de Formação Política, *Partido dos trabalhadores: Resoluções de encontros e congressos, 1979–1998* (São Paulo: Diretório Nacional do PT/Editora Fundação Perseu Abramo, 1998). For a recent journalistic treatment of today’s PT, see Sue Branford and Bernardo Kucinski, *Politics Transformed: Lula and the Workers’ Party of Brazil* (New York: New Press, 2003).

Anticipatory Defeatism and the Challenge of Solidarity

For those who have studied Brazilian labor and the Left, Lula's election was the thrilling realization of a long-held dream. In historical terms, the 2002 election's significance was clear, since the leadership of Brazil had always passed—from colony to independence, from slavery to freedom, from monarchy to republic—without ever leaving the hands of the dominant classes and the educated minority that had served their interests. For the first time ever, power was placed in the hands of a representative of the popular majority in a Left-Center political articulation, multiclass in nature but under the hegemony of a party of the Left. Moreover, the majority of the Brazilian people had voted, for the first time, for a man with little formal education—and this happened in a country where popular deference to superiors, especially the educated (*os doutores*), was a deeply engrained tradition on the part of a large swath of working people in both the cities and the countryside. While the vast majority of observers have recognized this symbolism, we can only anticipate the likely long-term impact of Lula's victory on Brazilian political culture, particularly in increasing the self-confidence of working people and their belief that they can produce meaningful societal change.

In hindsight, the victory of the working class and the Left was an amazing triumph, although many sympathetic observers, including *petistas*, were rightly apprehensive about the challenges ahead, given the darkened international scenario marked by the drive for war emanating from a Pentagon and White House cabal. Yet those somber developments do not explain why so many in the international arena responded to Lula's victory with at best baited breath and only a muffled hope. One might well have expected millions of men and women of goodwill outside Brazil to be asking: "How did I allow myself to miss these amazing developments in Brazil where the Left is more successful today than two decades ago? Why did I let ethnocentric world maps, or self-absorption in national struggles, or the barrier of another language (Brazilians speak Portuguese) prevent me from learning what we need to know about this country, this people, these struggles, and that party and leader?"

Brazil has long been one of the world's least well-known major countries, even though it is the fifth largest in population (176 million in 2003) and tenth largest in gross domestic product. Yet even those who found themselves drawn to Brazil in 2002, however temporarily, seemed gripped by a spirit of anticipatory defeatism. Too often, their reaction of surprise and celebration was combined with a misplaced "realism" derived from the sad outcome of past histories, such as the 1970 election of Salvador Allende in Chile that was brought to an end by a CIA-sponsored coup in 1973. Yet there is an immense difference between Chile, where a leftist candidate came to power with the support of only one-third of the electorate, and Lula, who received two-thirds of the votes cast. If one is to understand the politics on the ground in Brazil, it is also vital to understand that the 2002 elections were not marked by the polarizing dynamics of 1970 in Chile; indeed, even the radicalism with which the dominant class had confronted Lula in earlier races was absent in 2002, and the election reflected a mature and considered popular vote accepted with little fear or controversy (a dem-

ocratic triumph). Indeed, this transition took place not in an atmosphere marked by a quickening and sharpening of political passions but—especially during the second round—almost as a society-wide blessing of the new; in some major cities like Rio de Janeiro and Salvador, Lula won 80 to 90 percent of the total vote.

Over the two years since Lula's election, it is possible to observe a mixture of responses among foreign observers interested in Brazilian developments. While few now publicly anticipate a Brazilian 9/11, a reference to the U.S.-supported military coup of September 11, 1973, that overthrew Allende, even fewer leftist voices abroad are now repeating earlier triumphalistic slogans about Brazil's rupture with neoliberalism and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), unhelpful representations that did not reflect what had actually occurred during this election. And finally, there are still many foreign sympathizers who assume—unwittingly playing the game of the Right—that Lula and the PT had already either "sold out," were about to, or did so once in power (the most-cited criticism being the government's observance of the orthodox macroeconomic policies dictated by the international capitalist system). Those more knowledgeable could cite the "Lula lite" professional advertising of the 2002 campaign while suggesting that the PT had abandoned its earlier principled radicalism and betrayed the interests of the third of the national electorate that had consistently voted for Lula since 1989.

