



Project
MUSE[®]

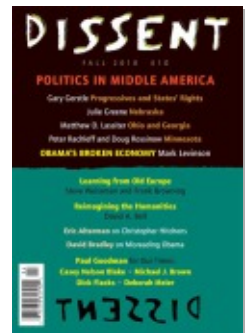
Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.

Does Brazil Still Need a Revolution?

Carlos Fraenkel

Dissent, Volume 58, Number 1, Winter 2011, pp. 27-32 (Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press



▶ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/dss/summary/v058/58.1.fraenkel.html>

Does Brazil Still Need a Revolution?

CARLOS FRAENKEL

As I walk to the Memorial of Resistance in São Paulo a few days before the election, I wonder whether a revolution is no longer necessary in Brazil. The memorial is symbolically located in what used to be the Department of Political and Social Order (DOPS), the state's organ to suppress political resistance to the government. During the military dictatorship that ruled Brazil from 1964 to 1985, the DOPS hunted down and tortured the regime's opponents, including my grandfather, killed through electric shocks in 1970. In the memorial's crowded auditorium, the Commission for Amnesty of the Ministry of Justice solemnly apologizes for the crime committed by the Brazilian state and declares my grandfather a "hero of the Brazilian people." There's plenty of symbolic recognition—a political biography has just been released; in the town hall, he's made an honorary citizen of São Paulo; a plaque will soon be unveiled in Jaboticabal, the city where he was born; and a street was named after him in Rio. What sometimes gets lost, I feel, in the eulogies and emotional recollections, is that today's Brazil is not the Brazil he fought for—first through the Communist Party, which he joined in 1931, and then as a leader of the armed struggle against the military regime from 1967 to his death. His lifelong project was a socialist revolution. One can disagree with that mission, but one shouldn't feel embarrassed calling it by its name. Many key figures in the government of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula) were fellow combatants of his in their youth. They include José Dirceu, Lula's first chief of staff (one of the political prisoners set free in 1969 in exchange for the American ambassador Burke Elbrick, whose abduction my grandfather helped to organize); Carlos Minc, Lula's minister of the environment (one of the

political prisoners set free in 1970 in exchange for the German ambassador Ehrenfried von Holleben); and Paulo Vernucchi, Lula's minister of human rights, who represents the government at the ceremony in the Memorial of Resistance and recalls setting up a clandestine meeting for my grandfather under his code name of "Walter."

And then there is, of course, Dilma Rousseff, who will succeed Lula as the president of Brazil. Like my parents, she became a member of a militant Marxist group as a student. But while they managed to escape to Europe as the repression turned violent at the end of the 1960s, Dilma was captured and tortured and spent two years in prison. Only with the amnesty of 1979 did she get her political rights back, the same year my parents left Germany to return home. Now in their sixties, the ex-guerrillas have become part of Brazil's political establishment: center-left politicians, who, I often hear, have since sobered and matured. But how immature were my grandfather's ideals, I wonder, and how much "pragmatic" compromise would he agree to today?

As far as I can tell there is not much at stake in the 2010 elections. Three of the four candidates were Marxists in their youth, and two of Dilma's opponents are themselves veterans of Lula's Workers' Party (PT) who only recently left it: Plínio de Arruda Sampaio in 2005 and Marina Silva, the candidate of the Green Party, in 2009. As for Dilma, as a little-known politician who never held elected office, her victory is largely due to Lula's immense popularity (his approval ratings reach 80 percent during the two months I'm in Brazil). Her key campaign promise is unequivocal: to continue Lula's politics. Would a José Serra government mean a real alternative? Some suspect Serra to be a closet politician of the Right who only poses as a social democrat. It's true that he has support in conservative circles. At a family reunion with

my upper-middle-class relatives in São Paulo, just before the run-off between Dilma and Serra, emotions and decibels run high. But I can't figure out why they like Serra and detest the PT so much. After all, Lula hasn't touched any of their privileges. In the 1960s, Serra was a prominent student activist in the left-wing Catholic youth movement that championed a "humanist socialism" and, like its Marxist counterparts, was persecuted by the military regime. Serra himself spent fourteen years in exile. Once a critic of Lula's welfare programs and identified with the neoliberal agenda of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (under whom he served as a minister), he now promises to expand Lula's signature *bolsa familia* (family fund) and denies allegations of the PT campaign that he plans to privatize Petrobras, Brazil's powerful oil company. On the whole, then, there seems to be little desire for change.

