


COMMENT

Biographies of Labor Activists: Trajectories, Daringness, and Challenges

Alexandre Fortes^{1*}  and Benito Bisso Schmidt²

¹History Department, Universidade Federal Rural do Rio de Janeiro, Instituto Multidisciplinar, Nova Iguaçu, Brazil, e-mail: fortes.ufrj@gmail.com, and ²History Department, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul Porto Alegre, RS, Brazil, e-mail: bbissos@yahoo.com

*Corresponding author

Abstract

This comment discusses three topics. First, John French's biography of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva is located in the broader trajectory of the production of biographical narratives of activists under the auspices of the historiography of the labour movement. Second, French's daring gesture of comparing the trajectories of Lula and August Bebel, who lived in such different contexts, and the impact of this in terms of a more sophisticated understanding of labour history in Brazil is discussed. Finally, we look at some of the challenges faced by writers of biographies of working-class leaders, notably in relation to the intersectionality between class, race, and gender.

The Place of Biography in the Historiography of the Labour Movement

Activist biographies do not represent a new genre in the historiography of the labour movement. In 1904, on the fortieth anniversary of the International Workingmen's Association (IWA), when the first generation of the labour movement, of which August Bebel was a part, gave way to new activists, Gustav Jaeckh described the function of the social-democrat historian as follows: "it is essential for the progress and the success of the movement that the young substitutes acquire an intimate knowledge of the context, of the struggles and victories of their spiritual ancestors and pioneers, in order to know in which historical field they were located and fought".¹

In the pages of labour newspapers, in pamphlets, and even in more substantial books, it is not difficult to find biographies of these "spiritual ancestors" and "pioneers", ranging from Spartacus to Marx, generally in linear and almost hagiographic narratives, with an emphasis on the battles fought and the martyrdoms suffered. The function of these heroic biographies was to inspire new generations to follow in the footsteps of their predecessors, constructing a *continuum* of struggles against social injustice. As Haupt highlights, biographies of this type are part of a

¹Georges Haupt, "Por que a história do movimento operário", *Revista Brasileira de História*, 5:10 (1985), pp. 208–231, 214.

historiography with a fundamentally ideological content: “it consists of forging the cohesion, demonstrating continuity, and perpetuating official legends which serve as a reference and which occupy the place of explanation”.²

Apologetic biographies of activists from a wide range of social movements, including labour and trade unions, continue to be produced in the present, usually by amateur historians and journalists, but also by activists. At times, they present important and unpublished documents, obtained through the personal relationships established between the biographers and their subjects or their relatives. They then frequently build simple explanations for the persons being portrayed based on what French describes as “the inevitability of the forward march to shape a narrative based on knowing how things turned out in the end”.

However, in the academic environment, when the history of workers came to be investigated by professional historians and sociologists, biographies were relegated to a secondary level, and often regarded as a model of traditional and bourgeois history that needed to be surpassed. In broader terms, this history was constructed from a structuralist Marxist perspective, which gave priority to structural determinations and to the actions of collective subjects, such as classes, trade unions, and parties. Determined individuals only appeared in these narratives as incarnations of groups and representative of political tendencies. Their idiosyncrasies appeared to have no relevance for the history of capitalism and revolutionary struggles.

This perspective came to be revised, especially due to the reflections and studies of the so-called group of British Marxist historians, who, in the 1950s, rebelled against the structuralist orthodoxy. The most notable of these was E.P. Thompson, himself the author of works of a biographical nature.³ Thompson opened the way for individual experiences to be seen as constitutive of the formation of the working class, peopling his narratives with their first names and fragments of people’s histories – “the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the ‘obsolete’ hand-loom weaver, the ‘utopian’ artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott”,⁴ among others – who suffered from the results of structural pressures, but also acted against them and in some cases, even if only temporarily, modified their course.