For its leftist critics, the nationwide popular celebration that followed Lula's election and inauguration would inevitably end in frustration once the PT's characteristic voluntarism was confronted with the hard realities of exercising executive power. But Lula saw things differently, and he repeatedly expressed his awareness, in his first speeches as president, of the heavy responsibility resting on his shoulders: "Any other president could fail but I can't." Yet what would constitute failure? And what would constitute success? The great paradox in which Lula and the PT were, and in some sense still are, trapped was summarized at the end of 2003 by the mayor of Belo Horizonte, Fernando Pimentel: "Current macroeconomic guidelines, necessary consequences of the choices made by Brazilian society in the 1990s . . . undermine the great national goal, which is to quickly achieve full social inclusion."⁷

Statements of this kind on economic problems reflect a deep change in the PT's approach that gradually evolved during the 1990s. In his 1989 campaign, Lula had championed the suspension of external debt payments as the starting point for a new economic model, but not strictly for economic reasons; the huge foreign debt had been contracted by illegitimate military governments at a time when no democratic control of state actions was possible. In 1994, still facing high rates of inflation, an interim government implemented the "Plano Real" economic stabilization plan that achieved surprising popularity and assured Lula's defeat at the hands of its architect Fernando Henrique Cardoso in the 1994 presidential elections (Cardoso was reelected in 1998 even though signs of economic stagnation were already widely perceived).

Thus important sectors of the PT leadership began to realize that there

7. Fernando Pimentel, "O paradoxo brasileiro," *Teoria e Debate*, no. 56 (2003-4): 27.

was broader and deeper support for orthodox economic stabilization than they had believed at first. This occurred, to a great degree, as a result of the frustration produced by the “heterodox” economic plans adopted under the new democratic governments after 1985, which produced heightened inflation, economic instability, and even greater inequality. For those without bank accounts or formal wages, the ability to know the real purchasing power of your income from the first to the last day of the month makes an enormous difference in the quality of life. If Lula were to be elected and to govern, he would have to prove that he would maintain, even rescue, such economic stability while seeking to mitigate its social costs and creating conditions for a new development project.

No one in the PT, of course, is unaware that the domestic economic choices made in the 1990s were defined by how the United States had restructured its hegemony since the 1980s. They recognize that the policies dictated by “multilateral” agencies to third world countries, with their severe social costs, and the intense pressure from “the international market” are part of the same neoliberal globalization. In the Cardoso era, such external restrictions were accompanied by large-scale domestic abuses, such as the widespread corruption that marked privatizations and the bribing of deputies to assure the approval of a constitutional amendment allowing the reelection of the president. Yet even so, as Pimentel stresses, the route followed by the country in the 1990s was nonetheless the result of democratic choice.

When Lula won election in 2002, the popular mood was hopeful but not soaring, and the mass of the PT's voters were pleased by the “responsibility” being shown by the new government in its maintenance of economic stability. Grumbling about the standpat nature of the government's macroeconomic policies could be loudly heard, especially from a tiny minority of the PT's left wing that was lionized for its “courage” by an opportunistic press that vigorously opposes the PT. Some have even claimed that Lula has merely embraced the neoliberal policies of his predecessor Cardoso. Yet few within the PT, even on the Left, no matter how disgruntled, chose to play into this game of the government's opponents. All recognize that the easiest way for Lula's government to kill the Left's electoral future would be to recklessly challenge, with no credible prospects of success, the IMF and the international capitalist system, plunging the country into a crisis that would immiserate the mass of the population and kill the Left's credibility for a generation.

