

SUGGESTION

The Social Biographical Approach in Global Labour History

Editorial

Luis Inácio Lula Da Silva, originally a metalworker and trade union activist, was president of Brazil from 2003 to 2010, leading the largest country of Latin America, with more than 212 million people. In 2020, social and labour historian John D. French, with a long career devoted to Brazilian labour history, published the much acclaimed biography *Lula and His Politics of Cunning: From Metalworker to President of Brazil*.¹ In this book, French explicitly aims to give a bottom-up account of Lula's life.²

French analyses how Lula, born into a working-class family from north-eastern Brazil, developed from a skilled migrant metal worker in the São Paulo region into an influential trade union leader amidst the social tensions and strikes of the 1970s and how, subsequently, he was able to unite the forces on the left by founding the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), the Workers' Party. Central to Lula's success was his ability to manoeuvre between various factions, using cunning as a weapon of the weak. When the PT quickly grew into one of the most successful socialist political parties of Latin America, Lula was able to ride the wave of Latin America's "left turn" from the late 1990s onwards to become one of the most important Latin American, and indeed global, leftist political leaders. After his two-term presidency, in November 2021 Lula announced that he would run again, and he is now the favourite to win a third term in the October 2022 general elections, with a lead of almost ten per cent over the incumbent president, the right-wing populist Bolsonaro.

By exploring Lula's remarkable trajectory as a worker and labour leader turned president of one of the largest countries in the Western hemisphere, against the background of Brazil's social and economic transformations in the second half of the twentieth and first decades of the twenty-first centuries, French offers a social historian's perspective on the biographical genre, long dominated by political historians,

¹The book received several prizes, such as the Latin American Studies Association's Sergio Buarque de Holanda Prize for Best Book in the Social Sciences, and the Warren Dean Memorial Prize from the Conference on Latin American History. There have also been several reviews and interviews. Author interviews: <https://uncpressblog.com/2020/10/12/author-interview-john-d-french-on-lula-and-his-politics-of-cunning/> and https://soundcloud.com/historiaspod/historias-148-john-french-on-lula-and-brazil?si=7de55e872613482295bc574b2d4ef8d6&fbclid=IwAR2YxwwEI2UGdfCVNT-xwU2uJ4LaDByQf_Pd-I6JfASxfIWvr5Y88fTvdRS

²Why Brazilian Workers Love Lula (jacobinmag.com)

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more than by social and labour historians. By focusing on Lula's exceptional role and career – on the lived experience of his protagonist – French's biography has revitalized an older biographical tradition in labour history. How does this new biographical approach compare to that tradition? Various reviews and discussions of French's Lula biography have already been published, and therefore the Editorial Committee of the *International Review of Social History* decided to organize a broader debate, to discuss the interplay between the biographical genre and recent trends in social history, and, more in particular, global labour history. In this debate, we have asked John French and a number of colleagues from around the world to discuss the value of the social-biographical perspective for the field of global labour history.

John French opens the debate with his essay "Common Men, Exceptional Politicians" asking the question "What Do We Gain from a Social-Biographical Approach to Working-Class leaders?" For French, August Bebel's life offers close parallels with Lula's: both were trade union and political operators who (co-)founded socialist parties from the bottom-up in countries with comparable histories of repression and persecution of socialists and progressives. His essay advocates an approach that explores both men's lived experiences, and how these experiences impacted their leadership, with special attention for the interplay between their public life and their individual and private spheres. Both leaders managed to change the society they lived in even though they did not belong to the societal elites, thereby exemplifying Sartre's aphorism that "you are what you do with what is done to you". Identifying the biographer's pitfall of understanding the life of their protagonist primarily from the perspective of how she or he ended up, French emphasizes the role of contingency in both men's lives.

In their responses, the other contributors to the debate, Melanie Nolan, Jürgen Schmidt, James R. Barrett, Alexandre Fortes and Benito Bisso Schmidt, and Jan Willem Stutje comment and intervene on different aspects of French's opening essay on the value of the biographical approach for global labour history.

