

# Neoliberal Unfolding of Lulism

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## Introduction

On April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2009, the leaders of the twenty richest countries in the world gathered for the G20 London Summit. Amidst his Secretary of Treasury Timothy F. Geithner and then Australian Prime-minister Kevin Rudd, the former U.S. president Barack Obama looked at Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, shook his hand enthusiastically and uttered: “this is my man right here, I love this guy! The most popular politician on Earth”. The federal administrations of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party, PT) were an international sensation. The PT was able to promote economic growth and to diminish social inequality. During the years the party was ahead of national politics, it contributed to improve living standards, but without confronting capitalism. At the same time it fostered upward social mobility of the lowest stratum of the population, the party encouraged their financialization and maintained high rates of bank profits. Last but not least, it was able to do so continually, having won four presidential elections in a row, with Lula da Silva achieving approval rates which neared 90% (Bonin, 2010).

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Lula da Silva's role in this phenomenon was so crucial that the assemblage of the Workers' Party's programs and social politics and the project of a weak reformism based on class compromise and on the mobilization of lower classes was coined "Lulism" after him (see Singer, 2012). The party's politics thus assumed his face: that of a self-made man. The present article aims to scrutinize one of Lulism's most prominent, and yet relatively understudied<sup>4</sup> ideological consequences: entrepreneurship and its relations with the social programs implemented by the Workers' Party.

When the Worker's Party was struck by the 2016 coup which resulted in the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff, the major critique raised by a fraction of the Left referred to the Party's failure in promoting strong grassroots social mobilization that could have reverted this process. However, if taken seriously, the "Lulist" project of development without social conflict had in its core a politics of non-confrontation. The "conservative compromise" (Singer, 2012) that constituted the substratum of "Lulism" was predicated upon a concession from the Workers' Party: in order to govern, it had to abandon a class struggle approach.

The question of class structure in Brazil is quite complex. Historically, the major part of the lower classes in Brazil did not constitute a working class in a traditional sense. Many Brazilian intellectuals (Fernandes, 1978; Singer, 1981; Oliveira, 2003) argued that one of the main features of peripheral capitalism lies in its ability to raise capital accumulation without reaching the same civilizational standards of the center of capitalism (see Oliveira, 1997, p. 33). In that sense, the working class in Brazil lived under significantly different conditions, if compared to the countries of the Global North. Access to (limited) social rights was restricted to formal workers who never constituted the major part of the working classes. Therefore, the "proletariat" has always occupied an intermediate position in Brazilian social stratification, since an even more subaltern stratum dwelled below: the precariat or subproletariat (Braga, 2012; Singer, 2012).<sup>5</sup> Underemployment and informal labor were the rule and not an exception in this capitalist configuration.

Since the 1950s, this physiognomy of the subaltern classes has been regarded as a hindrance to Brazilian development: a large stratum of Brazilian population was never

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<sup>4</sup> For exceptions to this rule, see De Tommasi & Velazco, 2013; Salgado, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> According to Braga, there is a significant difference between his concept and Singer's, since he emphasizes the political forms of mobilization and organization undertaken by the precariat. On the other hand, Singer resorts to Marxist discussions on Bonapartism to show how the subproletariat is incapable of autonomous forms of political organization due to extreme poverty and the lack of material conditions. Thus, the most impoverished workers in Brazil tend to rely on the figure of a popular leader.

adequately integrated, and their extreme poverty and social fragility were a mean of exclusion which prevented them from entering “modern” capitalist circuits of production and consumption<sup>6</sup>. One of the main subjective consequences of this arrangement was a feeling of non-belonging, both in an economical and in a political sense, shared by a significant part of the population.

The PT attempted to reverse this situation. The endeavor is explicit in its motto during Lula da Silva’s administration, “Brasil, um país de todos” (Brazil, a country for all), and in his discourses about raising the self-esteem of Brazilian people<sup>7</sup>. This, however, could not be achieved by strengthening the working class as such, as a result of the “conservative compromise”: within the “Lulist” project, it was impossible to promote class struggle. Hence, it employed other devices.