To be effective, world solidarity with Brazil must be informed by a realistic understanding of the challenges, the limits, and opportunities represented by Lula's government. We need a mature and nonadulatory vision that steers confidently between the Scylla of pessimism (we know how this story will end: sellout or tragedy) and the Charybdis of Pollyannaish illusions that the empire and savage capitalism has or will meet its match in Brazil, whose people, if united, will never be defeated. Let us be straightforward about these matters:

1. The election of Lula was a defeat for neoliberalism and the Washington policy consensus of 1989, but the mass popular vote for Lula was not a conscious repudiation of those policies. Thus the election of Lula was not, as some have

proclaimed, a vote for an alternative to neoliberalism. Indeed, the program of the current government and the campaign itself has been marked by the PT's shift to broader political alliances, including a pact with a small Liberal Party whose evangelical capitalist leader serves as Lula's vice president. Lula's campaign had consciously aimed to broaden the social and regional base of the PT's electoral support through a tentative vision—hard to articulate and define—that the country can do better economically and in terms of equity, and that Brazil need not stand still in the face of the heightened incursions of predatory foreign powers and a parasitic upper class.

2. The election of Lula was not a definitive historical transition in Brazilian history, but only an open door to a possibly different future, and this humble claim is precisely what the PT itself has declared with due modesty. The contours of any changes to come are fully unclear, it should be emphasized, and will emerge only from the social and political process of struggle based on principles of inclusion, discussion, deliberation, and debate. As Lula said in his victory speech, his election was a commitment to change, a vote by the Brazilian people against the recent past, and a statement of hope that the country might move toward a new horizon from which an alternative might be seen.
3. The election of Lula was not a triumph of social movements. Indeed, one of the key defining dimensions of this election—its nonpolarized nature—stems from the fact that Lula's electoral victory occurred when social mobilization was not on the ascent (as would have been true if Lula had won in 1989 or 1994). Lula's election followed a decade in which mass activism had fallen off (with the notable exception of the Landless Workers' Movement, or MST), and the mass organizations built during the 1970s and 1980s were devastated by an economic liberalization that eliminated, for example, half of the industrial working class in Brazil. Conditions for mass struggle have not been ideal in an environment marked by the formally recognized unemployment of tens of millions, with millions of other discouraged workers no longer even counted, and where tens of millions more, the truly miserable ones, have always stood entirely outside the productive apparatus. There is, however, one limited sense in which Lula's election can be seen as a victory for social movements. It is very much the triumph of a remarkable generation of leaders that grew out of the dynamic protest movements that brought an end to the military regime, even if the organizations they led no longer have the same dynamism as in the past.⁸
4. Change under Lula's government is not and will not be revolutionary. For all of us with hopes for a different world, this may be the hardest realization to recognize and accept, although we must do so if we are to guarantee the

8. For English-language accounts of two of the PT's compelling political personalities, see Medea Benjamin and Maisa Mendonça, *Benedita da Silva: An Afro-Brazilian Woman's Story of Politics and Love* (Oakland, CA: Institute for Food and Development Policy, 1997); and Andrew Revkin, *The Burning Season: The Murder of Chico Mendes and the Fight for the Amazon Rain Forest* (Washington, DC: Island Press/Shearwater Books, 2004). For an extraordinary array of interviews with Lula, his family, and his friends, see Denise Paraná, *Lula, o filho do Brasil: Edição revista e ampliada* (São Paulo: Editora Perseu Abramo, 2002).

survival of our common hopes and work toward their future success. The space of utopia, after all, is about the future, and this is especially true of the practical politics of social transformation. This government of Lula and its path will offer surprises and even disappointments because politics is an open-ended game whose outcome is not guaranteed and cannot be judged in advance. What the Lula government does offer is an opportunity for the oppressed and dominated, and their allied social movements, to recoup their losses from the past two decades. They can do so as they embark on the most formidable challenge of all: to reshape and redirect a giant ocean liner of a country like Brazil. The difficulty is that they have to do so at a time when neoliberal policies have stripped a weakened Brazilian state of many vital tools while weakening its ties to society, which are far more fragile and distant than in the past. As Lula says, it is not one man who can govern this country, nor can a government alone make things change. Success requires the participation of all and a rebirth of hope, self-sacrifice, energy, and enthusiasm on the part of the populace; if this is to occur, it will require consciousness-raising on an even more massive scale than was true during the epic struggles of the 1970s and 1980s. So, wherein lies the origin of this popular victory? The answer is that we are dealing with a triumph of politics and political leadership, and it has both the strengths and weaknesses of that origin.

