

# 'Lula is pop!': a critical analysis of a 'celebrity' politician

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## **ABSTRACT**

The essay *Lula is pop: a critical analysis of a 'celebrity' politician* is an initial attempt of stimulating a theoretical debate and further study on the construction of the image of the current president Luis Inácio Lula da Silva in the media. This piece has focused on the element of the 'category of experience', and on the emphasis placed by the media on 'personal experience', highlighting how these factors played a key part in the construction of the image of Lula as a unique star persona in 2002. Lastly, this debate has been situated within two significant socio-political contexts, which are also the so-called 'evils' of post-modernity Western cultures, which have been accused of valuing excessive individualism over solidarity.

Key words: Lula – popular culture – post-modernism

## **RESUMO**

O ensaio *Lula é pop: uma análise crítica de uma "celebridade" política*, é uma tentativa inicial de estimular um debate teórico e estudo suplementar na construção da imagem atual do presidente Luís Inácio Lula da Silva nos meios de comunicação. Esse trabalho concentrou-se no elemento "categoria de experiência", e na ênfase "experiência

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pessoal” colocada pela mídia, salientando como esses fatores tiveram um papel chave na construção da imagem de Lula como uma única estrela em 2002. Finalmente, esse debate foi situado em dois contextos sócio-políticos significantes, os quais são também tão chamados de “males” das culturas ocidentais da pós modernidade que têm sido acusadas de valorizar o individualismo excessivo mais do que a solidariedade.

Palavras-chave: Lula – cultura popular – pós-modernismo

## RÉSUMÉ

Dans l' article « Lula est pop : une analyse critique d'une célébrité politique », l'auteur se propose à faire une tentative préliminaire de stimuler le débat théorique et l'étude supplémentaire pour la construction de l'image actuelle du Président Luís Inácio Lula da Silva dans les médias. Ainsi, l'auteur se concentre sur deux éléments présentés par les médias – « la catégorie de l'expérience » et « l'expérience personnelle » - en mettant en évidence le rôle que ces facteurs ont eu dans la construction de l'image du Président Lula en tant que star unique de 2002. Enfin, ce débat se situe en deux contextes sociopolitiques significatifs, également appelés de « maux » des cultures occidentales de la postmodernité, accusés de valoriser plutôt l'individualisme excessif que la solidarité.

Mots-clés: Lula ; culture populaire ; postmodernisme.

## RESUMEN

El presente ensayo, titulado Lula es pop: un análisis crítico de una “celebridad” política, es una tentativa inicial de estimular un debate teórico y un estudio sobre la construcción de la imagen del actual presidente Luis Inácio Lula da Silva en los medios de comunicación. Este trabajo se concentró en el elemento “categoría de experiencia”, y en el énfasis “experiencia personal” colocado por los medios, destacando como esos factores tuvieron un papel central en la construcción de la imagen de Lula como única estrella en 2002. Finalmente, este debate fue situado en dos contextos socio-políticos significantes, los cuales son también llamados de “males” de las culturas occidentales de la posmodernidad que han sido acusados de valorizar o individualismo excesivo mucho más que la solidaridad.

Palabras llave: Lula - cultura popular - posmodernismo

## 'The cult of experience' in the name of a good cause?

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of January of 2003, the day Luis Inacio Lula da Silva was sworn in as president of Brazil's approximately 170 million people, the grandness of the manifestations of contentment in the streets seemed to add fuel to the picture that had already emerged in the public sphere of the media – that of the birth of a new charismatic leadership in the country, and in the whole Latin America, according to many. In October 2002, Lula was elected president of Brazil with 52 million votes, which represented nearly 62% of the valid votes, a number that put him ahead of many world leaders, such as George W. Bush, who received 50,4 million votes and Bill Clinton, who was given 47,4 million. The former union leader and factory worker who was defeated three times in his bid to run for president of Brazil - having received the pejorative nickname 'the bearded frog' by another left-wing opponent back in the 1989 elections - had finally made it to Palácio do Planalto.

Gone was the 'bearded frog' of 1989 and, in its place, a politician with a superstar status had emerged. Similarly to many Hollywood celebrities, Lula gave autographs, received gifts and flowers, was chased by normal citizens and experienced many emotional moments in his presidential debut. Lula's harassment in public was comparable by some to the idolatry that was awarded to the populist politician Getulio Vargas during the 30's. Lula's victory was marked by big street parties that resembled samba schools practising for Carnival. In what seemed to resemble also the idolatry afforded to another legendary world leader such as Nelson Mandela, Lula's victory was celebrated in the best *melodramatic* form possible. The population's excessive emotion reflected an urge for the 'good side' to finally prevail over the forces of 'evil', which were associated in Brazil to political corruption, corporate greed and backward mentality of the ruling elites. Furthermore, Lula's high number of votes were compared to those received by the former actor and US president, Ronald Reagan. An even more evident and clear attempt to insert Lula's star persona within the global dominant ideology, and thus recognise this 'new' form of leadership in Latin America that was beginning to take shape, the ambassador of the

US to Brazil, Donna Hrinak, highlighted during the 2002 campaign that the PT candidate then was a symbol of the 'American dream' of social improvement. "The dream of the US is a little bit the dream of Brazilian people" stated Hrinak.<sup>2</sup>

