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Lula’s Legacy in Brazil

11 Introduction

13 After Lula: The Brazilian Workers’ Party in Transition
by Silvia Leindecker and Michael Fox

The Workers’ Party promised a new style of politics rooted in roots and activism. But in order to win elections, the party had to make concessions. It embraced a coalition with rival parties, took kickbacks, and paid for votes. Now after Lula’s highly successful second term, the party appears to be back on track—but to where?

19 Lula’s Political Economy: Crisis and Continuity
by Paulo Kliass

For most of his two terms in office, Lula followed the economic policies of his neoliberal predecessors. But the global financial crisis of 2007–9 forced a last-minute change in direction. Lula broke from the mold—he invested locally, raised the minimum wage yet again, and quickly lifted Brazil out of the meltdown as no one had expected.

23 Brazil’s Social Safety Net Under Lula
by Aaron Ansell

Under Lula, 20 million Brazilians were lifted out of poverty. Much of the credit for this achievement has gone to three key social policies: cash-transfer programs to the poor, aid to small farmers, and labor and pension reforms. But these programs all function within the neoliberal framework established before Lula came to power.

27 Lula and the Meaning of Agrarian Reform
by Cliff Welch

Until Lula’s victorious 2002 campaign for president, the Workers’ Party had consistently supported a radical definition of agrarian reform. By 2002, however, its position had changed: Agrarian reform was no longer part and parcel of the fight for socialism, but rather an essential economic development policy.

31 Dilma as Lula’s Successor: The First 100 Days
by Emir Sader

For the first time Brazil has a president who was elected not as an opposition candidate, but as a successor, continuing a government of unprecedented achievement, and following Brazil’s most popular leader since Getúlio Vargas.

32 The Lula Government’s Foreign Policy:
An Interview With Emir Sader
by Pablo Gentili

34 Lula’s Approach to Affirmative Action and Race
by João Feres Júnior, Verônica Toste Daflon, and Luiz Augusto Campos

For decades, racial issues in Brazil were largely absent from public debate. But all that changed with the introduction of affirmative action policies in higher education under the Lula government. Lula was a pragmatic but effective supporter of affirmative action, promoting a debate about the purpose of universities and their social function.
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Obama in Latin America: More of the Same

By Alexis Stoumbelis, Lisa Fuller, and Michael Fox

THE DAY BEFORE PRESIDENT OBAMA ARRIVED in San Salvador on March 21, thousands of union members and campesinos marched to the U.S. Embassy. Over the loudspeaker an organizer proclaimed, “The global economic crisis, climate change, narco-trafficking, insecurity, and the food crisis have their origin in the economic model imposed on our people by the great world powers, primarily the United States.” Outside of Obama’s press conference the next day, hundreds of Salvadorens carried photos of family members who had been killed and disappeared during the country’s civil war, in which U.S.-backed government forces brutally repressed the leftist Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). Marching alongside them, Hondurans bore crosses on their backs in memory of the hundreds of activists killed since the June 2009 coup against President Manuel Zelaya.

Days earlier in Chile, demonstrators denounced a proposed U.S. nuclear energy agreement and called on the United States to acknowledge its role in the 1973 CIA-backed coup against Salvador Allende. Mobilizations in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, forced Obama’s press conference with Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff indoors, as protesters chanted, “Go home, Obama! The petroleum is ours!” Throughout the hemisphere, people waited to hear whether Obama would demonstrate the new era of “mutual interest and mutual respect” with Latin America that he had promised during his campaign. What they heard instead was mostly más de lo mismo—more of the same, dressed up in a language of “partnership” and cooperation.

Before Obama had embarked on his five-day trip to Latin America, he made clear that the primary motivation for the trip was to increase U.S. exports to the region and, in doing so, create new U.S. jobs. His goal, in this “fiercely competitive world,” was to ensure that Latin American countries would import most of their goods from the United States, not from China, the European Union, or other countries in the region. This was especially apparent during Obama’s visit to Brazil, Latin America’s largest economy, where China has just overtaken the United States as the number one trading partner.

Brazil, with an economic growth rate of 7.5% in 2010, is also the world leader in ethanol production and home to the recently discovered deep-water oil reserves estimated by some to be larger than the combined reserves of the United States, Canada, and Mexico.

While culturally significant—the first African American U.S. president visiting Brazil’s first woman president—Obama’s visit was overshadowed by his authorization of the Libya bombing. Meanwhile, as one columnist for the Brazilian newspaper Folha de São Paulo pointed out, Obama lacked “deliverables” or “concrete results.” Obama failed, for example, to announce support for Brazil’s bid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. And for all of his rhetoric about increasing trade, Obama did not offer to reduce the U.S. tariff on Brazilian ethanol.

Obama did, however, offer billion-dollar funds to help Brazilian businesses purchase U.S. products and to support the development of offshore oil rigs. “We want to be one of your best customers,” he said, referring to the oil.

In Chile, Obama and President Sebastián Piñera initiated talks on launching a nuclear power program in the earthquake-prone country—even as the ongoing disaster at Japan’s Fukushima plant was unfolding. Obama gave a speech from Chile’s La Moneda presidential palace in which he embraced hemispheric cooperation. He quoted Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, applauded the heroism of the Chilean miners rescued in October, and reminded listeners that “we are all Americans.” He also praised Chile on its leadership in the transition “from dicta-
torship to democracy,” but failed to apologize for the U.S. support for that very dictatorship. While Obama applauded Chile’s geothermal energy program, as well as Brazil’s biofuel industry, as an example of “alternative energy,” his support for off-shore oil rigs is more of the status quo.

In El Salvador, the gulf between the reality and the rhetoric of a “new era” was perhaps most palpable and painful. Obama made a highly celebrated visit to the tomb of revered martyr Monseñor Óscar Romero, who was murdered in 1980 by Salvadoran soldiers trained at the School of the Americas at Fort Benning, Georgia. However, Obama also announced $200 million for a security initiative to combat narco-trafficking in Central America. Many fear the move could increase human rights violations, as in Mexico, where more than 36,000 people have been killed since 2006 in the “war on drugs.” Before the trip, William Brownfield, assistant secretary for the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs and former U.S. ambassador to Colombia, announced the plan to transform Central America into a “security corridor” between Colombia and Mexico, even though two other security aid packages, the Merida Initiative in Mexico and Plan Colombia, have increased the profitability of the drug trade and driven cartels into Central America.

Salvadoran president Mauricio Funes’s joint statements with Obama did reflect a significant shift from the “crackdown”-only approach of Mexico’s Felipe Calderón or Colombia’s Juan Manuel Santos. Funes emphasized that state investments in job creation and programs for drug rehabilitation and prevention were the only way to stem the proliferation of organized crime and migration. “We cannot continue offering our youngsters only two choices, go to the United States to find employment . . . or to fall into the hands of the criminal gangs,” Funes said. In rhetorical shift, Obama said that Central American governments—and not the United States—would design and implement programs for the new Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARI).

Although Obama agreed with Funes that an economic solution is needed, the policies he promoted were largely a continuation of the last 20 years of neoliberalism. He focused almost exclusively, for example, on fostering foreign investment as the path to development—even as the Canadian mining corporation Pacific Rim is suing El Salvador under a provision of CAFTA for more than $100 million in alleged “lost profits,” after it was denied mining permits to operate near the Lempa River, one the country’s primary sources of drinking water. Pacific Rim is the very type of foreign investor that Obama hailed as El Salvador’s potential savior.

As during his trip to Brazil, Obama’s new economic assistance for El Salvador—including the yet-to-be-defined Building Remittance Investment for Development Growth and Entrepreneurship (BRIDGE) and Partnership for Growth programs—seem intended to continue a vicious cycle of exploitation and dependence, cementing U.S. economic access to countries that are getting better offers elsewhere, including: China and other Latin American nations.

Perhaps Obama’s praise for Funes’s “pragmatism” was meant to assure him that support will be provided as long as corporate interests remain the priority. As recently as the coup in Honduras, the Obama administration showed that it would not defend Central American presidents who strayed too far to the left, for example, by joining the Venezuela-led Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas. FMLN-governed municipalities in El Salvador have been participating in ALBA initiatives with Venezuela for several years, and some co-operation with Cuba has now reached the national level through the FMLN-led Ministries of Health and Education. But maintaining U.S. support is a huge priority for any Salvadoran president, since 2.5 million Salvadorans, or about one third of the population, live in the United States.

Ultimately, Obama’s meeting with El Salvador’s first progressive president is significant not only for El Salvador, but also for the hemisphere. Movements that continue to resist the neoliberal agenda have shifted the terrain, forcing the United States to contend with some of the very political forces, like the FMLN, that it spent hundreds of millions of dollars trying to defeat in the 1980s. Social movements, progressive presidents, and global economic changes too, have pushed Obama to talk about “common prosperity”—even if real cooperation is still a long way off.
Civilization doesn’t eliminate barbarity, it perfects it.
—Voltaire

The most anticipated court decision in the last 17 years has just been made public.” With these words the news was announced on February 14: Judge Nicolás Zambrano of the court of Nueva Loja, Ecuador, found the North American company Chevron-Texaco guilty of causing social and environmental destruction in the Ecuadoran Amazon during its 26 years of operations there. The damage caused by Texaco, which merged with Chevron in 2001, far surpassed the destruction wreaked by BP in the Gulf of Mexico.

The judge declared that Chevron-Texaco, still known as Texpet in Ecuador, should pay a minimum of $8 billion in damages. The ruling further demanded that the North American transnational publicly apologize in Ecuador and the United States to the victims of its crimes. If it failed to do so within 15 days of the ruling, the sum of the damages would double. This is, without a doubt, another powerful message of the ruling: The money is not everything!

Within the week, Chevron appealed the Ecuadoran decision and responded by filing for an injunction in New York U.S. District Judge Lewis A. Kaplan. “Chevron is not apologizing,” the company’s attorney Randy Mastro told Kaplan, saying the court process that led to the ruling was corrupt. Even before the decision came down, Chevron had filed a racketeering lawsuit against the plaintiffs’ lawyers, whom it accused of conspiring to extort up to $113 billion from the company.

The history of this case goes back a long way. Oil exploration in Ecuador began with Texaco, in partnership with Gulf, in 1964 and lasted until 1992. During this time, the company drilled 339 wells on more than 1 million acres of land. In order to extract close to 1.5 billion barrels of crude, the company dumped billions of barrels of production and wastewater, and burned trillions of cubic feet of gas. Texaco did undertake an environmental remediation, carried out between 1995 and 1998, but it was a complete fraud, counting on the complicity of the then local authorities.

This did great damage to the biodiversity of the Amazon region and to the well-being of the people who live there. Indigenous communities and those of colonos (white or mestizo settlers who were once landless and moved to the Amazon) have suffered innumerable offenses to their most fundamental rights in the name of the entire population’s supposed well-being. For the indigenous peoples, the clash with Western civilization in its worst form, the oil company, has meant a radical change in their way of life, and for many of them even the loss of life.

In resistance, the Amazonian communities united around a lawsuit of international significance against Chevron on behalf of 30,000 people. This led to the “trial of the century,” as it is known in Ecuador, which began in 2003. This followed an earlier attempt to sue Texaco in U.S. District Court in New York in 1993, but the court, siding with the oil company, ruled that the case should proceed in Ecuador. During the trial, the plaintiffs presented evidence of unusually high cancer rates (31% of the population, compared with the national average of 12.3%) and other health problems, such as widespread miscarriages, in the region where Texaco once operated. One expert for the plaintiffs, using a conservative analysis based on census and survey data, estimated that more than 1,000 people had died from cancer due to oil contamination.

We know that the primary sources of contamination were the crude oil, the drilling mud, and other additives, as well as the toxic formation waters, which were dumped into the environment beginning in 1967, when Texaco first struck oil. When...
the formation water was dumped, it contaminated rivers, streams, swamps, and soils with petroleum, metals, and salts. The soils at the Texaco drilling stations and in the oil wells contain petroleum-based hydrocarbons and metals in concentrations that are many times higher than the standards for environmental cleanup in Ecuador and other countries around the world. The groundwater beneath the wastewater wells is also contaminated far beyond Ecuadorian standards.

This contamination was a result of Texaco’s environmental policies and practices, which were inadequate. The company failed to implement environmental controls, improperly handled waste production wells, dumped all of the contaminated formation waters into streams and rivers, released burned gases into the atmosphere, spilled oil dozens of times for various reasons—these are just a few of the conclusions that dozens of expert witnesses who testified at the trial. The arguments presented against Chevron-Texaco are clear: The company was directly responsible for the environmental and health impacts of the oil drilling.

There have also been multiple complaints in the psycho-social area: sexual violence by the company workers against both adult and underage women of indigenous and mestizo descent, discrimination and racism, forced displacement, harmful cultural impact, and the rupture of the social cohesion. Furthermore, on Texaco’s shoulders also rest the responsibility of the extinction of at least two indigenous peoples—the Tetetes and Sansahuaris, who once lived in what are now oil-drilling areas but disappeared in the 1970s—on top of all of the economic, social, and cultural damage caused to the indigenous Colán, Kichwa, Siona, Secoya, and Waorani peoples, as well as the harm to colonos.

Out of this struggle came a demand for a moratorium on oil drilling in the Amazon. There also developed the Yasuni-ITT Initiative, proposed by the Ecuadorian government, to refrain indefinitely from drilling the Ishpingo-Tambococha-Tiputini (ITT) oil field in Yasuni National Park—in exchange for 50% of the income that it would have obtained from extracting crude oil, provided by the international community—in the name of preserving biodiversity, indigenous peoples’ rights, and avoiding carbon emissions.

We cannot forget the advantages that Chevron-Texaco enjoyed, including the support of senior Ecuadoran officials and also part of the national press. It also launched and sustained an intense multimillion-dollar campaign to prove its innocence, within Ecuador as well as the United States. Now, after having attempted to escape from the U.S. laws in the first phase of the judicial process, the company insists on showing that the Ecuadorian judicial system is politicized and that the data presented by the plaintiffs is “the product of fraud and is contrary to the legitimate scientific evidence.”

While it is impossible to put a price on the environment, because life is immeasurable, the damage caused has been estimated in the billions of dollars. To that we must also add materials used without payment, work without remuneration, and the sicknesses. The $8 billion to $16 billion are insufficient to repay the victims and to restore the environment. Beyond its outcome, this trial sets a precedent to prosecute one of the world’s most powerful oil companies.

This judgment, moreover, goes beyond the scope of the Amazon. It exceeds what sooner or later Texaco will have to pay. Its operations affected all of humanity, as BP’s would decades later, as well as those of so many other extractive companies all across the planet. This ruling represents an opportunity to punish and halt the pollution caused by the oil and mining industries, which are backed by a combination of political and transnational corporate power around a discourse that encourages the exploitation of natural resources as a basis for achieving development—a discourse that sustains a policy of hiding the reality, intimidating those in opposition, and humiliating and neglecting the victims.

Out of this ruling comes a strong need for global environmental justice that can make human rights and the rights of nature a global reality. The validity of these rights requires the existence of adequate international legal frameworks, taking into consideration that environmental problems are issues that affect humanity as a whole. This ruling against Texaco thus represents a triumph of humanity.
The University of Puerto Rico: A Testing Ground for the Neoliberal State

By Rima Brusi-Gil de Lamadrid

On March 10, American Civil Liberties Union executive director Anthony Romero issued an open letter to the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice on the question of police brutality in Puerto Rico. In the letter Romero called on the Civil Rights Division, which has been investigating the Puerto Rican police since 2008, to complete its investigation and take into account reports of widespread abuses committed against University of Puerto Rico student protesters.

“Students have been mercilessly beaten, maced with pepper spray, and shot at with rubber bullets,” Romero wrote. “Police have also applied torture techniques on immobilized student protesters, including the illegal use of nightsticks to provoke serious and permanent injuries, and the application of pressure in the neck, eye and jaw of the protesters to provoke pain and cause unconsciousness. At most events young women are the first to be targeted for police violence and have also been sexually harassed, groped and touched by police.”

The police violence unleashed against the contemporary Puerto Rican student movement, which emerged in spring 2010, has turned the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) into a testing ground for the neoliberal state. Beyond quelling the students’ exercising their rights of free speech and association to contest “austerity measures” imposed by the university administration under the cover of the island’s “financial crisis,” the
state seems to be testing how much violence it can get away with when repressing protests against its agenda. In a way that has become familiar around the world, state violence in Puerto Rico complements broad, fast-paced neoliberal reforms.\(^2\) This was made evident soon after the 2008 elections, when governor-elect Luis Fortuño (of the pro-statehood New Progressive Party of Puerto Rico, or NPP, and the Republican National Committee) started appointing the members of his cabinet. For the island’s police superintendent, he named a former assistant FBI director, José Figueroa Sancha, who quickly announced his commitment to “zero tolerance” policing (known in Puerto Rico as la mano dura, or, roughly, the iron fist). After Fortuño took office in January 2009, the NPP-dominated Legislative Assembly passed Public Law 7, which declared a state of fiscal emergency and authorized the government to fast-track the dismissal of some 17,000 public employees, while expanding private contracting (including with companies hired to manage the layoffs). Public Law 7 also cut funds to the public university system.