One of them was the credit expansion policy aimed to incorporate the peripheral population via consumption. That is, the integration would be propelled *through* the market – not against it or in spite of it. Another way of trying to include this part of the population were Social Programs. Educational programs, for instance, such as FIES and PROUNI, assimilate individuals by granting them a place in the educational system. This part of the population was thus interpellated as a specific group of individuals: mothers (Bolsa Família), consumers (credit expansion), students (FIES/PROUNI), families (Minha Casa Minha Vida). That is, they were interpellated mostly as individuals – and impoverished individuals, since all these programs were conditioned by income.

This assemblage had consequences we would like to explore in this article. This particularistic (as opposed to universal) pattern chosen as a method for sorting out beneficiaries of social programs is predicated upon a certain moral, an ethos fostered by the very way these programs were designed and implemented. The main unit of assimilation favored by Lulism was not class, but rather the individual, a process that resulted in the dissemination of entrepreneurship as a guideline not only for economic behavior, but also for political and social conduct as a whole.

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<sup>6</sup> Francisco de Oliveira (2003) showed how this intertwining of “archaic” and “modern” elements played a decisive role for the accumulation of capital in peripheral capitalist configurations.

<sup>7</sup> When asked about the great legacy of his administration, Lula da Silva said: "In those 10 years all of us Brazilians recovered our pride in ourselves, each one of us. We recovered our self-respect" (Sader and Gentili, 2016, p. 222).

This phenomenon combines two distinct albeit interrelated elements: PT's resort to neoliberal dispositives of government and the class compromise politics enacted since the "Letter to the Brazilian People" signed in 2002 by then candidate Lula.

We would like to discuss these topics as follows. First, we will examine recent changes in the configuration of the Brazilian working classes, especially in the way they perceive their daily life. To do so, we will look at a research carried out by the Workers' Party research institute "Fundação Perseu Abramo". It contains some indications about the dissemination of an entrepreneurial self among Brazilian workers. We will then contend the meaning of neoliberalism during the party's administrations. In particular, we will resort to Michel Foucault's considerations on the topic, since they offer a detailed account of the relations between the neoliberal order and the configuration of entrepreneurship. Subsequently, we will consider the relationship between private education and entrepreneurship as an example of how neoliberal ideology and practices pervades Brazilian working classes, particularly in the outskirts of large cities.

The 2018 elections in Brazil were testimony to the rise of extreme-right politicians and supporters, epitomized by the election of Jair Bolsonaro as president. Even though Bolsonaro had his best voting performance in the wealthiest and whitest cities of the country, whereas PT candidate Fernando Haddad was best-voted in the most impoverished and blackest ones, a non-neglectable share of working-class vote<sup>8</sup> helped elect a president, governors and senators which, considered in conjunction, represent the biggest threat to democracy since the end<sup>9</sup> of the civil-military dictatorship in 1984. This article might shed some light on some of the underlying causes for this phenomenon and help explain why class solidarity was *not* chosen as a way out of the economic and political crisis in course in Brazil since 2014.

### **Lower-class liberalism**

In 2016, João Agripino da Costa Doria Junior won the elections for mayor in the city of São Paulo. Two years later, he would resign office to run for governor, an election which

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<sup>8</sup> According to IBOPE, 47% of the valid votes cast by people who earn up to 2 minimum wages went to Bolsonaro. See <https://politica.estadao.com.br/noticias/eleicoes,bolsonaro-tambem-ganhou-entre-as-mulheres-diz-ibope,70002588225> and also [https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2018/10/24/actualidad/1540379382\\_123933.html](https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2018/10/24/actualidad/1540379382_123933.html).

<sup>9</sup> On the continuities between the dictatorship which started with a coup in 1964 and the subsequent period of alleged re-democratization, see Safatle and Teles (2010).

he also won. He is a multimillionaire and a former TV show host, and the mobilization of the business entrepreneur and the self-made man's image against the figures of traditional politicians was the cornerstone of his campaign. The ongoing corruption scandals in Brazil also favored him. He won both elections by advertising a managerial discourse, and the idea that he was already rich, therefore would not need to be corrupt, appealed to many voters in the peripheral areas of São Paulo, where he triumphed over Fernando Haddad, the former mayor and Workers' Party candidate who ran against him in the 2016 municipal elections. PT lost votes especially in the so-called "consolidated peripheries", impoverished neighborhoods benefited by "Lulism", which have undergone many urbanistic transformations and which's dwellers were among those whose income increased consistently in the last decade. These neighborhoods, such as Pirituba and Vila Carioca, for instance, used to be typical working-class areas, but gentrification processes and real estate speculation propelled by the income rise promoted by Lulism expelled the most impoverished to even more distant parts of the city – a periphery around the periphery, as Rolnik stated (2016). That is, those who were favored by the Social Programs promoted by PT were those who preferred to vote for a businessman for mayor.