I last visited Brazil in 2003, at the beginning of the Lula government, when some still hoped and others feared that Lula would pursue a socialist agenda. These hopes and fears have long vanished. Among the left-wing governments that democratically came to power in Latin America over the last couple of decades, Lula's has arguably shown the least radical imagination. If I had doubts about this, they dissipate on the flight to São Paulo as I read an encomium on Lula's welfare programs in the *Economist*. And in a televised debate of the elections, the moderator asks Serra what he considers Lula's greatest achievement: "that he abandoned the political program that got him elected in 2002 and continued the economic and social policies of his predecessor, Fernando Henrique Cardoso." Although this is surely an exaggeration, Lula's critics on the Left concur that he hasn't fundamentally changed things. There is, for example, Plínio, who runs on a socialist platform (which gets him less than 1 percent of the vote). He dismisses the welfare programs bundled together in Lula's *bolsa familia* as *bolsa esmola* (charity fund) meant to appease the poor and points to a long list of unresolved issues: from the deplorable state of the public school system to the longstanding challenge to face up to a handful of powerful

farmers and redistribute vast stretches of idle agricultural land to the landless masses. Stronger criticism comes from a radical fringe. At the 29th Bienal in São Paulo, whose theme is the intersection of art and politics, I see a series of controversial paintings by Gil Vicente, who portrays himself as shooting and stabbing his "enemies," a group of prominent politicians including both Lula and Fernando Henrique Cardoso. Although the paintings cause considerable media stir, they do not reflect the mood in Brazil's intellectual circles. Much more representative is a manifesto endorsing Dilma's candidacy, signed by more than five hundred Brazilian philosophers, that hails the Lula government for having stirred Brazil toward a "society based on freedom, justice, and solidarity."

The philosophers' manifesto is an example of what I would call the optimistic narrative about the PT government. This narrative concedes that things in Brazil aren't yet perfect, but argues that one can't expect Lula to redress half a millennium of injustice in eight years. What's important is that he has set the country in the right direction. From now on things will get better, one PT government at a time. Consider health care, for example: Vilma Santana, a public health professor at the Federal University of Bahia and a leading scholar on workers' health, tells me how her maid had a thyroid cancer removed. "In addition to not paying a penny for the surgery and follow-up treatment, she received full compensation benefits during the recovery period." Vilma, who belongs to the generation of my parents and Dilma and likewise was part of the student groups opposing the dictatorship, is proud of the Brazilian health care system. "Since 1988 the Constitution guarantees health care for all as a fundamental human right. We're now delivering on this promise." A few days later I witness an unsettling scene in a public high school in Cajazeiras, one of the poorest neighborhoods on the periphery of Salvador. Teachers are collecting money to pay for a consultation with a private dermatologist for one of their students. A skin disease has disfigured his face, preventing him from leaving the house. The appointment he gets through the state system is in two months, which would force

him to repeat the entire school year. “He’s always been a diligent student,” one teacher tells me. “So we want to help him out.” At this point health care in Brazil remains a two-class system. The country with the world’s highest number of cosmetic surgeries (adding a little here, taking away a little there is a popular gift for the daughters of the rich) is the same country in which students risk losing a school year waiting for their appointment. According to the optimistic narrative we should see the gap close gradually until the right to health care, guaranteed in the Constitution, means the same thing to all citizens. But can even a well-meaning government like the PT’s democratize health care against the resistance of the elites?