The Triumph of Politics: 2002

After 1998, those who declared their intention to vote for Lula increased as social conditions produced by neoliberal policies deteriorated. Yet this turn toward Lula was not a "natural" or inevitable development. It occurred as a result of some of Lula's personal choices and because of the positive results of the PT's administration of local governments. When Lula was defeated by Collor in 1989, he chose to follow a quite unusual path for a Brazilian political leader: he decided he would not seek any office other than the presidency. Traveling constantly, he crossed Brazil's amazing distances from one extreme to another with the "Citizenship Caravans." In doing so, he acquired an unmatched living knowledge of the country's social, economic, and political reality that would provide concrete and relevant examples, whatever the matter at issue, in his political discourse. He also founded an Institute of Citizenship, a think tank for debating and producing guidelines for public policies that worked with significant autonomy vis-à-vis the party.

Enjoying a wide freedom of movement in comparison with officeholders, Lula became a nationally recognized symbol of concern for social justice as well as a synonym for perseverance, having failed three times in his attempt to reach the presidency. The projection of this positive image of Lula was clearly perceptible in 2002, but it was the result of a long-term process that involved more than marketing. There was also the drama of his personal trajectory: from being a poor migrant to a skilled worker and moving from a grassroots activist to one of the country's most important political leaders. This story was now used to demonstrate to Brazilians that, despite

the perversions of Brazilian capitalism and the limits of its democracy, there still was a lot to be proud of and reasons to keep hope in a better future alive.

Unlike his 1982 campaign for governor in São Paulo, Lula was no longer presented as a victim of “the system,” unfairly arrested, someone “just like you” as his campaign slogan went. Lula in 2002 was presented to voters as a self-made politician, internationally acknowledged but still proud of his origins. He displayed a realistic and responsible awareness about the country’s critical situation but, at the same time, raised even higher his 1989 campaign slogan “without fear of being happy.” Workers and popular groups must not stop in their struggle to do something new “with what’s been done to them,” as in Sartre’s definition of freedom. Granted, the gifts of marketing “wizard” Duda Mendonça were vital to consolidating this new image, and the high-quality pasteurized way in which it was broadcast was decisive to its success, but the fact is that the message fit the candidate very well. At least better than the orthodox Marxist outlook that many intellectuals and left-wing groups would like to have seen adopted by this unmistakably individual expression of working-class consciousness.

At the same time, local experiences of municipal administration had proven that the PT was capable of honest government and the reorientation of public policies to the benefit of majorities. Of course the slogan about a “PT way of governing,” postulated as completely different from what was practiced by other parties, was in great measure a propaganda tool. Yet it worked because it was rooted in something real: practical policies that expanded access to education, health, and housing and that improved the quality of services and goods provided; programs of popular credit; and, most of all, initiatives to raise the levels of citizen involvement, such as the participatory budgeting.⁹ These became the trademarks of many PT local governments and assured them of wide recognition, not only in the form of an increase in popular support but in a disproportionate number of “good government” awards. Taken together with the slow decline in Cardoso’s popularity, these successful local experiences contributed to the PT’s exceptionally good performance in the 2000 municipal elections, which in turn provided the party with an expanded power base that would prove critical in the presidential race two years later.