The following August, the government of the capital city of San Juan decided to strictly enforce existing regulations against public drinking. In an ominous precursor, large numbers of Puerto Rico and municipal police, including riot police, were mobilized to target Avenida Universidad, directly in front of the UPR campus in Río Piedras, a subdivision of San Juan. Instead of simply fining violators up to $500, as the law stipulates, the officers chased students down the street and tear-gassed them, in one case sending a young woman to the hospital with a badly wounded thigh.\(^3\)

In April 2010 the UPR administration announced that tuition waivers, traditionally given to athletes, band and choir members, and honor students, would be eliminated for students eligible for Pell Grants, which are granted on the basis of financial need. This was touted as part of the solution to the university’s crisis; its budget was already depressed before the passing of Law 7, and the additional cuts have spilled disaster. The university now faces an estimated annual deficit of between $240 million and $300 million.\(^4\)

Students responded by launching a strike. Originally planned as a two-day stoppage, the strike ended up lasting almost 10 weeks. Although one would hardly know it from the U.S. media, the students’ massive protests repeatedly paralyzed Puerto Rico’s 11-campus, 65,000-student public university system. They not only organized large demonstrations but also developed new participatory forms of decision making and created their own media—including some that are still going strong, for example the online newspaper Rojo Gallito, websites like Estudiantes de la UPR Informan, and online radio stations like Radio Huelga.\(^5\)

After the student strike began, Fortuño framed his administration’s position toward the UPR strike. In a speech, he called the student strikers “members of a tiny minority” driven by selfish, “ideological” motives, as opposed to a “silent majority” that “really wants to study.” He referred to public, affordable higher education as a “privilege” that Puerto Rico provides to its students at no small cost to its citizens. “Tuition paid by students covers hardly 3% of the university’s budget; the rest is paid by us taxpayers,” he said, contrasting responsible citizens with the protesting students. “That is why our people—a just and noble people, but also respectful of law and order, and believing in democracy—get upset when they see what we have all witnessed at the university.”\(^6\)

Officials and public figures—including ex-governor Romero Barceló, Police Superintendent Figueroa Sancha, chief of staff Marcos Rodríguez, and UPR Board of Trustees president Ygrí Rivera—echoed the governor’s sentiments, portraying the students as selfish, privileged, disorderly, and ideologically driven. Disparaging the students and their cause, politicians and administrators speaking to the media, especially radio, frequently described them as socialists, leftists, anarcolocos (anarchist crazies), and even terrorists.\(^7\)

Yet by June, popular opinion seemed to side with the students. Editorials in major newspapers urged the university administration to negotiate with the students, as did San Juan Superior Court judge José Negrón Fernández, who named a mediator. Sixty-nine days after the strike began, the students ended it and an agreement was signed by a majority of the trustees that included some important victories: Tuition waivers would remain in place; the imposition of an $800 annual fee was postponed, pending reexamination and discussion; and university employees and students who participated in the strike would not be subject to administrative sanctions.\(^8\) The agreement, however, was not signed by either Rivera or UPR president José Ramón de la Torre.

The government, meanwhile, did not miss a beat. Aggressively pursuing their agenda, Fortuño and the legislature set about undermining democratic governance at UPR, both in the administration and among students. On June 21, Fortuño signed a law that had been fast-tracked through the legislature the same day, expanding UPR’s Board of Trustees from 13 to 17 members, and announced the names of the new members the very next day.\(^9\) (To put this in context, UPR, with fewer than 60,000 students, now has almost as many trustees as the New York State university system, with more than 400,000 students.) Attuned to the legislature’s activities, members of student media,
unions, and environmental groups attempted on June 30 to observe a legislative session in which several key new laws would be discussed—including one that would criminalize certain protests and another that would effectively abolish student assemblies and replace them with an anonymous electronic voting system. But the Capitol that morning was closed to the public and surrounded by riot police, despite the fact that the legislature’s sessions are open to the public under the Constitution. Numerous incidents of police brutality against demonstrators, as well as members of the press, were documented that day by both mainstream and alternative media.

During the ensuing months the new majority on the Board of Trustees installed chancellors on several campuses who were openly rejected by faculty assemblies and search committees. At the Mayagüez campus, the new chancellor declared that any demonstrations or protests were to take place in a new “public expression zone” located in an old athletic track, far away from campus buildings—and potential audiences. The Puerto Rican satirical online newspaper El Name wondered whether such a move was not, after all, equivalent to sending protesting students to the moon, to “freely” express what nobody would hear.

Finally, in December, Fortuño signed the law that made student voting electronic, effectively eliminating open, public debate in student assemblies. Soon after, the trustees ratified the postponed $800 fee, to be implemented in January, without so much as a glance at student and faculty proposals—some of which even agreed to allow students and employees to shoulder more of the university’s financial burden, as long as the trustees agreed to demand that the legislature undo the cuts to the university’s budget mandated by Law 7, as well as to direct monies owed by other government agencies, estimated at $300 million, to the university. All these proposals were ignored, however, and the student fee simply implemented.

These developments prompted the students at the Río Piedras campus to mobilize for a second strike, beginning with a 48-hour stoppage on December 7–8, with the option to begin an indefinite strike December 14. Then, in the early-morning hours of December 7, when the two-day strike was to commence, private security guards hired by the university demolished the gates to the Río Piedras campus to prevent the students from barricading themselves in, as they had done earlier in the year. Many of the private guards were young men from impoverished communities with little training and education, hired—in a surreal turn of events—by the ex-wrestler Chicky Starr, well-known years ago for his cheating ways in the ring and now a recruiter for the Capitol Security company.

By December 9, private guards, riot police, and Puerto Rican police had virtually occupied the campus. They have, with few interruptions, remained ever since. The police occupation of the UPR campus beginning in December marked the first time that the police had entered university grounds in the decades since the drafting of the No-Confrontation Policy, created to promote non-violent negotiation between conflicting groups at the university in the late 1980s, following violent confrontations between police and students. It required that the police stay off campuses.

Further crimping students’ rights, the Supreme Court of Puerto Rico ruled on December 13 that university students do not have a right to go on strike. Because students are not employees, the Court argued, what they “call ‘strike’ is simply an organized protest.” As a consequence of this decision, the UPR administration was now legally empowered to “regulate the orderly exercise of free speech and association within the university community.” Immediately after the Court’s ruling, the chancellor of the Río Piedras campus circulated a letter announcing that large gatherings and demonstrations on campus would not be permitted until January 12, when classes were to resume, in order to “preserve safety.” The chancellor’s decision was later found unconstitutional.

Despite the students’ efforts in defiance of the crackdown on their right to protest, the $800 fee has remained in place. It is expected to bring in an annual $40 million. Meanwhile, the Board of Trustees in April decided to request a $75 million line of credit for new construction projects that will be outsourced to private developers. One of the projected buildings will house the Army ROTC, a program that will serve only about 100 students and whose presence on campus has historically been criticized and resisted.

Although students and their supporters have faced police violence since the first strike began, it intensified in the winter, once the $800 fee was instituted and students defied official limits on their expression. Now there were incidents every day, and numerous students were arrested, with many of the women reporting being groped by the arresting officers. In January, UPR professors joined the chorus of denunciations, condemning the techniques used by the police during the arrests as torture. In February, riot police attacked demonstrators at a sit-in at the Capitol with rubber bullets, arresting more than 150.

The same week, a “paint-in”—in which students gathered at the university to paint slogans against the fee and the police presence on campus—ended in chaos, after the police attacked the demonstration, and dozens of student activists, as
well as passersby, ended up wounded or arrested.22

University faculty and employees joined the students’ protests against the police violence and occupation of the university, culminating in the resignation of UPR president De la Torre on February 11. Following a massive march of some 15,000 people on February 12, Fortuño, who had spent the weekend in Washington at the Conservative Political Action Conference, returned to Puerto Rico and announced that the police would be withdrawn from campus. By the 25th, however, they had returned.23

If the University Became a Testing Ground for the Violence of the Neoliberal State, it has also become one for an exhausted student movement that has come under increased criticism, including from within its own ranks, for tactics such as wearing hoods, closing down the campus, and throwing smoke bombs inside buildings.24 This critique reached a high point in March, when Ana Guadalupe, the Río Piedras chancellor, was assaulted by an angry mob of protesters.25 Predictably, the government and its supporters immediately condemned the incident; some in the media who had supported the students, like Mayra Montero, a popular columnist for El Nuevo Día, now scolded them and called the strike “a failure.”26

Others lamented the incident for its improvised and violent nature, so different from the nonviolent yet creative and assertive expression people had come to expect from the student movement. Yet others have noted that the state and the administration were quick to investigate, arrest, and prosecute students for pulling Guadalupe’s hair and throwing water at her, but that the numerous abuses committed by police against the students never seem to be adequately investigated, if at all. To name just one example, in May 2010 videos and photos posted online supported allegations that Assistant Police Superintendent José Rosa Carrasquillo had repeatedly kicked a subdued student in the genitals, prompting the ACLU to demand that he be dismissed and charged with assault.27 Nothing came of it.

Although the use and abuse of police forces and the erosion of civil rights are the most visible, and the most visibly violent, tactics of neoliberalism being tested at UPR, they are not the only ones. They have accompanied a concerted effort to shrink the institution and funnel public funds away from it. Although the administration has not explicitly stated plans to close campuses or eliminate programs, it publicly bases its revenue projections on an estimated student body of 50,000 students, which is 15,000 fewer than in 2008, and the lowest number since the early 1970s.

When the administration reported that about 54,000 students had registered in late January and early February, it called this “a success.”28 The number of registered students has declined since 2010 for a variety of reasons—some have been asked to leave, as exchange students recently were, for “security reasons.” Some have left because of the conflict, as the administration is quick to point out. And some have left because they simply can no longer afford it, though their number remains unknown.

Perhaps the most significant factor in the loss of students, however, has been the deliberate elimination of course offerings, which prevents students from being able to achieve full-time status. Low-income students are particularly vulnerable to this, since to qualify for a Pell Grant students must register for at least 12 credits. These low-income students who leave will become particularly attractive as “customers” for private colleges, which may end up benefiting from how the legislature plans to use $30 million to “help” the UPR budget. Instead of giving the money directly to the troubled institution so that the fee could be reduced for everyone, it will be given away to individual students, selected by a board, as a “scholarship.” It would not be surprising for these “scholarships” to eventually morph into a sort of voucher system that students would be able to use in the private colleges that are proliferating on the island.29

Indeed, the deliberate shrinking of the UPR system is equivalent, if not identical, to the privatization of higher education. This would be consonant with the broader neoliberal agenda of Fortuño, who once served on the Board of Directors of one of the largest private education institutions in Puerto Rico, the Ana G. Méndez university system. The consequences of this agenda would be devastating for the diversity of the student body. Because socioeconomic inequality translates into pre-college educational inequality, students from poorer communities tend to have lower admission, retention, and graduation rates. As the university gets smaller, the students most likely to be affected are precisely those with the most economic need. They will likely end up at private institutions in Puerto Rico, most of which have higher tuitions and lower graduation rates than UPR.

This has implications for the student profile, for institutional diversity, but even more critically, for the ability of Puerto Rico to face its current and future social and economic challenges.

Historically, the people of Puerto Rico have viewed their public university not as a cost or as a burden but as an investment—the kind of investment most needed in times of economic crisis. At stake in the students’ continuing struggle are the civil rights of Puerto Ricans and the question of whether the public university, and indeed the very notion of public investment in the common good, will survive.
According to an old Brazilian joke, “Brazil is the country of the future—and always will be.” But the future may have finally arrived with the presidency of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–10). Under Lula, Brazil seemed to have reached one of those moments in history when a society enters a new epoch. Lula oversaw robust economic growth, chipped away at the country’s massive social and economic inequality, and pushed forth Brazil’s emergence as a rising economic and geopolitical power. Lula’s presidency was also a personal triumph: He left office with approval ratings of more than 80% in public opinion polls, making him the most popular president in the country’s history.

Brazil’s new epoch may be identified with an individual, perhaps fairly, perhaps not. An individual can be a catalyst for major changes but can also benefit from timing, getting credit for changes that come to a head just in time to cast up a hero. How much credit can Lula and his administration take? In this Report we consider that question.

Lula’s record is all the more remarkable given his origins and the obstacles to political change in Brazil. He was born in poverty in 1945 in the northeastern state of Pernambuco and migrated with his family at the age of seven to São Paulo, then Brazil’s booming industrial city. He never went beyond the fourth grade in school, but emerged in the 1970s as the leader of a labor-based movement of opposition to the military dictatorship that gave rise to the Workers’ Party (PT). Lula has been the PT’s unquestioned leader since it was founded in 1980 and was its candidate for president three times before winning election in 2002.

The PT promised to be a different kind of party, eschewing Brazil’s traditional clientelism, corruption, and corporatist interest-group politics. The PT called itself a class-based party, overtly committed to socialism and specifically to agrarian reform, participatory democracy, redistribution of wealth, independence from the North American superpower, and regional solidarity within Latin America. As journalists Silvia Leindecker and Michael Fox make clear in their article, the PT under Lula has transformed in ways that its longtime militants have not always welcomed.

A major corruption scandal involving congressional vote-buying devastated the party in 2005, though Lula himself was not publicly implicated. The PT went from a party of committed militants to more of a professional party with much less organic contact with its base; its electorate was also transformed, as the beneficiaries of Bolsa Família (Family Stipend), a program of cash transfers to the poor, voted massively for Lula in the 2006 election (especially in the poverty-stricken Northeast), while he lost support in the party’s traditional southern and southeastern base and among educated middle-class voters.

When Lula became president, Brazil had been one of the world’s top 10 industrial economies for some years. The military dictatorship (1964–85) and the first civilian governments that succeeded it had all followed a path of capital-intensive, conservative modernization. Lula’s predecessor, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, opened the economy to an unprecedented influx of foreign capital and hewed closely to the dictates of international finance. Lula vowed economic orthodoxy in his 2002 campaign, in a “Letter to the Brazilian People.” But it was really addressed to foreign investors and creditors. He reassured them that he would not attack the position of capital or withdraw from any international agreements. In office he was more orthodox than Cardoso, who had run up a substantial public debt. Lula, on the contrary, ran a high budget surplus and paid the debt to the IMF in full.

Paying off the IMF was greatly helped by Brazil’s emerging position in the world economy. Under Lula the country found new markets for its products, for which there was elevated demand throughout Lula’s time in office, helping the country achieve relative prosperity in the decade of the 2000s. Brazil particularly tightened its relationship with China, now its most important trading partner.

Cardoso’s supporters say that Lula’s economic successes would not have been possible without the stabilizing measures of his predecessor. But as Brazilian economist Paulo Kliass points out in his article, the government showed its willingness to step out of neoliberal orthodoxy to address...
the international financial crisis of 2008. Responding rapidly, the government maintained public expenditures and guaranteed that private banks would continue to provide credit. As a result, Brazil suffered less from the economic crisis than most countries, with growth resuming by the end of 2009 and a growth rate for 2010 of 7.5%. These expansionary and interventionist policies were very different from Cardoso’s.

Central to this was Bolsa Família and other cash-transfer programs, as well as credit to small farmers for food production and pensions for workers in the country’s expanding informal sector, where an increasing part of Brazil’s labor force works. Anthropologist Aaron Ansell notes in his contribution to this Report that cash-transfer programs began not under Lula but Cardoso, who originally sold it to the public as an efficient, market-friendly means of alleviating poverty. Under Lula, Cardoso’s limited program was extended to the entire poor population, while as under Cardoso the recipients were obligated to keep their children in school and see that they received regular medical attention. According to the World Bank, the poverty rate fell from 22% to 7% between 2003 and 2009 (though inequality as measured by the Gini index still remains very high).

The greatest disappointment to Lula’s longtime supporters has been his rejection of agrarian reform and his promotion of large-scale agriculture. Small cooperative farms produce more food, use land more productively, and create more jobs than the same amount of land in large-scale commercial farms. The biggest and most mobilized social movement in Brazil, probably in all of Latin America, is the Landless Workers Movement (MST), which has been militantly occupying land and pushing for agrarian reform for 25 years. Yet government benefits to small-scale agriculturalists have been limited to a family farm credit, the legalization of squatters’ possessions, and the colonization of new land in the Amazon region. There has been little move to challenge the latifundio and distribute land from absentee owners to those who work it. As historian Cliff Welch notes herein, the Lula government managed to avoid “challenging concentrated land ownership where it counts”—among private landowners in the northeast coastal zone, where large-scale agribusiness is concentrated. “This is no surprise,” Welch writes. “Agribusiness was a linchpin of the PT’s overall economic policy under Lula, who helped construct the narrative of agribusiness as the ‘savior’ of the Brazilian economy.”

Finally, it is impossible to talk about social inequality in Brazil without discussing race. While many of the beneficiaries of the income subsidies are black or of mixed race, there are also many in the rising middle class whose relative poverty has consigned them to inferior public schools, where they are poorly prepared for the competitive admission to Brazil’s public universities. During Lula’s term, affirmative action programs, which began haltingly in the 1990s, expanded dramatically. The federal government has not mandated affirmative action; that has been left to individual public universities (or, in some cases, state governments). But as political scientist João Feres shows, the support of Lula personally and his administration have greatly expanded the political space for these programs, which have admitted students based on a mixture of racial and economic criteria so that poor Brazilians of all races have benefited to some degree.

In eight years as president, Lula was both progressive and pragmatic. He achieved some major goals, including greater equality of income, but he converted an activist, progressive movement-party into an institution that trims its demands to maintain capitalist hegemony. As president, Lula was both progressive and pragmatic. He achieved some major goals—greater equality of income and national independence—but he has converted an activist, progressive movement-party into an institution that trims its demands to maintain capitalist hegemony. At the same time, he has presided over Brazil’s emergence as an up-and-coming world power. Lula chose not to govern by mobilizing his left constituency for radical change. While falling far short of the ambitions of longtime PT militants, he nevertheless has accomplished a lot.

Whether these changes turn out to inaugurate a new epoch will depend significantly on his successor, Dilma Rousseff, who will pursue the same goals to build on Lula’s success, although without his charisma and personal popularity. Lula himself has been silent about his future, saying only in his farewell speech that he will “live the life of the streets.” But few people believe he will disappear from public view.
After Lula: The Brazilian Workers’ Party in Transition

By Sílvia Leindecker and Michael Fox

The day before the first round of the 2010 elections, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva took his likely successor, Dilma Rousseff, home to where it all started—the ABC Metalworkers’ Union building in São Bernardo do Campo, an industrial city to the south of São Paulo. Rousseff followed Lula out the doors of the building and into a packed crowd that roared with excitement. Climbing into a nearby car, they slowly caravanned through the streets, flanked on all sides by supporters who sang and danced to the campaign songs, and cheered for the homecoming and the future.

It was here that Lula got his start as a labor leader more than three decades ago, and where he led hundreds of thousands in the first major strikes against the Brazilian dictatorship. At the time, this São Paulo suburb was the hub of Brazilian industry, and the ABC Metalworkers’ Union was the heart of the labor movement, which by 1980 had founded a radical new movement that would give power to the people—the Workers’ Party (PT).