Thompson sought to show, in a phrase which has become a classic, that the formation of the working class became “an active process, which owes as much to agency as to conditioning”.⁵ It is precisely this human action, in which activists played a not negligible part, that various labour historians have focused on in recent years. As part of this effort, they have produced studies concerned with a broad set of activist biographies, such as biographical dictionaries and prosopographical research,⁶ and

²*Ibid.*, pp. 214–215.

³E.P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (London, 1955); *idem*, *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (Cambridge, 1993).

⁴*Idem*, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, 1968), p. 12.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁶In relation to dictionaries, the most famous is the monumental *Dictionnaire Biographique du Mouvement Ouvrier Français* (Paris, 1991), known as *Maitron* (in honour of its first director and also the man who envisaged it, the historian Jean Maitron (1910–1987)), work on which began in 1955 with a specific political objective: understanding activists as a whole and not only the leaders, and also counterposing itself to the Stalinist cult of personality.

studies on specific activists, as French did in the case of *Lula and His Politics of Cunning*. The concern was not to heroize these characters and transform them into models of behaviour, but to think of them as historic subjects, whose trajectories were not determined at birth, but traced through the possibilities and limits of specific contexts.

Lula, Bebel, and the Protagonism of Workers

In 2002, in an essay in comparative history on the impact of the legal system of labour relations on the Brazilian labour movement, Michael Hall referred to “the surprising possibility that Brazil could be a country like any other”.⁷ John French’s provocative article on the similarities between the life trajectories and styles of leadership of Lula and Bebel evokes similar reflections. The irony of Hall’s comment and French’s daring comparison are perhaps not immediately evident to North Atlantic readers. However, labour activists and practitioners of labour history in other parts of the Global South possibly share with their Brazilian colleagues the liberating sensation generated by reading the two studies.

For decades, the colonialist yoke incrustated in the Brazilian intelligentsia pontificated on the congenital incapacity of peripheral workers to demonstrate a political conscience equivalent to that of their peers in “advanced capitalism”. Modernizing liberals and the self-proclaimed Marxist vanguards joined together in belittling the political practice of workers. After the 1964 military coup, the Brazilian intellectual left developed a peculiar capacity for endless debates about the historic failure of the working class without any concrete mention of any strike, trade union, or labour leader. Inspired by the philosopher Marilena Chauí, Chalhoub and Silva called this metanarrative of Brazilian history the “paradigm of absence”.⁸ In this, the advance of industrialism under the aegis of “populism” is explained by the incapacity of a working class formed by rural migrants to adequately reproduce the experience of “developed” countries in which parties and ideologies supposedly represented the pure and simple tradition of pre-determined class interests in representation in the political sphere.⁹

While the pioneers of Brazilian industrial sociology in the late 1950s and early 1960s made no explicit reference to race,¹⁰ the expanded working class, which they saw as an amorphous and easily manipulated mass with no previous political experience, was also a darker-skinned one. Most of the newly arrived at the burgeoning industrial centres in the southern parts of the country came from the impoverished northeast, where the Portuguese occupation had been concentrated for the first few centuries of Brazilian history. Coming from a longer history of miscegenation between people of Native, African, and European descent, *Nordestinos*, although quite diverse as

⁷Michael Hall, “Corporativismo e Fascismo”, in Ângela Araújo (ed.), *Do Corporativismo ao Neoliberalismo. Estado e Trabalhadores no Brasil e na Inglaterra* (São Paulo, 2002), pp. 13–28.

⁸Sidney Chalhoub and Fernando Teixeira da Silva, “Sujeitos no Imaginário Acadêmico. Escravos e Trabalhadores na Historiografia Brasileira desde os Anos 1980”, *Cadernos AEL*, 14:26 (2009), pp. 11–49.

⁹Francisco C. Weffort, *O populismo na política brasileira* (Rio de Janeiro, 1978).

