


SUGGESTION

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?

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Abstract

Lula and His Politics of Cunning explores the origin, roots, and evolution of Luis Inácio Lula da Silva's vision, discourse, and practice of leadership as a process of becoming. This commentary invites historians of labor movements and the left to think beyond their geographical and chronological specializations. It argues that there is much to gain from thinking globally if we wish to achieve meaningful causal insights applicable to the sweep of capitalist development.

Lula and His Politics of Cunning explores the origin, roots, and evolution of Lula's vision, discourse, and practice of leadership as a process of becoming. That a fourth-grade-educated man – born in 1945 – could ascend from a poor rural migrant to become a metalworker, a firebrand strike leader, and founder of a radical socialist party is striking, all the more so given his 2002 election, and subsequent re-election, in 2006, as the thirty-fifth Brazilian president. To quote his presidential self-promotion, Lula's life has, indeed, been a case of “never before in the history of Brazil” and, to be honest, almost anywhere else in the world. Moreover, his political trajectory is all the more important given that, today, his Workers Party (PT) is the world's largest and most dynamic leftist organization and, having won two of the three presidential elections held after Lula left office in 2010, has a good chance of returning their man to the presidency for a third term in 2022.

This commentary invites historians of labor movements and the left to think beyond their geographical and chronological specializations. It argues that there is much to gain from thinking globally if we wish to achieve meaningful causal insights applicable to the sweep of capitalist development. To do so demands a theoretically robust interdisciplinary foundation for a biographical enterprise that avoids the

superficiality of “man/woman and his/her times” accounts. While attending to socio-economic stratification and cultural dynamics, the exercise and mechanics of leadership must be approached in an actor-centered manner that is attentive to the discursive and performative, but without losing sight of institutions and economics. Above all, my book “advances a very specific understanding of politics as relationships and leadership as embodied work done with words [...] [that] can only be understood as process and a two-way (even if asymmetrical) relationship that causally links mass consciousness and action, whether in a strike or at the ballot box”. In the case of Lula, it reveals a distinctive and socially rooted leadership profile based on “an additive and transformative politics of cunning executed by creating spaces of convergence across difference”.¹

How Brazil Transformed English Historian Eric Hobsbawm’s Perspective

In his 2002 autobiography, Eric Hobsbawm (1917–2012) describes how his forty years of engagement with Latin America changed his entire “perspective on the history of the rest of the globe”. He first visited the region in the wake of the Cuban Revolution with a three-month 1962 jaunt to six Latin American countries, which impressed upon him how change “occurred at express speed” in the region. He was especially struck by the “explosion of giant [Latin American] super-cities such as the megalopolis of São Paulo”, which, as he wrote privately at the time, seemed “a sort of nineteenth-century Chicago: brash, fast, dynamic, modern [...] with skyscrapers sprout[ing], the neon-lights glow[ing], the cars (mostly made in the country) tear[ing] through the streets in their thousands in a typically Brazilian anarchy”. Economically, the city’s industrialization – with factories manned by rural migrants – left him with the impression of “a pyramid balanced on its point”.²

Speaking on the BBC after his return, the Marxist labor historian enthused about the region’s growing peasant movements and the prospects for social revolution. In briefing his British comrades, British intelligence wiretaps found him reporting that nothing dramatic was occurring in the region’s big cities and little evidence of working-class radicalism. Less than two decades later, his impression was revealed to be false when the most dramatic explosion of labor militancy in the Western hemisphere occurred among hundreds of thousands of metalworkers in the booming industrial suburbs of São Paulo known as ABC. It would be three massive strikes against international auto companies between 1978 and 1980, conducted under a military dictatorship, which catapulted Lula into the international newspaper headlines where he remains today.

Brazil would prove Hobsbawm’s most enduring Latin American connection, including cumulative book sales estimated at 600,000 and his courtship by Fernando Henrique Cardoso, the ex-Marxist sociologist turned neoliberal, who served as Brazil’s president from 1994 to 2002. As for Lula, Hobsbawm met him in 1992, thirteen years after the union leader had founded a new Workers Party

¹John D. French, *Lula and His Politics of Cunning: From Metalworker to President of Brazil* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2020), pp. 12, 336.

