

Cultural Daily

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Lula and Bo-bo and the Political Stage

Gustavo Prado Sampaio · Monday, January 10th, 2022

The Brazilian elections are less than a year away, and candidates are getting ready for the sound of that weird gun-thing that begins all races – running rather than political ones. Among the names who want to rule Latin America’s largest democracy is former president Lula da Silva, who presided over the country from 2003 to 2010. Brazil doesn’t allow a candidate to run for a third consecutive term, but it does allow a president to run for a third term after a 4-year “resting” period.

This election will be a doozy, as they say. On one side, Lula da Silva, who presided over a period of great economic growth. On the other, Bolsonaro, whose negligence has put Brazil back on the map of world hunger, a little prize awarded by the United Nations. I don’t mean to make it sound that Lula is some kind of infallible God. His party was involved in several high-profile corruption scandals throughout his time in government. He is no perfect candidate, for sure. But he is... how do I put this? Very different from (unpredictable) Bolsonaro.

Bolsonaro is [Trump on steroids](#). You probably didn’t hear about this in US media, but the wanna-be-dictator who’s been chillin’ in Brasilia told several reporters he would be glad to shove cans of condensed milk up their bottoms. The context isn’t important. But I should add that he said this in a meeting with his Ministers, who laughed and clapped at the idea of sweetening (forgive me, please) the press’s bottom line.



Bolsonaro

It's heartbreaking and hard to put it any other way: the political scenario is right out of a Banana Republic. For what it's worth, Brazil is one of the world's largest producers of bananas. So at the very least, I can say this and pretend I don't mean what I mean when I say it.

This surreal scenario has got me thinking about how the two favorites for president, Lula, and Bo-bo, perform their respective worldviews in front of the cameras. I have been getting into performativity lately. In particular, how politicians perform. It's likely this isn't a new concept to you: remember the rumors about Hillary being coached into being more approachable? We have a name in my field for this kind of coaching: acting class.

Much has been written about Bolsonaro's 2018 run. At the time, daily pictures of him circulated through WhatsApp and online social media platforms; they made him seem like a "man of the people," a "political outsider." I can't seem to get one of these pictures out of my mind. Mostly because my father, a college-educated man, sent it to me as proof that Bolsonaro was the man for the job, a man of the people. It's a picture of the future president having breakfast at his home. He is sitting at a round table; behind him, we can see what looks like a simple, lower-middle-class home. In front of him, he has a glass of coffee and milk (the famous "média") and a piece of bread (pão francês). The bread lays on the table, not on a plate. Bread crumbs surround it. A people's breakfast. A little bit coffee, a little bit of milk, a piece of plateless bread.

Of course, it was all masterfully staged. Bolsonaro had served in various elected positions for more than two decades; he wasn't a people person, nor was he a man of the people. He wasn't working-class or lower-middle class. Neither were his children, who had followed in their father's footsteps, joining politics. His eldest son recently purchased a mansion, and it didn't go unnoticed.

During the past four years, the opposition has masterfully deconstructed his well-crafted man of the people persona. They were, of course, aided by some blatant political mistakes on the part of

Bo-bo and his kids, as well as a dissatisfied public who has seen higher and higher levels of unemployment and inflation.

This poses a problem, of course. Bolsonaro was always an insider but capitalized on voter dissatisfaction with the Worker's Party. This time, the people are dissatisfied with him; and you would be pressed to find a Brazilian who'd tell you he's a working man whose government is entirely free of corruption. Hey, remember that thing I said about the mansion?

Lula's persona, in turn, is suffering from some of the same issues. He's not an outsider, and he will never completely shed the corruption scandals that plagued his government. However, he is still seen as Brazil's first working-class president, an important figure symbolizing the possibility (not certainty) of increased equality in one of the world's most unequal countries. Lula's lawyers have also been able to get him out of a lot of legal trouble (did I mention he was in prison for a bit?). They were aided by plain politics and by clearly partisan and politically motivated behavior on the part of the judge and prosecutors who convicted him.

Lula seems to have an advantage, not just in the polls but from the perspective of the narrative. Bolsonaro is seen as corrupt (not nearly as much as Lula, but enough to warrant comparisons by undecided voters), his response to the pandemic was dismal (you think Trump's was bad? Do some Googling. Things in Brazil were wild!), and he is neither a man of the people nor has been a president of the people (austerity measures and privatizations abound in his presidential record).

On the other hand, Lula continues to be seen as a champion of the working-class who presided over one of the most impressive economic periods in Brazilian history. A period that saw the eradication of hunger, successful distribution of wealth, and the creation of an entirely new middle class. FDR would be jealous, and the former president capitalizes on his record.

I can't forget the first interview I watched with Lula after being released from federal custody. Interview might be a bit of a stretch. It was more like a series of inspiring monologues in which he recounted significant successes of his government. There are quite a few. He also chose to play a presidential character whose anger was directly connected to the dire situation of the Brazilian people. When asked whether he held a grudge against the people who had put him in jail, his answer is not at all. He didn't have time for anger, he said. There was work to be done. What a narrative! This is what I call good storytelling.

In fact, Lula is a master at storytelling. A great, inspiring playwright. As a union leader, he convinced (through sheer charisma) thousands to go on strike while Brazil was still under an anti-union military dictatorship supported by an entitled capitalist class. Later, he brought together a team of impressive political marketers who helped him create a winning narrative to go with his infectious personality and smile.

By the time Lula stepped down and got his successor Dilma elected, he had perfected the art of inspiring people. Dilma's first TV advertisement began with the outgoing and (hopefully) incoming presidents on opposite sides of the country exchanging compliments about Lula's work. She'd look at the camera and praise him, the cold waters of the southern-most river in Brazil behind her. He'd look at the camera and tell her how much had been done and how happy he was that she'd continue his work. Behind him, the Oiapoque river, a warm, tropical landscape. They end their conversation with Lula saying that by being on opposite sides of the country, they can give Brazil a hug as large as its potential. If that isn't excellent storytelling, I don't know what is.

Bolsonaro, oh, poor Bolsonaro, built his campaign on anger. And he was incredibly effective. People are still angry. But they are now angry at him. His narrative was “vamos metralhar a petralhada”, or, loosely translated, “let’s shoot the left with machine guns.” (I’m not exaggerating. If you doubt me, scroll up and read about that condensed milk ordeal again.) Anger is an easy sentiment to build; we’re hardwired to experience it, to be swept by it, at the slightest provocation. It is also a difficult emotion to curb.

The election is months away. Candidates haven’t even officially started campaigning yet. But political narratives aren’t built in months. In politics, they take a while to take form, and deconstructing negative narratives when you’re carrying a troublesome past with you, can be virtually impossible. If Lula can’t shed his past, neither can Bolsonaro. The former, however, has a much more infectious, positive message at a time when all the people want is a little bit of light at the end of their faded futures.

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