'When Collor won no one celebrated, when Fernando Henrique won twice, no one celebrated. Everyone waited for Lula. It was a Carnival out of the normal period and the music that was most heard was the National Hymn' wrote columnist Artur Xexeo in *O Globo*<sup>3</sup> in the aftermath of the victory, in attempts to capture and describe the dominant mood of the time. Moreover, a proliferation of analyses debating the reasons behind the victory of Lula appeared during this period almost everywhere in the press, and open discussions on the theme were also taken up widely in the media's public sphere. A particular pertinent analysis was that of the documentary director Joao Moreira Salles, who highlighted how the current president had brought back the utopia to people's lives, a generous utopia of inclusion that embodied the belief that dreams could - and do - come true<sup>4</sup>. As acclaimed sociologists and writers such as Emir Sader and Frei Betto pointed out, the main reason for the historical victory of the left in the country was the defeat of the neo-liberal policies and economic stability model of the former government of Fernando Henrique Cardoso, which culminated in validating the project of the left of equating a more humanistic and social democratic model with that of a growing and solid economy.

Amid the various analyses carried out by political scientists, journalists and academics aiming to explain Lula's success at the polls, what remains still intellectually challenging to deliberate upon is how Lula's image was negotiated in the media in the last 2002 elections. As stated by the journalist Sergio Salustiano in the article 'Lula e pop' (*Lula is pop*), published in the online media newsletter *Observatorio da Imprensa* ([www.observatoriodaimprensa.com.br](http://www.observatoriodaimprensa.com.br)) (6/11/2002), who would imagine that a former leftist metalworker without a university degree would transform himself into a pop idol of Brazilian people? How did the majority of Brazilian voters transform a radical left-wing leader - and until only recently, a highly rejected politician - into a celebrity? The answer is far from simple and would demand a thorough sociological and psychological research study into the behaviour of Brazilian voters, which could then

contribute to shed a particular light on the changes that have taken place in Brazilian society, in an attempt to highlight the main reasons that lie behind the appeal of Lula's 'new' image to 'the people'<sup>5</sup>.

This essay does not aim to do this. Rather, it will strive to initiate a theoretical discussion on the relationship between Lula's image and the media in the light of a particular post-modern trend that has marked commercial contemporary media industries in Western cultures. Most significantly, that of the emphasis of the media in cultivating celebrity lifestyles and individual experiences in detriment of social ideals and of collective modes of thinking. Could the euphoria surrounding Lula's victory be a transitory mood of happiness and hope, one which is in tune with the fragmentary and ephemeral character of many post-modern global phenomena, one might ask? Has Lula's image been linked to this hysteria around excessive individualism and, if so, has it been able to promote an image of a new leader in the name of a 'good' cause? This piece will strive to initiate such a debate by discussing some major stories that were published in the national newspapers *O Globo*, *Estado de Sao Paulo* and *Folha de Sao Paulo* on the Worker's Party 2002 election campaign and their victory at the October polls.

Most notably, the deepening of Brazil's economic recession, the sharp rise of unemployment and the escalation of violence have been presented as factors which led to the left's victory at the polls.<sup>6</sup> The solution encountered by many disillusioned with the former government of Fernando Henrique Cardoso - perceived as responsible for widening the gap between the rich and the poor - was to invest their hopes on a charismatic, paternalistic and 'truthful' leader who was 'just like the people'. Nothing seemed more reasonable than to elect a man *from the people* who would govern *for the people*, and who would thus 'save them' from economic hardship. A melodramatic impulse of making it right this time seemed to be immersed in the collective subconscious, stimulating 'the people' to elect a saviour of the nation, and not merely another politician. This image of 'the saviour', or of the man close to the people, has been constructed by the media much also through the stimulus it received from some of the marketing strategies adopted by the Worker's Party (PT) during their presidential campaigns.

In the series of stories published by newspaper *O Globo* about the outcome of the 2002 elections, for instance, it is possible to highlight one which is very much immersed in the creation of the myth of the leader close to the people, in a striking opposition to the traditional classic figure of the patriarchal and elitist ruler of Brazilian politics and society. Entitled 'Caravanas' (Caravans), the story foregrounds the identification of the people with Lula during all the 17 trips that he made to the Northeast and inner cities from 1993 to 2001, which resulted in the book 'Caravana da cidadania – Diário de viagem ao Brasil esquecido' (The Citizenship Caravan – Diary of a Journey to Brazil's Forgotten Places)<sup>7</sup>. The story highlighted how Lula wanted distance from the coldness and isolation of the campaign offices, and how his 'degree' was obtained during these trips to the country. 'For those who criticised him for not having a university degree, Lula answered that his university was done in the caravans', stated the paper. The story further highlighted how these citizenship caravans were crucial in the creation of his unique sensibility, which was also stressed in the beginning of the story with the tale of a humble and rural worker from the town of Laje in Bahia trying to gain his own voice by grabbing the microphone from Lula. This scene seemed to echo, from a certain distance, the classic cinematic image of the desperate poor man that tries to speak in the midst of a politician's campaign in the fictional state of Eldorado, the 'setting' used by Glauber Rocha in *Terra in Transe*. 'Lula, you will excuse me, but I never used a microphone. Today I will say everything' said the man to Lula, a scene also included in the caravan book, which was written by journalists that covered these trips to stuffy little towns in the country, in a close observation of the extreme poverty and inequality of Brazil. In these excursions, a nearly (utopian) longing for a more just nation and the sense of urgency towards the need to include these vast segments of marginalized Brazilians in Brazilian society was starting to shape up. Contrary to the citizenship caravans, in Glauber Rocha's film the peasant is not allowed a voice and is oppressed by the politicians. That, of course, is another story.