To understand why this shift took place was one of the impulses of a research carried out by Fundação Perseu Abramo (FPA), a research institute connected to the Workers' Party. Among many other thought-provoking issues, its most important discovery was that the peripheries of São Paulo had assumed an entrepreneurial physiognomy which could explain why their inhabitants identified themselves with a wealthy tycoon and did not stand up for the Lulist project in the moment of the coup. This research raised important questions about the development of the Workers' Party, especially regarding the growing distance between its leadership and its social basis (Galhardo and Venceslau, 2017; Locatelli, 2017; Souza and Nozaki, 2017). Nonetheless, the research remains relatively unnoticed at an academic level. The present paper summarizes some of its conclusions and takes them as a starting point for the analysis of entrepreneurship during the PT administrations.

The investigation aimed to understand the values and perceptions of the people living in the periphery of São Paulo. It was conducted based on in-depth interviews and focus groups in peripheral districts and *favelas* between 2016 and 2017. The sample was constituted by groups divided by: age; place of residence (outer neighborhoods or slums); monthly familiar income (up to two minimum wages and between two and five minimum wages);

religious affiliation; electoral affiliation; and whether they were beneficiaries of social programs or not.

The issues discussed with the interviewed included the following: city areas; family and social mobility; education; work and economic life; sociability, leisure, and consumption; religion; gender relations, homophobia, racism, abortion, drugs, and human rights; political and institutional perceptions.

The research had two intents. Firstly, it sought to understand the elements which composed the worldview of the interviewed. Secondly, it aimed to update the Workers' Party's political project. The following hypothesis conducted the research: as the economy was in an expansion cycle, new values were created among the urban working classes. In this article, we argue that the expansion cycle in the economy is not the sole reason for the fabrication of such new values. The latter was also due to the very *modus operandi* employed by PT to promote its social programs.

First and foremost, it is worth emphasizing that the respondents declared a strong desire to become an entrepreneur. In the words of one of the interviewed: "I wanted to have a business of French fries, 'The house of fries'... I would like to start from there and not work for others, but for myself" (Female, white, 46 years old, income: 2 to 5 minimum wages – Fundação Perseu Abramo, 2017, p. 30). According to the researchers, this desire is expressed by ideas such as not having a boss, having more flexibility to manage his/her own time, having his/her own business to work as near as possible to home, etc. (Fundação Perseu Abramo, 2017, p. 23).

Statements such as these, usually associated with entrepreneurship, could also involve a double meaning. They could express the desire of becoming a businessman/businesswoman and, at the same time, of carrying out an economic activity autonomously. It explains why many informal workers see themselves as entrepreneurs. Therefore, the dissemination of entrepreneurial discourse bears a contradictory feature. It alternates between the promise of freedom from traditional employment structures, and in particular those characterized by informality and precarity, and the identification with the higher positions of working hierarchies. Since Brazilian society was not able to assemble a broad and reliable system of social protection and security, it is plausible that people tend to see in entrepreneurial discourse a way out of misery and precarity.

However, the self-identification as entrepreneurs is not the only point we would like to emphasize. The discourse of personal effort is likewise widespread: it concerns work, education, personal and economic achievements, as we can notice in the words of a white male, 30 years old, who earned 2 to 5 minimum wages: “you have to have faith and make an effort to reach it... (...) I asked God for help, and there it is [he points to a car]... if you don’t make the effort and you don’t help yourself, God is not going to help you; it’s not going to come easily” (Fundação Perseu Abramo, 2017, p. 24).