So the early twenty-first century saw Lula’s image being infused with ever more positive meanings while the PT’s upper crust was becoming more pragmatic and its local governments were deepening their capacity to produce innovation in public management. At this very moment, however, the original base of the PT, in terms of its social movement roots, was facing a deep crisis. For example, the size, composition, and bargaining power of those workers who had done so much to change Brazilian unionism in the 1980s, such as metalworkers and bank employees, declined dramatically. Even the idea of an automobile plant of forty thousand workers, as with the São Bernardo do Campo Volkswagen plant in Lula’s day, now seemed

9. See William R. Nylen, *Participatory Democracy versus Elitist Democracy: Lessons from Brazil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); and Gainpaolo Baiocchi, ed., *Radicals in Power: The Workers’ Party (PT) and Experiments in Urban Democracy in Brazil* (London: Zed Books, 2003).

part of a remote past. The combined effects of economic stagnation, high unemployment rates, and productive restructuring drove unions into retreat. The situation was different in the countryside, where landless workers (MST and other new groups) expanded their efforts and remained active, although profound political disagreements would cool the relationship between the PT and the MST.¹⁰

Inside the Catholic Church, progressive groups suffered harsh setbacks at the hands of Vatican conservatives and began to lose popular support to Pentecostalism and the reactionary charismatic movement within the Catholic Church. And, although the PT had always been critical of “really existing socialism,” the intellectuals of the Left were deeply affected by the fall of the Soviet Union and the Eastern European regimes. Those intellectuals faced intense difficulties as they sought to build a renewed socialist theory that might provide the conceptual tools capable of linking day-to-day political activities with some kind of utopian perspective.

Thus, when the PT's electoral strategy for the 2002 presidential election was outlined, the PT was stronger in the institutional field but weaker in its organic base, all the more so because of the brain drain from social movements into public administration. The party had managed to become a major collective actor in national politics, a feasible alternative, but could not rely on a renewed surge of activism to propel it to victory in its fourth attempt to gain the presidency. It was clear that a broader arch of alliances would be necessary, and the PT turned to the small Center-Right Liberal Party to provide its vice presidential candidate, José de Alencar. The owner of the country's most important textile group, Alencar was a more traditional kind of self-made man, but would prove helpful in calming down his business colleagues while gaining a large numbers of votes for Lula in the key state of Minas Gerais, which had elected Alencar a senator in 1998.

During the 2002 election, coordinated attempts by the governing PSDB and market operators to use the risk of international speculative attacks to frighten potential Lula voters led his campaign to issue the “Letter to the People of Brazil,” which dropped an emphasis on the need for a “rupture” with the prevailing economic model, an emphasis that had still appeared in the electoral resolution adopted by the PT at its national meeting in Recife in December 2001. The letter stressed that a “new model cannot be the product of unilateral decisions by the government” but could come only as “the fruit of nationwide negotiation, which should aim toward an authentic alliance for the country, a new social contract, capable of insuring growth with stability.” Lula assumed a public vow to respect “the country's contracts and obligations” and to maintain the primary surplus in public finances “as long as necessary.” The letter also expressed the basic guidelines that would frame the new government economic policies while articulating its aspirations for a new project of national development.¹¹

To understand the policy decisions of Lula's government once elected, it is

10. On the MST, see Angus Wright and Wendy Wolford, *To Inherit the Earth: The Landless Movement and the Struggle for a New Brazil* (Oakland, CA: Food First Books, 2003).

11. “Letter to the People of Brazil,” São Paulo, June 22, 2002.

necessary to grasp how this extreme economic vulnerability combined with the national political context in 2002. Although the PT won the largest share of seats in the Chamber of Deputies, the Left was still far outnumbered by Center-Right parties in the National Congress. Even the broadest of definitions of “progressive parties” would not account for one-third of the deputies, and the numbers were even worse in the Senate. The election had seen an increase in the numbers of PT senators (many of them women), but this minority of novices could not compete in influence and experience with the majority of Center-Right senators, often former governors who were important leaders of regional oligarchies. Thus, driven by its moderate agenda and the need to ensure a parliamentary majority, Lula’s government can be characterized as Center-Left, and the need to maintain this broad and unstable set of alliances has and will continue to impose many puzzling contradictions on Lula, his government, and the PT.