¹⁰Juarez Rubens Brandão Lopes, “O Ajustamento do Trabalhador à Indústria: Mobilidade Social e Motivação”, in *idem*, *Sociedade industrial no Brasil* (São Paulo, 1964), pp. 360–400; Leoncio Martins Rodrigues, *Conflito Industrial e Sindicalismo no Brasil* (São Paulo, 1966).

individuals, were easily identified as a collective other with distinct cultural and racial features, and they faced strong prejudice from employers and fellow workers alike.¹¹

Even the New Left that emerged during the re-democratization process marked by the massive strikes of metalworkers from the manufacturing belt of São Paulo (the so-called ABC Paulista) and the creation of the Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, PT) at the end of the 1970s remained tributary to these approaches. On the one hand, a romanticized version of pre-1930s direct action unionism, mistakenly reduced to the importing of European patterns of action through immigration, was celebrated. On the other, the role of worker struggles in the conquest of social rights, in defence of democratic liberties, and a sovereign project of national development during the so-called Vargas Era, was erased from the historical record. As a result, even the resistance of the labour movements to the dictatorship imposed on the country in 1964 still remains underestimated in the historiographical debate.¹²

The one hundred years that separate the experiences of the formation of European social democracy and the Brazilian Partido dos Trabalhadores, as much as the colossal difference between socio-economic conditions in Germany during the process of unification and in Brazil at the end of the military dictatorship, warrant additional caution in the traditionally risky exercise of historical comparison. However, the study of other countries' experiences in a less normative perspective has been revealed to be fruitful as a source of inspiration for Brazilian labour history, which has consolidated itself as an area of research in recent decades. For example, in reading E.P. Thompson's classic study of the process of the formation of the English working class, one notes that he concludes with the electoral reform of 1832, which intended to ensure the inclusion of the middle class in the political system while continuing to leave workers excluded.

Alliances between labour leaders and middle-class reformers in Brazil were also historically marked by tensions and disputes between protagonists. Reports from participants state that the sociologist Fernando Henrique Cardoso walked out of a meeting organized to discuss the formation of the Partido dos Trabalhadores saying, "I am not joining a party led by a guy in overalls". The phrase echoes Thompson's analysis of the political vision of the former Jacobin labour organizer Francis Place after adhering to Benthamite utilitarianism and abandoning the "members unlimited" methods of agitation: "working men could not hope to bring about reform by and for *themselves*, but should give support to others 'most likely' to win concessions".¹³

For Thompson, the wars against France marked the opening of a counterrevolutionary period in which, given the absence of any national labour organization, the leadership role was exercised by "demagogues and martyrs", mostly coming from the middle classes or dissidents from the aristocracy itself. However, after 1815, the radical movement became "largely working-class in character, with an advanced democratic 'populism' as its theory".¹⁴ This combination involving a less visible process of organizing working-class grassroots at the same time that the main stage of

¹¹Paulo Roberto Ribeiro Fontes, *Migration and the Making of Industrial São Paulo* (Durham, NC, 2016).

¹²Larissa Rosa Correa and Paulo Roberto Ribeiro Fontes, "'As Falas de Jerônimo'. Trabalhadores, Sindicatos e a Historiografia da Ditadura Militar Brasileira", *Anos 90*, 23:43 (2016), pp. 129–151.

¹³Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 139.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 808.

resistance action was occupied by members of the educated elite, whether through persuasion or arms, was also present in the twenty-one years of military dictatorship in Brazil. One of the first results of the 1964 coup was the undermining of the national coordination mechanisms that had been constructed by labour movements in the post-war period, despite the limits imposed by corporatist trade union legislation and the illegality of the Communist Party.

As French's biography aptly demonstrates, in his initial period as a trade unionist Lula was perhaps less similar to the intellectualized and politicized August Bebel than to the mining leader Otto Hué, who, aware of the fragility generated by the division of workers in the Ruhr between socialists, Catholics, and Poles, "advocated a cautious style of labor leadership in response, stressing discipline, continuity of organization, political 'neutrality,' and conserving resources for the future, rejecting a more confrontational approach".¹⁵ The above-average pay levels of the metal workers in the ABC Paulista region and the "apolitical" tone adopted by leaders such as Lula in the mid-1970s led exponents of industrial sociology to predict the emergence of a "business unionism", combative in defending the specific interests of the category, but alien to broader efforts at both class organization and political participation.¹⁶