The PT fought to end the dictatorship and democratize Brazil. Its activists prided themselves on their militancy, ethics, transformative politics, and practices of democratic internal debate. But in order to win elections, the party had to make concessions. Over the course of its evolution, the party dropped the word “social-
ist” from its platform and embraced coalitions with rival parties. It even took kickbacks and paid for votes; scandals ensued. The largest was the mensalão, or “big monthly payment,” scandal, which broke in mid-2005. Representatives in the Brazilian Congress had been paid off for several years to support key projects introduced by the Lula administration. The crisis rocked the party to its very core just months before Lula’s bid for reelection in 2006. Now, after Lula’s highly successful second term, the party appears to have recovered from the scandals. But where is it headed?

At the ABC Union building two days after Rousseff’s resounding 56% victory in the runoff presidential elections, union leader Silvio Nascimento was resolute.

“All of the scandals, it lifted a curtain, and stirred a debate within the PT,” Nascimento explained. “It helped us to wake up in time. To learn from our own mistakes.”

The mensalão scandal led sectors of the PT to speak of refounding the party and the left.1 Defections were inevitable. A current within the PT, the Socialist Popular Action, split from the party, carrying five congressional representatives to the fledgling Socialism and Freedom Party, which had been created the year before by another group of left-wing PT congressional representatives who had been expelled in 2003 for voting against Lula’s social security reform.

As a result of the scandal, according to Francisco Menezes, co-director of the Brazilian Institute of Economic and Social Analysis (IBASE), in Rio de Janeiro, the party began to lose its diversity. “Of course everyone was still rooted in the principles of the party,” Menezes said. “But you lost important figures who would make the internal debate more dynamic.” With the majority of the party defections coming from the left-wing currents, the PT was pushed toward the political center.

The mensalão scandal also forced the resignation of top PT figures, including the last two presidents of the party and the treasurer. Lula responded by replacing several ministries with non-PT ministers from among the governing coalition. Lula also distanced himself from the party, even decreasing the size of the PT star in his 2006 electoral propaganda. In some ways, electorally, his steps were rewarded. The middle-class voters who defected over the scandals were replaced by poor voters, largely from the impoverished Northeast, who cared more that for the first time the government was looking out for them. In 2003–4, Lula had launched a subsidized residential electricity program, a literacy campaign, and Zero Hunger—a package of social programs including soup kitchens, water cisterns for rural communities, and Bolsa Família (Family Stipend), a monthly cash support for low-income families with children in school. By the end of 2006, more than 11 million families received Bolsa Família benefits.2 This contributed to a huge shift in electoral support, giving Lula and the PT the voters who had eluded them for decades.

A central theme in Rousseff’s 2010 electoral strategy was convincing these voters that she would “stay the course” and continue the policies initiated by Lula and his government. Bolsa Família and other social policies were so important in the 2010 electoral campaign that Rousseff and her closest challenger, José Serra of the Social Democrat Party, fought over who would best implement these programs to ever growing numbers of people.

Rousseff’s place as Lula’s chief of staff since 2005 helped her to win the day. This was clear at the final rally in São Paulo before the first round elections. Beneath a thick rain, thousands of PT supporters packed into the massive samba stadium. Rousseff was applauded, but the real hero was Lula. Cheers for the outgoing president echoed over the crowd when he took the stage. It took several minutes for them to quiet enough for Lula to speak. Some of Lula’s fans that night were longtime PT supporters, but many were new converts from the poor communities outside the city who had come by the busload to see their hero and his likely successor. This is the shifting face of the PT.

With the help of Lula’s social programs, the PT has won over a lower-class electorate that is traditionally used by politicians for their votes and then ignored once in office. Lula made good on his promises, and voters responded. In 2006, Lula won between 60% and 86% of the valid votes in the impoverished North-Northeast. This was the same region that had voted overwhelmingly against Lula (55% to 70%) in his first presidential run in 1989, in part because of the media spin that Lula would socialize what little they had. The charismatic young neoliberal candidate Fernando Collor de Mello was portrayed as poised to carry them into a new era of success.3

While these voters came out in droves for Lula in 2006, they did not necessarily vote for the PT across the ticket. In 2006, for the first time, the PT actually lost seats in both the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies. This points to two trends: (1) Low-income voters identified with Lula—born to a poor family in the Northeast—although they did not necessarily connect with the PT, and (2) poor PT supporters cared more
about social benefits, like Bolsa Família, than the leftist political ideology that invigorated supporters in the party’s early years.

With this shifting electoral base, under the Lula government, the PT became both more populist and personalist, but nowhere near Brazil’s historic Getúlio Vargas or Argentina’s Juan Perón. While Lula has always been the shining star, the PT itself remains too important. Now out of office, Lula will take a backseat.

“Lula will only be called upon if there is really a moment of crisis, and Dilma is attacked by the opposition. Then it is possible that he will be called to support Dilma. But on the other hand, Rousseff is going to follow his lead,” said Igor Fuser, a political scientist at the Cásper Libero University in São Paulo.

Fortunately, Rousseff’s election opened the window of opportunity further for change. Although she also came from the grassroots struggle against the dictatorship, she did not emerge through the unions or the PT. She is a new figure and an outsider. So much so that ABC’s Silvio Nascimento believes that her candidacy would have been rejected by the PT party leadership had Lula presented her in his first term, before the corruption scandals.

She is also the figure who perhaps best characterizes the PT’s new face, having been appointed as Lula’s chief of staff after top party officials were forced to resign following the mensalão scandal. Her candidacy and presidency marked a shift away from the personalism of Lula, and a point of unity for the PT.

Already in December there was more cohesion than ever before from the various PT currents jostling for political power in the new Rousseff government. This is at least partially due to the “maturity” Nascimento spoke of shortly after Rousseff’s victory. “It is important for the people to try to resolve their problems inside the party, to resolve their issues in the debate,” he said.

According to Bernardo Cotrim, director of political education of the Rio de Janeiro State PT, there is more space for dialogue and synthesis today within the party than before. “The crisis of 2005 played a role of opening this up,” he explained. “Principally from 2002 to 2005, the majority of the decisions were very centralized, with
In the 1980s, the PT revolutionized local government, opening democratic space to the community through processes like participatory budgeting, and popular councils. But slowly the party slid into the games of everyday Brazilian politicking—adapting to the tough realities of getting elected and holding offices across the country.

Since at least 1995, internal party power had been dominated by a faction known as the Majority Camp, which prioritized winning elections over grassroots activism. Led by Lula, José Dirceu, and their São Paulo allies, the majority coalition won all but one of the party’s national internal elections. Meanwhile, Lula consolidated the lessons learned from previous PT elected offices. In the presidency, he only took on the political fights he knew he could win, which explains why his foreign policy was much more progressive then the rest of his platform. The PT tabled some of its historic demands, such as urban and agrarian reform.

“The PT bet on institutionalism,” said José Batista de Oliveira, a leader of Brazil’s Landless Workers’ Movement (MST) in Brasilia. “We respect their decision. On one hand it has been a victory and they have been able to carry out some social reforms. On the other hand it has been really bad. In the sense of grassroots organization, it was a defeat. It weakened the social struggle, and it didn’t truly alter the institutionalism of inequalities, agrarian and urban reform.”

That has not necessarily meant a decline in the social movements, but a change in their demands. While there are contradictions between the PT platforms and the realities once the PT gets into office, for Brazil’s major labor federation, the Unified Workers’ Central (CUT), the PT has opened the door of opportunity.

“It’s a different context now with the PT in government. We went from a period of resistance to a period of achievement,” said Anderson Campos, youth adviser to the CUT Executive Council. “We no longer had to fight against the privatization of the public sector. Instead, we fought for a minimum wage increase. Now that employment has risen, our demand for 2011 is work with dignity. So the agenda is much more favorable today than 10 years ago.” According to Campos, Brazil’s labor movement was “far more victorious” under the Lula government than in the 1990s, winning increased salaries and workers’ rights. But on the streets during election time, the PT has followed the lead of the more traditional parties that pay “volunteers” to wave banners and hand out flyers for their candidates.

“That would have been unthinkable 20 years ago,” said former PT member, now Rio de Janeiro state legislature Porto Alegre residents at a participatory budgeting assembly in 2002. Many Workers’ Party members are now pushing to reinvigorate grassroots participation in the party and local government.

a position that at times could even be considered authoritarian. This has improved a lot.”
with the Green Party, Rogerio Rocco. “The PT is no longer a party of the street. It is no longer a party of activists. It is a party in power.”

This shift in the party has been noted by scholars. University of Texas political science professor Wendy Hunter, for example, told the Folha de São Paulo in November that “the PT changed to the point of almost being unrecognizable.” Pedro Florianó Ribeiro, a political scientist at Federal São Carlos University in São Paulo State, explained that these changes largely took place as a result of Majority Camp policies and the fact that “the state ties became central to the survival of the organization.”

“As the PT won elections, this brought changes to the party,” Ribeiro said. “Elected representatives in the Congress, Senate, mayors, and governors, all acquired more and more power within the party, because they control the sources of funding and they control positions that are held by the activist base.” According to Ribeiro, this process “came from the 1980s and principally the 1990s” but “increased” with the Lula government, because there were thousands of positions to be held. “So this changed the balance of power within the organization,” he said.

For Ribeiro, the PT has become a type of “cartel party” or an “electoral-professional party”—in other words, a 21st-century version of a “catch-all,” appealing to a broader base with vague proposals, like the U.S. Republican or Democratic parties, but with radical roots. Hunter points out that the party’s decision to increasingly contract professional consultants, publicists, and media experts “represented a break with the party’s historical aspiration to lead rather than to follow the masses,” another core characteristic of the electoral-professional party.

In short, the PT has shifted far enough to the center to attract mainstream voters. In 2006, social programs like Bolsa Família helped to ensure the support of poorer communities, regardless of political affiliation. Meanwhile, the PT’s elected officials hold power over party leaders. Money and power largely come from the state and large corporations. This is especially important in Brazil, where political campaigns are expensive and corporations provided, on average, 11 times more money to right-wing congressional candidates than the PT in 1994, and six times more in 1998. With unions barred from contributing to electoral campaigns, and with the need to raise cash, Lula began in 2002 to receive off-the-book donations from big investors that did not want to “have all their eggs in one basket,” according to political philosopher and former PT voter Ruy Fausto. The move lifted Lula to the presidency, but it further diluted the PT platform and ultimately led to the corruption schemes that would plague the first term of his government.

“We changed. The PT changed,” admitted PT founder and Rio Grande do Sul PT president Raul Pont. “It transformed into a more electoral party, throwing all of its effort at institutionalism. We can say it was inevitable, but on the other hand, we can’t lose our militancy, our origins, and our political identity. We run the risk of transforming ourselves in one more party of the establishment.”

That is exactly what many critical voices fear has happened, and what others within the party are fighting by returning power to the núcleos de base—the community- or issue-based party cells that were once the heart of the PT, where members went to debate and organize.

The importance of the núcleos waned as the PT won elections, consolidated, and institutionalized. They still exist, but they are largely debilitated, especially after a 2001 reform to the PT statutes installed direct elections for party representatives. In most parties, the move would be seen as positive step toward increasing democracy, but for the PT, it stifled debate and grassroots participation. Before, the núcleos would choose delegates to go to the PT conventions on the municipal, state, and national levels. Issues and electoral candidates were debated in lively assemblies until they could come to a decision. “All of this was lost because the meetings are worthless now,” says Ribeiro. “The members vote to elect their representatives. The meetings still happen, but they are worthless, because when you have a meeting, you already know who won majority.”

Fully aware of this, the PT in Brazil’s southernmost state of Rio Grande do Sul decided in 2009 to go back to its roots, holding vibrant municipal meetings across the state with local delegates. The move came after several years of the right-wing governor Yeda Crusius, who cracked down on social movements and helped to outlaw the itinerant schools of the MST.

“We returned to our origins in 2009 with the same methodology we had used before 2001,” explained Uribatan de Souza, the former state coordinator of participatory budgeting. The day of the state conference in Porto Alegre, there was standing room only in the Dante Barone Theater of the Legislative Assembly, where hundreds of PT members were actively debating their next steps. The move helped to consolidate the organization around the governor’s candidacy of Tarso Genro, a former Porto Alegre mayor and minister of education and justice under Lula.

Genro won the governorship overwhelmingly in the first round of the 2010 elections. His administration is now discussing plans to reinstall participatory budgeting throughout the state, and the Rio Grande do Sul PT has
launched a commission to discuss an official return to the pre-2001 statutes.

Rio Grande do Sul is not the only place that has kept the grassroots spirit of the PT alive. In 2009, 700 PT members from 28 núcleos in the São Paulo municipalities of Carapicuíba and Osasco joined forces to form a grassroots network that they call the Fórum dos Núcleos. The first experience of its kind, the forum is helping to reignite grassroots activism in the region, holding several local meetings, trainings, and political and cultural activities.

However, Angela Donda, a longtime PT member who helped to organize the fórum admitted that having Lula in office has been a real drain on the núcleos, since their strongest leaders were picked for positions in the government. Under the Lula administration almost 23,000 positions were filled by appointees—slightly more than previous administrations. “This was a shock,” Donda said. “We’re still trying to overcome the lack of their leadership with the development of new activists.”

While the PT has grown tremendously in recent years—now to nearly 1.7 million members—many of the new affiliates have signed up without the political commitment of the traditional PT party activists. This was a conscious shift, promoted by PT leaders like José Dirceu in the Majority Camp, in order to make the party more palatable to the mainstream. Many at the heart of the PT believe that it was a mistake to weaken the núcleos, but there is now a debate over the next generation of organizing.

“People say, ‘We need to revitalize the núcleos!’ Then you ask, ‘Are you an activist in a núcleo?’ No. I think we need to construct other spaces to organize the masses,” Cotrim said. He pointed to the thriving blogosphere, which helped to counter the right-wing electoral media campaign and lift Rousseff to victory. “We are going to have militants over the next period that are activists over the Internet, and they are never going to come to a meeting here—even. Principally with the youth, we have to be aware of the changing times. We have to construct new cultural environments,” Cotrim said.

On Friday, November 26, the same day the PSOL held a demonstration in downtown Rio de Janeiro, and the Rio Green Party was organizing their own núcleos, Rio’s PT organized an event called Youth and Union Action, simulcast live over Twitter. It was their first such attempt and dozens of people participated in the talk through their computers. The PT is also still working on the ground. In 2010, the party launched a series of rallies and teach-ins across the country. They plan to get more than 100,000 members involved through next year.

The second round of the elections also reinvigorated exciting new grassroots activism in support of the PT. Popular musician Chico Buarque, theologian Leonardo Boff, and architect Oscar Niemeyer, together with hundreds of other intellectuals, actors, militants, and artists publicly displayed their support for the Rousseff candidacy in a way that hadn’t been seen in years. Important Afro-Brazilian figures held an event in Rio, while social movements sprang to life faced with the possibility of a right-wing upset.

“In the second round we were able to organize across an even larger and more important sector of society than we did with Lula in 2006,” Cotrim said. “We need to take advantage of this.”

Political reform is also on the lips of many active PT members. Even the PT executive council has put it high on the 2011 agenda for the next Congress, with the goal of creating a system of public financing for electoral campaigns, thereby circumventing a major cause of the PT corruption scandals.

It’s been a long time coming. The PT “paid a very high price” when Lula won in 2002, with the wind at his back “he could have pushed harder then for a political reform,” explains IBASE co-director Menezes. “The PT didn’t confront the system then, and they became prisoners to it.”

This is something Rousseff undoubtedly hopes to avoid. But at the helm of a politically diverse, 10-party coalition, she has an uphill battle before her. Although the coalition has more control over the Congress than under either of Lula’s presidential terms, finding cohesion across the political spectrum will not be easy. Moreover, Rousseff lacks Lula’s charisma and the direct connection with the people. Cotrim, for one, thinks she was a great choice because she represents what was best in the government in recent times.

“But the Dilma government will need party support for mediations which Lula didn’t need,” he said, “so the PT will need to be up to the challenge.”

And PT activists seem to believe that both the Rousseff government and the party are ready.

“I thank God that the mensalão and the other scandals happened,” said Silvio Nascimento, back at the ABC Union building in São Bernardo do Campo, where the halls are lined with posters of the union’s vibrant past. “Why? Because it was from there that we could fix things and come back to this project. To see what we want. To see what our activists want.”

But with a shifting electorate, the loss of key party activists, and the influx of non-political supporters, that “we” is changing, and with it, the definition of Brazil’s most important political movement.
Lula’s Political Economy: Crisis and Continuity

By Paulo Kliass

For most of his two terms in office (2003–10), Brazilian president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva followed the same economic policy imperatives established by his neoliberal predecessors. He prioritized the fight against inflation with raised interest rates, assuring investors high returns while settling accounts with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and he committed to maintaining a high budget surplus. In the second half of his last term in office, however, the global financial crisis of 2007–9 forced a last-minute change in direction. Lula broke from the mold—he invested locally, raised the minimum wage yet again, and quickly lifted Brazil out of the meltdown as no one had expected.

In a March 30, 2009, op-ed in Le Monde, Lula hit out against the crisis. “Unlike the crises of the last 15 years—in Asia, Mexico, and Russia—the current storm that has struck the planet has its origins in the center of the world economy, the United States,” Lula wrote. He added: “I never tire of repeating that it is time to restore the policy and the role of the state. The leaders have to assume the responsibilities bestowed upon them to society. It is important to save banks or insurance to protect deposits and Social Security. But it is more important to protect jobs and stimulate production.”

With the neoliberal model in crisis across the planet, even Brazilian economists aligned with

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the establishment were willing to change their positions on important issues. From then on, the government looked not only to pursue economic growth, but also to maintain stability. The search for economic development—as opposed to just economic growth—returned to the government agenda, with a focus on reducing social and economic inequality.

The government began to adopt Keynesian countercyclical policies in order to prevent Brazil from being seriously hit by the effects of the crisis. These policies included tax breaks and fiscal stimulus in important sectors in order to maintain the level of employment and the supply of goods such as cars and appliances. The government also allocated significant resources to the National Bank for Economic and Social Development (BNDES), to provide investments and loans at subsidized interest rates through the National Treasury. The strategy, which meant some degree of a break with the traditional recipes of economic orthodoxy, showed positive results: Although GDP fell into a mild recession in 2009, the Brazilian economy was already growing again the following year.