Such sentiments of hope and inclusion were at the core of the image that Lula adopted in his 2002 presidential campaign, which culminated in the creation of his 'pop-star' persona, in other words, of his 'celebrity' status amongst 'the people', most significantly in the aftermath of the

left's victory at the October polls. International academics such as the Mexican intellectual and minister of Foreign Relations, Jorge Castaneda, quickly highlight how the victory of the left in Brazil reflected 'many hopes of many Latin Americans'<sup>8</sup>. Most importantly, it indicated a serious intention of tackling Brazil's social problems. Brazil today occupies the 73<sup>rd</sup> position in the UN ranking of human development. Not surprisingly, the expectations and demands of the new government have remained extremely high and Lula's present administration has been subject to increase pressure from all sectors of Brazilian society. Everyone seems to be advocating a political stance. Notwithstanding, Jostein Gripsrud (1992:93) quotes Sparks (1988) to point out the argument on how the interest in politics is linked to the type of government that a country has. In emerging bourgeois democracies which have grown out of repressive political systems, such as the case of Brazil, for instance, the population will tend naturally to show a wider interest in political issues. 'Experience will then gradually tend to teach people a lesson about the limits to democratic participation in modern bourgeois democracies' states Gripsrud. It seems, therefore, that only time will tell if the hopes of Brazilians will be met or not by the current administration, and if Lula's 'celebrity' image will pass the test of durability and overcome the Andy Warhol '15 minutes of fame' slogan, which has been awarded to many post-modern pop-stars. Lula himself has affirmed that he does not want to be yet 'another picture' on the wall of the presidents of Brazil.

Arguably, Lula's personal 'experience' and individuality was a significant factor that helped him construct and consolidate his image as a charismatic, paternalistic and progressive leader. This can be examined through a particular national perspective as well as through the premises of post-modernity culture and their impact on the media industries and vehicles throughout the world. Notably, the emphasis placed by the media on the individual dimension represents a typical feature of traditional middle and upper class Brazilian culture, which has privileged the private sphere over the public one and has placed a significant importance on kinship ties, personal and on family relationships as a means of survival in the system, as brilliantly argued in Da Matta's (1979:1991) essay 'Voce sabe com quem esta falando?' (Do you know who you are talking to?). Thus,

Lula was able to articulate his discourse within the realm of the personal by combining an image that included an appeal to take care of 'the people' and be a sort of 'father' to them (i.e. 'I am the only candidate that can save Brazil'), a progressive stance which defended the combat of hunger (Hunger Zero), the end of illiteracy (Brazil Literate), the creation of jobs and the improvement of public education and health with a more conservative position regarding the maintenance of the political economy model of the former government.

In her article on the 'Category of Experience, Project of the Self', Angela McRobbie (2003) has been overly negative towards the public exploration of the self, associating this with the so-called 'evils' of post-modern life and its emphasis on superficiality and individualism. This is evident when she argues that the 'project of the self and experience in popular and commercial culture acts as a compensation for the ills of individualism in a post-social era'. On the other hand, Pierre Bourdieu (1999) in *The Weight of the World* – a text that has been criticised by McRobbie in *A Mixed Bag of Misfortunes* - has defended in the postscript which contains a collection of interviews of people's 'experience', that one must acknowledge *the effect* that the exposure of suffering of certain subjects can have on other people's lives. In other words, Bourdieu has stated how people can understand that their suffering 'can be imputed to social causes', and therefore they can 'feel exonerated' (1999:629). Thus, this process creates naturally the feeling of identification with the 'suffering subjects' by those who have 'experienced' similar situations (i.e. unfair job dismissal, feelings of despair concerning lack of money, etc) in their lives.

Many Brazilians identified maybe more with the suffering that Lula had experienced in his personal life and less with the ideology and values of the Worker's Party as such, which for many were not easily understandable and, in general, had little appeal in comparison to the more 'exciting' factors surrounding Lula's life. The possibilities of identifying with these aspects were thus created by the media and the massive coverage that was given to Lula's victory in what was perceived by some as a typical case of a melodramatic *reality show* at its best. The media in Brazil, exemplified by the private television Rede Globo – which is considered to be the fourth largest in the world - and the main national newspapers



(*Estado de Sao Paulo*, *Folha de Sao Paulo*, *Correio Braziliense*, *O Globo*, and *Jornal do Brasil*), all attracted in similar ways a wide audience/public/readership with stories about Lula's 'experience' as a son of illiterate parents who came from the poverty-stricken Northeast of Brazil and made it as a union leader and national politician. We were told many times how he overcame years of suffering and hardship as an immigrant worker in urban Sao Paulo, the biggest city in Latin America, and how he was badly treated by his father and was brought up by a single mother, how he lost his finger working in a factory, was arrested in 1980 and spent one month in jail and how his first wife died, among other melodramatic stories.

Editorials in the conservative newspaper *Estado de Sao Paulo* and other stories highlighted how a significant number of people voted for Lula mainly because of his personality, and not because they supported the Worker's Party. According to the editorial 'Lula foi o grande vencedor' (Lula was the great winner) published on the 29<sup>th</sup> of October 2002, most of the '53 million people who elected Lula voted for candidates of the other parties for governor of State, senator and MP. Another editorial published on the same day entitled 'Nao havia 'onda vermelha' (There was no red wave) was quick to highlight that the Worker's Party had increased their numbers in the Chamber of Deputies, being the biggest party there, but had not managed to obtain a wide majority in Parliament, which meant that they would depend on alliances with the opposition forces to approve their own projects. The identification with 'a simple man from the people', so the media told us, was what made possible the engagement of a wider public in a humanistic social project for the country, but this did not mean that the country was going 'red', according to *Estado de Sao Paulo*.

