

COMMENT

The Politics of the Social Biographical Approach to Working-Class Leaders

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Abstract

In this paper, I consider John French's biography, *Lula and His Politics of Cunning: From Metalworker to President of Brazil* (2020). French discusses his methodology, which he characterizes as "a social biographical approach". I argue that this methodology is already in historians' toolkit. Historians writing biography seem to start with first premises rather than building on what went before. I thus contextualize the methodology, situating French's biography of Lula within more general shifts in approaches to biography.

John D. French's 2020 biography, *Lula and His Politics of Cunning*, is about Brazil's successful charismatic politician, Luis Inácio Lula da Silva, born in 1945, who rose from humble origins.¹ He trained at the National Service of Industrial Training (SENAI) as a lathe operator and joined the Diadema Metalworkers Union. Lula was elected president of the union in 1975 and 1978 and was the leader of about 100,000 workers, whose wildcat strikes for higher wages in 1978–1980 showed the potential and strength of the workers' movement and first brought him to national prominence. This mobilization resulted in the state recognizing trade unions as bargaining agents for the workers. Meanwhile, Lula served a prison sentence for violations of the National Security Law. He then turned his energies towards a political party, Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), the Workers Party, made up of unionist, intellectual, religious, and leftist groups. A founding member of the PT, he was elected to the national Chamber of Deputies in 1986. Having ridden the popular insurgencies of the 1980s at the "tail end" of a dictatorship, Lula was a presidential candidate three times before succeeding: he was twice elected President in 2002 and 2006. Lula was electorally successful in second-round run-offs between leading presidential candidates, gaining three fifths of the votes in both elections. In power, he adopted the politics of the possible, or, as French describes it, "the cunning of the weak". People at the bottom of Brazilian society had trodden warily and complaisantly in the face of military dictatorship and subsequent authoritarian rule. Lula adopted collaborative

¹John D. French, *Lula and His Politics of Cunning: From Metal Worker to President of Brazil* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2020).

and transformative, rather than revolutionary, strategies. He successfully pursued redistributive policies on behalf of the majority, a politics of the centre, rather than either neoliberalism or socialism. Lula left office with eighty per cent approval ratings. Ineligible to run for a third consecutive term, he was succeeded by his nominee and chief of staff, economist Dilma Vana Rousseff, who won the 2010 elections and was re-elected in 2014. Under Lula's political leadership, Brazil seemed to be on a promise: from a low starting point, it could achieve both economic success and greater equality. Not as deft as Lula, Dilma was impeached and destroyed politically for alleged campaign finance violations in 2016. Lula was convicted and imprisoned on charges of kickbacks, money laundering, and corruption in 2017. He was released and all charges against him were dropped, allowing him to announce that he will run for president again in 2022.

French's account is no cradle to grave biography of Lula; he focuses on his early life and his becoming a leader. He adopts a biographical approach supposedly "essential to understanding" how Lula rose from a "fourth-grade-educated man" of the humblest origins to become a metalworker, a union strike leader, a radical leftist politician, and the thirty-fifth Brazilian president, serving from 2003 to 2011. There are other biographies written by Lula's friends and foes, mostly journalists.² French concentrates on Lula's first forty years and the forging of his leadership skills. French takes what he calls a social biographical approach. That is, his method is about how Lula, and those he associated with, experienced and navigated social structures. He avoids "abstractions" to concentrate on "fully embodied individuals in their concrete relationships".³ French's argument is that Lula's political practices and leadership style were "set" in the first forty years of his life in relation to his experiences. Critical of previous biographies of Lula, he argues that they are all excessively individualistic narratives adopting a "personalist approach" that concentrates on Lula alone. Instead, French considers Lula amidst his family, workmates, friends, and associates. French introduced the social biographical approach as the frame of his 2020 biography on Lula and discussed it in detail in an Afterword, "Toward a Biographical Pivot". In his reflection on the biography, French advocates more generally on historians' biographical methodologies, suggesting that they ought to negotiate between life and times, as he has done. In this commentary, I will critically appraise three aspects of French's reflection: his view of historians' biographical practice; his approach to Lula's biography; and some political implications of his approach to the biography of a working-class leader.