The Lula government also played an important role in strengthening the internal market. It raised the minimum wage, which directly affects roughly half of formal employees, and also indirectly affects those in the informal sector where wages are often determined by the minimum wage. Pensions and social security benefits were also strengthened, affecting the more than 50% of retirees who receive social security benefits that amount to the value of up to one minimum wage. The government also expanded the network of cash-grant beneficiaries in the Bolsa Família (Family Stipend) network, now reaching over 40 million people and roughly 25% of the population. The cash grants vary according to the situation of each family, but the monthly stipend can reach almost 15% of the equivalent of a monthly minimum wage. These three instruments—the minimum wage, social security, and cash grants to poor families—were essential to cut short the recessionary effects of the crisis.

Brazil has now experienced an unprecedented process of recomposing incomes. Three instruments—the minimum wage, social security, and cash grants to poor families—were essential to cut short the recessionary effects of the crisis.

As has been reported widely, inequality in Brazil has decreased between the richest 10% and poorest 10% of the population, improving Brazil’s Gini coefficient, which is commonly used to measure inequality. However, the net worth of the richest 1% of the population has grown more than proportionately to the improvement of the lower classes. This is because during Lula’s eight years in office, the transfer of resources from the federal budget to the financial system and the Brazilian elite occurred in the

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Brazil has now experienced an unprecedented recomposition of incomes.
form of interest payments on the debt—about $600 billion worth. That is 10 times the amount of resources allocated to programs aimed at the low-income population.

Lula’s fealty to the neoliberal imperatives of his predecessor should be understood in context. In the run-up to the 2002 presidential elections, the financial markets were nervous that Lula, perceived as a radical, might actually be elected. The influential financier George Soros cautioned that a Lula victory would plunge Brazil into economic “chaos,” and the corporate media warned of rising inflation.

Less than four months ahead of the election, Lula attempted to reassure investors by publishing a “Letter to the Brazilian People,” in which he declared: “There are no miracles in the life of a people and a country. A clear and sensible transition between what we have today and what society demands is what will be necessary.” He added that he would respect “the country’s contracts and obligations”—meaning that he would maintain the essential elements of the political economy developed by the preceding government of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995–2002) of the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB), the PT’s staunch opponent both in the National Congress and on the streets.

The “Letter to the Brazilian People” set the tone for everything that followed. Lula’s appointee to the Finance Ministry, Antonio Palocci, had implemented orthodox neoliberal policies while serving as mayor of the Ribeirão Preto, where he had privatized the public sanitation and telephone companies. Upon taking office Palocci placed important figures from his previous team in key ministry positions and convinced Lula to name Henrique Meirelles—who until the eve of the elections had served as president of the International Bank of Boston, one of the country’s largest creditors—as president of the Central Bank (BC). After building his entire professional career as a well-behaved member of the private international financial system, Meirelles ran for a congressional seat with the PSDB. He won, but quickly traded congress for the BC. Lula promised him total political and administrative autonomy, a promise that was fulfilled. Meirelles left office eight years later, in December, when Lula ended his second term.

The goal was to continue Cardoso’s economic policies, coupled with a generic discourse of “respect for contracts” to appease the so-called market forces. Politically speaking, the idea was to remove any doubt among investors that Lula would pursue economic stability, following the basic contours of the anti-inflation program established in 1994 known as the Real Plan. The central elements of the stabilization plan, which Lula promised to ensure, were (1) to combat inflation with high interest rates, (2) maintain a free-floating exchange-rate regime, and (3) build the national surplus.

Early in the government, amid contacts with the international financial community and missions from the IMF, Lula unilaterally announced his willingness to increase the goal of generating an already high primary surplus from 3.75% to 4.25% of GDP. This emblematic measure meant, however, that the government would have to radically commit to contain budget expenditures in infrastructure and social services, in order to direct even more public resources to pay the interest on the federal debt.

Meanwhile, the government’s orthodox monetary policy kept official interest rates high. During the 96 months of the Lula government, Brazil had the highest rates in the world. Adjusted for inflation, Brazil’s real interest rate hovered between 6% and 12% per year between 2003 and 2010. Inflation remained relatively under control. In 2002, before Lula took office, prices grew at a rate of 12.6% a year. During Lula’s first term (2003–6), the average annual growth was down to 6.3%; during his second term (2007–10), annual inflation averaged 5.2% a year.

In achieving this, Lula benefited from the international prices on commodities and quickly looked to Brazilian exports to boost economic growth. Within only a couple of years, Brazilian exports had already broken successive records. In 2002, total exports were worth about $60 billion. During Lula’s first term, the annual average jumped to $106 billion. During his second term, exports continued to climb to an average of $178 billion a year. In March 2004, the government celebrated the milestone of exporting $100 billion of commodities in 12 months. Just under six years later, in January 2010, Brazil reached the symbolic landmark of $200 billion in annual exports.

This impressive performance enabled Brazil to significantly improve its international solvency—in December 2005, Brazil paid off its debts to the IMF and other creditors, although this was coupled with an increase in domestic debt, which is now over 1 trillion, or about 40% of GDP. The boom also helped Brazil build up its national reserves, which went up every year during the Lula government. Shortly before his inauguration, Brazil had $38 billion of net international reserves. In December 2006, that figure had risen to $86 billion. At the end of the Lula government reserves had jumped to $290 billion.

The export boom also had an impact on GDP growth. During the period 1999–02, GDP had grown at an annual average of 2.2%. During Lula’s first term (2003–6), the annual average rose to 3.5%. During his second term (2007–10), Brazil’s GDP grew at an annual average of 4.5%. Although these numbers show improvement, critics have
pointed out that they are well below growth figures for the countries that occupy a comparable position in the new dynamic international economy—Russia, India, China, and South Africa, which together with Brazil are known as the BRICS. Just for comparison, during the Lula’s first term, China and India grew at average annual rates of 9% and 7% respectively. During Lula’s second term, they grew at 10% and 9% a year. In other words, once could conclude that Brazil is actually losing the opportunity to take a true and necessary leap toward development.

The negative side of this boom, however, was that it was anchored in products of low aggregate value—primary products, especially agricultural commodities and extractive goods like oil and iron ore. These products represented up to 57% of all exports, including iron ore (14.3%), oil (8%), soybeans (5.5%), sugar (4.6%), chicken (2.9%), and coffee (2.6%). As opposed to manufactured products, which can generate additional value for the Brazilian economy across the chain of production, these products, with little value added, had almost no multiplier effect. Meanwhile, imports grew, predominantly manufactured goods like automobiles and auto parts, circuits, micro-electronics, pharmaceuticals, steel products, transmitters and receivers, motors, generators, pumps, bearings, gears, and so on. In other words, Brazil remains clearly deficient in terms of intensive technology and value-added production.

Lula’s policy of high interest rates only further reinforced Brazil’s status as an exporter of low-value goods and importer of high-value products. The high rates attracted a major influx of international finance capital, which hit the market without exchange controls. As a result, the Brazilian currency, the real, appreciated. The higher currency immediately harmed the export of manufactured products, which were unable to offer competitive prices abroad. Meanwhile, the very same currency appreciation stimulated the import of manufactured goods from abroad. Because of the difficulty of competing with imports—especially from China and other Asian countries—many sectors reduced their investments in the expansion of domestic productive capacity. In the controversy over the currency issue, there was clearly a division, even in the business sector. Those who produced goods demanded a devaluation of the real, while the representatives of finance capital called for the continuation of the facade of free exchange.

With Lula’s support for the export sector, his government became politically dependent on groups related to agribusiness. He even stated in 2007 that the sugar mill owners were the “true heroes” of the country—a sadly ironic statement, considering the dark stain of slavery and its legacy that these groups still carry from the 18th and 19th centuries. The Brazilian sugar industry is still characterized by poor working conditions, low wages, and a record of workplace accidents. In terms of agriculture and land policies, Lula made little progress in expanding land reform and stimulating family farms. The movements organizing around these issues were frustrated by the Lula administration, especially with the expectations they had when he was elected to office.

The economic policies of Lula’s handpicked successor, Dilma Rousseff, have thus far shown little difference. Perhaps it is a matter of time. But it is noteworthy that she chose Lula’s former finance minister, Palocci, for the strategic post of chief of staff. In a sign that there could be some continuity of the heterodox approach, she maintained Guido Mantega at the Finance Ministry. The Central Bank was handed to Alexandre Tombini, a career economist at the institution. The economic policy decisions, adopted during the first months of government, maintain the trend of elevating official interest rates with a priority on fighting inflation.

The foundation of the orthodox model of monetary policy remains intact, and little has been done to counteract currency appreciation. Moreover, in Rousseff’s first week in office, she announced a significant budget cut for 2011, which is weakening the government’s ability to act. The Central Bank continues to increase the official interest rates as an instrument to combat inflation.

In March and April, the government announced some measures—to little effect—to try to curb the appreciation of the Brazilian currency in the exchange market. However, the results were not efficient, largely due to the high interest rates that continue to attract a steady flow of speculative capital. There is an urgent need to establish control mechanisms for the entry and exit of foreign capital.

According to what we have seen in the first months of the Rousseff government, there is an intense political dispute over the direction the government’s economic agenda. On one side are powerful forces aligned with the financial system that don’t intend to give up the benefits they have acquired from the conservative economic policies. They support a model based on macroeconomic adjustments accomplished by raising official interest rates, cutting public expenses, and maintaining the policy of the appreciated exchange rate of the real. On the other side, there are those who favor again embracing the developmentalist agenda, in which the state’s most essential role is to improve the profound social and economic inequalities of country. They propose confronting the economic questions with industrial policies and distribution, recognizing that the magic solution of the market is not always the best option for the country.
A widely cited number of 20 million Brazilians were lifted out of poverty under the administration of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–10). Overall, according to the Brazilian government, extreme poverty in Brazil decreased from 12% in 2003 to 4.8% in 2008.1 Much of the credit for this achievement should go to three key social policies of Lula’s administration: cash-transfer programs to the poor, aid to small farmers, and labor and pension reforms. Most prominent among these was the cash-grant program, Bolsa Família (Family Stipend), which expanded an already existing welfare system established by Lula’s predecessor. The Lula government also created stronger mechanisms for promoting transparency and accountability in the distribution of these grants in areas, such as the Northeast, where traditions of clientelism in the distribution of benefits were strong. By 2006, Bolsa Familia had reached 11 million families (about one quarter of Brazil’s population), most of them in the Northeast.2

Without diminishing the importance of these programs to Brazil’s poor majority, we must nonetheless recognize that they function within the neoliberal framework established before Lula came to power. The cash-transfer programs, for example, embody the neoliberal values of efficiency, privatization, and individu-
alization. Social policy experts classify them as “targeted” policies because they take aim at specific segments of the population. Lula’s policies targeted people living in extreme poverty, indigenous and rural Afro-Brazilian communities, farmers faced with drought, urban people who live by rifling through trash, and other afflicted groups. In this way they differ from policies that reach all citizens, like price controls on foods, national food production and distribution programs, universal health care, and so on. Targeting is “efficient” in the sense that it maximizes poverty reduction by excluding anyone who is not poor.

Cash-transfer programs also support privatization because they channel capital in its most liquid form (cash) and thus require far less bureaucracy than federal development institutions. These programs emphasize individual choice by increasing consumers’ buying power, rather than offering them cheap government-subsidized foods. In fact, even framing social justice in terms of “poverty alleviation,” rather than the achievement of economic equality, already takes a page from the playbooks of the most famous neoliberal thinkers of the 20th century. It is telling that in 2004, one quarter of Lula’s funding for his main cash-transfer program came from the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank. Yet, even though his cash-transfer programs were paradigmatically neoliberal, they have succeeded in reducing poverty and inequality. He certainly did a better job with these policies than did his predecessor, Fernando Henrique Cardoso.

During Cardoso’s second term in office (1999–2002), he initiated several targeted cash grants. The Bolsa Escola (School Benefit) program was his most important; it promoted school attendance by sending parents about $8–$10 in 2000 each month for every child who attended school. This compensated parents for the loss of their children’s labor during the day. Three smaller cash grants aimed to subsidize food and gas purchases, and to increase the income of families hit hard by natural calamities. (By U.S. standards, Cardoso can hardly be called “right-wing.”) When Lula took office, he retained and supplemented these grants with a new cash program called Food Card, which his administration conceptualized as part of a broader food security initiative, Zero Hunger. The Food Card gave indigent families about $17 per month in 2003. This essentially doubled the amount of federal money that a family could have received from all of Cardoso’s grants combined. The following year, Lula merged all the cash grants into Bolsa Família, and then slowly increased the allowance throughout his two terms. By 2009, families in extreme poverty received up to about $116 each month.

Bolsa Família reached many more people than any of Cardoso’s grants. When Cardoso left office in 2002, Bolsa Escola, his largest cash grant program, benefited 4.6 million families. The difference was due to two factors: First, Cardoso’s Bolsa Escola worked through a quota system, limiting the number of families that could receive the grant, whereas Bolsa Família went to all households with a combined income of less than $60 (90 reais) per month per resident. This technical distinction is important for understanding how cash grants are distributed at the municipal level (more on this below). Second, Bolsa Família targeted not only “extremely poor” families, but also “moderately poor” families (though the amount was adjusted). This meant that Lula’s cash grant included a broader swath of the working poor than those of his predecessor. As a result of these changes, by 2006, Bolsa Família had already reduced extreme poverty in Brazil by 19% and moderate poverty by 12%.

Lula’s initial cash program, Food Card, quickly came under fire from both the political right and left because it initially required its beneficiaries to spend the grant exclusively on food. Right-wing neoliberals claimed that enforcing this measure required wasteful administrative costs, while left-wing advocates within the food security movement claimed the measure was a form of state paternalism that denied poor people the right to spend their money as they chose. When Lula merged all of the grants into Bolsa Família he replaced spending restrictions with grant conditions, such as mandatory school attendance, child vaccinations, child health exams, and perinatal medical exams for expecting mothers. These conditions more closely mirrored the Cardoso government’s policy requirements. But Cardoso’s followers from the Brazilian Social Democratic Party accused the Lula government of not enforcing requirements that grant recipients comply with these conditions. After a rocky start involving a reorganization of the social welfare ministries (and the replacement of the head minister overseeing social policy), the Lula government redoubled its enforcement. By 2007, Lula’s enforcement of school attendance outpaced that of Cardoso, and beneficiary compliance with the health conditions has been consistently high and nutritional studies
indicate that malnutrition among beneficiaries was reduced from 14% to 7% between 2004 and 2006.7

In addition to improving the economic and education- al standing of poor families, Bolsa Familia has improved the transparency and accountability of local democracy in Brazil—a relevant criterion for evaluating policy in a country still reeling from military dictatorship (1964–85). One of the biggest problems with decentralized cash-transfer programs is that municipal politicians often co-opt them for their own political interests. They gain control over the distribution circuits, channel funds to their friends and electors, and withhold the stipends from the local opposition. Under Cardoso, mayors had full authority to appoint the members of the local councils that controlled the dispensation of the cash grants.8 Frequent manipulation of these councils and general confusion about the process of beneficiary selection led to a resource “leakage” rate of up to 36% (in the case of Bolsa Escola), i.e. 36% of the people who received the grant did not really qualify.9 Moreover, Cardoso’s quota system all but presumed that some eligible families could not possibly receive Bolsa Escola. This made political favoritism practically inevitable, especially in small rural towns.

Lula rearranged the municipal procedure for “targeting” the poor. He initially short-circuited the mayors’ offices by creating openly elected municipal commit- tees to select the beneficiaries.10 But his move against the (mostly conservative) mayors was costly. Without the mayors’ support, the new elected committees had no place to work, no computer to use, and no transporta- tion to do the groundwork. When Lula launched Bolsa Familia to synthesize the existing cash grants in 2004, he returned control over the enrollment to the mayors’ offices, but he created fraud hotlines and “social control” committees to monitor the municipal government.11 Studies suggest that these procedural changes made Bolsa Familia better at avoiding mayoral interference than the preceding programs.12 There is little doubt among analysts that Bolsa Familia shored up Lula’s re-election in 2006 by winning him the support of many poor people who previously voted conservatively.13

Lula announced his creation of the Zero Hunger program during his campaign in 2002. His cash grants would initially comprise only one com- ponent of the more comprehensive Zero Hunger, which would also include initiatives in land reform, housing, health, nutrition, sanitation, water resources, education, and other areas of development. But these development- oriented initiatives received less media attention than the cash grants, and poor Brazilians seemed to prefer cash to these other initiatives. While Lula quickly stopped talk- ing about Zero Hunger, he continued to expand many of those unpublicized initiatives, including those that sup- ported food production on Brazil’s poorest family farms.

Before the 1990s, Brazilian agricultural policy focused on improving the production of an already privileged class of industrial farmers. Cardoso lifted restrictions on foreign agribusiness, and thus accelerated the concentra- tion of rural landownership to the detriment of small family agriculture. Yet Cardoso deserves some credit for initiating the National Aid to Family Agriculture Program (PRONAF), which channels rural credit to the poorer strata of small farmers. At its peak under Cardoso, PRONAF benefited 953,000 families, but much of its resources never reached the poorest farmers.14

By 2005, Lula had nearly doubled the number of benefi- ciaries receiving PRONAF credit and tripled the over- all federal investment in PRONAF.15 He also redirected credit to the poorest segments of the rural population. After 2005, the Lula government reconceptualized the objectives to rural development, moving away from the straightforward increase in cash income and towards the more complex goal of food security, which includes factors such as economic diversification and environmental sus- tainability.16 These measures increased subsistence farmers’ food production, though their effect on rural income re- mains unclear. Even under Lula, PRONAF had real short- comings that pointed to some of the fundamental prob- lems with neoliberal restructuring. In 1990, the Collor administration extinguished the parastate Rural Extension and Technical Assistance Company (EMBRATER), which funded and coordinated rural development of small fam- ily agriculture in all 27 states. Nearly overnight, the state- level technical assistance companies lost roughly 40% of their resources, reducing government assistance to small farmers.17 President Cardoso exacerbated the problem by extinguishing the Superintendency for the Development of the Northeast (SUDENE), the main federal institution that had implemented many large-scale development projects (e.g., dam construction) in the northeastern countryside. Lacking labor opportunities on big projects and techni- cal assistance with various small-scale economic projects, small farmers often find themselves unable to pay back the microfinance loans.18 Lula has partially tried to address this issue by resurrecting SUDENE, but it is not yet clear what role it will play in promoting rural development in the Northeast, Brazil’s poorest region.