Conjecturally explosive situations, however, tend to expose the multifaceted nature of class consciousness. As Steve Smith demonstrated, the strength of "backward" class identities such as "craft consciousness", and "factory patriotism" did not prevent the workers of St Petersburg, the ABC of the Russian Empire, from supporting the October Revolution: "within eight months, Russia achieved more in building powerful industrial unions than had been achieved in decades in the West".¹⁷ In a similar form, in a context of effervescence, although far from revolutionary, only five years were necessary for the "privileged" and "depoliticized" metalworkers headed by Lula to lead the processes involved in the creation of the PT and Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT – the United Workers' Central).

A project on the oral history of the PT, which began in 2004, has revealed the many "Lulas" who forged the links with the networks that made feasible the process of overcoming the historic fragility represented by the absence of national organizations capable of representing the Brazilian working-class movement, whether in political or trade union spheres. There are a number of examples here. The parents of Paulo Rocha, peasants from the interior of the Amazonian state of Pará, asked a travelling priest to bring the boy, who stood out due to his intelligence, to study in a Catholic boarding school. Rocha learned the craft of printing, became the most important labour leader in the region, and was later elected a federal deputy and senator. At the other end of the country, the Church and access to education were also the starting points in the career of Olívio Dutra, leader of the 1979 bank workers' strike, later mayor of Porto Alegre and governor of the state of Rio Grande do Sul. Benedita da Silva faced even greater barriers to both become leader of the *favelados*

¹⁵Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000* (Oxford [etc.], 2002), p. 77.

¹⁶Maria Hermínia Tavares de Almeida, "O sindicato no Brasil. Novos problemas, velhas estruturas", *Debate e Crítica*, 6 (1975), pp. 49–74.

¹⁷Steve Smith, "Craft Consciousness, Class Consciousness: Petrograd 1917", *History Workshop Journal*, 11:1 (1981), pp. 33–56, 51.

movement in Rio de Janeiro and the first black woman to exercise mandates as councillor, federal deputy, senator, and state governor.¹⁸

In addition to these examples, hundreds of other popular leaders emerged during the resistance to the dictatorship and learned the art of manoeuvring “within a world they did not control but in which they were far from being victims” (French). Similarly, they immediately identified in Lula’s national leadership the condition to overcoming the eternal dependence of the working class on the role of giving “support to others ‘most likely’ to win concessions”.

In his evolution from trade union leader to politician and statesman, Lula, as French demonstrates, progressively expanded the scope of his practice of an “additive and transformative politics of cunning executed by creating spaces of convergence across difference”.¹⁹ It is understandable that this rejection of “a more confrontational approach” has frustrated part of the academic left.

However, it is still surprising that this has derived from an interpretation of “Lulismo” as a peculiar form of class consciousness of the “subproletariat”²⁰ or even as “mediation between the predatory aspirations of the Brazilian bourgeoisie and the rights and aspirations of workers”.²¹ This rehashed version of the mechanistic strand of the theory of populism ignores decades of research on the objective challenges of the process of constructing class consciousness through political participation. Instead, it resorts to analogies between the relationship of Lula and his grassroots supporters and the actions of political leaders as distinct as Julius Caesar, Napoleon III, and Getúlio Vargas in a frustrated attempt to explain the supposed incapacity of popular sectors to act in a form consistent with their economic interests.

Patrick Joyce expressed the same anxiety in relation to the presence of “discourses and identities which are extra-economic in character, and inclusive and universalizing in their social remit” among English workers at the end of the nineteenth century. To the surprise of those who see populism as a typically Latin American sin, Joyce used the concept to classify the political identity of the British working class during the Second Industrial Revolution, in which “earlier, extra-proletarian identifications such as those of ‘the people’ and ‘nation’ are involved”.²²

Given the apparent omnipresence of the “phantom of populism”, it is perhaps the case that we agree with the arguments of Laclau,²³ that this complex tension between exclusivism and universalization and economic and extra-economic elements is inherent to the practice of politics. And in this game, as French showed, Lula has given the world a Brazilian contribution similar to that left by Pelé in the world of football.