Foreign policy is one area where there are signs that the hopes nourished by Lula’s election are really coming true. An activist approach to foreign policy is, as stated in a working paper by a presidential adviser, Marco Aurélio Garcia, a “constitutive element of the Brazilian government’s National Development Project” because it is essential to create “a more democratic and balanced world, from the economic and social point-of-view” in order to “reduce the country’s external vulnerability.”¹² A number of initiatives have ensued, such as the proposal for an international fund aimed at abolishing hunger, the constitution of the G-20 group within the World Trade Organization, and the demand that the IMF change its definition of “public expenses” to exclude investments in infrastructure. Moreover, Brazil opposed the war in Iraq and has actively helped to democratically resolve the Venezuelan crises of 2002–3. In terms of the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), Lula’s government does not need to voice an ideological rejection, because its sovereign conduct of the negotiations has prevented the risk of “annexation” to be found in the original U.S. design for the FTAA. The decisive factor in foreign policy has been the government’s reaffirmation of the peaceful and multilateral vocation of Brazilian diplomacy. The Common Market of the South (Mercosur), which was almost abandoned in the Cardoso-Meném era, is once again a real priority and has expanded to include Peru and Venezuela as new associate members. While Mercosur’s social and political aspects are finally being seriously addressed, efforts are being made to forge agreements between Mercosur and the Andean Community, India, South Africa, and the European Union, a decisive step toward a common and autonomous external policy for Mercosur’s founding members (Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Paraguay, all but the latter now ruled by the Left).

So Brazil today is facing formidable challenges. There are high popular expectations that something will be done to resolve long-term structural problems aggra-

12. “A política externa do Governo Luis Inácio Lula da Silva” [Roteiro da exposição do Professor Marco Aurélio Garcia, assessor especial do Presidente da República, aos embaixadores da Ásia e Oceania], Brasília, May 5, 2004 (unpublished).

vated by two “lost” decades in terms of economic growth and development. And yet the sovereignty of national states, which is essential for development, is severely restricted by neoliberal globalization, particularly in the capitalist periphery. Dealing with these problems is not the task of one leader, one party, or even one country, and it is to be hoped that people of goodwill can see that Brazil today is a crucial arena in efforts to keep alive the hopes expressed in the World Social Forum slogan: “A better world is possible.” The energies, brains, and hearts of the world’s politicians, intellectuals, and activists can, through solidarity, debate, and action, decisively contribute to making Lula’s domestic and international initiatives successful. And in the present world panorama, even a modest success in Brazil will certainly boost the world’s efforts to redirect globalization toward human ends.

Toward the Abolition of Misery

Given the many challenges facing Lula’s government, its supporters, and sympathizers, it is vital to recognize that Brazil’s problems, although daunting, are not new, nor have they been unknown to Brazilians of conscience in previous generations. One’s thoughts turn immediately to the reformist vision of André Rebouças, the grandson of a Portuguese tailor and a former slave, who was Brazil’s most distinguished nineteenth-century engineer and a leading abolitionist. Born in 1838, Rebouças was admitted to a prestigious military academy in Rio de Janeiro with a brilliant showing on the entrance exams. After training in France and England, he built an engineering business that made him a wealthy man, including completion of major construction projects such as the docks for the Rio customhouse. Although wealthy and well connected, this African-descended Brazilian was deeply outraged, as a patriot, by the fact that the beautiful name of the continent of America was indissolubly linked to “the monster of slavery. But it is true,” he went on, that generations of European pirates and marauders, who valued only gold and silver, had destroyed the Indian population of the New World, and then introduced Africans as human cattle. All the beneficiaries of this history of exploitation and crime, he declared, should feel remorse “for having imprisoned, on the most beautiful continent God has created[, one of] the noblest and most active races of the Old World.”¹³