The interviewed perceive the improvement of their living standards since 2003 not as a direct result of the social security programs implemented by the government, but rather as a product of personal effort. In this sense, they tend to see education as a primary instrument of social upward mobility, as one can draw from the words of a 17-year-old white female with an income of up to 2 minimum wages: “Some people I know wanted to go to college, for instance, but the best they could do was a technical course and now they regret it for not trying, not hustling” (Fundação Perseu Abramo, 2017, p. 39).

The research also points to the fact that the interviewed see the state as inefficient and associate it with free of charge, but low-quality services, as states a black female, 41 years old, who earned 2 to 5 minimum wages:

Education is much better in private schools. My grandson studied in a private school, but he had to leave because he couldn’t afford it any longer, but if he were still there, he would already be reading ... I find that if you are paying you can demand things and in the public school, from whom are you going to demand something? You can’t! (Fundação Perseu Abramo, 2017, p. 40)

The state and the public sphere are regarded as sources of social harms, and the private realm is seen as the solution. The major part of individuals also declared that state bureaucracy and high taxes are two significant issues that inhibit those who want to become an entrepreneur from pursuing their goal. In other words, the interviewed identified themselves with a liberal ideology that overstates the importance of the market. Therefore, the researchers recognized a convergence between the respondents’ ideas and the dominant discourse about economic activity, which is daily emphasized by large media and advertisement corporations. This convergence also appears in the opinion about the necessity of a joint operation between state and market. As the research report expounds, “As the dominant tonic, the sample seems to wish for a more combined performance between state authority and private enterprise in favor of the community. This might provide a gateway to

discourses about [public-private] partnerships and outsourcing” (Fundação Perseu Abramo, 2017, p. 58).

At the same time, conversely, values such as personal success and the commodification of daily life go hand in hand with the importance attributed to public institutions. According to the respondents, the educational and health system should be universal, and the state plays a crucial role in reducing social inequality. Therefore, public policies implemented by the Workers’ Party (such as Bolsa Família, FIES, and Prouni) were regarded as necessary, but insufficient.

Finally, the respondents tend to identify themselves with Lula da Silva’s trajectory not just because he was a worker, but because he is a successful example of upward social mobility. Combined with his charisma, this identification explains why Lula da Silva was seen as the most popular politician in the world.<sup>10</sup> It is also possible to state that in his figure lie projected the realizations of neoliberal values and ideas that flourished among urban workers since the 1990s and in particular during the PT administrations. Lula da Silva represents someone who was able to "make it" with his abilities and personal effort, in spite of all difficulties. In other words, a *nordestino* mechanical turner, 7<sup>th</sup> son of an illiterate mother of eight children, was able to occupy the president's office based solely on his *human capital*. That is the reason why the research led by Fundação Perseu Abramo observed the equivalence made by the respondents between Lula da Silva and João Doria, but also popular Brazilian entrepreneurs such as TV show host and SBT owner Silvio Santos. In spite of their non-neglectable share of political and ideological divergences, they all had one thing in common, namely, the fact that they represented individuals with successful professional and life stories making their way from the bottom and relying merely on their personal will.

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<sup>10</sup> There is a heated debate between Souza (2012, p. 250 ff.) and Braga (2012, p. 27-28) on the meaning of Lula’s charisma. On the one hand, Souza suggests that Lulism is an expression of the popular groups’ desires for social mobility. In other words, it articulates the fragmented conscious of working classes with the class consciousness embodied by Lula, seen as an “exemplary prophet”. Therefore, his political appeal does not represent some political passivity, but the distance between left-wing intellectuals and working-class yearnings. On the other hand, Braga emphasizes that Souza’s approach apprehends the political ideas of the Brazilian precariat only in terms of elections. Besides, the insistence on Lula’s charisma accentuates the manipulation from the political leader, as a simple ideological epiphenomenon and leaving behind the ways the precariat organizes itself. One can indeed understand Lula’s success and the identification of the working classes with his figure in terms of charisma, but not in Weberian terms, nor as simple manipulation. Unlike Souza’s analysis, one should conceive charisma in terms of personal identification and personalization, i.e., as psychoanalytical concepts. That way, the explanation of Lula’s charisma should not be restrained to his extraordinary traits but must consider why people identify them as a model. Also, since they experience relations of domination and exploitation but are unable to cope with them as political and economic forces, there is a tendency to attribute to a personal figure the solutions to their problems.