²E.J. Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times: A Twentieth-Century Life* (London, 2002), pp. 376–377; Richard J. Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History* (New York, 2019), pp. 405–407.

(PT), during an upsurge of opposition to the dictatorship that ruled from 1964 to 1985.³ With its allied trade union confederation, the socialist PT would anchor the noisy far left of the Brazilian political spectrum in the 1980s and 1990s.

The year that Hobsbawm published his autobiography saw Lula, in his fourth run, win the Presidency with sixty-one per cent of the national vote in the second round, a victory that could only “warm the cockles of all old red hearts”.⁴ As Hobsbawm observed in his best-selling *Age of Extremes* (1994), industrialization on the periphery had shown the capacity to “lead politics in directions familiar to that of the First World”, including the formation of “a socialist-oriented political labour-cum people’s party analogous to the mass social democratic parties of pre-1914 Europe”.⁵

Lula, Bebel, and their Parties

Writing at the height of the Tony Blair era of British Labor Party politics, Hobsbawm slyly noted that the PT’s “leader and presidential candidate [...] is probably the only industrial worker at the head of any Labour Party” in the world.⁶ And it has, indeed, been rare to find someone who had worked with their hands in the leadership of the socialist or revolutionary movements of the nineteenth or twentieth century. One of the closest analogues to Lula is August Bebel (1840–1913), the founder and long-time leader of German social democracy in the era of the Second International. The similarities include shared childhood experiences of hunger, odd jobbing at a young age, a fatherless family, and an interrupted educational trajectory followed by a formal apprenticeship to become lathe operators: a wood turner in the case of Bebel and a metal turner in Lula’s. Each built their careers as a public figure in workers’ movements, albeit in different types of activities: workers’ educational societies with Bebel and the state-created and financed trade union movement in the case of Lula.

A century apart, they built working-class movements in rapidly industrializing and urbanizing polities under less than democratic conditions, in authoritarian societies where voting was distorted by electoral and constitutional chicanery. Moreover, both men proved effective and formidable public speakers while occupying positions of unquestioned centrality as the star around which lesser constellations of party leaders orbited. Finally, both men served time in prison as a result of politically motivated persecution: four and a half years for Bebel in multiple prosecutions and two and half years for Lula on two very different occasions.⁷

The German socialist leader stood out as the only manual worker in the top ranks of European socialist leadership and enjoyed a remarkable career of agitation, party-building, and parliamentary representation, starting with his first election in 1868. “No other person had such a profound influence on the development of the SPD”, his biographers emphasize, and he remained, like Lula, his party’s “uncontested

³Evans, *Eric Hobsbawm*, pp. 408–409, 578–579.

⁴Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, p. 377.

⁵*Idem*, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914–1991* (New York, 1994), p. 370.

⁶*Idem*, *Interesting Times*, pp. 276–277.

⁷William Harvey Maehl, *August Bebel: Shadow Emperor of the German Workers* (Philadelphia, PA, 1980); Jürgen Schmidt, *August Bebel: Social Democracy and the Founding of the Labour Movement* (London, 2019), p. 79; James Retallack, “August Bebel: A Life for Social Justice and Democratic Reform”, *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte*, 58 (2018), pp. 145–162.

leader from its foundation until his death” in 1913.⁸ Of course, there were differences between the two men, including the era of capitalist development in which they emerged and their country’s historical formation. Bebel was an artisan entrepreneur with a small shop while Lula was a skilled industrial wage earner as large-scale mass production factories were implanted in a society whose population was overwhelmingly descended from Africans, a racist and authoritarian society shaped by almost four centuries of slavery. Interestingly, a republican form of government arrived only three decades apart in these two long time monarchies (1889 in Brazil, 1918 in Germany), which had, each in their own way, introduced a degree of restricted electoral participation and parliamentary rule without being constitutional monarchies.