Favelas line the runway at Guarulhos airport in São Paulo. The township of Guarulhos has one of the highest concentrations of shanty towns. Most people stranded here are migrants who, like Lula’s family in 1952, wanted to escape the *Sertão*, the desert-like region in the North-East (*Sertão* is derived from *Desertão*—the great desert). Brazilians can readily relate to this part of Lula’s biography, because much of Brazil’s best literature tells about the existential struggle of those who live in the *Sertão*. Every schoolchild, for example, reads Graciliano Ramos’s 1938 novel, *Vidas Secas* (*Barren Lives*), the story of Fabiano and his family who fight to preserve their humanity amid heat, drought, and poverty until, in the end, they give up and set out to find a better life in the city. What distinguishes Lula from the inhabitants of Guarulhos is of course the fairy-tale ending: the boy from the North-East who, without completing high school, first becomes the leader of the powerful Steel Workers’ Union in the industrial center of São Paulo and then, after three failed runs, is elected president of Brazil. (I get to see the fairy tale in Fábio Barreto’s hagiographic movie, *Lula, the Son of Brazil*, the most expensive production of Brazilian cinema. As the film ends, I cannot help wondering whether it is not a telling parable for the mechanisms of social exclusion that constrain the opportunities of so many here: it takes a miracle for a boy from a poor

family in the North-East to get into a position of power.)

On the other side of the social divide, surviving in *favelas* or the desert does not loom large on peoples’ minds. My final destination is Salvador, the capital of the state of Bahia, and Brazil’s third-largest city after São Paulo and Rio. On the connecting flight the excitement with Brazil’s economic upturn is palpable. On the back of every seat an advertisement from a large consulting firm alerts passengers that “the world is looking at Brazil, but may not be seeing your company” and then provides contact information. A free magazine, *O Mundo Corporativo* (*The Corporate World*), explores the dilemma of company owners in a booming economy (should they grow or sell?), how the Football Championship in 2014 and the Olympics in 2016 will further boost economic growth, and how best to benefit from the growing interest pharmaceutical companies are showing in the Brazilian market, one of the few to come out of the global recession relatively unscathed.

Among the main mechanisms of social exclusion in Brazil is the education system. One taxi driver I talk to turns out to have a law degree, but drives a taxi to supplement his day-job salary. Otherwise he wouldn’t be able to afford to send his daughter to one of the top private schools in Salvador, where the monthly tuition is about 1,500 Reais (ca. \$900 US), almost three times Brazil’s monthly minimum wage. The deterioration of the public school system in recent decades has made it all but impossible to get into one of the coveted disciplines at a good university—mainly engineering, law, and medicine, which open the door to wealth and prestige. Perversely, Brazil’s best universities are the free public universities funded by the federal government. Poor kids, then, cannot get into the universities they can afford but can get into the less demanding private universities that they cannot afford. Many high school teachers I talk to argue that Brazil’s elites are deliberately keeping the masses ignorant. There surely is a correlation between formal education and political choice. Consider Marisete Cerqueira, for instance, who cooks

and cleans for people in my apartment building. At age twelve she had to drop out of school because her father got fired and the burden to support the family fell on her and her siblings. "I vote for José Serra," she says, "because Dilma is in favor of killing little children." (Dilma's stance on abortion becomes a major issue as the election goes into the second round; the bishop of Guarulhos, for example—the shanty towns around São Paulo's airport—calls on his flock to vote against her for this reason.) "And didn't she rob banks and kill policemen as a student?" Marisete adds, alluding to Dilma's guerrilla past. (The extent to which Dilma herself took up arms is a matter of debate, but she certainly endorsed them as legitimate.)

The political campaigns, at any rate, seem to take a dim view of the voters' intelligence. My apartment in Salvador has a view over the *Farol da Barra*, the old light house, one of the most picturesque and historical spots in town. Every campaign car stops here, and since voters are not only deciding about the president, the congress, and the senate, but also about state governors and state parliaments, this makes for a lot of cars. They are all equipped with big speakers that aim at making a jingle stick in minds, construed around the number of the candidate that must be typed in the voting booth. "4342—vote X Y to see the great things he'll do for you" pretty much sums up the core message of all the jingles. (The largest number of votes for member of Congress goes to Tiririca, a popular TV clown, suspected to be illiterate. Among his slogans: "I don't know what a congress man does, but vote me in and I'll tell you.") Another feature of the campaigns is the candidates' hope to piggyback on Lula's popularity. Every candidate who is able to find a picture of himself or herself with Lula makes sure to put it up. Thus, both Geddel Vieira Lima and Jaques Wagner, political rivals for the office of Bahia's governor, pose throughout the city in Lula's company. But even the seemingly all-powerful Lula cannot get them both elected.

