

## Book Review

– *Lula and his politics of cunning: From metalworker to president of Brazil*,  
John D. French. University of North Carolina Press, 2020

Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, better known as Lula, is a fascinating figure. Born to a poor family in northwest Brazil in 1945, he entered adulthood in the urbanizing and industrializing São Paulo of the 1960s, finding work in its growing metal industry and getting deeply involved in labour unionism. Several decades later, Lula won Brazil's highest office. How did the metalworker transform into Brazil's most successful politician of the last twenty years? That is the main question French seeks to answer in this well-researched biography, presenting a detailed account of Lula's life and political maturation, skilfully set against the backdrop of social change in contemporary Brazil.

The book is divided into three parts. 'Origins and Roots' traces Lula's upbringing, his family's migration to São Paulo, and his first steps in the metal plants of the city's ABC district. 'From Luiz Inácio into Lula' deals with Lula's apprenticeship under unionist Paulo Vidal, his election as president of the Union of Metalworkers of São Bernardo do Campo, and two emotionally devastating moments in Lula's life, the loss of his first wife and the kidnapping and torture by Brazil's dictatorship of Lula's brother Frei Chico. These events led to 'Lula's mental revolution', transforming the shy and apolitical Luiz Inácio into the confident, self-made Lula who would inspire millions of Brazilians. 'Lula, the Peons of ABC, and the Pursuit of the Presidency' focuses on Lula's ascendency in union and national politics and narrates how he took on Brazil's elite, making demands for a more egalitarian distribution of wealth. Social mobilization and the strikes of the late 1970s carried Lula to national fame, providing a platform from which he would eventually make it to the presidency.

French forcefully and convincingly debunks the myth of Lula the naturally charismatic leader destined to guide Brazil's lower classes toward a better life. Instead, life moulded Lula through experiences, personal relations, and fortuitous opportunities. When he was still a teenager, Lula's mother Dona Lindu pushed her youngest son to acquire an apprenticeship at SENAI (National Industry Apprenticeship Service) that allowed Lula to acquire working skills, qualifying him for better-paying jobs. The apprenticeship also broadened his

horizon, enabling Lula to interact with the higher echelons of São Paulo's society. French emphasizes Lula's relationship with his brother Frei Chico and the great differences between both. While Lula was for the most part the 'good boy', Frei Chico was a rebel, politically active and a member of the communist party, a risky affiliation as Frei Chico's kidnapping and torture attest. While emotionally affected by the injustice done to his brother, it was however not what turned Lula to politics, and neither did it make Lula a communist or ignite in him an interest in leftist intellectualism. The real transformation happened later when Lula became a leading figure in the workers' union movement. At rallies, Lula, afraid of public speaking, discovered the crowds embraced him. French attributes Lula's popularity to him being one of the people, speaking in their vocabulary, knowing their plight first-hand. Lula came to embody the collective frustrations and desires of workers seeking a better life, and this gave him the charisma often perceived as a natural character trait. But chance played a role, too. The timing of Lula's rise to the union presidency coincided with Brazil's opening up while workers suffered from rising inflation and stagnant wages. As Lula emerged and transformed in the late 1970s, so did Brazil's working class in an era of great social mobilization.

Life's trajectory turned Lula into a 'cunning' politician, a term that to some may carry negative connotations. However, this is not how French applies it. Rather, the term captures how Lula learned to navigate the hierarchies of Brazilian society, aware of the need to befriend here, act forcefully there, persuade some, and mobilize public support when required. Lula's cunning was pragmatic, a tool of the powerless and underprivileged. *Lula and his Politics of Cunning* is an impressive and valuable work in which French constructs a powerful narrative supported by a variety of sources and drawing from a breadth of knowledge acquired during decades of studying Brazil. The book reads both as a biography and as a work of contemporary social history, bringing to life Brazil's transformation from dictatorship toward becoming a modern, industrialized democracy. It is particularly recommendable to those interested Brazil's labour movement that receives extensive treatment, the book's emphasis lying on its development and transformation and Lula's experiences and role in it. Those hoping to learn more about Lula's presidency might be somewhat disappointed with French only turning to this era of Lula's life on page 310 (out of 376). But this focus is probably deliberate. Much has been written about Lula's time in office, yet little about his formative, labour union years. French fills this gap masterfully.

Lula the politician is often described as a populist who appeals to the people by relying on his charisma. French does away with this simplification and portrays Lula's electoral victory in 2002 as a triumph over classism, a lower-class defeat of Brazil's elite. Similarly, he sees Lula's imprisonment on corruption charges in 2018 and the 'legal coup' against his chosen successor Dilma Rousseff in 2016 as a rectification carried out by the elite, a rich man's backlash against the poor man's presidency. But Lula's story is not over. He was released

---

from prison in 2019, and last year Brazil's Supreme Court squashed his conviction, allowing him to run for president again in October 2022's election. In September 2022 he was currently ahead in the polls, possibly thanks to his 'cunning', his embodiment of the collective frustrations and hopes of many Brazilians, or both. Whether Lula wins or loses, he will remain a powerful voice in Brazil in the coming years, making French's biography essential reading for anyone with an interest in the past and future of Brazilian politics.

Quintijn B. Kat, Ashoka University  
[quintijn.kat@ashoka.edu.in](mailto:quintijn.kat@ashoka.edu.in)