In 2018, James Retallack suggested that Bebel’s activities in Saxony were “under-represented in all biographies of him” despite its centrality to the first phase of Bebel’s career.⁹ His impressive 2017 monograph used the Kingdom of Saxony as a laboratory to “rethink old questions and pose new ones”, precisely because of its role as a “pioneer in Germany’s industrialization”, its “degree of urbanization”, and the rise of a large and politically active urban working class between 1860 and 1918.¹⁰ When combined with my knowledge of São Paulo, Retallack’s *Red Saxony* helped me to connect the trajectory of Bebel and the German Empire, with its population of 52 million in 1895, with the late-twentieth-century world of Lula, born in 1945, to a country with a population of 41 million in a vastly larger area, at 8.5 million square kilometers, than Germany with an area of a half million.

Along with the university-educated Wilhelm Liebknecht, Bebel courageously defied patriotic hysteria during Franco-Prussian War of 1870 and told a Reichstag, full of supporters of the crown, church, aristocracy, and army, that class-conscious workers everywhere found inspiration in the battle cry of the short-lived Paris Commune: “War upon the palaces, peace to the cottages, death to misery and idleness!”¹¹ Such words of anger and defiance were by no means alien to Lula, although he stands in striking contrast to Bebel’s militant embrace of atheism, scientific socialism, and Marxism. While Lula’s communist brother shared Bebel’s worldview, Lula as a mass leader never embraced a militant secularism or Marxist ideology, unlike many founding *petistas* (members of the PT). This is not to say that the Brazilian socialist leader, who consistently opposed anti-communism, was unfamiliar with the language of Marxism, its familial disputes, or its many contributions to the global opposition to capitalism.

It is far from an exercise in red nostalgia to place Lula and the PT, a Third-World-oriented socialist political formation, in a political lineage stretching back to the European-centered Internationals founded by Marx and Engels. In creating the nucleus of their respective parties, in 1868 and 1979, Bebel and Lula split with an opposition of liberals ostensibly committed to the creation of a liberal democratic

⁸Frances L. Carsten, “Bebel”, in: *Essays in German History* (London, [1985] 2003), p. 245.

⁹Retallack, “August Bebel”, p. 147.

¹⁰*Idem*, *Red Saxony: Election Battles and the Spectre of Democracy in Germany, 1860–1918* (New York, 2017), pp. 3, 13.

¹¹August Bebel, *My Life* (London [etc.], 1912), p. 235.

constitutional order within a rigged political system designed to prevent or at least minimize their advance. In doing so, Lula and the PT spoke in the language of the famous 1864 inaugural declaration by the short-lived International Working Men's Association (IWA): "the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves; that the struggle for the emancipation of the working classes means not a struggle for class privileges and monopolies, but for equal rights and duties, and the abolition of all class rule".¹²

Four years after the IWA's founding, the twenty-eight-year-old Bebel put an IWA affiliation to a vote in the small workers educational society he led, where it passed by sixty-nine to forty-six. In doing so, his organization broke with the broader liberal democratic camp they identified with the bourgeoisie and set an improbable and historically unprecedented course: the building of an explicitly working-class party that would eventually become the formidable SPD of the pre-1914 era.¹³ While aspiring to be workers' parties, the SPD and the PT were built from the bottom up – as insurgencies linked to popular educational initiatives, trade unions, and social movements – rather than being constructed from the top down, from the state outwards, or on the basis of courting local notables. And their social composition was never homogeneously working class, with significant support from sectors of the highly educated and lower middle classes.¹⁴

After operating clandestinely as an "outlawed party" for twelve years under Bismarck's anti-socialist legislation, the German Social Democratic Party consolidated itself after 1890 as the world's first mass membership socialist party, under the regime of universal male suffrage established by Bismarck in 1870. By 1912–1913, the SPD received nearly thirty-five per cent of the national vote and twenty-eight per cent of the seats in a Reichstag that lacked the means to effectively impact core policies of the crown, the state bureaucracy, or the army. Unlike the SPD, the PT was born in the final phase of a dictatorship and went on to flourish under the far more democratic New Republic after 1985. It was at this point that the country's substantial population of illiterates was finally enfranchised and Marxist-inspired parties like the communists were definitively legalized. Prior to this, small middle-class socialist parties had been tolerated, although they lacked the decisive influence on the working-class and peasant struggles of Brazil's persecuted Communist Party, which had – during a brief interlude in 1945 – received ten per cent of the national vote before being outlawed again in 1947.

