

Without Fear of Being Happy: Lula, The Workers Party and Brazil

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Review: *Without Fear of Being Happy*, by Emir Sader and Ken Silverstein, New York, London: Verso, 1991.

A red star is rising over Brazil, a brand new star of hope that owes very little to the ill-starred “really existing socialism”: the Brazilian Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores), the largest mass-movement committed to socialism in South America, whose symbol is a five-pointed red star with the letters “PT.” Luis Inacio da Silva, better known as “Lula,” a metal worker, trade unionist, and leader of the Partido dos Trabalhadores, almost won the presidential elections of 1989, receiving, at the head of a broad coalition, 47 percent of the vote.

Without Fear of Being Happy is the first comprehensive account of the origins and development of the PT. Its authors are Emir Sader, a well known Brazilian Social Scientist and leading figure in the Workers Party, and Ken Silverstein, a freelance journalist living in Rio de Janeiro. Lively and well documented, it combines the theoretical insights of the sociologist with the first-hand reports of the journalist. The result is a remarkable work that highlights the achievements and dilemmas of one of the most important and radical forces in the history of the Latin American labor movement.

Taking its title from the Workers Party slogan in the 1989 elections, *Without Fear of Being Happy* powerfully documents the original and unique character of the PT—a new kind of party, very different from most of the traditional forms of political organization in the Latin American left: populism, social democracy, or (Stalinist) communism. While breaking with the dominant tendencies in the Brazilian labor movement—the Vargas, Goulart, and Brizola brand of “laborist” populism (*trabalhismo*), and the pro-Soviet, pro-Chinese, or pro-Albanian communism—the Partido dos Trabalhadores also reflects the European social democratic model, considered as insufficiently radical. As Jose Dirceu, the secretary-general of the party recently stressed: “The PT doesn’t want to be a social democratic party because we are against capitalism.” In fact the astonishing development of the PT in the last few years is an ironic commentary on the first world conventional wisdom about “the triumph of capitalism” and “the end of history.”

The media in Brazil often complain that the PT is “too radical.” In an interesting interview with the authors of the book (which appears in the appendix), the PT leader, Lula, explains that the program may seem radical for the Brazilian upper middle class, “but it is not radical for the 90 percent of the people that live in poverty.”

Aptly summarized by Sader and Silverstein, the Workers’ Party history begins in 1978-1979, with the great strikes among metal workers in the industrial outskirts of Sao Paulo. The heavy industrialization promoted by the military dictatorship (established in 1964) created a new working class and a new generation of union activists. The strike wave of 1979, one of the biggest in Brazil’s

history, put the working class at the center stage of the country's political scene for the first time. Severely repressed by the government, the police, and the army (Lula and other leaders were jailed), and receiving little or no support from the liberal opposition (the MDB, Brazilian Democratic Movement), the new, so-called authentic unionists understood that the workers needed their own political representation. As Lula said when the strike was decreed illegal by the government: this illegality is based on laws that weren't made by us.

Soon after the strikes, a national metal workers' conference called for the formation of a workers' party, and in February 1980 the Partido dos Trabalhadores was founded. Its first resolution explained: "The PT is born of the will for political independence of the workers, who are tired of being putty in the hands of politicians and parties committed to the maintenance of the current economic, social, and political order. . . . The party will be the political expression of all those exploited by the capitalist system." While the unionists were the initiators and main leaders of the new party, they were immediately joined by several other social and political forces—Christian base community activists, socialist intellectuals, former members of the urban guerrilla movement (crushed by the military in the early 1970s), and various kinds of Marxist groups, of Trotskyist and Maoist origin.

While at the beginning the PT was mainly rooted in the most industrialized and developed areas—i.e., the southeast of the country (its stronghold being the state of Sao Paulo)—it gradually expanded throughout the whole country during the 1980s. The key factor in its growth into the rural and backward areas—particularly at the center, the North, and the Northeast of Brazil—was the support of the progressive Church, through its network of ecclesiastic base communities, its radical priests and nuns, and its Pastoral Land Commission (CPT).

After going through the lengthy and difficult process of legal registration required by the (declining) military regime for the creation of new parties, the PT emerged in 1982 as a mass party with 245,000 members. However, its first electoral results this same year were quite disappointing: 3.1 percent on a national scale. Many media sources confidently predicted that the PT was finished—a sort of wishful thinking that would often be repeated in the following years.

During the years 1983-1984, a vast popular movement emerged, struggling to put an end to twenty years of military power and calling for direct presidential elections. This gave the PT the opportunity to expand its relatively small political space, particularly in 1984, when hundreds of thousands gathered at rallies in southeastern capitals, organized by a broad coalition of opposition forces.