More than the incorporation of strict neoliberal ideas and values or even a form of conservatism, the FPA recognized this phenomenon as a kind of “lower class liberalism”<sup>11</sup>. The relation of the urban working classes with the notion of a public sphere and public services is intertwined with commodified interpretations of social relations. This commodified logic expresses itself “even in the interpretation of labor rights and social benefits. People trust more in policies that offer financial resources immediately ... than in the set of laws which guide those rights” (Fundação Perseu Abramo, 2017, p. 65), writes the report.

Certain ethnographic works confirm the diagnosis of these analytical perspectives, illustrating how the Brazilian urban working classes interweave their everyday activities with a neoliberal discourse. The idea that citizenship must be combined with market logic flourished since the social programs financed by large companies present themselves as virtuous and linked to social rights (Abílio, 2011; De Tommasi and Velazco, 2013; Rizek, 2016).

Thus, the research concluded that the interviewed sustained a “lower class liberalism” and not a hard-core neoliberal or conservative discourse because they combine the self-merit discourse with some recognition of the importance of certain public policies and also relative tolerance towards cultural diversity. The Perseu Abramo’s research implies a change in the way social programs are perceived and displays a contradictory perception in the lower classes regarding the need of a more present, strong State and a more market-oriented way it should be managed.

### **The Workers' Party administrations: between neoliberalism and post-neoliberalism**

One of the most discussed topics concerning the configuration of the PT is its relation to neoliberalism. Many authors (Wylde, 2012; Macdonald and Ruckert, 2009; Ruckert, Macdonald and Proulx, 2017) sought to understand if its administrations between 2003 and 2016 were successful in overcoming the processes of deindustrialization, massive unemployment and economic financialization, which characterized Brazilian federal governments during the 1990s.

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<sup>11</sup> Such phenomenon could display parallels with what Verónica Gago (2018) has termed “neoliberalism from below”.

In a recent congress, which took place in June 2017, the party tried to understand why Dilma Rousseff's administration was interrupted by a coup. The resolutions of the congress reflect on the accomplishments and mistakes made during the 13 years the party was ahead of the federal administration. One thing appears as unquestionable: Lula da Silva's and Rousseff's governments should be described as "post-neoliberal", along with other Latin American governments:

When we compare the performance of our governments with previous administrations (we refer specifically to Sarney, Collor, Itamar and Fernando Henrique's terms), we recognize a vast difference: during our administrations, there was an improvement in the living standards of the majority of the Brazilian population. Moreover, it is possible to state that during Lula da Silva's and Rousseff's administrations our country was in the world vanguard in fighting hunger, poverty, and deprivation: millions attained the right to live. *With an anti-neoliberal inspiration*, our administrations implemented not just public policies of social inclusion and cash transfer, but mostly the expansion of rights (Partido dos Trabalhadores, 2017, p. 23, emphasis added).

On the same document, the expression "improvement of living standards" is associated with the question of consumption in the working classes. It is now well known that between 2003 and 2016 the consumption level among the poorest strata of the Brazilian society raised constantly. This increase can be explained by a series of public policies implemented by the Worker's Party in the period it was in control of the state. The most relevant are the consistent increase of minimum wage, cash transfer programs<sup>12</sup> such as "Bolsa Família", and credit expansion. They allowed the most impoverished workers to consume commodities such as refrigerators and washing machines for the first time in their lives. In the meanwhile, those strata were also impelled to the service of banks and financial institutions. The assemblage of these programs has been recognized worldwide as the main

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<sup>12</sup> The Bolsa Família Program has been referred to in Anglo-Saxon literature in many ways: "cash transfer program", "conditional cash transfer" "allowance program", "cash aid program", among many others. We find that terms which mention the idea of "cash" are problematic, since it might convey the idea that the beneficiaries receive their allowance in actual cash, which is not true. They collect their monthly payment through a bank card issued by the government - which is not a minor element, since, as we will argue, the lower classes were able to ameliorate their standard of living only by entering the circuits of financialization and bank coverage. However, since "conditional cash transfer" has been utilized even in World Bank documents, we will employ such term in the article.

achievement of the PT administrations: a substantial decrease of social inequality<sup>13</sup> aligned with “bankarization” and financialization<sup>14</sup>.