Notably, the Brazilian elections stand out in a curious way as a *counter-tendency* to McRobbie's argument of the 'celebration' of experience as part of a *post-social era*. What has happened in Brazil, so it seems, has been the exact opposite. We have lived so far in a *pre-social* epoch. By the term pre-social, I mean the fact that Brazil has never had any form of strong Welfare State similar to the European one. In spite of the introduction of worker's laws in the 30's by the government of Getulio Vargas and of the existence of a public service sector in the country, public education and health services in Brazil are appalling and the overall social

indicators are frightful. According to sources such as the UN Economic Commission on Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and the Brazilian government, the illiteracy in 1990 was of 18,9% and the infant mortality of the period from 1990 to 1995 was at the rate of 56.5 thousand live births. For what can be considered the first time in the history of contemporary Brazilian society, a political programme put the country's drastic social problems on the top of the agenda.

Such factors oblige a rethinking of the negativity towards the concept of 'celebrity' and its 'natural' inclinations towards forms of extreme individualism. In the Brazilian case, the elections seemed even in some ways to have re-defined the idea of national Brazilian identity in the context of the wider inclusion that accompanied the victory of Lula and the Worker's Party in the country. They also recaptured (lost) sentiments of solidarity and companionship and, much in the same way as in the scene of the citizenship caravan, they gave voice to someone from the people to speak in their name. Furthermore, for some, the Brazilian 'experience' is pointing towards different winds of change than the ones detected in Europe at the moment, which is seeing a questioning of the Welfare State in the continent as well as a rise in far right-wing governments in countries such as Spain, Italy, Holland and Denmark. During his visit to the UK in June as president of Brazil, Lula was signalled out by Anthony Giddens as a man that could be capable of 'changing the world'<sup>9</sup>. Notwithstanding, soon after the victory of Lula in Brazil, the British historian Eric Hobsbawm accentuated the importance of the Brazilian 2002 elections and how they were crucial for the world to see a Latin American country 'rejecting the model of globalisation dictated by the IMF and the US', something which has not happened in Brazil, although the country has reached a new level of maturity in its negotiations with these international organisations.<sup>10</sup>

## Charisma, stardom, celebrity: a discussion of concepts

Before engaging in the examination of the use by the media of Lula's personal experience and how this validated the project of the Worker's Party of creating a social *possibility* for the country, I will endeavour to

define some key concepts and, most significantly, of what I mean by the term 'charisma'. Firstly, I would like to make a parallel between 'charisma' and 'stardom', highlighting how the latter term has been heavily charged with negativity. According to Richard Dyer's (1998) ground-breaking study on stars, Edgar Morin (1960:134) underpinned the argument that the 'internal characteristics of the star system are the ones of grand-scale industry...and financial capitalism'. Morin offers an analysis of star system as pure manipulation when he accentuates that the star system is the 'fruit of all fabrication'. Dyer, on the other hand, has reworked this concept in film studies and has emphasised the ideological implications and values behind the term stardom, citing Barry King (1985) to stress how stars have occupied a position in the establishment of certain social roles and types, and how these social roles have 'real consequences in terms of how people believe they can and should behave'. (1998:8). According to Dyer, King states that it is '...how people are represented as being in the mass media is going to have some kind of influence (even if only by reinforcement) on how people are in society' (1998:8).

It is this notion of the ideological dimension of the star persona, or celebrity, that I want to retain and associate with charisma. In Lula's case, as of other major 'celebrities', the charismatic qualities of the individual appear as crucial elements for the creation of a star persona image. As noted by Max Weber (1968), charisma is a 'certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman or at least superficially exceptional qualities'. In his preoccupation with linking freedom and creativity with charisma, Weber also enhanced the destructive tendencies of charisma, pointing out its intriguing connections with routine and bureaucracy. Curiously, the 'destructive' tendencies and the creative nature of Lula and the Worker's Party - their insistence on more flexible and less bureaucratic approaches to government policies and spending, such as the adoption of a form of decision-making over municipal budgets which includes public participation, the 'Orçamento Participativo' - were put in the foreground many times in the media, both in a positive as well as in a negative light. Lula's charismatic qualities were highlighted in the media, which pinpointed to the identification that he was capable of creating in the 'crowd' during

public events, to his much improved communication and presentation skills, and also to the Worker's Party commitment to social governmental spending as well as to their ethics and to Lula's alliance with various sectors of Brazilian society. It was through such media discourses that the construction of the 'celebrity' status image that circulated Lula during the campaign, and that has still clung to him in Brazil and abroad, started to emerge. They took definite shape with the emphasis that followed on Lula's 'personal' experience.

Firstly, though, it is worth noting that my defence here is not in favour of a 'better' form of celebrity status that can be associated with Lula, as opposed to a 'worse' form that would be more linked to second-rate Hollywood stars and their 15 minutes of fame, for instance, as perhaps would seem the case and, thus, would fit adequately McRobbie's analysis. Writing on the national hysteria and mourning surrounding the death of princess Diana, Jacqueline Rose (1999) argued upon 'different' approaches and versions to a celebrity status, and affirmed how one might sustain that a celebrity 'on the left' could be perceived as 'different' from the others, since 'any self-aggrandisement is offset by the collective good aimed at by their necessarily public commitment' (1999:10).