The 1988 constitution of the New Republic provided for a presidential system with direct two-stage elections. After a surprising second round showing in a polarized 1989 contest, Lula went on to win twenty-seven to thirty-two per cent of the national vote in 1994 and 1998. In 2002, he attained sixty-one per cent of the second round – a feat repeated in 2006 – although the PT and its allied communist, socialist, and leftist

¹²The International Workingmen's Association, *General Rules*, October 1864. Available at: <https://www.marxists.org/history/international/iwma/documents/1864/rules.htm>; last accessed 8 June 2002.

¹³Bebel, *My Life*, p. 113; Schmidt, *Bebel*, p. 62–63.

¹⁴Retallack, *Red Saxony*, p. 8. In the case of the early PT, "the party's core support base rested with organized interests, intellectuals, and progressive middle-class urbanites in industrial states of the South and Southeast". Wendy Hunter, *Transformation of the Workers' Party in Brazil* (New York, 2010), p. 28.

parties never held much more than a quarter of the chamber of deputies and far less in the Senate. This underlines the degree to which Lula's electoral appeal reached far beyond the votes of the leftist parties and allied social movements that provided the foundation of his political project and whose organizational heft guaranteed his political survival and success.

When Lula's electoral base shifted to the poor and Brazil's poorest regions in 2006, Brazilian academics launched a heated debate about Lula's "personalist" electoral appeal (Lulismo) versus a properly leftist Petismo (loyalty to the PT). At least in the English-language literature on Bebel, most seem to have shied away from considering a personalist dimension to Bebel's preeminence and appeal. This was true for the substantial biography by William Harvey Maehl (1980), with its focus on politics, although the question was raised in the recent biography by Jürgen Schmidt – published in German in 2013 and translated in 2019 – which offers some closing remarks about Bebel and charisma. In Lula's case, everyone agrees that the man is, indeed, charismatic although none are clear on what this might mean. The fourteenth chapter of my book deconstructs, critiques, and redefines the concept while laying out the empirical case for its "birth" during the strikes. That there may be some similarity between the followings of Bebel and Lula is suggested by Trotsky's observation upon hearing of his death: "It seemed incredible: Bebel dead! What would happen to Social Democracy? Ledebour's words about the German party instantly flashed through my mind: twenty percent radicals, thirty percent opportunists, and the rest follow Bebel."¹⁵

Social History, Biography, and Questions of Theory and Method

In 2004, Geoff Eley observed that the writing of biography was an early casualty of the rise of social history during the 1960s and 1970s, being condemned by the discipline's young rebels as a "trivializing and frivolous" enterprise befitting the profession's "benighted traditionalism". Yet, individual biography, he went on, was reclaimed by the 1980s as a site where the "intersection of elaborate and multiform forces [...] [could be] traced through and inside a particular life".¹⁶ A premier example would be Nick Salvatore's 1982 study of Eugene V. Debs, the US trade unionist-turned-socialist presidential candidate. It would prove an influential example of what has been called a "social biography" focused on "how, in what ways, with what success, does an individual interact with, create a life from, and possibly alter a culture and a society not of their own making". In that interplay, Salvatore argued, one can probe how "a broader social history entwines with a more private pattern" as Debs was followed "out of the union hall and

¹⁵Trotsky as cited in Kenneth A. Rasmussen, "August Bebel and the Origins of German Social Democracy, 1863–1890", *The Historian*, 50 (1988), p. 386. Richard J. Evans, "Proletarian Mentalities: Pub Conversation in Hamburg", in: *Proletarians and Politics: Socialism, Protest, and the Working Class in Germany before the First World War* (New York, 1990), pp. 136–138, 143, 148, shows the broad range of views and fascinating debates about Bebel among working class pub frequenters in as recorded by the Hamburg police before World War I.