Melanie Nolan argues that the methodology of the social biographical approach as presented by French has a longer pedigree and builds on older traditions than he asserts. She gives an overview of the history of the biographical genre, characterizing it as more persistent, methodologically varied, and open to innovation than suggested by French. She also argues that the contrasts between the biographical method and the new social history from the 1960s onwards are much less absolute than is often claimed.

Jürgen Schmidt, author of a recent biography of August Bebel, identifies five different conditions under which cross-border and cross-temporal "embodied social biographies" can be written fruitfully: awareness of the fact that historical actors are shaped by their own time and place; attention to the personal relations and networks; understanding that the psychology of the protagonist(s) is important but also risky to interpret in retrospective, and dependent on the sources available; that charisma reflects an interdependence between attribution and individual qualities; that political milieu matter for individual working-class leaders; and that political work involves a relation to both civil society and existing class relations.

James R. Barrett in his comments points to the diversity of working-class experience, as becomes clear when comparing Bebel and Lula, or, for that matter, comparing and contrasting them with the American socialist leader Eugene Debs and the communist leader William Z. Foster. He argues that individual psychology and the

homosocial worlds of these US leaders might have played a greater role, and makes a case for exploring and discussing the underestimated problem of working-class intellectual history.

Brazilian labour historians Alexandre Fortes and Benito Bisso Schmidt discuss the impact that comparing the trajectories of two individuals living in such different historical contexts has on a more sophisticated understanding of labour history in Brazil. More in particular, they focus on the challenges biographers of working-class leaders face in relation to the intersectionality between class, race, and gender.

In the final comment, Jan Willem Stutje, against the background of an renewed interest in the scholarly biography in social history, discusses the relationship between agency and structure or, put differently, the role of the personality in history and society. His comments then turn to the issues of charismatic leadership and the bond between the person being biographed (political leader) and his or her supporters, and the question of how to deal with issues of necessity and coincidence, and with the selection of leadership.

The approach of focusing on the lived experience as delineated by John French in his comparison between Lula and Bebel, also involves looking at their being part of the party as an organization and its grassroots. However, as Alexandre Fortes and Benito Bisso Schmidt alert us, this aspect of the figure of Lula could also hide “many other Lulas”, for example his role in organizing the workers’ movement, and how masculinities and privilege are built into the lives of these leaders and how they interact within this framework. James Barrett, in turn, stresses the place and role of the personal, while Jan Willem Stutje questions the “nationalism” of especially the German workers. All these topics offer new openings to rich and fruitful research on labour biographies. John French allows us to understand the politics of cunning of subaltern working leaders, and, as Melanie Nolan points out, the writing of a biography is also a political act, an intervention. In the end, the danger of the “biographical lie” – the risk of telling an individual’s past on the basis of what he later became – is part and parcel of the methodology of any historical analysis, as mentioned by Jürgen Schmidt.

Finally, in an Epilogue, John French brings Bebel’s and Lula’s life stories together again in a comparison of both men’s successes in advancing a more democratic political and economic system that in both countries challenged long traditions of authoritarianism rooted in the frustrations of a powerful minority haunted by a “specter of democracy”. In the upcoming presidential elections, Lula will run again, now against the most outspoken Brazilian representative of this authoritarian tradition. Irrespective of the outcome of these elections, this Suggestions and Debates dossier shows how relevant and topical global historical comparison can be.

Together, these contributions may serve as a stocktake of the current use of the biographical genre in the field of global labour history, and they show how the venerable tradition in labour history of writing biographies of working-class leaders is being continued and renewed, offering new methodological and theoretical perspectives that can broaden our field.

Editorial Committee

Cite this article: The Social Biographical Approach in Global Labour History. *International Review of Social History*, 68:1 (2023), pp. 107–109. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859022000591>