Putting French's View of Historians' Biographical Practice in Its Place

French invites "historians of the world's labour movement and plural lefts to think beyond their geographical and chronological specialisations" about biographical practice. Citing Geoff Ely and others, he suggests that the writing of biography was "one of

²Most recently by journalist, biographer, and friend of Lula, Fernando Morais (2021), with one volume on his rise. In English: Richard Bourne, *Lula of Brazil: The Story so Far* (London, 2005). Sue Branford and Bernardo Kucinski, *Lula and The Workers' Party in Brazil* (New York, 2005).

³French, *Lula and His Politics of Cunning*, p. 364.

the earliest casualties of the rise of social history during the 1960s and 1970s”, with the discipline’s young rebels deeming it a “trivializing and frivolous recourse [...] befitting the professional’s benighted traditionalism”.⁴ He takes the view that historians adopted nineteenth-century Thomas Carlyle’s standpoint of concentrating upon significant individual heroes. The implication, however, is that, under the influence of social history, historians were less interested in biography in the twentieth century. Annales and Marxist historians emphasised “the dependence of individuals upon their social environment” and challenged the importance of biography. More recently, however, there has been a biographical turn, a biographizing movement amongst historians.⁵ Historians pioneered a new kind of social biography of working-class leaders, such as Nick Salvatore in his 1982 study of Eugene V. Debs, which focused on probing a broader social history, which entwined “a more private pattern” of working-class leaders’ lives and community associations, as well as their unionism and public political cultural activism.⁶

In response, I would argue that French’s method is itself not well contextualized. His view of historians’ biographical practice is made from the perspective of Lula, which is his first biography. Hermione Lee has described standard monolithic accounts of historians’ biographical practice, into which French’s account fits like a glove, as an evolution graph narrative.⁷ It portrays the development of biography as a linear or a sequential progression from one stage to another. In French’s case, his account starts with Carlyle’s Victorian biography, although by concentrating upon his Great Man Theory (1840) he misrepresents Carlyle’s more complex views, as Margaret MacMillan and others have shown.⁸ For instance, in his article “On Biography” (1830), Carlyle opined that the man who first took an army over the Alps was no more momentous to us than “the nameless boor who first hammered out an iron spade. When the oak-tree is felled, the whole forest echoes with it; but a hundred acorns are planted silently by some unnoticed breeze”.⁹ Carlyle wrote about his friend John Sterling (1851) and his father, James Carlyle, (1881), neither of whom were heroes in any pantheon.¹⁰ Moreover, French’s view overlooks a great deal of historians’ biographical experimentation and debate over approaches in Carlyle’s wake.

⁴Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2005), p. 68.

⁵Prue Chamberlayne, Joanna Bornat, and Tom Wengraf (eds), *The Turn to Biographical Methods in Social Science* (London, 2000), esp. Michael Rustin “Reflections on the Biographical Turn in Social Science”, pp. 33–52. Barbara Merrill and Linden West, *Using Biographical Methods in Social Science* (London, 2009), p. 2; David Nasaw, “Introduction”, in “Historians and Biography”, special issue, *American Historical Review*, 114:3 (2009), pp. 573–578; Hans Renders, Binne de Haan, and Jonne Harmsma (eds), *The Biographical Turn: Lives in History* (London, 2016); Daniel R. Meister, “The Biographical Turn and the Case for Historical Biography”, *History Compass* (January 2018). Available at <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/hic3.12436>; last accessed 26 January 2020.

⁶Nick Salvatore, “Biography and Social History: An Intimate Relationship”, *Labour History*, 87 (2004), pp. 187–192.

⁷Hermione Lee, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2009), introduction, n.p.

⁸Margaret MacMillan, *History’s People: Personalities and the Past: CBC Massey Lectures* (Toronto, 2015), pp. 6–7.

⁹Thomas Carlyle, “Thoughts on History”, *Fraser’s Magazine*, 2 (1830), p. 415.

¹⁰Thomas Carlyle, *The Life of John Sterling* (London, 1851); *idem, Reminiscences*, ed. K.J. Fielding and Ian Campbell (Oxford, [1881] 1997).