Instead, I would rather suggest that Lula's *star persona* embodies certain values of solidarity and hope that redeem the emptiness and apathy characteristic of the previous decade, and that his *charismatic leadership* is somehow caught in the realm of his own personal experience, and that this has been crucial for stimulating a national (?) commitment to a new social project for the country. Therefore, instead of affirming that Lula's star persona embodies dominant values, or reinforces some aspects of the prevailing dominant elite ideology, the suggestion that seems more appropriate is to view this politician as representing social values that were to some extent in crisis. This argument has been made by Dyer (1998) in his analysis of stardom. As already mentioned above, Lula reflects the hopes and demands of many Brazilians for a better country and he reinforces values that had been until recently in sharp decline, such as solidarity, utopia, fraternity, taste for politics and citizenship. As Da Matta (1979:1991) and Jose Murilo de Carvalho (2001) have pointed out in their studies on citizenship in Brazil, the country has always lacked a strong

civic culture, something which is the result of a colonial legacy and of the authoritarian and repressive character that has long marked Brazilian society. It seems possible that such a character trait can be created in the collective conscious of Brazilians in the near future, in the midst of the current euphoria and hope concerning the emergence of a better country as a consequence of the changes that have been taking place in Brazil after the 2002 elections. What one hopes for is that this civic culture can be capable of transcending mere off-season Carnival euphoria, resulting in concrete governmental policies which can promote a more just, equal and democratic society for all of Brazilian citizens.

In his study of charisma as a vital element in the building of institutions, Weber (1968) pointed out that most studies concerning charismatic leaders in the literature of new countries have highlighted how such personalities emerged in abnormal situations of crisis and stress, and that these figures are interpreted in accordance to the disturbed events in which these countries find themselves. Nonetheless, this does not mean that only the people who have 'disturbed tendencies' are the ones more likely to be receptive to charismatic leadership. We have seen how Lula's wide support included most segments of Brazil's social classes, all of which voted accordingly to their own 'personal' interests, but also in the name of utopia and hope. They were not necessarily 'disturbed' in the pathological sense, although they felt unease with Brazil's socio-political and economic crisis. Furthermore, the concept of charisma is complex and can embody not only noble ideas of creativity, individual genius and freedom, but also religious and political fanaticism as well as social turmoil. As Eisenstadt states in the introduction of Weber's work:

"It is in situations of stress or, to use Durkheim's term, of anomie, that more and more people tend to feel helpless, alienated and disorientated and feel that society in which they live is the meaningless and normless; thus their own pathogenic tendencies become strengthened....." (1968: xxiii).

Having emphasised the situation of crisis as a determinant element for the emergence of a charismatic leadership in new developing countries, and highlighted some values associated to Lula's star persona, I wish now to turn to an important factor that contributed to the historical election of the left-wing government in Brazil: the category of individual experience.

## 'Bearded frog' or pop-star?: a critical analysis of the construction of a charismatic leader

The victory of Lula at the October 2002 polls received a massive coverage from the press, which explored widely the elected president's personal experiences and years of suffering, with all the main television stations conducting special features on his life, culminating with a historic live participation of the previous Worker's Party candidate in TV Globo's *Jornal Nacional*. Many segments of the mainstream press and some political scientists were quick to point out Lula's individual victory, and not that of his Worker's Party. The national newspaper *Estado de Sao Paulo*<sup>11</sup> stressed that the 53 million Brazilians who elected Lula voted exclusively on the individual, and therefore minimised the arguments concerning an ideological victory of the left. According to another story in the same paper, 'Brazil voted on Lula but not in the Worker's Party'<sup>12</sup>, numbers were given to support the claim that the Worker's Party did not do well at all in the polls in the states of the country. Even the former president, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, gave interviews stressing that his rival won the elections significantly due to the fact that he is 'a good person', and much less on the assumption that the left presented a project for the country and was successful in this bid. This analysis, however, was not pushed to its limits by the other newspapers, although some segments of mainstream public opinion worked within the realm of disassociating Lula's more centre-like image from that of the Worker's Party, still viewed by conservative segments of the elite as fragmented and radical.

In short, the mainstream press chose to stress on the personal attributes of the new leader above many other factors and there was a wider coverage of Lula's personal experience and personality than details of the party's ideas for the country in major areas such as health, education and employment. Regardless of the attempts to undermine the influences of the values of the Worker's Party in Lula's victory, which can be said to be justified in historical elite prejudices towards the 'radical' segments of the left-wing party, it is worth discussing the implications of the 'personal' experience of Lula more fully. Firstly, it must be noted that the marketing

strategies dictated by the publicity man Duda Mendonca for the Worker's Party campaign to the presidency worked as a form of adding fuel to the 'celebrity' chase and the 'reality show' that so much attracts contemporary Western media. Lula's 'transformation' into a statesman from his previous radical union leader image was emphasised more than the collective ideals of the Party, although the promise of creating 10 million jobs was one of the main headlines in the media. Moreover, the political scientist Elis Rejane from the federal university of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS), mentioned how the emphasis on Lula's individuality in the PT's marketing campaign was manifested even in his changed speech, which shifted from the 'we' characteristic of his union leadership role to the 'I' associated with personal authority and charisma. She also detected a loss in much of Lula's 'radical rhetoric', which gained a smoothness in order to create empathy and cooperation with a wider public, and was thus capable of transcending the party's 30% of faithful votes.<sup>13</sup>