Along with increased investment to PRONAF, Lula also created a new rural food policy: the Food Acquisition
Program. Through this program the state purchases crops from poor farmers at near-market prices. It then redistributes the crops to local schools and private charities in order to improve local nutrition. Studies of this program’s effects on local production, nutrition, and social mobilization have been generally positive. But while the program steadily increased its beneficiaries throughout Lula’s second term, by 2009 it still only reached 98,340 rural families. It will need to expand its scope in order to truly transform the countryside. Moreover, in the absence of a comprehensive land reform that ensures a decent quantity of arable land to farmers, one wonders how effective crop purchases and microloans can ever be.

Brazil’s population is about 86% urban, and most adults living in urban areas are unemployed, underemployed, or informally employed, according to the CIA World Factbook. Formal employment declined considerably during the 1990s, as did the strength of organized labor. Cardoso aided this decline. He increased “flexibility” to labor contracts (i.e., lower benefits and easier terminations), broke a major strike at the state oil company (Petrobras), and proposed legislation that would allow agreements reached through collective bargaining (with weakened unions) to prevail over legislation that ensured baseline rights and benefits to workers. In the face of longer hours and less job stability, labor activism declined during the 1990s. Even Brazil’s left-wing labor conglomerate, the Unified Workers’ Central (CUT), which has been intimately tied to the Workers’ Party, which by 1997 was operating at a $2.8 billion deficit because of Brazil’s aging population, fraud, and other problems with employee contributions.24

Lula continued to roll back the public pension system. In 2003, he passed social security reforms that taxed the pensions of retired bureaucrats at the high end of the pay scale. This group of privileged retirees then mobilized opposition among other government workers who aspired to high pensions. Lula also phased in reforms that would readjust the formula for calculating pensions to the detriment of all formal workers. In 2007, however, Lula pushed through legislation that extended pension benefits to informal laborers who make up more than half of Brazil’s workforce. Thus, while many formal workers had their pensions reduced, 28 million informal laborers who previously had no social security will now be entitled to pensions, which will be largely subsidized by the contributions of their formally employed counterparts.25

Enough of the unionized workforce continued to oppose these measures for President Dilma Rousseff to announce in November, before taking office, that she would not implement any further pension reform.25 It seems that solidarity with high-paid workers outweighed the workforce’s solidarity with the informal laborers—most of whom have little job security, wage protection, or benefits. This question points to a broader problem in interpreting Lula’s administration: Lula’s policies were guided by principles of social justice other than those of traditional working-class leaders or socialist parties. Instead of nationalizing industries, reducing interest rates, and ensuring job protections, Lula fought hunger and poverty, decreased patronage-based interference in welfare, and extended pensions to unorganized informal workers.

Just how progressive were Lula’s social policies? Did they differ substantially from those of his predecessor? For the most part, it seems Lula’s policies successfully responded to the challenges presented by Brazil’s neoliberal political economy. He did not try to upset the neoliberal foundation itself, and Lula proved himself to be a genuinely left-wing neoliberal. That position may seem like a contradiction in terms. But it may be described as a qualified form of progressivism.
Lula and the Meaning of Agrarian Reform

By Cliff Welch

Until Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva’s victorious 2002 campaign for president, Brazil’s Workers’ Party (PT) had consistently supported a radical definition of agrarian reform. Seen as a crucial tool for building socialism, agrarian reform would weaken the ruling class fragment that secured its power by controlling large swaths of Brazilian territory and help pave the way for the victory of a PT-controlled government. In the years before he was elected president, Lula went out of his way to participate in land occupations, marches, and forums organized by the Landless Workers’ Movement (MST) and other peasant groups. He visited jailed leaders like José Rainha Júnior, who was regularly persecuted by the state as a gang leader for successfully organizing thousands of families in land occupations. Lula also joined the MST in arguing that Rainha and other jailed landless militants were political prisoners who should be released.

By 2002, however, the PT position had changed: Agrarian reform was no longer part and parcel of the fight for socialism, but rather an essential economic development policy. “The agrarian reform question,” as official PT literature put it in 2003, “is a problem that interests all workers, in the countryside and city, because it contributes to a developmental model that generates employ-
ment and produces for domestic consumption, helping to make food available to all.1 Emptied of its political content, agrarian reform was now subordinated to economic objectives.

The Lula government’s redefinition of agrarian reform is the key to understanding its approach to the agrarian question. It reflected the PT’s shift to a “third road” strategy in the years leading up to Lula’s election—neither socialist nor neoliberal. With a focus on acquiring state power, the PT came to view explicitly socialist positions as a hindrance to electoral victory. Instigated by Lula—whose three previous presidential campaigns helped build his hegemony over the party—the PT reluctantly made a shift in ideology and endorsed capitalism, seeking to retain its “socialist” credentials by embracing “developmentalism.” The idea was to integrate small family farming in big picture economic planning, calling the inclusion agrarian reform without necessarily redistributing land. As mild and pro-capitalist as the vision was, it still irritated corporate agriculture, which sought to receive all subsidies in order to control its disbursements and thus eliminate peasant movements critical of its practices and wealth concentration.

The PT’s agrarian project relied upon a two-pronged strategy, with both social and economic dimensions. For reasons of institutional history, two separate ministries implemented the project: the Ministry of Agriculture, which promoted an aggressive modernization, export, and trade agenda in collusion with large-scale agribusiness, and the Agrarian Development Ministry (MDA), which focused on small family farm development by investing in government purchasing programs, infrastructure improvements on existing agrarian reform settlements, and formalizing the small-holding relationships of squatters, generally avoiding confrontation with large, private landowners.

Lula’s MDA claimed to have settled unprecedented numbers of landless people, surpassing the achievements of the PT’s key political rival, the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB) of conservative former president Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995–2002). Reflecting the continued importance of the agrarian question in national politics, both parties like to claim the title of having established the largest number of settlements and settled the largest number of families. According to DATALUTA, a rigorously scientific pro-agrarian reform research project at the State University of São Paulo, the Lula government created 2,517 new agrarian reform settlements and settled 416,015 families from 2003 to 2009.2 At five people per family, that adds up to more than 2 million people. During Cardoso’s eight years in power, DATALUTA found, 3,924 new settlements were created and 393,842 families settled; that is, almost 2 million people. Accordingly, Cardoso won in the number of new settlements, but Lula in the number of families resettled.

The Lula administration disputes the DATALUTA findings. The National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA), the MDA entity responsible for imple-
menting the administration’s policies, claims that 580,000 families, or some 2.9 million people, received land between 2003 and 2009. Based on these calculations, Lula claimed to have settled more than half (59%) the total number of all families who have benefited from agrarian reform throughout Brazilian history. The government also claimed to have settled them on 47 million hectares, nearly five times the amount of land distributed to peasants by Cardoso.3

The difference between the Lula government’s numbers and those of its critics is explained primarily by the practice of “regularization,” or normalizing peasant properties. Traditionally, peasants have faced significant difficulties in securing titles for their smallholdings. Due to local power structures and the expense of filing, many fail to register their farms. INCRA set out to overcome these problems through a policy of regularizing these holdings, counting each as one more family settled. For many researchers, the policy is an important investment in small farming but should not count as an agrarian reform statistic since the families were already settled and the land occupied. However, even when counting these numbers, DATALUTA arrived at a total that is 164,000 families below that claimed by Lula.

Another disputed characteristic of Lula’s agrarian reform practice is that of relocating families out of coastal zones—where the concentration of both population and large-scale agribusiness operations make the land struggle more acute—and onto large settlements on government land in the Amazon region. This practice helped to boost the higher INCRA figures. “Lula did not implement agrarian reform, but only a policy of settlements,” said Gilmar Mauro, a longtime coordinator of the MST, in a May 2010 interview.4

Setting aside environmental questions related to the destruction of rainforest—settlers have been accused of burning down forest to clear pasture and farmland—these policies also evade the crux of the agrarian reform question itself: challenging concentrated land ownership where it counts. Since the government controls much of the north, establishing agrarian reform settlements there means ignoring the redistributive objectives of the policy. Private landlords near the coast can rest easy, as agribusiness interests maintain the pace to control areas totaling 30 million hectares.5

Moreover, peasant farming’s contribution to rural employment between agricultural censuses declined from 77% to 74%. The 5 million small farmers who continued to produce foodstuffs had to work even harder as the nation’s dependency on their crops grew during the same period. Thus, small farmers’ contribution to important staples like beans and cassava grew, respectively, from 67% to 70% and from 85% to 87% of total production.6

These statistics help document the contradictory effects of policies favoring increased dependency on both small farms and corporate agriculture in recent years. They convey a sense of the content of the Lula government’s “agrarian reform” efforts. They confirm the growing concentration of land ownership and suggest the conflicts generated by this process.

The contested meaning of “agrarian reform” has long been at the center of Brazil’s rural struggle. In the early 20th century, revolutionaries in Mexico and Russia advocated agrarian reform as land redistribution, and this definition found its way into Brazilian political discourse in the 1920s via the Brazilian Communist Party. Through decades of struggle, support for the idea was consolidated with the founding of Brazil’s largest small farmer and rural labor organization, the National Confederation of Workers in Agriculture (CONTAG), in
1963. When the military took power in the 1964 coup, the dictatorship sought to enhance productivity through a reform of agricultural policies, and in doing so embraced a depoliticized version of agrarian reform. While peasants were said to benefit from these policies, they most often became its victims, with 30 million of them joining a rural exodus to the cities from 1960 to 1990. In the meantime, the military’s “agrarian reform” project bolstered agro-industry with the construction of large irrigation and hydroelectric infrastructure, as well as providing subsidies for chemical fertilizers, machinery, plant upgrades, and the reproduction of a dependent labor force.

The end of the dictatorship in the 1980s helped re-establish the initial radical political content of agrarian reform, advocated with vigor by the newly formed MST. But resistance to this interpretation produced new definitions in the debate over including agrarian reform in Brazil’s new constitution of 1988, which limited redistribution to cases in which landlords were proved to have failed to use their land productively or to have violated labor and environmental laws. Only in such cases could private land be appropriated by the state. Cardoso reaffirmed the trend of replacing political objectives with economic ones by introducing “market agrarian reform.” Under this policy, the landless were forced to take out loans subsidized by the World Bank to buy “agrarian reform” farms. Lula employed nearly all these tactics to formulate his agrarian reform policies.

Given these circumstances, peasant movements experimented with new strategies under the Lula government. One group occupied Congress. Others occupied large corporate estates and facilities, uprooted corporate orange groves in São Paulo State, attacked several enormous eucalyptus plantations in the state of Espírito Santo, and destroyed a genetically modified seed laboratory run by the Syngenta corporation in Paraná State. Under the law, each target was classified as productive and thus ostensibly outside the reach of agrarian reform legislation. But by its actions the MST and its allies in the Via Campesina movement sought to emphasize a neglected aspect of the constitution that stressed the “social function” of the land. They argued, for example, that the vast “green deserts” of eucalyptus trees, farmed by chemicals and machines to produce cellulose for the production of paper, served little social function beyond that of enriching investors.

While these attacks generated significant controversy, nearly everyone admits that the Lula administration distinguished itself by not over-reacting. That is to say, whereas former presidential administrations responded with repression, Lula condemned such actions but defended the autonomy of civil society organizations as essential to Brazil’s budding democracy. Cardoso had used his executive powers to criminalize land occupations, whereas Lula attempted to win over the movement by incorporating many militants in the MDA and INCRA. Although repression occurred during the Lula years, it was limited either to state or local police actions, or to the Congress, where conservative legislators used every tool available to them to investigate the movements and squeeze them dry of funds. Many PT congressmen and senators worked diligently to thwart these attacks.

Lula’s attempts at incorporation yielded results. For example, CONTAG supported the president’s policies and practices, despite some criticisms. The confederation came to accept definitions of agrarian reform that included the colonization of the north as well as regularization, and worked with the government to expand “market-based agrarian reform.” The national family farm credit program (PRONAF), funded by the World Bank, is popular among CONTAG leaders. During the Lula years, INCRA’s PRONAF expenditures increased to $1.3 billion, contributing to CONTAG’s support of the PT government. On the other hand, the Via Campesina–Brazil condemned such neoliberal measures and counseled member organizations to step up the pressure on the Rousseff administration.

Rousseff is expected to maintain Lula’s agrarian policies. In a July campaign speech to a CONTAG assembly, she promised to include another 2 million families in the PRONAF credit program. “Rural agriculture and agrarian reform in the countryside will be among my priorities,” she said. The redundancies in her language reveal a certain awkwardness with the topic. During the campaign, the theme was barely mentioned as both Rousseff and her main opponent concentrated on urban themes. Quite unlike Lula, Rousseff has no record of support and participation in the land struggle. Her feel for the subject is limited to its contribution to national development and role in easing stress on Brazil’s crowded cities by helping to retain people in the countryside. “What we need is to transform the small farmer into a property owner, and ensure that he sees his life improving in the countryside and in his educational opportunities,” she said.

Like Lula, she fought the dictatorship and is likely to feel unthreatened by social movements, but in her campaign speech she expressed her intolerance for one MST tactic—the occupation of public buildings, frequently used in recent years to pressure INCRA, the Bank of Brazil, and other state agencies to quicken the pace of agrarian reform. Yet because Lula’s agrarian reform record frustrated landless organizations like the MST and other Brazilians who care about the issue, Rousseff’s less-attuned administration and its continuation of these policies may very well provoke a new round of aggressive mobilizations.
Dilma as Lula’s Successor: 
The First 100 Days

By Emir Sader

The first 100 days may or may not be representative of a government. For the first time Brazil has a president who was elected not as an opposition candidate, but as a successor, continuing a government of unprecedented achievement, and following Brazil’s most popular leader since Getúlio Vargas, who led Brazil’s industrialization in the 1930s.

In 1995, the conservative newspaper Folha de São Paulo welcomed Brazilian president Fernando Henrique Cardoso’s inauguration, with a special section announcing the “Cardoso Era”—a recognition that Lula, who truly initiated a new era in the country, did not receive. The commemoration was lost to insignificance when it became clear that Cardoso was simply the Brazilian chapter of the region’s neoliberal presidents; joining Argentina’s Carlos Menem, Peru’s Alberto Fujimori, Venezuela’s Carlos Andrés Perez, and Mexico’s Carlos Salinas de Gortari, among others, in failure and defeat.

The balance of Lula’s first 100 days foreshadowed the pitfalls into which his critics would fall, from both the right and the left. The right-wing sought to tarnish his image as a representative of the popular movement, emphasizing the continuity, and dissolution over the PT’s long announced priorities, especially in terms of social policies. The left-wing critics, in a similar way, rushed to write off the Lula government as a clear continuation of the neoliberal Cardoso government, appealing to the traditional epithets of “treason,” “surrender,” and “reconciliation.” Both sides condemned the Lula government, already within its first 100 days.

The Lula enigma—title of a chapter in my forthcoming book The New Mole, which looks at the “decipher me or I’ll devour you” paradigm that Lula represented to his adversaries—would not take long to bemuse these critics on both the right and the ultra-left, and defeat them both. It is not by chance that they both rallied against him, be it because of the popular support that he had acquired, or because they both raced to be the first to defeat him in their campaign of condemnations.

Both sides were defeated when it became clear that the first 100 days were a transition from the “cursed legacy” of successive right-wing governments to the creation of an economic and social model that would again focus on development and income distribution. This was at the heart of the undeniable success of Lula’s two terms.

The first 100 days of the Dilma Rousseff government are unique because they are the continuation of a government and a leader of unprecedented success in Brazil and, in some ways, the world (as pointed out by British historian Perry Anderson in his March 31 article “Lula’s Brazil,” in the London Review of Books). A few months ago, we debated what to expect post-Lula: whether we would have the opportunism of the conservative presidential candidate, José Serra, or the rigidity of Rousseff. We have had neither one nor the other.

Just as Lula’s announced break with Cardoso pushed critics to emphasize the elements of continuity—ignoring important shifts in both foreign and social policy—now they look to highlight the differences. Both approaches were, and are, wrong: The Lula government was not the continuation of the Cardoso government, and the Rousseff government is not a break from the Lula government.

The essential elements of the Lula government have been maintained and reinforced with Rousseff: The economic and social model has undergone the same adjustments that Lula himself would have made, faced with the changing international reality, such as the situation of the global economy, with the continued importance that foreign exchange has had over the past two years in particular. The government seeks to address these challenges on the narrow bridge between avoiding uncontrolled inflation and balancing trade—a situation in which it is necessary to manage interest rates and other instruments against excessive fluctuation or appreciation of the currency. The Lula
government would not have done anything much different. It is not by chance that there is continuity between Lula’s and Rousseff’s economic staff, now with even greater cohesion, with the appointment of career economist Alexandre Tombini to head the Central Bank.

In the same way, Rousseff has maintained social policies as central to the government’s fundamental pillar: development while combating social inequality. The Growth Acceleration Program (PAC)—which invested over half a trillion dollars during Lula’s second term—is still protected from budget adjustments, and still holds a leading role in the government’s continued economic expansion and poverty alleviation programs. The adjustments at the heart of the Rousseff government have improved the harmony and capacity to manage this key pillar, which will continue the achievements of the Lula government.