It is not just that the biography of biography is more complex than French suggests. From a wider perspective, one can see that labour historians never really abandoned biography. Take, for instance, British Marxists. Ironically, because they were Marxist and therefore it might be assumed they were materialists and structuralists with little interest in biography, it comes as a surprise that the British Marxists wrote biography from the 1930s. A founding member of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), Dona Torr set herself the task of promoting historical study in the party, critically “part of an overall publishing programme by the CPGB to utilise personality in its propaganda”.¹¹ The Communist Party Historians Group (CPHG) championed the biographical method.¹² This cluster of British Marxist historians and Communist Party members at various times included Maurice Dobb, Christopher Hill, Rodney Hilton, Charles Hobday, Eric Hobsbawm, Victor Kiernan, Stephen Finney Mason, A.L. Morton, George Rudé, Raphael Samuel, John Saville, Dorothy Thompson, E.P. Thompson, as well as Torr. French’s general approach to biography is similar to that of the British Marxist historians and to that of Marx and Engels. French writes: “I have shown how they manoeuvred within a world they did not control but in which they were far from being victims”.¹³ Marx is seldom associated with biographical practices but he put the position as succinctly as any – if we interpret him at his most humanistic position in *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852) – writing that: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.”¹⁴ The extent to which subjects navigate structures is critical.¹⁵ British Marxist biographers like E.P. Thompson were concerned to avoid teleological causation, the idea of something’s being for the sake of a goal, with that goal or end monopolizing consideration. They considered contingency and counterfactuals and their accounts involved a complex consideration of motivation and achievement, the very issue that French wishes to emphasize. They rarely managed to “do it from the inside” however, owing to sources, a point I will return to.

Thompson railed against Stalinists for their “belittling of conscious human agency in the making of history”.¹⁶ He was keen to reassert relationships and dynamism into interpretations of Marxism and socialism, such as that found in the *German Ideology* (1846): “The dialectical interaction between men and their social environment” was the dynamic force of history: “circumstances make men just as much as men make

¹¹Dave Renton, “The Historian and Her Group: Dona Torr and Marxist History”, *British Online Archives* (29 March 2021). Available at <https://microform.digital/boa/posts/category/contextual-essays/410/the-historian-and-her-group-dona-torr-and-marxist-history>; last accessed 28 September 2021; Anthony Howe, “The Past is Ours: The Political Usage of English History by the British Communist Party, and the Role of Dona Torr in the Creation of its Historians’ Group, 1930–56” (PhD, University of Sydney, 2004).

¹²Harvey J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians: An Introductory Analysis* (Cambridge, 1984).

¹³French, *Lula and His Politics of Cunning*, p. 364.

¹⁴Thompson championed a version: see E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963), preface.

¹⁵Volker R. Berghahn and Simone Lässig (eds), *Biography between Structure and Agency: Central European Lives in International Historiography* (New York and Oxford, 2008).

¹⁶Thompson, “Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines”, *The New Reasoner*, 1 (Summer 1957), p. 113.

circumstances”, and so on.¹⁷ People were partly agents in history, just as they were partly victims of their environment. Rather than dogmatism, Thompson wanted “a return to man: from abstractions and scholastic formulations to real men: from deceptions and myths to honest history”, what he termed “socialist humanism”, which is similar to the method that French pursues.¹⁸

In short, to suggest that labour historians in the past have been simple in their “personalist approach” does an injustice to historians’ own history. I am writing about this elsewhere but I make two points here.¹⁹ Historians have been debating the need to avoid the superficiality of the “man/woman and his/her times approach” for some time now. They have approached biography from different directions: biography from above, biography from below, and biography from the inside, continually reassessing the issue of historical distance and perspective since the nineteenth century.²⁰ Above all, they have argued over biographical method. Reporting changes in biographical practice as a linear progression misrepresents historians’ own trajectory.