Amid Brazil's harsh socio-political and economic crisis and 'defeated' neo-liberal policy - which on one hand contributed for voters to look beyond the traditional representatives of the country's elites to other segments of civil society and politicians - and the still rooted prejudices in Brazilian society towards tackling social issues and dealing with conflict, PT's marketing strategies paved the way for emphasis in the media's public sphere on the personal 'experiences' of Lula. The current president's mixed bag of misfortunes, to use McRobbie's phrase, contributed to shake apathetic and highly individualistic crowds from the poor to the middle-classes, each preoccupied in their own way with *personal problems* such as unemployment and violence. The specialist in leadership Eugenio Mussak, who teaches at the Human Resources of the University of Sao Paulo (USP), placed Lula as the symbol of the typical Brazilian man and pointed out how this reflected the country's hopes for change. 'He is the type of guy who came from the Northeast of the country, who has experienced many difficulties and has been fighting for a long-time, yet has never been corrupted'<sup>14</sup>.

As stated before, the emphasis on the personal experience seems to be very much a component of traditional and patriarchal Brazilian society in its exaltation of paternalistic and authoritarian figures (Da Matta, 1979).

The anthropologist has described how traditional societies such as Brazil operate within a framework that privileges closed and elitist networks of personal relationships from which no one can escape from and has suggested that certain 'superpeople' in Brazilian society dictate models of behaviour to the large majority. The senator from Bahia, Antonio Carlos Magalhaes, and the media magnate, Roberto Marinho, owner of Brazil's media conglomerate Organizações Globo, who died in August 2003, for instance, have been amongst Brazil's most powerful 'super people'.<sup>15</sup> Da Matta has traced also the main characteristics of Brazil's social and political system, one which is intensely worried with authority, hierarchy and with 'everyone in their proper place'. According to Da Matta, Brazil's power structure is one in which 'better off people are fully convinced that they have 'class' and that they are special and entitled to treat others with political indifference and contempt' (1979: xi).

Notably, Lula's charismatic leadership has reworked the classical figure of Brazilian authority and has embodied other values such as solidarity, combining the paternalistic element that is so in tune with Brazilian culture with a more flexible, less hierarchical and more 'closer-to-the-people attitude'. These have been key components of his unique celebrity persona. As Dyer (1998) reminds us in his analysis of stars: they must be great and ordinary at the same time. Stars must be 'just like anyone of us'. Thus, if first Lula's 'ordinariness' was one of the main reasons for his high rates of rejection in previous elections – many of the poorer people in Brazil felt very uncomfortable with voting for someone 'just like them', for they were too used to voting for the classical repressive and elitist authority figure exemplified by Da Matta's 'super person' -, in the 2002 elections this 'ordinariness' was a charismatic and positive quality. Lula's 'ordinariness' was made evident in a series of marketing strategies that distanced him from his union leader image, approaching him more to the people through an emphasis on certain elements of his 'ordinariness' and on his personal experience. Polls indicated that Brazilians felt deceived by previous leaders and were unhappy with the current economic recession. They felt that they needed someone 'honest' and 'good' and 'just like them' to try and change things.

Lula's marketing strategist, Duda Mendonça, adopted a series of policies during the PT's presidential campaign which aimed to improve the



politician's image in the public opinion. Here was an attempt to conquer both the conservative middle and upper-classes and the poorer segments of society that still showed prejudice towards a man similar to them. As has been widely emphasised in political science and in studies concerning the sociology of voting behaviour, the large and diverse layer which constitutes the middle classes in modern societies is an undefined group, and it is them that contemporary political parties aim at winning if they want to achieve consent and do well at the polls. It seems evident that it was an unemployed and impoverished Brazilian middle class, dissatisfied with the former government and with the economic recession in the country, that decided much of the 2002 elections.

Furthermore, according to the mainstream press, Lula was often told during his campaign by his advisers to take better care of himself. He was given lessons and lectures on presentation and communication skills and was made to wear a suit and tie and pose to photographers as a statesman. Lula was also asked to smile more and make jokes in public, shifting away from a 'bad-humoured' and 'angry' image associated to his role as a union leader. In due accordance to Brazil's culture of aversion to conflict and crisis, as highlighted by Da Matta (1979), Lula adopted a more harmonious stance in his public appearances, controlling his criticisms and ceasing to attack his enemies and the 'reactionary elite' that until recently were the ones who were doubtless about his victory. Instead, he took on a more moderate approach to Brazil's socio-political and economic problems and juxtaposed the slogan 'Lula is all peace and love' with an image of himself as a bit of an 'entrepreneur of the self', in other words, as a sort of 'self made man'.<sup>16</sup> Various press profiles compared Lula's childhood to a Charles Dickens tale and accentuated the suffering that he experienced in the hands of his ruthless and absent father, an example that has been used to highlight also his paternalistic tendencies. The story of how Lula lost his thumb finger whilst working with machines in a factory in the outskirts of Sao Paulo is perhaps the tale of Lula's life that was told more times in the press. The media also pointed out the close relationship that Lula had with his mother, who taught him to be proud and to stand up for himself. Nonetheless, Lula is certainly not the first or the last politician who has had his persona constructed through his past experiences. The former pri-

me-minister of the UK, Margaret Thatcher, intelligently manipulated her past to construct an image of herself as a hard and powerful woman.