The changes that Rousseff has made must be addressed in their own specific context. Rousseff has promised to build 500 new urgent care facilities by 2014 and on March 28, launched the Stork Network (Rede Cegonha), a new $5.7 billion program to attend to new mothers and their babies. These steps are clearly positive for public health, which is one of the country’s most serious social problems. Building off of steps under the Lula government, the Rousseff administration has prioritized the creation of a Truth Commission (to investigate the cases of torture and disappearances under the Brazilian dictatorship)—an important added initiative under the Department of Human Rights. The Institute for Applied Economic Research (IPEA), charged with producing accurate statistical data to improve public policy, has continued its remarkable work. And the Rousseff government has tasked the Ministry of Communications with democratizing particularly with the Portuguese-speaking countries, which were completely rejected in terms of foreign policy under Lula’s predecessor, Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995–2002). This allowed us to not only begin to repay the historic debt our country has to Africa, but also establish tight connections of economic exchange, supporting large projects in infrastructure and educational and scientific cooperation, from a completely non-paternalistic perspective, and clearly in solidarity and brotherhood. Likewise, in terms of international trade, China became Brazil’s principal partner, with South America second and United States in third place.

In summary, during the Lula government there was a very substantial change in foreign policy from that of his predecessor. It was a very radical break that could also be seen in the other areas of public policy carried out from 2003 to 2010—that changes that, without a doubt, will also underscore the foreign policy style of the new president, Dilma Rousseff.

What was the most significant change of the Lula administration in terms of international geopolitics?

Brazil was always the privileged ally of the United States, whether it was during the Brazilian military dictatorship
Brazilian communications by prioritizing community media and more closely regulating television and radio waves.

The problems must be addressed within this context: The Rousseff government’s continuity with the Lula government. We can’t allow critics to isolate partial aspects of the bigger picture or get carried away by simple journalistic motifs—which tend to use descriptive imagery to focus only on the appearances, without the capacity for profound political analysis. The problems are in the economic realm: the difficulties of adjusting internal measures without jeopardizing the objectives of the central government, the obstacles to carrying out the PAC development projects—some of the most serious problems facing the government, the nuances of international politics, and cultural policy.

But the Rousseff government’s greatest achievement is already its capacity to expand the potential of the government. In other words, to maintain the objectives set forth by the Lula government, broadening alliances and legitimizing it politically and socially, extending the capacity for dialogue and interaction with other social sectors—such as the middle class—as well as with the opposition. Herein lies the essential art of constructing alternatives to neoliberalism: to develop an alternative model, guaranteeing the economic, social, political, and cultural conditions for it to be reproduced and consolidated.

The Rousseff government has inherited not just a country in much better shape than Lula did eight years ago, but also a weakened, demoralized, and defeated right-wing—both in its political sphere as well as in the media. That is the context in which the Rousseff government must be assessed, as well as the progress it will make and the problems it will face in the thousands of days to come.

By Pablo Gentili

(1964–85) or during the government of Cardoso. The Lula government abandoned this inferior position, adopting a clearly multipolar direction in its foreign policy. The most concrete way of consolidating this new path was to try to intervene, in the most autonomous and active way, in the definition of agreements or in the resolution of conflicts in which the North American government is involved and whose participation has done nothing but intensify conflicts and multiply tensions. I think that without a doubt, the involvement of the Brazilian government in looking to expand the parties involved in negotiations in the case of Palestine as well in Iraq are eloquent signs of this significant change in foreign policy.

In this same way, Brazil has proposed the real democratization of the United Nations, particularly the increase of the number of permanent members on the Security Council. Brazil hasn’t only fought actively to occupy a permanent seat on this Council, but to make it more open and less immune to the arbitrary whims of the most powerful countries on the planet.

Is this a renewed version of the “third worldism” that grew out of the Non-Aligned Movement in the 1960s and 1970s?

In a way, yes, but now there is a larger emphasis on the recognition of the South, as a geopolitical reference that includes the emerging countries and, at the same time, although the references to imperialism have diminished, a counter-position to the arrogance and systematic violation of popular self-determination that orients the foreign policy of the hegemonic nations. During the Lula government Brazil has been a key actor in this change, and as I said, the BRICs are the clearest expression of the prominence that the emerging countries have achieved.

Will there be changes in Brazilian foreign policy during under the Rousseff government?

It is my understanding that in general, there should be continuity. The new minister of foreign affairs, Antonio Patriota, is closely connected to his predecessor, Celso Amorim, and he will follow the fundamental policies that guided foreign policy under the Lula government. At the same time, another important person who helped to define the path that Brazil took in this area, Marco Aurelio Garcia, will continue as special adviser to Rousseff, as he was with Lula.

It is probable that the absence of Lula and Amorim, with all of the international prominence that they had, will decrease the high profile of Brazilian foreign policy, as least in the beginning. Rousseff’s most characteristic and active themes of political involvement have been more economically and socially oriented, in terms of strengthening and transforming the state. Perhaps foreign policy will lose a bit of the central role that it had during the Lula government, although it is still too early to know. What appears to be without a doubt is that the general focus that guided the change and radicalization of Brazilian foreign policy during the last eight years will continue and strengthen.

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For decades racial issues in Brazil were largely absent from public debate. But all that changed with the introduction of affirmative action policies in higher education under the government of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–10). During his presidency Lula often referred to the persistence of racial prejudice and discrimination in Brazil, and his government implemented policies that aimed to address these problems. Lula was a pragmatic but effective supporter of race-conscious affirmative action in Brazil, thus helping to promote a debate about the purpose of universities and their social function.

Affirmative action programs, including race-conscious ones, thrived during his administration, providing higher education to people who would otherwise remain excluded from universities. This was the case even if the federal government was not always directly involved in promoting them. University autonomy was respected, and most programs were instituted by the university administrations themselves, which shows that the push toward more inclusive admission policies cannot be entirely credited to governmental initiative.

In supporting affirmative action, Lula took on one of Brazil’s glaring examples of racial inequality: As of 2000, 42% of the black population had no schooling, compared with 23% of whites, and 1.41% of blacks held an advanced degree, compared with 6.59% among whites.1 In 2003, the year Lula took office, more than 72% of undergraduates at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), the country’s largest federal university, were white, even though 54% of Rio de Janeiro State is white, according to the 2000 census.2 With regional variations of intensity, the underrepresentation of people of color in Brazil’s public universities was and is a reality throughout the country. This underrepresentation mirrors the close correlation of whiteness and wealth in Brazil: The per capita household income of whites was more than twice as high as that of non-whites, according to a government-run national survey in 2007. This inequality plays out early in the life of Brazilian children. With few exceptions, public elementary and middle schools are poorly funded and offer low-quality education. As a result, the upper middle class and the rich send their children to private primary schools, while the children of poor or blue-collar families are forced to attend public schools.

This picture is reversed in higher education. With very few exceptions, public universities offer much better professional training and house most of the scientific research produced in the country. Private universities often live off tuition they can extract from an increasingly large and competitive market—in 2008 there were more than 3.8 million students enrolled in private colleges, compared with about 340,000 in 1995. After the competitive entrance examination, the children of the well-to-do are most-likely admitted to the public universities, while the children of the lower middle class are doomed to pay for low-quality private colleges. That is why affirmative action policies have become a hot topic: They redistribute access to public universities, which is a much coveted good, capable of maintaining or improving one’s social status and increasing income.

Although Lula’s government was the first to implement policies aimed at redressing racial inequalities, such policies were not a direct product of his administration. In fact, his predecessor, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, was the first Brazilian president to openly acknowledge the existence of racial discrimination in the country. His position, however, was vague if not ambivalent. In a conference organized by the federal government in 1996, he declared that
Brazil “should look for solutions that are not a simple copy or repetition of solutions designed for other situations in which prejudice and discrimination are present, but in a context different from ours.” This argument makes an all but explicit reference to the United States and has since then become common among those who oppose affirmative action.

In May 2002 Cardoso launched the Second National Plan on Human Rights, which included provisions for race-conscious affirmative action, but Congress never approved it. He also created the Affirmative Action National Program, which included quotas for blacks and women as mandatory criteria for hiring federal employees and workers serving governmental contractors. The program was not implemented, however. Lula, in contrast, went further. Soon after taking office, he created the Secretariat for Policies Promoting Racial Equality (SEPPIR), a ministry-level agency that addresses discrimination.

He also signed into law a bill (no. 10.639) mandating the inclusion of the history of Africa and Afro-Brazilian culture in the curriculum of all elementary schools. Bill 10.639 has been implemented through a number of initiatives headed by the Ministry of Education and SEPPIR to produce educational materials and to train teachers. However, the actual impact of these initiatives on the education of Brazilian children is yet to be evaluated.

In January 2005 the government created the University Program for All (PROUNI), which targeted private colleges by offering them federal tax exemptions in exchange for undergraduate scholarships that cover tuition and a modest stipend. PROUNI has quota reservations for people of African descent, mixed-race people (pardos), and indigenous peoples, with the number of beneficiaries of each group varying according to the demographics of each state. To be accepted for full a scholarship, students must prove that their families have a per capita income of less than one and a half times the minimum wage; for partial scholarships, less than three times the minimum wage. So far the program has served 748,000 students, about half of them of color.

The federal government also created incentives for public universities to adhere to programs of equal opportunity. A good example is the nationwide Restructuring and Expansion of Federal Universities (REUNI) program, which includes mechanisms for establishing affirmative action policies. However, there is still no federal law that establishes affirmative action in public universities, where it would really count.

The lack of a federal affirmative action law has not stopped public universities from initiating their own programs. After Cardoso raised the issue in 2002, affirmative action programs spread rather quickly through the public university system, first in state universities and later in federal ones, which were much slower in adopting them. Although several federal universities now have affirmative action, state universities are still ahead, with 86% (32/37) of them
having adopted programs, compared with 62% (38/61) of federal universities. These include all sorts of affirmative action programs and not only race-conscious ones.

More than 71% of all public universities in the country already have some type of affirmative action, and in the regions that have the largest number of public universities, the Southeast and the Northeast, the percentage is higher than the national average. This is quite remarkable, given that before the implementation of the first affirmative action programs, there was almost no public debate in the country about equal opportunity in access to higher education. Public universities were able to implement their own programs, despite the lack of federal laws on affirmative action, because they enjoy a great deal of administrative autonomy in Brazil. Out of all 70 public universities that now have affirmative action, 54 (77%) created their programs through internal deliberations. The other 16 (23%) are state universities that were compelled by state laws to implement affirmative action.

Because affirmative action spread over public university systems in a decentralized manner, the programs vary widely, with different criteria for admissions and different kinds of beneficiaries. Among the public universities with affirmative action, more than 87% have programs benefitting students of all races coming from the public school system; public schooling works well as a proxy for low income, given that in an economy that still has a large informal sector, proofs of income are not always reliable. More than 57% of those universities with affirmative action have programs for black students, and more than 51% for indigenous peoples.

There were at least three bills discussed in Congress during Lula’s presidency that would have established a federal affirmative action program, but all of them met a great deal of opposition, particularly from representatives and senators of the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB) and the conservative Democrats, a right-wing party that has been historically allied with the PSDB. One proposal that was passed, the Statute on Racial Equality, officially recognizes Brazil as a multi-racial and multi-ethnic country where people of African descent have been subject to racial discrimination.

The law establishes an agency called the National System for the Promotion of Racial Equality (SINAPIR), requires that schools at all levels—not just primary schools—include the history and culture of Afro-Brazilians in their curricula, prohibits racial and ethnic
discrimination, protects Afro-Brazilian religions as a matter of freedom of expression, recognizes still existing Maroon communities (quilombolas) and provides financial help for them, and declares the Afro-Brazilian martial art capoeira an official sport worthy of government support. Affirmative action in public universities, however, was dropped from the law during negotiations.

The opposition to race-conscious affirmative action in Brazil owes much to a long-standing myth that race relations in the country are harmonious and devoid of conflict. A history of racial mixing and a lack of discrimination and prejudice, the story goes, are the hallmarks of social relations among Brazilians, who inhabit a color continuum that goes from very dark to very light. Often referred to as the myth of “racial democracy,” this narrative was created by 20th-century Brazilian intellectuals like the sociologist Gilberto Freyre, among others, as well as foreigners. It once worked well as an antidote to various racist theories and was eventually adopted by the state as the core of a discourse on national identity and social integration. But with Brazil’s return to liberal democracy in the 1980s, it increasingly became an impediment rather than a support for the expansion of civil, political, and social rights and opportunities.

Today, the myth is systematically used to deny the existence of racism and discrimination in Brazil, despite a plethora of demographic, economic, and social data and analyses since the 1950s showing stark differences in terms of income and opportunities between whites and non-whites. Few are more strident in opposing affirmative action than the commentators given a platform by the country’s big media—particularly Rede Globo (which owns the largest television network in the country, several cable channels, the newspapers O Globo and Extra, and several other publications) and the Abril company (which publishes the weekly news magazine Veja). On top of assuming an editorial stand against affirmative action, these media channels give voice to journalists, academics, and public intellectuals engaged in challenging affirmative action through a variety of arguments.

Their arguments take three main forms: The first accuses policy makers of importing a system of racial classification from the United States, one that will ultimately cause the racialization of Brazilian society and create racial conflict in a country that did not previously have it; in other words, affirmative action will erode Brazil’s nation identity, which is based on racial harmony and mixing. The second, more legalistic argument holds that affirmative action violates the equal protection clause of Brazil’s constitution or simply undermines the republican principle of legal and political equality. Finally, the third argument portrays affirmative action as ineffective because it either has procedural flaws, such as the supposed impossibility of sorting out blacks from whites in Brazil, or produces unintended results, such as excluding poor whites or benefitting only the black middle class.

These arguments are quite similar to those used in the United States, with the exception of the “racial democracy” argument, which in Brazil is invoked quite often. That is, while in the United States commentators who oppose affirmative action might accuse it of betraying the nation’s foundational tradition of strict equality before the law, in Brazil affirmative action is charged with violating a different kind of national identity, one based on racial tolerance and mixing.

Reading Brazil’s big newspapers and news magazines, one would think the issue has been deadlocked in an acrimonious debate pitching righteous self-proclaimed liberal academics defending the republican virtue of social harmony against self-interested militants colonized by the Ford Foundation and its U.S. race categorizations. Fortunately, the reality is quite different—affirmative action has been strongly supported by many Brazilians. Yet intellectuals and politicians who oppose it have launched a concerted effort to bring at least two cases against affirmative action before Brazil’s Supreme Court.

As the bill that created PROUNI was being discussed in Congress in late 2004, the Liberal Front Party (PFL) challenged the constitutionality of PROUNI before Brazil’s Supreme Court, arguing that among other things the program violated the universities’ autonomy. In July 2009 the same party, now renamed Democrats, challenged the constitutionality of the race-conscious admissions program of the Federal University of Brasília before the Court. Some politicians close to Cardoso, like his onetime minister of education, Paulo Renato Souza, have been very vocal against race-conscious affirmative action. If the PSDB’s candidate, José Serra, had won the recent presidential elections in 2010 affirmative action programs would be in potential risk.

Although the Supreme Court might be sensitive to the popularity of a measure that would address the problem of racial inequality in the country’s higher education system, there is no guarantee that more conservative ideas and interpretations of Brazilian society will not prevail.
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40

NACLA REPORT ON THE AMERICAS
Scene From an Occupation

By Joseph Nevins

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CROSSING WITH THE VIRGIN: STORIES FROM THE MIGRANT TRAIL by Kathryn Ferguson, Norma A. Price, and Ted Parks (University of Arizona Press, 2010), paperback, 240 pp., $17.95

THE DEATH OF JOSSELINE: IMMIGRATION STORIES FROM THE ARIZONA-MEXICO BORDERLANDS by Margaret Regan (Beacon Press, 2010), paperback, 256 pp., $15

MIGRA! A HISTORY OF THE U.S. BORDER PATROL by Kelly Lytle Hernández (University of California Press, 2010), paperback, 336 pp., $21.95

Using the courts to condemn part of Eloisa Tamez’s land, the authorities put an 18-foot-high steel barrier in her backyard, a wall justified in the name of the political black hole called national security. In doing so, they effectively cut off access to the rest of the university professor’s property. Her family has held legal title to the land, originally more than 10,000 acres in size, since 1767, long before the land-hungry state and its colonists arrived on the scene. Since then, various factors—settlers and local officials’ legal chicanery, the distribution of subdivisions to heirs, and land sales—have shrunk it to a narrow, three-acre strip that extends from Tamez’s house all the way to the internationally recognized boundary about one and a half miles away.

Although this saga sounds as if it could have taken place in occupied Palestine, the Tamez family actually hails from thousands of miles away—in the Rio Grande Valley, near Brownsville, Cameron County, Texas, along the U.S.-Mexico boundary. Like many of their neighbors, the Tamez family gained title to their property from Spanish colonial authorities, but their Lipan Apache ties to the area’s land go back much farther. In the era of so-called Homeland Security, however, such roots mean little. As of January 2010, when the Tamez family was profiled in The Texas Observer, the federal government had seized land from 199 of the Tamez’s fellow county residents and bulldozed some of their citrus orchards, in order to make room for new border barriers.1

Such developments, predicted Margo Tamez, Eloisa’s daughter, in testimony to the Organization of American States in 2008, will cut off Apache families from their sacred sites across the Rio Grande and undercut their ability to subsist on the land, forcing them to move elsewhere.2

Just as the Jewish-only settlements and what Israel calls the security fence are intended to inhibit mobility in Palestine, so, too, are the barriers that increasingly scar the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. In both settings, mere walking—and other forms of everyday mobility—can be threatening to the authorities who seek to control the land and to keep out those deemed permanent outsiders. This dynamic is vividly described by the lawyer and human rights activist Raja Shehadeh, a native of Ramallah, West Bank, in his Palestinian Walks. In this simultaneously beautiful, painful, and instructive book, Shehadeh recounts six long walks, or sarha (the plural of the Arabic term sarha), which he describes as a kind of aimless wandering, “not restricted by time and place,” in which a hiker goes “where his spirit takes him to nourish his soul and rejuvenate himself.” Not a term applicable to just any walk, a sarha “implies letting go,” he writes. “It’s a drug-free high, Palestinian style.”

In relating the walks, which took place in the West Bank between 1978 and 2006, Shehadeh movingly explores the splendor and power of the area’s landscape and offers a sobering look at how Israel’s occupation has tragically transformed it so as to deny basic dignity to the Palestinian population. A key goal is to try and “record how the land felt and looked before this calamity” with the “hope to preserve, at least in words, what has been lost forever.” Among what has been lost is open space and the right “simply to walk and savor what nature has to offer. . . . without anger, fear or insecurity . . . without the fear of losing what they’ve come to love.” In the context of Israel’s ongoing land theft, Shehadeh feels “like one who is told that he contracted a terminal disease,” with his time to live—to walk—“running out.”