In addition, there has been a wider debate over the role of the individual in history. This has included not only historians, but also those in different disciplines and has occurred in waves.²¹ Sociologist Herbert Spencer vigorously disagreed with Carlyle, who was, in turn, criticized by William James.²² In turn, Sidney Hook, in his 1943 *The Hero in History*, was critical of both structuralist Georgi Plekhanov and personalist Carlyle.²³ The Russian Revolution reignited interest in socialist leadership and biographical studies of Marx, Lenin, August Bebel, and others appeared in English. World War II created interest in leadership and Isaac Deutscher’s consideration of Stalin was part of a wave of political biographies.²⁴ The discussion over the role of the individual has been one of Geoff Ely’s “crooked lines”. In 1944, Albert William Levi was fatalistic about the debate among historians when he reviewed Hook’s book, arguing that there would “always be” those with “scientific and romantic” temperaments, who would argue over the role of the great man in history. He added that “every generation must face the question anew”.²⁵ Levi claimed that Hook was dangling his toe in the mid-twentieth century, in a debate that had already been long-running:

¹⁷Thompson, “Socialist Humanism”, p. 114.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 109.

¹⁹Melanie Nolan, *Biography: An Historiography*, Routledge, forthcoming.

²⁰Barbara Caine, “Biography and the Question of Historical Distance”, in Mark Salber Phillips, *Rethinking Historical Distance* (Houndsmills and New York, 2013).

²¹Melanie Nolan, “The Great Individual in History: Historicising Historians’ Biographical Practice”, in Hans Renders and David Veltman (eds), *Fear of Theory* (Leiden, 2021), pp. 72–88.

²²*Herbert Spencer: The Study of Sociology* (New York, [1873] 1912); William James, “Great Men and Their Environment”, *Atlantic Monthly*, 46 (October 1880), pp. 441–449.

²³Sidney Hook, *The Hero in History: A Study in Limitation and Possibility* (New York, 1943); G.V. Plekhanov, *The Role of the Individual in History* (London, [1898] 1961); Herbert Butterfield, “The Role of the Individual in History”, *History (New Series)*, 40 (1955), pp. 138–139.

²⁴Ernest Mandel, “The Role of the Individual in History: The Case of World War Two”, *New Left Review*, 1:157 (May–June 1986), pp. 61–77.

²⁵Albert William Levi, “Book Review, *The Hero in History: A Study in Limitation and Possibility*”, *Ethics*, 54:2 (1944), pp. 152–153.

The positions are worn thin. On the one hand, there is Carlyle. Over against him there are Herbert Spencer and Engels. They are racing madly toward the finish line. But calm and collected in white flannels at the tape are the great mediators. Sidney Hook is one of them. Not the great man alone, not social forces alone, but both of them are causal factors in the stream of history! With slightly different emphasis and vocabulary, Sidney Hook is saying substantially what William James said in “Great Men and their Environment” – only James said it in thirty pages, and Hook takes almost three hundred!²⁶

Currently, a number of historians are developing versions of the social biographical method, with its central concern on relationships. Ray Monk, biographer of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1991), used the latter’s idea of seeing connections in writing biography rather than building a theory or producing “truths”. Monk has argued that you understand a person when you establish connections.²⁷ Similarly, as French noted, “It was in the late 1970s that a timid new union president [Lula], finding his voice, connected viscerally with the consciousness of a large swath of his fellow workers”, to the “peons”.²⁸ He made “heart-to-heart connections” and understood how to use the media to bring his political message – and his name recognition – to millions. French relates Lula to “thousands of his friends, allies, and admirers, the tens of thousands of rank-and-file workers, and the tens of millions of his voters”.²⁹

The kind of biography that French respects is that of Anne Lopes and Gary Roth’s 2003 biography of August Bebel, which is “a fully embodied and gendered social biographical approach” in which they exquisitely sketch out “the quite complicated unfolding of [his] beliefs and activities” as Bebel gropes his “way towards issues of gender equality”.³⁰ The emphasis is on the “quite complicated unfolding of [his] beliefs and activities”. Such a biography does not presume the outcome. French argued that most cradle-to-grave biography does not capture the contingency of a life. Similarly, Michael Heinrich, in his recent 2019 biography of Marx (the first volume of three to be published), pursues a method of a “mutual process of constitution” of context, the author, and the life:

The “historical world” contributes essentially to what constitutes the individual, who can only experience this constitution in actions, communications, and relations, whereby it also affects the “historical world”. This means that “acting” and “reacting” occur simultaneously in most cases, albeit with different degrees of consequences at different times.³¹

²⁶Levi, “The Hero in History”, p. 152.