According to Dyer in his discussion of stars, Barry King has criticised the realm of personal experience for its depoliticising dimension. King considers the personal experience as a bit of devoid of politics, an opinion that is maybe shared by many who twist their noses towards the obsession with the 'personal' dimension in everyday capitalist societies. This suggestion is not shared by Dyer, who notes most significantly how 'we are so shaped and penetrated by our society that the personal is always political' (1998: 28). It is precisely this assumption of the political element in the personal that has been used in the construction of Lula's 'star' persona. Notably, the connection of the category of experience to Lula's campaign was not something unique of the 2002 elections. Lula's charisma building can only be understood fully and with greater depth if the events that made him run for 13 years for Presidency are included in such an analysis. As Lula himself affirmed in his first official speech as president, 'I am a product of a history and the result of the dreams of other generations'<sup>17</sup>. Furthermore, such an examination would also have to include historical and socio-political aspects that created the conditions for the construction of Lula's star persona as it stands now in the light of public opinion. This essay is merely an attempt at initiating such a discussion. Weber (1968:22) has stated how the charismatic leader 'gains and maintains authority solely by proving his strength in life'. In brief, it is this 'strength' that Lula has proven to the public opinion that he has. Again and again we were told through the press how Lula was defeated in three earlier elections – in 1989, he lost for Fernando Collor; in 1994, for Fernando Henrique Cardoso, who was elected again in 1998. In spite of these 'misfortunes', the general outcome was that Lula turned out to be a winner.

Similarly to the 2002 elections but for different reasons, the 1989 round was considered of historical significance for Brazil. To the right, was the arrogant, spoiled, boyish good-looking kid of a rich family of the Northeast, Fernando Collor, preferred rival to the radical, uneducated, factory worker and 'bearded frog' that stood on the left, Luis Inacio Lula da Silva. Supported by the mainstream press and by Brazil's TV Globo apparatus, Collor won the second round of elections with a wide margin of difference from his

rival Lula. Nonetheless, he was to be expelled from office two years later after the national outcry over the massive corruption scandal involving Collor and his close allies<sup>18</sup>. In the 1994 elections, Lula ran for president again, but this time his rival was a much more acceptable candidate, a key political figure that received not only the support of the right, but also of the left *intelligentsia*. The political scientist and professor of the University of Sao Paulo, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, widely known and respected abroad for his theory on the dependency of the Brazilian economy and as an acclaimed university professor, won the elections sustained by the then recent success of the stabilisation plan (the Real Plan), which was launched by him when he was minister of Finance.

Fernando Henrique Cardoso's image was – and is - eternally contrasted to that of Lula's in the press, with the latter being seen as always 'not prepared', too 'common' and 'radical', having always a 'lack of something', a suggestion which implicitly seems to allude to a supposed envy that the latter has of the former, who seems always to have 'something' more than the other. Upset after being fooled by the megalomaniac speech and corrupt nature of Fernando Collor, Fernando Henrique seemed for the Brazilian elite to be the right candidate at the right place and at the right time, the only one capable of continuing the neo-liberal policies that the country was starting to adopt in conjunction with the rest of Latin America which included, among others, the privatisation of public sectors. Thus, on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January of 2003, Lula used his *personal experience* to put the social in the limelight, inaugurating what some have seen as a 'new' social democratic era never perceived before in the country. Lula announced in his first speech as president of the country that the combat against hunger – something which he himself had experienced - would be a top priority in his agenda for the country. His old image of the 'bearded frog' was replaced by a curious 'star persona' type. The former shoeshine boy and metalworker, born in a small town in the poverty-stricken state of Pernambuco 57 years ago, was only upset that his mother, whom he developed a close and warm relationship with, had not lived long enough to see him elected president.

## Conclusion

This piece has attempted to initiate a discussion on a different form of perception of the use of the category of experience, which has been disassociated from the negative implications traced in Angela McRobbie's discussion of the typicality of the 'cult of celebrity' in post-modern and post-social advanced capitalists societies. I have underpinned the argument that, in the Brazilian case, personal 'experiences' and misfortunes have been intelligent marketing strategies used to make apathetic 'audiences' – to use a media term – socially aware. Such has been the case of the construction of the image of Luis Inacio Lula da Silva in the last elections and also during his 13 year run for the Presidency of the country, although I have focused exclusively on the 2002 elections in this piece. Moreover, Lula has been granted the presidency of the country based highly on the *symbolism* of the oppressive employer-employee relationship that has much marked Brazilian authoritarian society, as well as on the identification that 'the people' have with his curious working-class star persona. Nonetheless, one can compare the Brazilian experience to other forms of use of the personal as a means of image construction, which has been the case of Margaret Thatcher in the UK. However, it seems more appropriate to parallel Lula's star persona to that of Nelson Mandela, for instance, whose brilliant biography has managed to launch him as an international legendary figure. To cut a story short, it must also be stated firmly that the Brazilian case is an exceptional one which makes an analogy to any other case seem problematic and in need of further study.

Furthermore, rather than highlighting in a simplistic and not very useful manner the 'disadvantages' and 'advantages' of adopting a different perception towards the discussion of the category of experience, this piece has stressed the uses and implications of Lula's 'personal experiences' and how these mixed bag of misfortunes have had an evident contribution to the victory of the Worker's Party, as well as to the wider public support of change and adoption of a social agenda for the country. Within a series of 'personal experiences' included in Lula's biography, I have chosen to discuss here the ones that were most emphasised by political analysts and the media, including the analogies of Lula's paternalistic form of authority

and interaction with 'the people' to his absence of a father-figure in his life. Notably, the reshaping of his image as a more father-like middle-aged middle-class man, as opposed to his previous 'radical union leader' one, has been juxtaposed with his life misfortunes.