The strengthening of internal markets and the expansion of distributive programs, however, were not only a characteristic of the most recent economic boom.<sup>15</sup> On a subjective level, it goes hand in hand with the feeling of belonging of the lower classes. Going back to PT’s 2017 congress resolutions, one finds that social programs like Bolsa Família mean to millions of families “the feeling of belonging to a community, it means a statement that we share a destiny and responsibilities, that nobody can be subject to abandonment, misery, deprivation, oblivion, and helplessness in sickness and old age” (Partido dos Trabalhadores, 2017, p. 25).

But those programs have not benefited just the lower strata. It was also functional to capital accumulation, especially to a broad process of financialization, as Lavinás shows:

Social policy served as collateral to access financial markets through credit, facilitating an intense process of financial inclusion. As such, it has supported debt-financed spending at the expense of the provision of public goods and services. What we have seen is social policy being taken as a mechanism in order to secure credit, and consumer credit in particular. [...] as a result, it allows the collateral receiver (financial institutions) to trade collateralized loans on the financial market, amplifying securitization and deepening household dependence on new and permanent loans. (Lavinás, 2017, p. 5)

By allowing over 36 million people<sup>16</sup> to leave extreme poverty behind and including them in the realm of consumption, the PT unquestionably accomplished a remarkable objective. In spite of its shortcomings, this event represented something these people and their ancestors had never before experienced in Brazil’s entire history. Looking back, especially

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<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, it has been recently demonstrated that this inequality decrease should be revised, since labor income inequality was reduced in Brazil in conjunction with a growth of capital income among elite groups (Medeiros et al., 2015; Morgan, 2017).

<sup>14</sup> For new data pointing to a substantial increase in financialization processes during PT’s rule, see Lapyda, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> In the last years, there has been a discussion about the causes of this economic boom. Authors such as Carvalho (2018) and Sicsú (2019) argue that the main reason for the GDP growth lies not in the expansion of consumption, but rather in public investment. In this sense, social programs and the rise in the minimum wage did not constitute alone the improvement of working-class living conditions. They took place in conjunction with the expansion of public investment, which allowed for the rise of private expenditure and consequently increasing formal labor. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that even if the PT’s governments played a major role in the expansion of economic activities, especially during Lula’s administration, this does not exclude processes of financialization. Also, it concerns two problems with Keynesian and neo-Keynesian analysis. First, consumption is not the end of all economic activity, as Keynes’ epigraph in Sicsú’s essay tells us (2019, p. 128). On the contrary, the primary purpose of economic activity in capitalist society is capital accumulation. Second, these analyses tend to see the functioning of neoliberalism as a strict opposition between state and market, which may not be the case.

<sup>16</sup> Data provided by the Ministry of Social Development. Available at <<http://www.brasil.gov.br/cidadania-e-justica/2013/09/em-10-anos-bolsa-familia-tirou-36-milhoes-pessoas-da-extrema-pobreza>>.

now that one experiences in a much severer fashion the impact of “pure” neoliberal measures, such as the labor rights’ amendment promoted by then president Michel Temer in 2017, or the pension amendment currently in discussion under Bolsonaro’s administration, one realizes how much of a political and social deed this was. When roughly one-fourth of the population enters the realm of consumption overnight, the PT tried and, to a certain degree, was able to solve one of the main obstacles to economic growth in Brazil since its independence, namely, that of the internal market. Since almost 40 million people were hitherto excluded from the possibilities of normal reproduction of labor power, the dimension of the domestic market was always a hindrance for the development of an autonomous and continuous economic growth in Brazil.

Nonetheless, we would like to emphasize particular consequences of this achievement. They are related to the diffusion of neoliberalism as an art of governing, notwithstanding the humanitarian drive that led to the formulation of the social programs in the first place – this is not to say that PT’s intentions were cynical, but that they are only a part of the whole issue.

We want to focus now on the Bolsa Família to investigate this diffusion. This is important due to the fact that the program was regarded as one of the main instruments responsible for diminishing social inequalities and granting social security in Brazil. Even though this rightfully happened, we contend that the program displays not only typical welfare-like mechanisms (which are more striking at first sight), but also entails neoliberal modes of subjectivation.