²⁷Ray Monk, “Life without Theory: Biography as an Exemplar of Philosophical Understanding”, *Poetics Today*, 28:3 (2007), pp. 527–570.

²⁸French, *Lula and His Politics of Cunning*, pp. 5, 248.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 3.

³⁰Anne Lopes and Gary Roth, *Men’s Feminism: August Bebel and the German Socialist Movement* (New York, 2000), pp. 23, 46–47.

³¹Michael Heinrich, *Karl Marx and the Birth of Modern Society: The Life of Marx and the Development of His Work. Vol. 1: 1818–1841*, transl. Alexander Locascio (New York, 2019), “Appendix: How is Biographical Writing Possible Today? On the Methodology of a Marx Biography”, p. 332.

Of course, this is a tall order, juggling influences, context, social processes of action and communication, and so on. Heinrich takes his cue from Siegfried Kracauer's characterization in the 1930s of "social biography", which, on the one hand, relied on Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's conception of the "developmental history of the person not only as something internal, but as historically conditioned" and, on the other hand, to Wilhelm Dilthey's belief that the "task of the biographer" was "to understand the productive nexus through which an individual is determined by his milieu and reacts to it".³² Heinrich emphasized that the subject of a biography ought to be considered in the context of their society; that is, their social relations, rather than as a self-contained autonomous subject. The biographer understands the subject not by trying to feel empathy or re-enacting their experiences but by considering the process of their communication. A mutual process of constitution takes place, a process that is constant and unfinished: "That which we usually attempt to hold on to as a 'person' is neither a simple, clearly delineated entity nor a mere illusion; it is the continuous result of a network of effects."³³

A life does not attain a coherent teleological shape; instead, a biography should emphasize its ruptures and contingencies. Moreover, the perspective of the biographer must be made clear. As Heinrich writes, Marx's work "is made of a continuous string of attempts, which were interrupted, of new beginnings, which were not continued, or were so in other ways".³⁴ Heinrich pays close attention to Marx's dead ends, his conceptual experimentation, and his processing of ever-new experiences, which are woven into an extensively researched familial, historical, and political fabric, drawing on a wide range of first-hand letters and regional studies. Heinrich is critical of a raft of recent biographies of Marx by Francis Wheen, Jonathan Sperber, and Gareth Stedman Jones.³⁵ He argues that biographers needed to consider Marx as text, context, and praxis.

A number of biographers have adopted, or are adopting, "French's" social biographical approach, then. Like Heinrich, French emphasizes that a person is constituted in childhood and family relationships and school experiences, which are as important as Goethe's and Dilthey's cognitive pathways. Heinrich's wider point is that what "one expects of a biography, what counts as a good or adequate biography, has changed again and again".³⁶ The issue is that French does not provide an overview of historians' biographical process in order to place his biography. In many ways, he is reinventing an approach already in our toolkit.

French's Social Biographical Approach to Lula

Of course, French uses the method to skilfully trace and explain Lula's evolution from a rural migrant to a skilled metal worker in São Paulo, from a shrewd trade union

³²Citing Siegfried Kracauer, *Jacques Offenbach and the Paris of His Time* (Frankfurt, [1937] 1976), preface; Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Poetry and Truth* (Auckland, 2008), p. 57; Wilhelm Dilthey, *The Formation of the Historical World in the Human Sciences* (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford, 2002), pp. 265–266.

³³Heinrich, "How Is Biographical Writing Possible Today?", p. 333.

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵Francis Wheen, *Karl Marx: A Life* (London, 1999); Jonathan Sperber, *Karl Marx: A Nineteenth-Century Life* (London, 2013); Gareth Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion* (London, 2016).