¹⁶Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2005), p. 168.

its political culture and into other dimensions” of his life including home and community.¹⁷

Such promising beginnings were further stimulated by the gender-based critique of masculinist labor history and the methodological revolution associated with an increasingly sophisticated use of oral history among those who study the twentieth century.¹⁸ Indeed, the question of gender spoke to a central challenge in the “historiography of working-class and left-wing parties”, in the view of national PT leader Marco Aurélio Garcia (1941–2017), an historian by training, who was a top advisor to Lula and his PT successor Dilma Rouseff. As a political cadre since the early 1960s, Garcia invited us to ponder if “a history of the left [is even] possible without a history of political militancy?” In his view, “a party (and political action) cannot be understood without an analysis of its plans, the national and international historical context in which it moved, the cultural traditions which it embodies and the changes in its social bases”. But one must never neglect “the phenomenon of militancy”, where individual and collective paths converge, the “relationship between the public and private spheres” blurs, and “the borders between the objective and subjective are weakened”. No matter how disciplined, militants “are specific people, men and women, bearers of ethical values, political convictions and religious influences” whose backgrounds “affect the way in which they will ‘apply’ the party ‘line’ in society, whether through a speech, pamphlet, other methods of ‘agitprop’ or violent armed action”.¹⁹ In other words, we must avoid analyzing left-wing politics through external labels, ideological markers, and emblematic representations, rather than interpreting these abstractions in light of the diversity of individuals who made them a real force through their actions.

In *Apologies to Thucydides: Understanding History as Culture and Vice Versa* (2004), US anthropologist Marshall Sahlins (1930–2021) took up the challenge of what he called “the acting historical subject” and how we are to conceptualize “the relationships between types of historical agency and modes of historical change”.²⁰ This question, he notes, was most powerfully raised by Jean-Paul Sartre who wryly observed, in his neglected 1957 classic *Search for a Method*, that Paul Valéry may be a petty bourgeois intellectual but not all petty bourgeois intellectuals are Paul Valéry.²¹ Drawing on Sartre, Sahlins notes that there are no standard interchangeable subjects, “persons who are nothing and do nothing but what their class, country, or ethnic group has made them”. Rather, there is only “the concrete individual, whose relations to the totality are mediated by a particular biographical experience in

¹⁷Salvatore’s *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana, IL, 1982). The quotes are from Salvatore, “Biography and Social History: An Intimate Relationship”, *Labour History*, 87 (2004), pp. 189, 190; see also the review essay by James R. Barrett, “American Socialism and Social Biography”, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 26 (1984), pp. 75–81.

¹⁸John D. French and Daniel James (eds), *The Gendered Worlds of Latin American Women Workers: From Household and Factory to the Union Hall and Ballot Box* (Durham, NC, 1997).

¹⁹Marco Aurélio Garcia, “The Gender of Militancy: Notes on the Possibilities of a Different History of Political Action”, in *Gender and History: Retrospect and Prospect*, edited by Leonore Davidoff, Keith McClelland, and Eleni Varikas (Oxford, 2000), pp. 50, 43–44.

²⁰Marshall David Sahlins, *Apologies to Thucydides: Understanding History as Culture and Vice Versa* (Chicago, IL, 2004), p. 151.

²¹Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method* (New York, 1968), p. 56.

familial and other institutions” and who thus expresses “the cultural universals in an individual form”.²²

To paraphrase Sartre, you are not what society has done to you; rather, you are what you do with what is done to you. The freedom to which humans are condemned, Sartre noted, consists in the “small movement which makes of a totally conditioned social being someone who does not render back completely what his conditioning has given him”.²³ In 2000, Anne Lopes and Gary Roth provided an impressive example in their striking monograph on the “men’s feminism” of August Bebel. Sharing a fully embodied and gendered social biographical approach, they exquisitely sketched out “the quite complicated unfolding of [his] beliefs and activities” as Bebel groped “his way towards issues of gender equality”.

Through close textual analysis, Lopes and Roth charted the relationships he sustained with women while paying close attention to the meanings to be found in what may seem the “ambiguous, the vague, [or] the seemingly unimportant” in Bebel’s words or actions. In doing so, they reached beyond the man to situate “Bebel within events for which he was only intermittently important” as part of a larger history that “remains unintelligible without him”.²⁴ In line with Bebel’s “men’s feminism”, Lula would – as head of a union in a ninety per cent male industry – organize its first Congress of Women Metalworkers in 1978 and chose a woman, Dilma Rousseff, as his successor as outgoing president in 2010. Her election offered a striking show of his personal power within the PT and his remarkable sway among the mass of voters; her re-election in 2014 was followed by an illegitimate parliamentary impeachment in a right-wing campaign that jailed Lula to prevent his candidacy in 2018, which was won by the far-right outsider candidate Jair Bolsonaro.