However, this coalition soon broke down: when the opposition failed to obtain in Parliament the two-thirds majority "legally" required to pass a constitutional amendment establishing direct presidential elections, the liberal forces (the PMDB and other parties) accepted a compromise with the military—to replace direct popular vote by a so-called Electoral College (composed of Congress and the Senate, several of whose members were nominated by the government). The PMDB and its allies picked a moderate ticket: Tancredo Neves, an old liberal banker and politician, and Jose Sarney, the former leader of the pro-military party (PDS), who had rallied to the opposition. This ticket easily won in the Electoral College, but without the vote of the five PT Congressmen, who refused to take part and denounced it as a confiscation of the people's right to select the country's leader. Soon after, Tancredo Neves died and, ironically, Jose Sarney, the former mouthpiece of the military regime, became the first civilian president since 1964.

Although the PT's refusal to vote in the Electoral College was widely criticized by the liberals and the media, the party was able, at the Congressional elections of 1987, to double its support from 3 to 7 percent. The Congress approved a new constitution, creating a "New Republic," and formally ending the more than two decades of dictatorship. However, since most progressive propositions (on

agrarian reform, on curbing military power) were defeated, the PT once more went against the stream by being the only party not to approve the new constitution. And again it was labeled as sectarian, radical, and “antidemocratic.”

In December 1987, the party’s national conference approved an important document, a democratic and popular platform for an alternative hegemony. Denouncing the bureaucratic conception of socialism based on the one-party system, it called for the self-organization of workers as the foundation for an effectively democratic socialism.

Unable to stop inflation and unwilling to raise wages, the Sarney government generated social discontent and a wave of strikes in which the PT was closely involved. The most violent conflict took place at the National Steel Company in Volta Redonda (near Rio), when the army invaded the plant, killing three striking workers.

In this context, local elections took place in 1988. The outcome was the greatest shock in the country’s electoral history: the PT won mayoral office in thirty-six major cities, including Sao Paulo, South America’s largest city (with more than 15 million inhabitants). One year later came the presidential elections. At the first round, to the surprise of most political analysts, Lula obtained 16.5 percent, leaving behind the two more moderate forces of the left: the populist Brizola (the heir of Vargas and Goulart) and the social democrat Mario Covas, whose program was a sort of “capitalism with a human face.” Lula’s platform called for an agrarian reform, a suspension of foreign debt payment, and a strict curb on military power; moreover, he did not hide that his ultimate goal was a socialist society. For the second round, the PT managed to patch together an alliance with the two other left-of-center parties and finally got 47 percent of the vote. Lula’s conservative rival, Collor de Melo, supported by military and business and above all by the powerful Rede Globo, the TV and media network that has a 70 percent audience share (mainly thanks to its hugely popular soap operas), was able to win the elections by projecting a populist image of “anticorruption fighter.”

The impressive results of Lula were due to the hard work of hundreds of thousands (perhaps one million) party activists and sympathizers throughout the country, and to the more or less explicit support of the progressive Church. Surprisingly enough, Lula had his best results in the North and Northeast areas: clearly, the PT ceased to be a “southern” phenomena and has become a national party rooted in all regions of the country.

The authors of *Without Fear of Being Happy* do not hide the difficulties and weaknesses of the PT: the internal coexistence of its various tendencies and factions is not always peaceful; several of its elected mayors were not very successful in confronting the challenges of public administration; and the party is far from having a coherent strategy for transforming Brazil into a democratic socialist society. But they believe that the PT is in a good position to pick up the pieces if Collor stumbles.

Concluding their book, they sum up the reasons for the birth of the PT. The model of development imposed by the generals entailed brutal sacrifices for the poor majority, making Brazil one of the weak links in the Latin American capitalist system. According to the World Bank, Brazil in 1989 was among the worst countries in terms of social inequality: while the top 20 percent of the population received 66.6 percent of the national income, the bottom 60 percent took home only 16.4 percent. The PT is the attempt by this poor and oppressed majority to take history in its own hands.

One of the most intriguing aspects of the spectacular rise of the PT’s red star over Brazil is that it coincides with the crumbling of so-called real socialism in Eastern Europe and the former USSR. This can only be understood if one recalls that, in contrast to the dominant communist tradition in Brazil (Stalinist and post-Stalinist), the PT never identified with the authoritarian/bureaucratic model of command economy. At the same time that it supported Nicaragua and Cuba against U.S.

imperialism, the PT sided with Solidarnosc in Poland against General Jaruzelski. Commenting on the events in Eastern Europe in his interview with the authors, Lula observed: "The hard truth is that there was no socialism there.... The bureaucracy, the lack of democracy, the lack of liberty, the impossibility for the people to breathe, the lack of union autonomy—all that shows that socialism didn't exist."

This was not only a question of foreign policy. It also had practical consequences for the kind of party that the PT tried to build. In contrast to the old paradigm of a unanimous and "monolithic" organization, the PT is composed of quite heterogeneous ideological and political tendencies. While this may raise some problems and frictions, its ultimate results are rather beneficial. As Lula stresses in his interview: "I also think it's positive that groups who think so differently coexist in the PT, even those with antagonistic ideologies and notions about forms of organization. The PT offers a positive experience to other political organizations of how it is possible to coexist with diversity."

P.S.

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