³⁶Heinrich, "How Is Biographical Writing Possible Today?", p. 232.

leader to a powerful orator and successful politician. He argues that Lula embodied the collective identity of organized workers. He defines Lula's cunning as pragmatism, a desire to make capitalism more egalitarian by collaboration. French's concern is with the development of Lula's skills, essentially set by 1978–1980, and the success in his cunning thereafter, rather than assessing the pragmatism of his politics or any particular policy. His focus is understanding this evolution, admiring Lula. French employs three narrative devices: biographical; contingent; and relational.

His narrative frame is biographical rather than structural. French rails at “narrative frames which treat lives” of Lula and August Bebel “as personifications of a variety of collectivities, socioeconomic processes, cultural hierarchies or political movements”. Lula's and Bebel's leadership was a praxis: unique, performative, and contingent; biographical, psychological, and interactive. So, his interest is in the differences – their personal modes – as much as any similarities between Lula and Bebel. Taking his cue from anthropologists, Alexander Goldenweiser and Marshall David Sahlins, French argues that, even when the new ideas or practices seemed to have been adopted from elsewhere and are generally common, psychological and social factors affect their receptivity. Goldenweiser coined the term the “principle of limited possibilities” to tackle hyper-diffusionist theory. Cultural diffusion is always mediated by “the essential uniqueness of each individual and their creative potential inherent in all of us”, meaning ideas are incorporated differently by different societies and by the individuals who make up any institution. Thus, French compares the ABC strikes on Lula's “watch”, which produced a “socialist-oriented” “political labour-cum-people's party” to the mass social democratic parties of pre-1914 Europe.³⁷ The ABC refers to the cluster of São Paulo municipalities of Santo André, São Bernardo do Campo, and São Caetano do Sul, which hosted the main metal industry factories. French notes that the militant mass strikes of the 1970s served the same purpose as the militant mass strikes in the 1930s United States; that is, they finally broke employer and government opposition.³⁸ But the point is that Lula's achievement was in twenty-first-century Brazil. Others came from poor, disadvantaged backgrounds to become very popular, such as Evo Morales of Bolivia or, at other times and places, such as Michael Joseph Savage who was very popular in New Zealand in the 1930s.³⁹ Brazil is unique, however, the fifth largest and fifth most-populous country in the world. Lula was “the most popular president in the history of Brazil and perhaps the world”.⁴⁰ French's interest is not particularly comparative. French argues that the individual must be the centre of study: there is only “the concrete individual, whose relations to the totality are mediated by a particular biographical experience in familial and other institutions” and who thus expresses “the cultural universals in an individual form”.

Secondly, French sets out to reject backward storytelling. Following the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, French argues, biography is usually based on a “simple lie:

³⁷French, *Lula and His Politics of Cunning*, p. 18.

³⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 297–298.

³⁹Barry Gustafson, “Savage, Michael Joseph”, *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, 1998. Available at <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/4s9/savage-michael-joseph>; last accessed 23 December 2021; Barry Gustafson, *From the Cradle to the Grave: A Biography of Michael Joseph Savage* (Auckland, 1986).

⁴⁰French, *Lula and His Politics of Cunning*, p. 1.