In the 1880s Rebouças was one of the principal architects of the Brazilian abolitionist movement, and he devoted his energy and much of his fortune to financing the newspapers that fanned the flames of Brazil’s first national urban-based protest movement. Advancing a vision of a truly democratic Brazil, Rebouças specifically attacked the monopoly of land that left “millions and millions of Brazilians without even a little piece of property” where they could put down roots. In all of his writings, this outstanding social reformer emphasized the indissoluble connection between racial oppression and economic exploitation. “We must level this beautiful Brazil,” he declared, in order to hasten the advent of a “Rural Democracy” that would allow this vast country to attack the misery (poverty) in which the majority of

13. Sydney M. G. dos Santos, *André Rebouças e seu tempo* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Vozes, 1985), 104.

the Brazilian population lived, even those who were legally free. Talking about cheap and exploitative employers, he noted that their “aversion to paying fair salaries and to a just distribution” of wealth could be traced to the “slavery and serfdom” so long practiced in Brazil.

The horrors of starvation, disease, and early death, Rebouças declared, were “the children of Misery; they are the fruit of parasitism by the superior races over several centuries, trampling upon labor, leaving people to waste away through tiredness and hunger.” For this Brazilian patriot, the final extinction of slavery in 1888, which occurred twenty-five years after the United States, “brings to the fore the problem of the Abolition of Misery” because slavery “was a great machine for producing proletarians and people living in misery. It was slavery that made possible, for three centuries, [a] most monstrous monopoly of land that . . . produced [in turn] Urban Misery, homes without a floor, without air, without light; people accumulating in pig sties; begging during the day and sleeping at night amongst rubbish. It was slavery that produced Rural Misery, peoples without land [*sem terra*], workers without wages [*sem salário*], many without any compensation at all.”¹⁴

Rebouças was not the only Brazilian thinker to see the direct linkages between the challenges of unfree labor (slavery) and capitalist “free labor.” In the late eighteenth century, Luís dos Santos Vilhena in Bahia observed that “political society is divided into proprietors and those who own no property; the former are infinitely fewer than the latter, as is well known. The proprietor tries to buy as cheaply as possible the only possession of the propertyless or wage earner, his labor. The latter in turn tries to sell it as dearly as possible. In this struggle, the weaker contestant although greater in numbers usually succumbs to the stronger.”¹⁵ During the hundred years that separated Vilhena and Rebouças, Brazil’s long history of popular struggles had not yet generated an organized counterbalance to the power of the rich and wealthy, a class that lacked, then and now, as Rebouças noted, even “the most minimum idea of a just and equitable distribution [of wealth] between capital and labor.”¹⁶

The ongoing fight to build a more equitable nation, with a decent and honest government, would stretch into the twentieth century, but progress was and has been made. The current Brazilian Constitution of 1988, formulated after the ouster of the military dictatorship, is a landmark in its avowal of the noble goal of abolishing misery and guaranteeing the well-being and happiness of the popular majority. It is the task of the PT, Lula, and people of goodwill to force Brazil’s attention back to these deep and historically rooted aspirations.

To succeed in proving that “another world is possible” will not be easy in Brazil, or quick. Yet this is no different than the situation facing the United States in 1860, when another politically astute leader counseled against an impatience that would sacrifice the possibilities of change—in this case, the end of slavery—on the

14. *Ibid.*, 349.

15. Luís dos Santos Vilhena, *A Bahia no século XVIII*, vol. 3 (Bahia: Editôra Itapuã, 1969), 919.

16. Santos, *André Rebouças*, 349.

altar of political purity. The path forward is often convoluted, insisted Frederick Douglass, born a slave, but the key is struggle. "The whole history of the progress of human liberty," he declared in 1857, "shows that all concessions yet made to her august claims have been born of earnest struggle. . . . If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet deprecate agitation, are men who want crops without plowing up the ground, they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. The struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical," he concluded, "but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will."¹⁷ ■

17. Frederick Douglass, "The Significance of Emancipation in the West Indies," speech, Canandaigua, NY, August 3, 1857; reprinted in *The Frederick Douglass Papers: Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews*, vol. 3, 1855–1863, ed. John W. Blasingame (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).