Open space and the ability to simply walk are also increasingly under siege in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, as compellingly illustrated by two recent collections of stories from the U.S.-Mexico borderlands—Crossing With the Virgin, co-authored by three members of the migrant humanitarian aid group Samaritans, Kathryn Ferguson, Norma A. Price, and Ted Parks; and The Death of Josseline, by the Tucson-based journalist Margaret Regan. Traversing the borderlands, these works make clear, is often a death-defying undertaking for those who enter the United States
“illegally” from Mexico. The arduous terrain and other environmental factors, combined with the distances that must be traveled to circumvent the ever widening policing apparatus, lead many to perish before they reach their destination. With more than 2,000 migrant corpses recovered in southern Arizona alone since the late 1990s, death has become a way of life in the borderlands region, which Regan calls a “killing field.”

The names and stories of these human beings who meet their untimely demise in the borderlands are largely invisible in mainstream U.S. debate on immigration issues. They include Lucrecia Domínguez Luna, who perished in the arms of her 15-year-old son, Jesús, as they tried to reach a husband and father living and working in the United States, and whose story Norma Price poignantly recounts; also among them is Josseline Jamilet Hernández Quinteros—a 15-year-old girl from El Salvador who died of hypothermia in southern Arizona while trying to unite with her family in Los Angeles—which tragic plight Regan movingly narrates.

These deaths speak to the inherent flip side of “security” in a world of dramatic socio-economic inequalities. Security for those within requires protections for those defined as outside the sociopolitical-geographical boundaries of the planet’s relatively privileged portions, an insecurity produced by the very presence of the enforcement apparatus.

THE POLICING OF IMMIGRANTS

and regulation of territorial boundaries in the United States are hardly new. Yet it was mostly individual states, not the federal government, that policed human mobility—of citizens and non-citizens alike—until the 1870s. At that time Washington began passing laws restricting immigration on the basis of social, political, economic, and ethno-racial criteria. The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act—together with successful efforts by Chinese migrants and their supporters to circumvent Exclusion-related controls by, among other means, entering through Canada and Mexico—led to the first policing of migrants along U.S. territorial boundaries.

The novelty of the present is the extent and depth of the exclusion and control apparatus. The Border Patrol, now the federal government’s largest law enforcement body, for example, has grown massively since the 1990s. In 1994, the agency had roughly 4,200 agents; today it numbers about 21,000. During that time, the number of immigration detention beds grew from 5,000 to 33,000, manifested by a network of about 350 federal, county, and local facilities where the Department of Homeland Security jailed about 380,000 migrants in 2009, according to the Detention Watch Network. The most visible manifestations of this growth are in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, where the length of walls, fences, and barriers have increased from a few dozen miles’ worth in the mid-1990s to more than 600 miles today. And it is in this region where about 18,000 of all Border Patrol agents are deployed.

The Southwest was not always the agency’s geographical focus, as Kelly Lytle Hernández reports in her insightful history of the Border Patrol, Migra!. In the early years of the agency (established in 1924), the Canadian and Mexican border regions were assigned roughly equal weight—at least as indicated by the allocation of officers. But such relative parity quickly disappeared as federal authorities began to focus the lion’s share of enforcement on the U.S.-Mexico divide and people of Mexican origin.

What explains this shift, among other factors, is that unlike the part of the United States that abuts Canada, all of the U.S. Southwest, except a small portion comprising southern Arizona and southwestern New Mexico, was gained through war (1846–48). In 1853, Mexico surrendered that small portion, in a land-and-people-grab euphemistically called the Gadsden Purchase, in response to Washington’s threats to militarily take the resource-rich territory.) And the region’s southern boundary divides two countries whose dominant ethno-cultural composition and socio-economic levels diverge profoundly. The associated differences have long facilitated Mexico’s role as a source of low-wage and disposable labor for the United States. Mainstream U.S. society has historically framed these as racial distinctions, with all the inequalities and injustices they inevitably entail.

While the intensity of fear and loathing has ebbed and flowed, low-income Mexicans, and Latinos more broadly, have long been represented as the embodied antipathy of all that is hegemonically perceived as good. What has changed are the labels attached to them—“Communist,” “illegal,” “criminal,” and “terrorist” among the most socially marginalizing—and the related ideological smoke screens used to legitimize their exclusion, one of the most powerful being “the rule of law,” which in this case provides ever fewer protections for those caught up in the endlessly widening web of policing. As one Border Patrol agent jokes to Regan, the U.S. Constitution has an “asterisk” for the border region. Whereas the Bill of Rights prohibits unreasonable searches and seizures, Regan explains, the Border Patrol can enter anyone’s land (but not buildings) within proximity of the international divide, and set
up checkpoints along roads to stop drivers—without probable cause.

The border zone is expanding, with the federal government now defining it as a 100-mile-wide strip that abuts the country’s edges. This definitional generosity allows the Border Patrol to establish highway checkpoints near White River Junction, Vermont; to conduct sweeps in the Greyhound bus station in West Palm Beach, Florida; or to board east-west-bound passenger trains in Havre, Montana—creating a policing area that includes nearly two thirds of the U.S. population in what the American Civil Liberties Union calls a “Constitution-Free Zone.” For proponents of such “thickening,” the federal government’s perceived failure to prevent unauthorized migrants from entering or residing in the United States necessitates ever more intense enforcement of the country’s perimeter. It also compels growing policing of migrants within: The federal government has exiled millions of people since the mid-1990s—fiscal year 2010 saw a record 392,862 deportations—and thus the separation of hundreds of thousands of U.S. citizen children from one or more of their parents.

Still, the changes are most profoundly felt in the locales that abut the U.S.-Mexico divide—which, despite its violent origins and the fact that migrants have long faced myriad forms of violence negotiating passage, allowed for relatively fluid movement between U.S. border towns and the “twin” population centers in Mexico until fairly recently. Those days seem quite distant, given the overlapping wars on drugs, “illegals,” and terror waged in the borderlands—the Border Patrol today says that it focuses on “preventing terrorists and terrorists’ weapons, including weapons of mass destruction, from entering the United States,” according to its website.

It is in this context that the wall-building spree arrived in Eloisa Tamez’s backyard. “I feel like we live in an occupied zone now,” the 17-year military veteran told The Texas Observer. Onetime mayor of Douglas, Arizona, Ray Borane echoes this characterization in a quote from Regan. He describes Douglas as “an occupied town”—with 453 Border Patrol agents stationed there in 2000, an almost eightfold increase over 1994—while likening it to “a militarized zone.” Regan later cites Mike Wilson of the Tohono O’odham Nation, whose traditional lands are bisected by the international boundary, and who likens the Border Patrol on “the Rez” to “an occupying army.”

Speaking of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands more broadly, Crossing With the Virgin contributor Kathryn Ferguson describes the area as a “low-level war zone where there are men with guns—Border Patrol, National Guard, thieves, Minute-men, ranchers, hunters, helicopters, ATVs, horse patrols, and Humvees.” She later reports on a particular encounter: One night, while she and a friend drove northward from the international divide, stadium lights suddenly blinded them. They had encountered “a Border Patrol checkpoint, rigid-faced men with guns telling us to stop.” Despite being in southern Arizona, “I had to remind myself that this was my country,” she writes. “I was not in foreign occupied territory.”

I t is easy to label such characterizations hyperbole. But to draw parallels between what transpires in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands and conventional cases of occupation—as in, say, Palestine—is not to assert sameness so much as it is to highlight significant parallels. Most palpable is the systematic dehumanization they both involve, from depriving the indigenous populations of their resources and ways of life to the hunting down of human beings for the “crime” of entering national territory without sanction of the sovereign power.

The inhumanity is not always lost on its immediate producers. Lytle Hernández quotes from a 1978 interview with a Border Patrol agent: “If you look at the human aspects,” the agent said, referring to his work, “we are stopping starving people from coming in to work, [and] it is not pretty to look at.” Or as another agent explained in 2007, “It’s very hard to make this job look pretty. We’re fortunate enough to live in a country where there are lots of opportunities. And most of the people who we run into here want to make that
dream happen. Unfortunately, it’s our job to stop that dream. That’s what we do on an everyday basis.”

Israel has its own Border Police, whose duties include apprehending and expelling unauthorized workers who are often, but not exclusively, Palestinian. In a collection of testimonies of female soldiers who served in the occupied territories released in 2010, a Border Policewoman spoke with regret about her work enforcing the boundary between the West Bank and Israel proper: “In half an hour you can catch 30 people without any effort.” As to what then happens to these “illegal aliens”—women, men, children, and elderly—she explained: “They would have them stand, and there’s the well-known Border Guard song (in Arabic): ‘One hummus, one bean, I love the Border Guard’—they would make them sing this. Sing, and jump . . . and if one of them would laugh, or if they would decide someone was laughing, they would punch him.” Such abuse, reportedly commonplace, “could go on for hours, depending on how bored [the guards] are.”

While all relatively wealthy countries stymie the hopes, dreams, and livelihoods of the unauthorized migrants they capture, it is the deeply rooted nature of the ties between the supposed “us” and “them” in the case of Mexico and the United States, and Palestine and Israel, that distinguish the practices of control and exclusion. And it is their overlapping historical and contemporary geographies—which defy simple notions of “here” and “there,” despite the efforts of the boundary makers—that raise pronounced ethical issues. In an overt sense, Israel’s occupation is particularly harsh in policing mobility.

As part of its efforts to undermine Hamas and further its dispossession of the Palestinians by fragmenting their territory, Israel prohibits Gazans from pursuing university studies in the nominally Palestinian-governed West Bank, and has arrested and deported numerous students back to Gaza. At the same time, Israel seeks to control Gaza’s perimeter, in part by widening it, and violently enforces its will. Israeli soldiers frequently fire on Palestinians, including children, scavenging for construction materials among the ruins created by Israel’s January 2009 military assault on Gaza, for instance. In 2010, according to Save the Children, 26 such children were shot near the boundary with Israel, including 16 who were beyond the Israeli-imposed 328-yard no-go zone that extends into the Gaza Strip.

Such levels of violence are not manifest in today’s U.S.-Mexico borderlands—the worst of it having been carried out in the 1800s and early 1900s by U.S. and local authorities, as well as Anglo settlers, as they subjugated and dispossessed the Native and pre-conquest Mexican populations. Nonetheless, recent years have seen numerous incidents of U.S. authorities, like the Israelis, firing upon alleged rock throwers or shooting unarmed border-crossers.

CROSSING WITH THE VIRGIN

Contributor Norma Price describes the autopsy of 16-year-old Juan de Jesús Rivera Cota, killed by a Border Patrol bullet in 2005, for instance. But, as is normal for situations in which the system of control is strongly institutionalized and thus largely invisible as violence—at least to those who...
embrace it—so, too, are the dominant expressions of injustice and the accompanying brutality, migrant deaths being the most obvious one. Another is Operation Streamline. Begun in 2005, the now border-wide program (minus California) processes hundreds of apprehended Mexican border-crossers on a daily basis through the federal court system and convictst hem of the misdemeanor of illegal entry. Upon pleading guilty (which they invariably do), defendants receive sentences of anywhere from time served to six months and then are formally deported, thus making it a felony if they return and making them liable for anywhere from two to 20 years in prison.

I witnessed this scene in a Tucson courthouse in March 2009 as a federal magistrate convicted the afternoon’s 69 defendants, all with their hands chained to their wrists and feet shackled. Afterward, the judge, a woman of Mexican descent born and raised in the border town of Nogales, Arizona, spoke to a group of university students visiting the courtroom. In response to a question about the program’s effectiveness in dissuading would-be unauthorized migrants, she characterized it as a complete waste of resources. When asked why she continued to do such work, the judge explained that she had kids to put through college. She later described her hometown as “like occupied territory.”

That the judge serves the very occupation she decries is unsurprising. It speaks to the contradictions and complexities that human beings embody, and is also a manifestation of how regimes of occupation can co-opt critics. To the extent that the regime has normalized the occupation—so much so that it is not visible as such—it additionally displays the success with which the occupiers have nationalized the minds-sets of many: Today more than half of Border Patrol agents are Latinos, the vast majority from the border region. It thus also illustrates how the dispossession narrows the options for the land’s inhabitants, the borderlands including some of the poorest areas of the United States, with socioeconomic indices for broad swaths of the Mexican-origin population especially dire. In the case of Palestinians, many perform construction jobs and labor in the very settlements in the West Bank and greater Jerusalem that exacerbate their plight.

In such contexts, the line between occupier and occupied, guard and policed, is often blurry at best: On January 10, U.S. authorities arrested Marcos Gerardo Manzano Jr., a Border Patrol agent, for allegedly harboring unauthorized immigrants at his home, one of them being his twice previously deported father. Some of his neighbors, almost all of whom are of Mexican descent, in the San Ysidro section of San Diego expressed sympathy for Manzano. “What could he do?” one neighbor was quoted as saying, adding in reference to Manzano’s father: “He’s family.” For U.S. authorities, such allegiance is the core of the problem: “His loyalty to his father was stronger than the loyalty to the Border Patrol,” one official stated condemningly, “and that’s the sad reality of it.”

Supporters of occupation regimes justify the injustice in various ways, one being the invocation of the rule of law established by the conquering power. In this regard, the original injustice of colonization is perpetuated and obscured by what historian Arno Mayer has called a “violence of conservation”—physical and institutional brutality deployed to counter, and made necessary by, the individuals and groups who resist the social order that was violently brought about by an earlier wrong (a “violence of foundation” for Meyer). A second justification of occupation invokes “might makes right”: As one Israeli settler says to Shehadeh in defending his country’s presence in what is, according to international law, Palestinian land: “There was a war and we won.” His words made me recall a rally I witnessed in Los Angeles on July 4, 1997. The demonstrators were calling for a crackdown on unwanted immigration and for increased militarization of the U.S.-Mexico boundary. Among them was a woman carrying a sign directed at people of Mexican de-
What was lost to the pre-conquest populations and their descendants in both cases was not only land but, for those now cut off from territory to which they previously had access, all the associated rights, like the right to move, live, and work within the area. And for those members of the subjugated populations caught within the boundaries of the expanding entities or (in the U.S. case) who would later migrate to it, their rights in the new country would prove to be conditional and restricted. The theft was an inextricable part of the process to Americanize what is now the U.S. Southwest, and to make an Israel whose territory continues to expand.

What should give hope in the face of such injustices is that occupations are by definition temporary—or at least they are supposed to be. The United States has the advantage over Israel of having its ill-gotten territory legitimated by an international treaty, albeit one effectively realized at gunpoint, while having a considerable amount of time to dispossess and discipline the indigenous and Mexican populations it inherited and establish effective control. As such, the U.S. “occupation” is seen—at home and abroad—as something else, and certainly not temporary (at least in the foreseeable term). Hence, the conquest truly seems past, at least to many. In the case of Palestine, by contrast, the past visibly lives on, thus the international outrage directed at Israel and the direct resistance by Palestinians living under occupation.

Nonetheless, the distinct perceptions of the two situations speak, perhaps, more to the conventional nature of our definitions of occupation than they do to the depth and significance of the differences between the two sites. While Raja Shehadeh is clearly preoccupied with occupation of a conventional sort, his conception and critique of occupation concern much larger matters. In his book’s last sarha, he encounters an Israeli settler—one of the hundreds of thousands of colonists he despises for “the aggressiveness of their intentions and behavior toward my land.” In addition to stealing land and wastefully devouring the area’s fragile water supply, the settlers are an integral part of the Israeli system of control that stymies mobility. Shehadeh does not hide his rage from the settler. Yet, at the same time, he is able to see a connection with the young man due to a shared attachment to, and respect for, the land.

“I love these hills no less than you,” the settler asserts in response to Shehadeh’s challenge. “I was raised here. The sights and smells of this land are a sacred part of me. This is my home.” Shehadeh accepts the settler’s invitation to join him in smoking a water pipe of hashish. While Shehadeh feels a certain discomfort—“I began to feel guilty at what I was doing, willingly, sharing these hills with this settler”—he also is able to see beyond the clash between occupied and occupier: “But then I thought: these are still my hills despite how things are turning out. But they also belong to whoever can appreciate them.” Here becomes apparent Shehadeh’s full critique of occupation, and of the two-decade-old “peace process,” which has served to further Palestinian dispossession and render a two-state solution almost unimaginable, given the breadth and depth of
Israel’s presence in Palestine. What is at stake above all is how human beings behave toward the land and one another. In this sense, the problem is principally those who see the land as a blank canvas, one that can carve up and fill without any regard for the flora, fauna, and physical landscape, and who show contempt for its human inhabitants and their ties to it.

In many ways, Shehadeh embraces practices that precede the very creation of the state of Israel. They include those of his paternal grandfather, a man who lived humbly in Ramallah while moving seasonally between the town and his fields in the nearby hills, and the semi-nomadic Bedouin, a people whose presence in the region goes back centuries. They had, Shehadeh writes, “a different vision of the land,” one that “saw it as an integral whole.” And then there are the Greek Orthodox monks who lead lives of contemplative seclusion in a centuries-old monastery near Jericho, an oasis of “tranquility and peace” where they do not “bother with the worldly events taking place outside their door.” Shehadeh wants to draw “inspiration from this long tradition, and search for a tranquil place” where he “could take refuge and sit out the bad times” and nurse his “despair about Israel’s unbridled power” as a “time comes when one has to accept reality, difficult as that might be, and find ways to live through it without losing one’s self-esteem and principles.”

By continuing to engage in the struggle to free the land, but in a way that goes beyond simple dichotomies of friend and foe and that embraces a belonging to something far beyond the here-and-now, Shehadeh leaves the reader with a vision that transcends the seemingly intractable conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. Acknowledging the land’s permanence and the transient nature of any human construct, Shehadeh allows for a peaceful and just coexistence for all who reside in, and have a selfless, love-like claim to the contested land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River.