The monthly payments of the Bolsa Família are transferred to its beneficiaries in the form of a bank card issued by Caixa Econômica Federal (a state bank). One of the effects of this operation, whether intended or not, was the inclusion of people living in extreme and relative poverty within the coverage of the banking system. Between 2003 and 2007 alone, there was an increase of over 17 million new bank accounts, and this figure points especially to those living at the base of the social structure. The Workers’ Party government worked to enact several laws (such as Law 10.735, from September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2003, or Law 11.110, from April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2005), which stimulated the “bankarization” of low-income strata, especially through the expansion of microcredit and payroll consigned credit (Barone and Sader, 2008<sup>17</sup>). According to data provided by Lula’s Institute, “the number of card users more than

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<sup>17</sup> Barone and Sader (2008) provide an insightful analysis of the expansion of credit, comparing its features during the PT governments and its predecessor, Fernando Henrique Cardoso. From this, they draw an interesting

doubled between 2008 and 2012”<sup>18</sup>. Not by chance, the first lines of the article in which these numbers appear read as: “Citizenship rights improve through the inclusion of more than 45 million Brazilians in the banking system”. In the PT project, citizenship was intimately associated to “bankarization” and financialization. That is to say, citizenship was closely related to the market and the private sector.

One of the hypotheses sustained by the present article is that PT was *not* neoliberal in a strict sense. It did mobilize, however, certain neoliberal dispositives of government. As a result, an entrepreneurial ethos was fostered throughout society as a whole, especially in the “consolidated peripheries” of São Paulo, even if accompanied by or even fostered by social security programs typically seen as welfarist ones<sup>19</sup>.

In order to address some of these elements, we resort to Foucault’s lectures on neoliberal governmentality (2008) in which he demonstrates how neoliberalism does not mean the lack of social planning or the retreat of the state. On the contrary, he shows how neoliberalism provides social policies with very clear objectives and instruments, but which are conceived of through a new interpretative and practical grid of rationality of government – when one compares them to the policies of the welfare state, for instance. The notion of a *Gesellschaftspolitik*, a politics for society, was recurrent in the works of many *Ordoliberalen* (Foucault, 2008, p. 159-214). The ordoliberal argument, as far as social policy is concerned, is not to remedy the devastating effects of the market in society, but rather to act upon society

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conclusion: microcredit before Lulism was understood as a way to foster entrepreneurship, whereas, during the Workers’ Party years, it was aimed at consumption. However, even if the economic and social *intentions* were not the same, the *consequences* of the public policies point to an expansion of entrepreneurial ways of life.

<sup>18</sup> Data available at <<http://www.brasildamudanca.com.br/en/microeconomia/number-credit-card-users-doubles>>.

<sup>19</sup> Consequently, we should proceed with caution when analyzing the neoliberal features of PT’s governments. Although they present many similarities with neoliberal countries of the Global North, they are not the same. In Brazil, there is a convergence between neoliberal practices and precarization, on the one hand, but there is also a convergence between certain neoliberal dispositives (especially how they were employed by the PT) and improvements in the precariat life’s conditions, on the other hand. This conjunction of elements produces a mixture of optimism and political conformity on a subjective level. One could refer to Oliveira’s (2003) allegory of the *platypus* to reflect on this kind of counter-intuitive assemblage. For a different point of view, see Kerstenetzky’s book (2012) about the constitution of a welfare state in Brazil, in particular after the Constitution of 1988. According to her, Lula da Silva’s administration was able to combine economic growth with income redistribution, translating European social-democratic experiments to the Brazilian reality. However, she recognizes that there was not an expansion in the provision of public goods during the period, stressing the necessary connection between this provision and substantial changes in income distribution. Although she contends the construction of a Brazilian welfare state, her argument reinforces the working-class perceptions in the Perseu Abramo’s research, i.e., the split between higher wages and the lack of public goods and services.

itself, to have a societal policy, to implement and allow the competitive mechanisms the market to run free<sup>20</sup>.