¹⁸Alexandre Fortes and Marieta de Moraes Ferreira (eds), *Muitos caminhos, uma estrela. Memórias de militantes do PT* (São Paulo, 2008).

¹⁹John D. French, *Lula and His Politics of Cunning: From Metalworker to President of Brazil* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2020), p. 12.

²⁰André Singer, “Raízes sociais e ideológicas do lulismo”, *Novos Estudos CEBRAP*, 85 (2009), pp. 85–102.

²¹Ruy Braga and Fábio Luis Barbosa dos Santos, “The Political Economy of Lulism and Its Aftermath”, *Latin American Perspectives*, 47:1 (2020), pp. 169–186.

²²Patrick Joyce, *Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1848–1914* (Cambridge [etc.], 1991), p. 11.

²³Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London [etc.], 2005).

The Challenges of Intersectionality

In his essay, French points to the crucial role of the “gender-based critique of masculinist labor history” and the “methodological revolution associated with an increasingly sophisticated use of oral history” for the development of what Nick Salvatore called “social biography”. Later, based on the study of Anne Lopes and Gary Roth, he deals with the “men’s feminism” of August Bebel. However, at no moment is the construction of masculinities of the German socialist and Lula mentioned as a decisive aspect of their biographies. Similarly, their race does not appear in his discussion of their trajectories. Obviously, it would be impossible to deal with all the constituent aspects of these activists’ lives in a brief essay. However, we want to call attention, in the final part of these comments, to the importance of taking into account what black feminists have called the intersectionality between the various social markers of difference, especially class, race, and gender, in outlining of historical processes related to both individuals and collectivities. In this sense, authors such as Kimberlé Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins evidence how intersections of oppression are determinants to understand the experiences of poor black women.²⁴

In relation to the biographies compared by French, it seems to us necessary to take into account the intersections of oppression, but also those of privilege, evidencing the weight and the incidence of these markers in contexts as diverse as those experienced by Bebel and Lula. Both come from the working class, but are also cisgender and white males. While the former position conditions them to suffer a series of oppressions, obviously differentiated by the different stages of industrial development in Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and Brazil in the second half of the twentieth century, the latter gives them privileges in relation to cisgender female workers and workers of “colour”.

Bebel lived in Europe in a context in which racial “scientific” theories had much prestige and a great weight in the construction of social hierarchies and in the justification of colonialism. As a skilled worker, he probably did not perceive his “colour” as an important element in the structuration of the German working class. However, as a socialist activist, he strongly condemned the German colonist adventures in Africa, especially the genocide of the Herero people, and theories of racial purity.²⁵ He thus had a certain “racial conscience”, which perhaps allowed him to consider his whiteness, although obviously without using this word, as an element of privilege in relation to colonized people overseas.

Lula, in turn, became a worker at a moment when racial theories had been discredited, which did not signify to any extent the mitigation of racism in daily life. On the contrary, theories which reinforced the idea of the harmony of the three races in Brazil (identifying it as a “racial paradise”), which gained greater amplitude in the 1930s and were reactivated as the official ideology of the dictatorship established in 1964, hid extremely violent practices of white oppression and served to justify the

²⁴Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics”, *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1 (1989), pp. 139–167, 1989; Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (Cambridge, 2020).

²⁵Andrew Deas, “Germany’s Introspective Wars: Colonial and Domestic Conflict in the German Press. Discourse on Race, 1904–1907 (MA thesis, Brandeis University, 2009), p. 45.

repression of the black movement. This movement managed to organize and make itself appear more effective only in the final years of the dictatorship, when Lula became a trade union leader of national standing.