Becoming Lula and Bebel: Avoiding Biography’s Lies

Biography has always been based on a simple lie: the individual’s past is recounted in light of his future. Although presented as a seamless birth-to-death narrative, the storytelling actually begins where the life ends, whether in fame or infamy. “The end is taken as the truth of the beginning”, as Jean-Paul Sartre observed in a memoir of his childhood; “a young lawyer is carrying his head under his arm because he is the late Robespierre”.²⁵ Such backward storytelling in the Brazilian case brings us Lula-as-he-becomes-who-we-already-think-we-know: a vastly popular, widely loved, and much-respected two-term president with a “demotic and larger-than-life personality”.²⁶ In such an emblematic, even iconic, mode of narration, Lula’s public life across four decades is overwhelmed by the retrospective meanings ascribed to his

²²Sahlins, *Apologies to Thucydides*, p. 151; John D. French, “Social History and the Study of ‘Great Men’? The *Hispanic American Historical Review*, William Spence Robertson (1872–1956), and the Disciplinary Debate About Biography”, *Anuario Colombiano de Historia Social y de la Cultura*, 40, Sup. 1 (2013), pp. 99–138.

²³Interview with Jean-Paul Sartre, “Itinerary of a Thought”, *New Left Review*, 58 (1969), p. 45.

²⁴Anne Lopes and Gary Roth, *Men’s Feminism: August Bebel and the German Socialist Movement* (New York, 2000), pp. 23, 46–47. This deeply researched book is remarkably sensitive to the traces of orality to be found in Bebel’s writing, a vital issue too seldom explored by biographers.

²⁵Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Words* (London, 1964), p. 136.

²⁶Richard Bourne, *Lula of Brazil: The Story So Far* (Berkeley, CA, 2008), p. 155.

rise. The socio-economic, institutional, and politico-cultural context of his life fades away, leaving a shallow story devoid of contingency and drama.

As tools of persuasion, emblematic modes of narration have always been fundamental to members, supporters, and journalistic sympathizers of Lula, Bebel, and their parties. Across diverse audiences, mediums, and shifting conjunctures, even academics have deployed narrative frames that treat the two men as personifications of a variety of collectivities, socio-economic processes, cultural hierarchies, or political movements. In this way, Lula or Bebel are commonly taken to symbolize or even embody the working classes that emerged with the Brazilian “economic miracle” of the 1970s or during the maturation and take-off of German industrialization after the 1860s. Alternatively, their trajectories are presented as inextricably bound up with that of their parties. This applies especially to Bebel, very much the organization man who involved himself far more deeply in party administration than Lula and played a decisive public role in intra-party disputes. Lula, by contrast, was more hands off, being involved yet floating above factional divergences (organized tendencies are legal in the PT) while retaining a position as a broker who could in the end resolve or smooth over conflicts as needed. Unlike Bebel, however, Lula neither wrote a book nor styled himself an intellectual, although my book argues that skilled workers like Lula are best understood as a working-class intelligentsia, unrecognized as such by the highly educated.

Biography in the emblematic mode fails to advance our understanding of Lula or Bebel as individuals, their rise to prominence, or the shifting foundations for their enduring roles over the following four decades; after all, influence gained and pre-eminence attained is always under threat. The weakness lies in allowing the inevitability of the forward march to shape a narrative based on knowing how things turned out in the end: the impressive steady growth of Lula’s vote in presidential races or, with Bebel, the striking rise in membership and votes for the candidates of the SPD after 1890. In other words, it fails to fully contend with the contingency of historical action, which is characterized by radical uncertainty and the agony of decisions made or avoided. With the end of the anti-socialist laws, for example, Bebel not only had no way of knowing whether this would be the last attempt, but also did not know that he would never again face prosecution after 1890. Or, when the 1988 Constitution was adopted, Lula had no way of knowing – in the midst of political turmoil and sustained hyper-inflation – whether tomorrow might bring a return to power of the military. In other words, true understanding – especially in terms of causality – can only be achieved if we recognize, in Sartre’s words, that the future always lies at the heart of the present.²⁷