We have also seen how Lula can be situated beyond the classical authority figure of Brazilian society, being therefore a much more 'human super person' than the traditional key players of Brazilian politics and society. Similarly to *The Weight of the World's* political importance in letting normal citizens 'come out and speak', which is used by Pierre Bourdieu and his team as a form of engaging the public in wider social issues, the appeal to Lula's personal experience in the campaigns has been crucial in his attempt to obtain sympathy and identification of a previous indifferent society that overemphasised the personal, excluding the social. Therefore, it seems appropriate to rethink our negativity towards all forms of 'cults of experience' and 'real life' reality shows that societies are offering us and the media are feeding upon for their own 'personal' benefit. It is wise and legitimate to recognise the authenticity – and necessity – of such forms if some are out there in the name of change and social preoccupations aiming, in other words, for a better and more just world. The world needs pop-stars anyway.

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## Notes

2 See 'Lula representa o sonho norte-americano, mas nao a realidade' (*Lula represents the American dream, but not reality*) in *Folha Online* (10/06/2002)

3 'Bloco de sujos elige seu foliao mais bonito' (*The dirty block elects their favourite reveller*) (02/11/2002)

<sup>4</sup> See 'Lula recupera a paixao politica' (*Lula recovers the passion for politics*) in *No Minimo* ([www.nominimo.ibest.com](http://www.nominimo.ibest.com)) (31/10/2002)

5 The term 'the people' has a long history in social science theory which I do not wish to pursue here. In the political sense, the expression has been put opposite the term 'working class'. This piece on the other hand refers to 'the people' as to the majority of a certain population in a country, and therefore should not be understood as equivalent to 'the mass'. The latter term has also a long history of definitions, but in spite of revisions, the phrase is still mainly tied to the Frankfurt School terminology of the 'grand mass' of passive and ignorant subjects who are easily manipulated by the 'mass media'. I have chosen to use inverted commas for the term 'the people' to highlight its problematic definition, as well as to cast an element of irony on the phrase.

6 Studies conducted by the Secretary of Development and Employment of Sao Paulo showed that Brazil in 2000 was only behind India in terms of high unemployment as a result of the economic recession that hit the country. This study made use of official statistics from international bodies such as the IMF and the World Bank. According to the study, Brazil has 11,4 million people unemployed, whereas India has 41,3 million. Another study conducted by UNESCO in Brazil also showed an escalation in crime rates in the whole country, linking violence to the assassination of young teenagers. The research 'Map of Violence – Part III' was released in the beginning of 2002. It showed that in a period of 10 years, the killing of young people of 15 to 24 years of age rose to 77% in the country. In the year 2000, 17.762 young people were murdered. Jacob Waiselfisz, the director of UNESCO's office in Recife, highlighted how the numbers were higher than the ones of the Intifada in the Palestinian. During a period of 17 months in Israel, a total of 1.400 people were killed.

7 'Caravanas', written by journalist Mauro Ventura and published in *O Globo* (28/10/2002)

- 8 See interview in *O Globo* (28/10/2002) 'Vitoria reflete esperanca de latino-americanos' (*Victory reflects hope of Latin Americans*)
- 9 See "'Lula pode mudar o mundo', diz diretor da London School" (*Lula can change the world, says the director of London School*), in *Folha Online*, 15/07/2003.
- 10 See 'Historiador Eric Hobsbawm diz que eleicao de Lula tem importancia para o mundo inteiro' (*Historian Eric Hobsbawm says that the election of Lula has importance for the whole world*). Hobsbawm also analysed the strength of Lula and the Worker's Party, mentioning how they were able to attract many of Brazil's social classes, including poor workers, intellectuals and liberal professionals.
- 11 'Lula foi o grande vencedor' (*Lula was the great winner*) (Estado de Sao Paulo, 29/10/2002)
- 12 'O Brasil votou em Lula, mas nao no PT' (*Brazil voted in Lula, and not in the Worker's Party*) (Estado de Sao Paulo, 29/10/2002)
- 13 See also the story 'O novo estilo da Republica da Silva' (*The new style of the Silva Republic*) in *O Globo* (04/11/2002)
- 14 See the full interview in the business magazine *Amanha* 'Incoerencia e nao mudar' (*Incoherence is not to change*) (11/2002)
- 15 Roberto Marinho's death received massive publicity from the mainstream press and critical analysis that highlighted the end of an era of the model of the 'family-run' media industries. Roberto Marinho, who leaves his media empire to his sons, has had a turbulent relationship with Luis Inacio Lula da Silva, who was only afforded a more 'sympathetic' coverage by Globo Organizations in the 2002 elections.
- 16 See the story 'Lula tenta explicar nova imagem a grupos mais radicais' (*Lula tries to explain new image to radical grupos*) in *O Globo* (26/08/2002)
- 17 'Lula ao povo: Sou o resultado de uma historia' in *O Globo* (03/01/2003)
- 18 There is an enormous amount of articles and stories published in Brazilian newspapers on the ex-president Fernando Collor and his impeachment process, but there are few books on the subject. The most famous is Mario Sergio Conti's *Noticias do Planalto- A Imprensa e Fernando Collor*, which focused on the relationship between the media and Collor. *Fora Collor!* (Out Collor!), written by the journalists Sergio Sa Leitao and Barbara Axt, is another book which consists of a selection of interviews that aims to discuss the youth rebellion against Collor, highlighting the massive street protests and how they were crucial for his decline.