

## EPILOGUE

# Epilogue: Authoritarianism and the Specter of Democracy

John D. French

Department of History, Trinity College of Arts and Sciences, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, United States, e-mail: [jdfrench@duke.edu](mailto:jdfrench@duke.edu)

Lula acquired a remarkably durable stature during the titanic battles of 1978–1980. Under his leadership, ABC’s workers achieved an “incredible mobilizing force” as part of an unprecedented “politicization of the daily life of the subaltern”. To everyone’s surprise, including their own, workers had decided “the path of their own lives” via a mass movement that sought to universalize their collective and individual demands as a social class and as dignified, rights-bearing citizens. After this momentous occurrence, the leadership of this emerging working class – symbolized by Lula – threw its weight behind a “reformulation of the democratic political system, out of order since 1964”.<sup>1</sup>

At the point Lula was ousted from the union, strike participation had already reached into the millions nationwide – and by the mid-1980s to tens of millions – with Lula personifying the combative New Unionism that predominated in blue-collar, white-collar, and rural workers’ unions. In shifting the balance of power at the core of Brazil’s industrial economy, the movement in ABC was analogous in its long-term impact to the militant sit-down strikes in basic industry in the US in the 1930s that laid the groundwork for the New Deal electoral coalition that prevailed into the 1970s. The advance of Lula and the PT after 1985 occurred during the most electorally democratic period Brazil had ever experienced – with the military withdrawn from the political calculus – as social class, regional, and individual interests were hotly pursued within a competitive multiparty-political system in a continental scale capitalist country. Most importantly, the choice of a presidential not parliamentary system as part of Brazil’s constitutional architecture offered a possibility to Lula and the PT denied their German counterparts: that a socialist could reach the top of the political superstructure and command the executive.

The 2003–2016 PT presidencies would see significant if moderate advances in socio-economic redistribution and an increase in opportunities for upward mobility by the subaltern, including Brazil’s African-descended citizens. Yet, one should not overestimate the degree of acceptance of these democratic advances. Although

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<sup>1</sup>Antonio Luigi Negro, *Linhas de Montagem. O Industrialismo Nacional-Desenvolvimentista e a Sindicalização dos Trabalhadores* (São Paulo, 2004), pp. 315, 308.

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separated in time, Lula's Brazil and Wilhelmine Germany were both characterized by a deeply entrenched authoritarianism rooted in the frustrations of a powerful minority haunted by a "specter of democracy" they saw as embodied in the rising vote for Lula and the SPD.

Rooted in the upper and educated classes, this "multifarious, fractured, authoritarian imaginary" – to use Retallack's term – involved the defense of "cherished ideals, privileges, and interests [...] [ultimately] rooted in the direct experience of lordly domination of landed estates and [...] [of] myths idealizing a system of paternalism".<sup>2</sup> In the face of a perceived threat to long-established hierarchies, this was a "mental map in which authority is found at the very center and liberty is relegated to the margins (if not beyond)".<sup>3</sup> In both countries, the anti-democratic "practice and politics on the right" involved a "contest to sustain relationships of super- and subordination – to deploy power rather than become the object of its deployment". In Brazil, this dynamic is aptly captured in a revealing aphorism "Manda quem pode, obedece quem tem juízo" (those who can, command; those with good judgement, obey).

In a similar fashion, Brazil's entrenched authoritarian imaginary went back to almost four centuries of slavery (abolition came in 1888) during which a tiny minority had grown accustomed to ruling "paternalistically" over a country of slaves, landless peasants, and dependents, two thirds of them non-white. Eternally fearful of democracy although attached to "liberal" rhetorical conventions, the traditional "conservative classes", and their "homens de bem" (men of respect, those with rights versus those without) expected deference from those below. They felt threatened but powerless in the face of the rise of Lula and the PT, which violated established values, norms of conduct, and interpersonal behaviors that undergirded daily life "as it should be", a vision that also appealed to Brazil's "little men".

In both countries, this imaginary was most clearly expressed through rhetorical overkill that Retallack believes historians have been too quick to downplay: the SPD as unquestionably "subversive, violent, revolutionary, irreligious, immoral, and un-German"; or, as Bismarck himself put it, the SPD as a criminal conspiracy of robbers and thieves that must be fought by all who seek "a well-ordered state [...]. The Social Democratic question," Germany's great statesman concluded in frustration, "is ultimately a military one."<sup>4</sup> An analogous discourse would come to occupy center stage in Brazil during the drive of center and right-wing parties, along with economic elites and the mass media, to reject the PT's narrow victory in the 2014 presidential election. In a heated mass campaign mobilizing millions, President Rouseff was in the end impeached and Lula jailed leading to the 2018 victory of a belligerent federal deputy known for his extremist rhetoric and idolization of Brazil's military dictatorship.

During the televised impeachment hearings, Jair Bolsonaro riveted the nation not with his cry of "down with communism", his invocation of God and patriotism, or his praise of the armed forces. Rather, Bolsonaro grabbed the front pages by boldly

<sup>2</sup>James Retallack, *The German Right, 1860–1920* (Toronto, 2006), pp. 18, 39.

<sup>3</sup>*Idem*, pp. 14, 16.

<sup>4</sup>James Retallack, *Red Saxony: Election Battles and the Spectre of Democracy in Germany, 1860–1918* (Oxford, 2017), p. 10; *idem*, *The German Right*, pp. 11, 182.

hailing the military torturer by name who had, he said, struck “horror” into the heart of Rouseff when she was an imprisoned student radical. Speaking to an ecstatic crowd after finishing ahead in the first-round, Bolsonaro pledged that the “reds would be banished from our county [...] Either they should leave or they’re going to jail” where such bandits belong including, he added, his PT run-off opponent Fernando Haddad, a university professor. In chilling language, the man hailed as the “myth” by his enthusiasts pledged *petistas* would all be going “to the end of the beach” (*ponto da praia*), a reference to a naval torture center in Rio during the military regime. Declaring his disdain for workers and the poor, he promised there would be “no more NGOs to satisfy your hunger for mortadella [bologna]”, the lower-class food preference with which anti-*petistas* stigmatize those who supported Lula and the left. With the Armed Forces standing proud, he declared, the “terrorists” who occupy the lands of others, like Brazil’s world famous landless workers movement, will face a “Civil and Military police [that] with judicial backing [will] make the law respected on your backs”, a reference to whipping.

As with his Wilhelmine counterparts, Bolsonaro gave vent to an authoritarian imaginary, hidden in the shadows of an electoral democratic order, which represented a powerful continuity within Brazilian society that found its voice in the crisis that emerged when the center and more moderate right refused to accept the PT’s 2014 victory. While Bolsonaro’s most ardent fans were found among the well off and educated, especially in the richest states, he combined his anti-democratic law-and-order rhetoric with a frank avowal of personal prejudices against Blacks, women, homosexuals, the disabled, and other stigmatized groups. His message did not lack for resonance among a swath of the popular sectors plagued with crime and economic uncertainty, and unsettled by changing social mores. The events of 2015 to 2018 revealed the existence of another Brazil, angry, frustrated, and ambivalent about democracy, as opposed to naive observers who had seen only a stable and “consolidated democracy” with a thriving civil society and a responsible left. It would not take much to give a Brazilian twist to Retallack’s striking formulation: “The specter of democracy – with socialism as its harbinger – was not born in 1933 or 1903. With the Paris Commune as its midwife, this specter first appeared in 1871 and it was a German nightmare.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Retallack, *Red Saxony*, p. 10.