the individual's past is re-counted in light of his future".⁴¹ So, Lula's past biographers (with the laudable exception of Denise Paraná) misinterpreted his life by emphasizing its inevitability. Others, such as Nêumanne Pinto, emphasized luck; that destiny "placed him in the right place, at the right time, and with the right person".⁴² Yet others suggest both luck and destiny by concentrating upon "magic" turning points in his life.⁴³ "Journalistic accounts" of Lula's life, for instance, emphasize his brother's imprisonment and torture as a turning point. Above all, at the outset, French notes that most Lula observers "completely dismissed the man's first forty years of life as ancient history".⁴⁴ Human beings are not totally conditioned. It is a complex relationship in which, to cite Sartre, "you are what you do with what is done to you". Whatever the authority for holding the individual as an "acting subject", French focuses on the relational process. The device he uses here is to ask questions: Why was there nothing unique in Lula's first quarter century that predicts his extraordinary trajectory over the next half century?⁴⁵ He lacked political formation at this point. Its development was the central process: Lula captured the desire for change and capably applied methods that spoke the politics of cunning to his constituency. One thing he needed to develop was public speaking experience.⁴⁶ How did a mass worker insurgency emerge in ABC's metalworking industry, a world of men – ten per cent of the workforce was female – who did not identify collectively as factory workers; indeed, eighty per cent of them eschewed membership in the union that Lula came to lead? It seems that Lula championed their bread-and-butter issues and channelled a common group consciousness by relating politics and the everyday life. Why was Lula not tortured when he was imprisoned in 1980? He had powerful mentors. How did he come to dominate his union when he was a mere figurehead when he was first appointed?⁴⁷ He learned as he came to practice politics from his fellow skilled workers and trade unionists, a remarkable generation of working-class baby boomers.⁴⁸ How are we to explain his sustained success against the odds and his adept manoeuvring of the government as president, for which he seemed ill-prepared due to his scant experience in elected office?⁴⁹ He was not polarizing and he captivated many people.⁵⁰ His "ideal of person-to-person engagement and honest communication" about encoded social relations was a practice of "higher cunning".⁵¹ French sets out to show contingency: that Lula was both "a very lucky and gifted man".⁵²

Thirdly, French adopts strategies to avoid an excessively individualistic approach. He focuses on Lula's significant relationships.⁵³ He anchors the study, above all, in

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 19, 381.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 95, 213.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 363.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 113, 181.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 223–224.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 250–251.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 334.

Lula's relationships with others: with his family first and foremost, especially his brother José Ferreira de Melo, better known by his nickname, Frei Chico. Chico is the revolutionary and yet his combatant rebellious communist methods did not push through. French considers "rebels, good boys, and operators" showing the effectiveness of the operators' path of union and political militancy. French considers the women with whom Lula made his life but they are subsidiary to Chico. Rather than radicalizing Lula's political outlook, Chico's travails functioned as just one episode in a sustained and critical period of personal growth and self-discovery, which intensified after the February 1975 union election. "With ambition and energy, Lula broadened his intellectual and political understanding and deepened relationships with fellow directors, union activists, and members as he struggled to become *de facto*, not merely *de jure*, president"; thus able to be presidential in the May 1978 strikes that made him famous. He had become a charismatic leader and operator by the time of the late 1970s strikes.

In the process, French's biography offers new insights – based on hitherto-unused sources. He mines the work of sociologists on rural migrants who became factory workers. This ranged from a single sociologist, who interviewed a metalworker who had migrated to São Paulo in 1957, the pioneering empirical work by Juarez Brandão Lopes and Leôncio Martins Rodrigues, to a group of Universidade de São Paulo (USP)'s ambitious young researchers, who surveyed three hundred of the city's industrial enterprises in the early 1960s. Often, French points to their structuralist explanations, which, he argued, revealed a failure of these sociologists to identify with their subjects' specific working-class condition. He was able to read across the grain and rework the data, however. He also made good use of intelligence agency records into the extraordinary actions of the metalworkers and their trade unions in the 1970s. He was able to use the company surveillance records, for instance, to show the numbers of strikers in 1979 and "the strikers' robust success".⁵⁴ Indeed, French's biography of Lula is the product of a huge amount of research. He has adopted a "rich granular detail", which is the culmination of forty years of research and engagement with São Paulo's popular and working classes, especially the São Paulo metalworkers.⁵⁵

The story faces problems of evidence, nonetheless. One weakness of the social biographical approach is that we know far too few details of the circumstances of some aspects of Lula's life and early personality development to make many assumptions with any degree of certainty. French conveys a picture of Lula's life that is based on fragmentary and limited sources. We lack evidence regarding his dating life.⁵⁶ On a more critical point, for instance, whether Chico's detention radicalized Lula, French notes that "we ultimately lack contemporaneous evidence for how his thinking, feeling, and speaking about the crisis evolved over the eighteen months leading to the mid-1978 *Senhor Vogue* profile".⁵⁷

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, p. 274.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, p. 364.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, p. 167.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, p. 231.