It would obviously be absurd to claim that the PT government has an interest in "keeping the masses ignorant." Lula himself wasn't able to complete high school because he had to help support his family once they settled in

São Paulo (he started working as a shoe shiner and street vendor at age twelve). But does the government have the power to democratize the education system and make sure that the right to education, guaranteed in the Constitution, doesn't mean different things to different citizens? In fact, most of the money Lula assigned to education was spent on expanding federal universities. While universities everywhere in the world are struggling with tight budgets, Brazil's are flourishing as never before. (Colleagues in Salvador encourage me to apply for a visiting research fellowship that is handsomely endowed with a 5,000 Reais monthly stipend, almost \$3,000 US. That makes them competitive with European and North American offers. The goal is to "internationalize" Brazilian academia.) The key to breaking the mechanism of social exclusion, however, lies not in prestigious research projects, but in the reform of the public school system. That's not only very expensive but also a long-term project that will take a generation or two to bear fruits. Much too late, in other words, to pay off at the next election.

Playing by democratic rules comes with more than time constraints. Parties still have little binding power in Brazil, and members of Congress often cross party lines when they deem it advantageous. Lula never had a comfortable majority to get more radical projects off the ground—from investing into the public school system to redistributing agricultural land. (In this respect things look considerably better for Dilma.) That's part of the background to the PT's greatest corruption scandal, the *Mensalão* affair in 2005, which almost cost Lula his job. The PT was caught paying large sums to buy off votes in Congress. Key figures of the government, like José Dirceu, fell in the wake of the scandal, opening the way for Dilma's ascent, as she replaced Dirceu as Lula's chief of staff. What the *Mensalão* affair shows is how difficult it can be to follow up on good intentions.

It seems like a paradox: on the way to a campaign event to hear Lula, Dilma, and Jaques Wagner in Salvador I ask the taxi driver whether things have gotten better since

Lula took office. “*Um pouquinho*” (a little) he says. On the way back, another taxi driver tells me that he has never seen the people so satisfied with the government. Leaving aside Lula’s immense personal charisma as a man from the people who talks like the people and rose from shining shoes to the presidency, I wonder how a little improvement can have such a big effect. The chief element of Lula’s success formula is the *bolsa familia*, which transfers small amounts of money—up to a maximum of 200 Reais (ca. \$115 US)—to families that are classified as extremely poor or poor, that is, have a monthly per capita income of 140 Reais (ca. \$82 US) or less. As Lula’s opponents point out, he hasn’t invented *bolsa familia* but built on the foundation laid by Fernando Henrique Cardoso. More than twelve million families are currently enrolled, which has the virtuous side effect of keeping kids in school and getting them vaccinated, the two conditions families must meet to get the money. (Marisete, for example, tells me that if she could just get to school in time for the evening classes, she’d do it for the cash. But she doesn’t finish work until around 7 p.m. and needs more than an hour to get home by bus.) As a consequence many families are lifted out of extreme poverty. Since saving isn’t an option when you rise from nothing to almost nothing (the average per capita income of the extremely poor went up from 49 to 72 Reais—ca. \$29 US to \$42 US—which lies just above the extreme poverty line of 70 Reais), the additional income gives the domestic economy a boost. Companies grow to the satisfaction of the elites, which in turn generates new jobs. These jobs help to lift previously poor people into the so-called “*Classe C*,” the low middle class, which starts at 1,100 Reais (ca. \$645 US) per month per family. Since members of the *Classe C* also spend rather than save, the domestic economy is further stimulated.

From rich to poor, in the end everyone’s lot has gotten better—at least *um pouquinho*. To be sure, that’s not social justice (or not yet on the optimistic view). While the Gini index—the income inequality coefficient—fell from 0.59 to 0.54 during Lula’s tenure, the gap between

rich and poor in Brazil remains one of the world’s widest. And the rich continue to be terrified of the poor. As we walk through an affluent neighborhood to the private school I went to in São Paulo in the early eighties, the villas often can’t be seen behind the high walls that come with electric wire, video surveillance, frightening dogs, and armed door men. It takes half an hour of negotiating at the school’s entrance before the two guards get permission to let us in. When my wife wants to take a picture, we are politely but firmly advised that photographing the location is prohibited. We might, after all, be preparing the abduction of one of the rich kids who study here.