In explaining Lula’s highly improbable ascent, I have consciously avoided recounting his past in light of his future while insisting that we must understand his childhood if we are “to discover the whole man in the adult; that is, not only his present determinations but also the weight of his history”.²⁸ Indeed, one third of my book is spent on the first twenty-three years before Lula even joined the union while the second third focuses on his trajectory at work and in the union and peaks with the

²⁷Sartre, *Search*, p. 96.

²⁸*Idem*, p. 60.

defeat of a forty-one-day strike in 1980 that resulted in the seizure of the union, the persecution of its leadership, and the firing of 15,000 workers. It is only by grappling with the very real pain – and how a potentially career-ending defeat was handled by Lula discursively and in practice – that one can fully grasp leadership as process that is part of a two-way relationship that causally links mass consciousness and action, whether in a strike or at the ballot box.

The rigorous detective work reflected in my book is the culmination of forty years of research and engagement with São Paulo's popular and working classes, especially the metalworkers of ABC, their unions, and their most famous native son. Having explored Lula's emergence as a historical actor and public personality across three quarters of a century, my biography's rich granular detail provides readers a path toward understanding how those on the bottom experienced the processes that shaped their collective well-being and individual prospects as dependent wage earners. I have shown how they maneuvered within a world they did not control but in which they were far from being victims. My tale of two brothers – along with parents, siblings, relatives, adolescent buddies, girlfriends, and shop mates – whose then-anonymous lives were marked by suffering, loss, and nostalgia – is at the same time a story of adventure, joy, and fulfillment.

It consciously avoids the all-too-common temptation to speak of Lula as “not only a man, but also a myth”, in the words of his biographer Richard Bourne, or to describe his life as a fable, as was done by the knowledgeable Brazilian journalist Paulo Markun.²⁹ To do so produces improbable narratives fraught with premonitions of a future destiny while reinforcing the idea of Lula's natural, instinctive, or intuitive “gift for leadership”. Such ideas about his exceptional communicative capacity, if not genius and grace, are shared not only by his friends and admirers but even by his frustrated Brazilian opponents. In naturalizing Lula's talents, empty abstractions – including charisma and *Lulismo* – are retrospectively accorded a causal role in explaining his success. Yet, Lula's actual life trajectory disproves timeless generalizations that suggest a unique gift or a stable “essence”, the main drawback of backward storytelling. In a similar fashion, we must abandon the fiction that any individual can meaningfully ‘represent’ or stand-in for a larger collectivity, which is not only statistically impossible but fails to explain how such an individual came to be accepted by even a minority of that statistical category, why they did not abandon him or her along the way, or how new and different groups came to later link themselves to him.

Thus, Lula is best seen from an early age as a “walking metamorphosis”.³⁰ He may have been rural by birth, but he was deeply urban. He may have hailed from a family of farmers, but he never held a hoe; he was a *nordestino* but would return to his poor home region only after he became famous and he had grown up surrounded by diverse migrants from very different states, including members of the Japanese-descended minority in São Paulo. Given all this, it is hard to assert that Lula reasons and feels as a member of the working class because of his socialization into such an identity

²⁹Richard Bourne, *Lula of Brazil: The Story So Far* (Berkeley, CA, 2008), pp. 230, 210; Paulo Markun, *O Sapo e o Príncipe. Personagens, Fatos e Fábulas do Brasil Contemporâneo* (Rio de Janeiro, 2004).

³⁰This phrase is from a song lyric by Raul Seixas Lula himself has cited. Tiago Pariz, “Lula. ‘Prefiro ser considerado uma metamorfose ambulante’”, *O Globo*, 12 May 2007.

via his immediate family or community. Rather, Lula was being perpetually made and remade while partaking of multiple cultures, identities, outlooks, and ideological influences. And he did so with the energy and drive of an ambitious newcomer with a world to conquer, opportunities to pursue, and a sense of dignity to achieve and defend; might this not also be broadly true for his German counterpart?

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