Today’s U.S.-Mexico borderlands is also one of despair in many ways, but, like any place, it is also one riven with contradictions and instabilities. It is a region deformed by rapacious development, with threatened water supplies, the prospects of long-term drought exacerbated by climate change. It is also one blanketed by a U.S. policing apparatus that harms the region’s landscape, flora, and fauna. Yet countless migrants continue to challenge the regime of exclusion and overcome it to varying degrees.

As Crossing With the Virgin co-author Ted Parks insists, “The migrants will come as long as the forces are in place” that drive them. For these reasons and more, it is thus hard to imagine the settler status quo’s long-term survival. However, given the growing intensity of occupation in the form of the ever-hardening enforcement regime, it is also difficult to envision its end in the foreseeable term. Nonetheless, that need not lead to an acquiescence to the unacceptable in the name of realism.

“Even if we take [unjust social arrangements] as givens for purposes of immediate action in a particular context, “writes political theorist Joseph Careens, “we should not forget about our assessment of their fundamental character. Otherwise we wind up legitimating what should only be endured.” And given the fundamental character of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, any just solution to the ongoing, multifaceted war there must challenge its foundational violence, and the contemporary manifestations of that violence.

Perhaps a similar vision to that of Shehadeh provides the resources to enable us to carry on and to imagine and produce a world beyond occupation. It is a vision that respects the land’s power and embraces its beauty, and allows for fluidity in terms of passage and residence. It also appreciates that the land will far outlast the relatively short lifespan of human conflicts and injustices, and will ultimately endure despite the associated destruction.

AFTER YEARS OF NEOLIBERAL POLICIES, Latin America’s poverty rate in the 1990s had risen to well over 40%. A new phase of capitalism had spread across the continent, increasing inequality and resulting in what the editors of Reclaiming Latin America call “a double crisis of both political representation and of political economy.” Social movements responded and kicked 11 Latin American leaders out of office in just 15 years. These movements paved the way for the election of progressive presidents across the region.

The electoral rise of the Latin American left has captured the world’s attention. The contributors to this edited volume, largely from British academia, aim to offer “substantial insights into the character and content of the left’s political revival.” The book includes chapters with both regional analysis and case studies from Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Cuba, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. The editors highlight the importance of what they call “a new continentalism,” best exemplified by the derailing of the U.S.-backed Free Trade Area of the Americas and the formation of the Bolivarian Alternative for the People of the Americas. However, the editors write, while “many of these electoral victors have strong majorities . . . electoral tides go out as well as come in.”

ACCORDING TO THE EDITORS OF LATIN America’s Left Turns, the wave of left-leaning electoral victories in Latin America has been over-simplified. “Dichotomizing the left into radical populists and social democrats conveniently reproduces the old cleavage between revolution and reform within the new context of democracy and globalization,” the editors write. The scholars who contribute to this collection of 12 essays attempt to leave the dualities behind and decipher the true inter-workings of the Latin American left turns.

What does unite the Latin American new left? The editors contend that the left turns “are a multiplicity of disparate efforts to reopen or re-found the constitutional order or social pact.” Several countries in the region have rewritten their constitutions, but the editors ask, “Will [this] address poverty or social exclusion? Will it take on the task of transforming state institutions?” Venezuela and Bolivia are discussed in-depth, for having “inspired the most heated debate” and for their positions on liberalism, democracy, and constituent power—central issues throughout the book. While the countries of the left turns have effectively worked toward reducing the “region’s intolerably unequal distribution of income,” the editors contend that they still have major challenges in security, accountability, and corruption.

LEFT AND PROGRESSIVE GOVERNMENTS have taken power across the Americas “and this raises unique problems for grassroots movements,” writes Raúl Zibechi in his first book translated into English, Dispersing Power. “How the movements relate to these governments will be critical in the coming years.” Although Zibechi, a columnist for the Uruguayan newspaper Brecha, makes brief mention of movements in Argentina, Brazil, and elsewhere, he looks almost exclusively to Bolivia—where uprisings a decade ago knocked two leaders from power and helped pave the way for the election of the country’s first indigenous president, Evo Morales.

But this book isn’t about Morales; it’s about the social movements that helped to put him where he is, and that have maintained a sometimes uneasy, though continuing, support for Morales in the years since he was elected and reelected. “Community does not merely exist, it is made,” writes Zibechi, as he carries us to the local councils and describes the community power created by the country’s indigenous Aymara. The book references everyone from Karl Marx to Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, and includes chapters that combine reportage with theoretical musings on the “community as a social machine,” the “self-constructed city,” community justice, and the “difficult coexistence” of state and non-state actors.
If there is a silver lining in the catastrophic earthquake that hit Haiti on January 12, 2010, it is that the country is once again a focus of international attention and concern. There are now many more journalists based there full-time than before the earthquake, with many more occasionally flying in. Some of them have produced detailed, thoughtful, and probing journalism on an array of important issues facing Haitians—most notably the failed relief and reconstruction efforts. But the coverage of Haiti’s recent elections shows that there are still important and contentious topics that the press has not investigated deeply, leaving out much crucial historical background.

Most English-language news media reported on the serious problems that plagued Haiti’s November 28 presidential and legislative elections—long lines, incomplete voter registries, record low voter turnout, violence, and chaos. But they barely mentioned the election’s biggest flaw: the arbitrary banning of more than a dozen political parties from the ballot—most notably Fanmi Lavalas, the country’s most popular party, which has won every election in which it has been allowed to participate.

Fanmi Lavalas emerged in 1996 from the Lavalas social movement, founded by ousted former president Jean-Bertrand Aristide, which pushed out the dictator Jean-Claude Duvalier. Excluding this party was equivalent to barring the Democratic or Republican party in a U.S. election, as one commentator noted. Meanwhile, U.S. government funding of the elections went ahead—with $14 million committed—with almost no notice from the U.S. press. A Nexis search turned up just four unique news articles in 2010 before election day describing the amount of U.S. funding for the elections. Of these, just one mentioned the exclusion of Fanmi Lavalas.

Despite having reported extensively on the inherent problems in Haiti’s November 28 vote, the news media treated the election’s official outcome, a runoff election between the top two candidates, as if it were legitimate. In doing so, the media again largely ignored crucial information—this time, that the vote counting was so riddled with irregularities that the election results ought to have been simply thrown out and a new election scheduled. Instead, the media uncritically reported the recommendations of a report released by an Organization of American States mission to Haiti; the report was deeply flawed in its methodology and statistical analysis, yet its conclusions in favor of a runoff were endorsed by the U.S. State Department and most U.S.-based commentators.

The officially approved runoff election culminated with the second round in April, when the Haitian electoral authority announced the victory of a right-wing candidate, Michel “Sweet Mickey” Martelly, a popular kompa singer with ties to the old Duvalier regime. The U.S. press once again offered little in the way of critical coverage of this important development.

By Dan Beeton

Haiti’s Elections: Parties Banned, Media Yawn

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The Provisional Electoral Council (CEP), Haiti’s electoral authority, first banned Fanmi Lavalas and other parties in February 2009, ahead of legislative elections the following April. The decision was arbitrary, and in the case of Fanmi Lavalas, the CEP resorted to a technicality. It claimed it could not adequately verify Aristide’s signature, sent while he was still in forced exile in South Africa, as head of the party—a problem that the authority seemed reluctant to solve.

Although the party exclusions were a long-standing and contentious issue well ahead of the November elections, the subject received little attention. A Nexis search of U.S. newspapers and newswires found only six unique news articles that even mentioned the party exclusions in election day coverage (two each from the Associated Press and The Miami Herald, and one each from The Christian Science Monitor and Agence France-Presse); in none of these articles did the exclusions figure as a lead story, usually appearing in the 14th paragraph or later. Press coverage of the issue was also scarce in the run-up to the elections; just 26 news articles (out of almost 200) mentioned the exclusion of Fanmi Lavalas in 2010 coverage before the elections. Of these, the party exclusions were a central point in only three articles; in most, they were buried several paragraphs into the story.

Tellingly, the focus of six of these 26 articles was the possible candidacy of celebrity musician Wyclef Jean, which the CEP ultimately rejected. “Haiti’s presidential election revolves around personalities rather than parties or issues,” The Washington Post’s William Booth stated in one article. The same could be said of U.S. news coverage of the elections—the Post all but completely ignored the exclusion of Fanmi Lavalas and the other parties. (Other articles mentioned “accusations”—dubious at the time, and since debunked—that Aristide’s party “rigged legislative elections” when it was in power, while ignoring the rigging of the 2010 elections that was already under way.)

Some news coverage and commentary conspicuously left out any mention of the party exclusions, even when reporting on Fanmi Lavalas itself. “Their Unity and Lavalas parties are divided, which means that for the first time there is no clear front-runner,” a Los Angeles Times editorial stated, in reference to presidents René Préval and Aristide, respectively. A Washington Post article by Edward Cody similarly mentioned “divisions” within the Lavalas political movement, but neglected to tell readers that the Fanmi Lavalas party was actually excluded from the ballot. The day after the elections, the Los Angeles Times’ Joe Mozingo insinuated that the exclusion of Fanmi Lavalas diversified the playing field for new political hopefuls:

One remarkable aspect of this election was that people in neighborhoods long prone—and sometimes pressured—to vote for one candidate now were pondering many. The populist former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, who is in exile in South Africa, dominated politics for the last two decades, with Preval elected largely on the perception he was Aristide’s protégé.

But on Sunday, voters spoke openly about an array of candidates.

This reporting paints an incomplete—and distorted—picture of Haitian politics. Mozingo neglected to mention that the reason Aristide no longer “dominated politics,” and perhaps even the reason voters were speaking “openly about an array of candidates,” was that Aristide’s party was not allowed to compete. (The use of words like “pressured,” “dominated,” and “openly” also suggests a new supposed opening of democracy in Haiti, following an Aristide-“dominated” period of political “pressure.” In reality, the opposite has happened, with the democratically elected Aristide forced into exile in 2004 and thousands of his supporters hunted down by an unelected and unconstitutional government in the two years that followed.)

In one case, a reporter may have left the impression that Fanmi Lavalas was not in fact excluded. In an October 15 article, The Miami Herald’s Jacqueline Charles wrote that there were “at least six Lavalas candidates” running in the presidential race, “including former Aristide Prime Minister Yvon Neptune and Minister of Haitians Living Abroad Leslie Voltaire, and Yves Cristallin, Fanmi Lavalas co-founder.” When prompted for a correction, she replied in an e-mail that she stood by her article and that she never stated that any candidates were running as candidates of the Fanmi Lavalas party, and that Lavalas was a movement long before the party was founded.

As I noted in a blog post at the time, this is true and an important clarification to make, since the Herald should not presume that most of its readers know this history and will differentiate between “Lavalas candidates” as candidates at one time associated with the Lavalas social movement and candidates affiliated with the Fanmi Lavalas party. The Herald issued no such clarification.

The U.S. news media’s mishandling of the Haitian election was for many observers of Haitian politics not surprising. After all, the media all but ignored a campaign of repression and persecution of Fanmi Lavalas supporters in the two years after the 2004 coup d’etat that ousted Aristide. Although Aristide’s removal from office—and the months of terrorist violence leading up to it—received a good deal of media attention (much of it highly misleading or inaccurate), the wave of murders, kidnappings, and false imprisonments that followed did not.
Few U.S. media outlets kept regular correspondents in Haiti in the years 2004–6, when the country was ruled by a U.S.-backed dictatorship. In August 2006, a report in The Lancet medical journal confirmed the disturbing pattern that had been hinted at in the occasional brave reports that did emerge from Haiti—of reconstituted death squads, extra-judicial killings (sometimes by the police and UN troops), rapes, and other atrocities. The Lancet study found that some 4,000 people may have been killed for political reasons, out of a total of about 8,000 killed during this brief period. The Lancet report went unnoticed by the media, as author Peter Hallward has noted.

The efforts of Fanmi Lavalas to contest this persecution and political exclusion have similarly received little mention in the U.S. press. The party, despite being purged of many of its leaders, showed its strength by calling a boycott of the 2009 legislative elections when the CEP banned it from the ballot; the ban that would later simply be extended into 2010. The boycott appears to have been highly successful—either that or voters, finding little reason to go to the polls, merely chose to stay away. In any case, there was less than 5% voter participation in the election—less than 23%—not just in Haiti but in the Western Hemisphere, going back over 60 years. Foreign journalists reported ballot stuffing and other fraud. At least two people were killed in election-related violence, and, by the end of the day, some of the polling stations had been trashed, ballots scattered about in a symbolic image of the chaos that surrounded the electoral process from start to finish.

Midway through the November 28 election, 12 of the 19 presidential candidates held a news conference to denounce the electoral process and demand that the election be annulled and a new one held. Among these candidates were Mirlande Manigat, a conservative former first lady, and Michel Martelly, the eventual winner. Both would later change their minds when it was announced that they had finished first and third (getting 6.4% and 4.6% of the electorate's vote, respectively) in the preliminary count. The second-place finisher, Jude Célestin, Préval's handpicked candidate, was calculated as having beaten Martelly by just 6,800 votes. Under Haiti's constitution, the top two finishers proceed to a second round. Martelly supporters began violent protests to demand his inclusion in the runoff; at least five people were reported killed in the ensuing violence over the following weeks.

In mid-December, the Haitian government announced that a mission from the Organization of American States would review the election results. Before the OAS mission released its report—or any details thereof—the Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR) conducted its own study of all 11,181 tally sheets from the election (12 times as many tally sheets as the OAS mission would end up counting) and announced that the number of votes either “not counted or counted wrong” was “much larger” than reported by either the OAS or the CEP. Because of this, CEPR noted, it was impossible to determine who should advance to a second round. “If there is a second round,” a CEPR press release announced, “it will be based on arbitrary assumptions and/or exclusions.” None of the U.S. and international media outlets, with their considerable budgets, conducted their own counts and analyses.

The CEPR study received some coverage—in Agence France-Presse, the Canadian Globe and Mail, and the Canadian Broadcasting Company, for example. While it
ultimately had a significant impact, being cited by influential voices, including Representative Maxine Waters (D-Calif.) and Haiti’s former ambassador the United States, Raymond Joseph, for example, many news media paid no heed to questions about the Haitian election until January 10, when the Associated Press leaked details of the OAS mission’s draft report.31

Rather than suggest that the election results be thrown out and a new election held, as the great majority of presidential candidates continued to urge, the OAS mission report concluded that the election should proceed to a second round and that Martelly—not Célestin—should advance as the second-place winner.32 The next day, CEPR announced that it too had obtained a copy of the OAS mission report (from a different source) and had posted it online, along with a preliminary analysis of it finding it to be “methodologically and statistically flawed” and that “the small margin of difference between Martelly and Célestin in the OAS’s recount—0.3%—was too small to statistically distinguish between the two, given the sample size and variance.”33 CEPR’s was the first and only statistical analysis of the OAS mission report, its methodology, and its conclusions.34

The timing was important: The OAS had not yet officially presented the report to the Haitian government, which it was expected to do after the anniversary of Haiti’s earthquake. There was still time, in other words, for the OAS to correct its methodology and its findings. But this would probably come about only if there were ample media coverage. Several outlets, most notably the AP, CNN, and Inter Press Service, did report news of the leak, including CEPR’s analysis. Others, however, ignored the analysis and the questions it raised.35 Editorials in the Washington Post and The Globe and Mail quickly urged the Haitian authorities to accept the OAS’s recommendations, apparently without having examined the report.36 The Post, for example, noted that the OAS mission report had been described by diplomats and international aid officials “as a careful work,” leaving it at that, and went on to urge Préval to “embrace it clearly, audibly and publicly.”37

Several days later, CEPR released a more detailed analysis of the OAS mission report, which found that the OAS had come to its conclusions by eliminating 234 vote tally sheets from areas where Célestin had a disproportionately high number of votes.38 CEPR also noted that the OAS mission ignored hundreds of other tally sheets—not counted or originally disqualified—that might have affirmed Célestin’s second-place finish, had the OAS team given them the same sort of review it accorded the 234 eliminated tally sheets. In short, the OAS appeared to be cherry-picking which ballots to toss.

While CEPR’s release of this second analysis did garner more media coverage—with some outlets starting to describe the OAS mission report as “controversial”—many outlets continued to ignore the scrutiny of the OAS’s findings.39 Coverage of the CEPR paper was important, since it was the only independent statistical analysis of the OAS mission report to emerge and to have an influence on the debate.

Ignoring the CEPR analysis, as some media outlets did, made it appear that there was either no controversy regarding the OAS’s recommendations or that challenges to its findings came only from vested parties—Célestin or the Haitian president, for example. Worse still was journalists’ failure to question the OAS mission about its methodology—accepting it, as Weisbrot put it, without asking “the most obvious questions.”30

The result of this under-reported tale was a runoff between two right-leaning candidates on March 20. On April 4, the CEP announced that Martelly had won. His victory was due in part to his campaign spending of Haiti’s equivalent of $15 billion in the United States (by comparison, the Obama campaign is hoping to spend about $1 billion in the U.S. on the reelection campaign).

Voter turnout in the runoff election was similarly low, as in the first round—about 23%—yet Martelly’s campaign claimed a landslide victory and a strong mandate. The Martelly camp was aided by a few journalists, like AOL News’s Emily Troutman, who wrote, “Martelly’s 67 percent of the vote in a free election is nearly unprecedented in Haiti, similar to Jean-Bertrand Aristide’s margin in 1990, and a clear mandate for his leadership.”40

But Martelly received support from just 16.7% of the electorate, leading other outlets, such as The New York Times and The Economist, to note that his mandate was not very significant. “Just 23% of registered voters cast valid votes in the run-off election,” The Economist noted, “recalling the title of one of Mr Martelly’s mid-1990s hit albums: ‘I Don’t Care.’”41 Aristide, by contrast, was elected in 1990 with 67% of the vote, but with turnout around 75%—and in the first round.42 In 1995, Préval was elected with more than 87% of the vote.43

In the end, readers of U.S. newspapers and magazines may understandably be confused as to why Haiti has now elected an apparently right-wing candidate who has proposed reconstituting the widely-disliked Haitian army.44 Meanwhile, the left-leaning Aristide—who was greeted by tens of thousands of supporters upon his return to Haiti on March 18—remains the country’s most popular political figure.45
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