The *Classe C* is all the rage these days. It now includes more than 50 percent of the population. A recent study, carried out by a consulting firm, casts light on the nexus between rising spending power, happiness, and the deeply entrenched class structure of Brazilian society. Members of the *Classe C*, the study finds, spend up to 60 percent of their income on luxury items: things like Nike shoes, perfumes, hand bags, flat screen TVs, and cars, paid off in small monthly *parcelas* (portions), often over years. Cars are the ultimate mark of economic success. But having one in São Paulo means, above all, spending time stuck in traffic (when you’re allowed to use the car at all; traffic has gone so out of hand that road space is rationed with severe restrictions on car use according to a system that associates license plates with week days). I get around much faster by metro and public busses, for which fast lanes are reserved on all the main roads. So why do people spend a large part of their meager income on things that have limited or no utility? According to the study, these things are status symbols that give their owners the sensation of belonging to the rich. Many of those interviewed describe their purchases as the fulfillment of a dream. This is not the only time I find that the social class structure has been internalized.

In Salvador, the former center of the Brazilian slave trade, more than 80 percent of the population is of African descent. But in the *Iate Clube*, the chichi restaurant overlooking the yacht port, where dinner for four costs what a domestic maid makes in a month, everyone,

except for the waiters, is white, has a smart-phone, and exudes a sense of entitlement as if inequality were a law of nature. Sometimes privilege is also seen as an expression of God's will. An acquaintance in São Paulo, a devout Catholic, lights candles and makes promises of good deeds to get her son into law school. In her view, his success depends on God, not on the fact that he went to one of the most expensive private schools and was enrolled in an equally expensive preparatory course for the entrance exam. He does get into law school, but only in a private university, not in a prestigious public one. That shouldn't affect his job prospects, though, because God has already arranged for his father to be a senior partner in a large law firm in São Paulo.

On several occasions I ask Marisete if she doesn't see herself as a victim of social injustice. Having to leave school to support the family at age twelve, cooking and cleaning for others six days a week for little money— isn't there something wrong with that? She doesn't think so. "The rich may have more money," she explains, "but they really don't know how to throw a party." On the other hand, she keenly wishes for her daughter to become a lawyer. The goal, in other words, is not to change the system, but to move to the other side of it. This is also a concern that Naomar de Almeida Filho, the president of the Federal University of Bahia, has about affirmative action programs (which his university was one of the first to propose). In 1888, Brazil was the last country to abolish slavery. Without access to education, land, or

employment (new jobs went to European immigrants), the freedom of the former slaves wasn't worth much. Up until today, Afro-descendants, who make up about half of Brazil's population, are for the most part poor. Since 2004, many public universities have adopted quotas according to varying racial and social criteria, although, as Naomar points out, the Lula government never succeeded in signing a comprehensive formula into law. "But on its own affirmative action may not be enough," he explains. "What I fear is that quota students will simply reproduce the system of oppression, discrimination, and social exclusion of which they were victims." Little would be won, for example, by graduating black engineers, lawyers, and doctors who think and behave exactly like their present-day white colleagues.

Perhaps the revolution, then, must begin in the minds (*pace* Marx), and there is indeed hope that this might happen. In 2008, the Lula government passed a law that makes philosophy and sociology classes obligatory in all Brazilian high schools. Every student now studies these disciplines over three years. The Socratic revision of beliefs will surely not change things as quickly as a socialist revolution. But if the new disciplines are well implemented, they could help embed change in the democratic process and give citizens the intellectual tools to take charge of their life.

Carlos Fraenkel teaches philosophy and Jewish studies at McGill University in Montréal. He spent part of his sabbatical in Salvador to learn about how philosophy is being taught in Brazilian high schools.

FOLLOW US ON TWITTER!
www.twitter.com/dissentmagazine