French mines Lula's observations and particularly his oratory and performances. It is a method that lends itself to being used for leaders, whether they are working class or not. For many of us writing about working-class leaders, however, we will simply not have the material for this approach. The social biographical method is only possible with some kinds of subjects for whom we have extensive sources. It is a method that lends itself to a particular kind of subject.

Biography as a Political Act?

French's account of Lula adopts a particular approach and uses particular sources. Different methods and sources have strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, the author plays a role with a perspective, too. Biography can itself be a political act, especially because Lula is still a political contender in Brazilian politics. As Chris Wallace has argued, what one knows about a politician is a "Silken Cord". Biography is an active rather than a passive publication; political biography is a political intervention. It can affect the political prospects of a politician. It can burnish or diminish the subject's standing: "It is capable of dragging a politician's reputation up or down and may even be designed to hang them."⁵⁸ There is an unavoidable perspectivity of depiction. French's account sets out to understand Lula and it is not concerned with Lula's limits, it is broadly laudatory and not particularly critical.

French suggests that Lula and the PT spoke the language of the famous 1864 inaugural declaration by the short-lived International Working Men's Association: "the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves; that the struggle for the emancipation of the working classes means not a struggle for class privileges and monopolies, but for equal rights and duties, the abolition of all class rule".⁵⁹ For French, a history of the left has to involve political militancy. And yet, the PT embraced capitalism. The ABC strikes on Lula's watch were powerfully dependent on ties forged with other non-working-class interests and institutions, especially the Church.⁶⁰ The redistributive economic policies his presidency pursued were on the back of ties forged with non-socialist allies. They involved an abandonment of the socialist goals of complete equal rights and the abolition of class rule, which were at the heart of the aims of International Working Men's Association. Lula in power did not institute equal rights and duties or abolish class rule. His government's policies were the politics of cunning, but also of the possible, which was more politically centralist: neoliberal economics and progressive social policy. He is involved in the struggle for the emancipation of the working classes within the capitalist frame.

To take another issue, French argues that "we must avoid analysing left wing politics through external labels, ideological markers, and emblematic representations

⁵⁸Chris Wallace, "The Silken Cord: Contemporaneous Australian 20th-Century Political Biography & Its Meaning" (PhD, Australian National University, 2015).

⁵⁹John D. French, reflection on his biography *Lula and His Politics of Cunning*, "Common Men, Exceptional Politicians: What Do We Gain from an Embodied Social Biographical Approach to Leftist Leaders like Germany's August Bebel and Brazil's Luis Inácio Lula da Silva?", *International Review of Social History*, 67:3 (2022).

⁶⁰French, *Lula and His Politics of Cunning*, p. 294.

rather than interpreting abstractions in light of the diversity of individuals who made them a real force through their actions”. This is all very well but a concentration on Lula and his massive popularity overlooks the volatility of Brazilian politics. French argues that there is a lesson in Brazil’s experience: “radical social movements emerge, and they can transform themselves – against the odds – into a transformative electoral politics of consistency and achievement”.⁶¹ Lula instituted social programmes, such as Zero Hunger, and programmes in education and health; the claim to success is the figure usually quoted that something like 28 million people were lifted out of poverty through job creation and welfare measures and 36 million people joined the middle class. These policies were funded by revenue from rising commodity prices. The PT programme of reforming neoliberalism was, nonetheless, followed by a conservative reaction. If Lula were to win the presidency in 2022, it would be another turn in Brazil. The situation remains changeable and volatile, however. Brazilian politics does not display electoral politics of consistency. There has been military dictatorship and authoritarian rule, PT leadership, and right-wing pushback. French cannot have it both ways, wanting to emphasize the particularity and the uniqueness of Lula, and Lula as representative of a general recipe for left-wing politics.

French objects to considerations of the limits of Lula; he is firmly focused on the achievement, on “the mastery of the thing!”.⁶² Like Manley Hopkins’s windhover, Lula buckled, he prepared for action and readied. He seemed to break, but did not. We cannot but feel his sheer, untrammelled energy. French sets out to understand Lula as profoundly as is possible by way of a particular biographical approach, in which he succeeds dramatically.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁶²Gerard Manley Hopkins, “The Windhover” (London, [1877] fp. 1918).