It was never doubted that Lula was white. However, as the biography written by French shows, although he does not say this explicitly, Lula's whiteness was "diminished" by his social (worker) and regional (*Nordestino*) origins. Above all, after reaching São Paulo Lula was seen to draw on Lia Vainer Schucman as a *branco encardido*, or tarnished white.²⁶ Based on the statements of *Nordestino* workers living in São Paulo, she states that:

João's discourse, as he defines the *Nordestino* by phenotypical characteristics and not by belonging to this Brazilian region, can help us think that both the stereotypes and the prejudice of the *Paulistano* (someone from the city of São Paulo) in relation to the *Nordestino* can be associated with an elementary level of racism. [...] Vinicius, a Paraíba (someone from Paraíba state) resident in São Paulo, who throughout his interview stated that whites have better attitudes than blacks, adopted for himself the self-classification of tarnished white, showing that, even while feeling part of "whiteness", he knew that there were degrees of white, and that in this racial logic, he is less white than the others.²⁷

Lula's "stained" whiteness meant that, on the one hand, he suffered prejudice and oppression common to other *Nordestinos* who moved to the Southeast in search of better living conditions, both in the world of work and of politics. On the other, it was also a fundamental factor in the construction of his leadership, allowing an identification with workers and with millions of voters who also felt and feel "tarnished" in a structurally racist society such as Brazil.

In relation to gender, we believe it is useful to return to notions of hegemonic and subaltern masculinities proposed by Connell and Messerschmidt, for whom:²⁸

Hegemonic masculinity was distinguished from other masculinities, especially subordinated masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honored way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men.²⁹

²⁶Lia Vainer Schucman, "Entre o 'Encardido', o 'Branco' e o 'Branquíssimo'. Raça, Hierarquia e Poder na Construção da Branquitude Paulistana" (MA thesis, Universidade de São Paulo, 2012). For a similar reflection, this time referring to the politician Luíza Erundina, see Roger Camacho Barreiro Júnior, "Entre Lágrimas, Sorrisos e muita Luta. A Inserção das Mulheres nos Espaços Políticos do Brasil por Meio das Trajetórias de Três Militantes de Esquerda - Lélia Abramo (1911-2004), Luíza Erundina de Sousa (1934-) e Irma Passoni (1943-)" (PhD, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, 2021).

²⁷Schucman, "Entre o 'Encardido'", p. 87.

²⁸R.W. Connell and J.W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept", *Gender & Society*, 19:6 (2005), pp. 829-859.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 832.

Do Bebel and Lula represent hegemonic or subordinated masculinities? How does the answer to this question help us think of the social construction of their trajectories? We are unable to go into this question in any further detail here, but it seems fundamental to us to highlight it.

From what it seems, both constructed their public personas as “real” men: cisgender; heterosexual; strong; capable of providing for their families; and dominating the public space (associations, trade unions, parliaments) with “virile” actions and discourse. Certainly, the skilled craftsman and the specialized industrial worker are associated with differentiated masculine characteristics, in terms of physical force and the restraint of gestures for example. Bebel and Lula appear to correspond to this “currently most honored way of being a man”, at least at the local level, “constructed in the arenas of face-to-face interaction of families, organizations, and immediate communities”.³⁰ At the regional scale – “constructed at the level of the culture or the nation-state”³¹ – they probably encountered difficulties in establishing themselves as “honorable men”, since in this sphere other masculine figures imposed themselves, above all in the sphere of institutional policy, with differentiated corporal and verbal performances. However, in an intelligent and insightful manner, they knew how to deal with these profiles and to establish themselves, despite this questioning, as virile men and national leaders.

Historians who write biographies of women know that the category of gender is fundamental for their analyses. Historians working with the reconstruction of the lives of men and women “of colour” do not hesitate to use the category of race. It thus seems fundamental to us that in biographies of white men, and in this specific case of white working-class men, to link the latter with gender and race. In this sense, the concepts of whiteness and masculinity, always considered through specific historical and racial contexts, can help us a lot to better understand Bebel, Lula, and so many other working-class activists in different times and places.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 849.

³¹*Ibid.*