In this sense, ordoliberalism was undoubtedly not against the idea of income distribution. They were indeed against a typical welfarist account of this question, according to which the even distribution of wealth from elites to laboring classes should be an objective to be pursued by the government. However, not only did they admit the possibility of a certain kind of income distribution, but they also believed it was a crucial factor in the enabling of neoliberalism. Even a neoliberal as radical as Milton Friedman himself defended a marginal transfer of a minimal portion of the resources destined for over-consumption to those who were underconsuming. Above this minimum, inequality is a key factor in ensuring the very existence of competition. What is at stake here is not some alleged humanity of individuals and their inalienable fundamental rights, but rather the very competitive dynamics of the neoliberal game. Friedman was thus among the first to support the idea of a guaranteed minimum income (see Paulani, 2008, p. 71).

Foucault also shows how one of the main features of neoliberal governmentality is the individualization of risks. Instead of providing social security through gratuitous and public social policies regarding healthcare, education, security, and so on, neoliberal mechanisms transfer the responsibility of all these issues to the individual. He or she is then responsible for the success – or, most commonly, failure – of his/her own life<sup>21</sup>.

In that sense, faced with the monstrous exclusion of the poorest, the Workers' Party chose to implement a series of mechanisms which aimed not at the distribution from the wealthiest (these, as Lula da Silva proudly remarks, “never made so much money in Brazilian history”<sup>22</sup>) to the stratum living in dire circumstances, but at the sheer minimum of existence. This was a direct and logic consequence of the idea of growth without confrontation, of eradicating poverty *with* or *through* class compromise<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> According to Dardot and Laval (2016) the re-introduction of the competitive logic in social programs is one of the main characteristics of the “neoliberal rationality” and it consists in a prior acceptance of the market economy. This kind of dispositive reinforces the individual responsibility as the core of the new public policies.

<sup>21</sup> For a more detailed account of this government of risks, see O'Malley, 1996; 2004; 2006.

<sup>22</sup> See Lula da Silva's speech in 2016: <<http://mais.uol.com.br/view/1575mnadmj5c/nunca-ganharam-dinheiro-como-no-meu-mandato-diz-lula-sobre-banqueiros-04020D183666C0C15326?types=A&>>

<sup>23</sup> According to Dardot and Laval (2016), the neoliberal turn of the left worldwide substituted the struggle against inequality (advocated by social democracy) for the struggle against poverty. Therefore, solidarity is perceived as a social aid which has to be followed by hard work and personal effort in order not to create dependency.

The social programs implemented by PT have a number of affinities with these neoliberal dispositives analyzed by Foucault since they promoted an individualist approach of social integration and promoted the dissemination of what Foucault called “the entrepreneur of himself”. In that sense, Perseu Abramo’s research comprehension of the “entrepreneur” as mainly a desire of autonomous work is narrow if we consider Foucault’s ideas of personal accountability and demands of individual performance linked to the entrepreneurial self. It is not only a desire of owning your own business but rather a pattern of subjective formation set up as a model for individuals, society and public institutions. According to this logic, individuals start to behave as companies guided by market-like rationalities of losses, profits, and investments; to compete with each other even outside the workplace; to dedicate increasing attention to ideas such as innovation, entrepreneurship and personal marketing, among other terms proper to the corporate realm. This includes not only interpersonal relations but also the way one relates to his/her self. In short: the form of neoliberal capitalist enterprise is disseminated throughout the social body.

However, such neoliberal practices settle in the periphery of capitalism in a very particular way: the entrepreneurial self is intimately related to the precariat. Even though many on the Left can be (rightfully) critical of paternalist measures taken by the Welfare State<sup>24</sup>, the substitution of such measures by individual accountability and meritocracy, especially when it affects people who belong to the lowest income strata, tends to produce a situation of complete precarity. It favors precisely the kind of attitudes related to entrepreneurial modes of thought and action. Even though individuals receive a monthly payment from the government, they also have to perform activities as autonomous decision-making subjects, allocating resources in the best possible strategy, calculating means and ends, exactly like an entrepreneur – except one that belongs to the lower social stratum of a peripheral country like Brazil. The result of this original peripheral assemblage is the idea of “*viração*”<sup>25</sup>, that is, the attempt to cope as quickly and efficiently as possible by resorting to a wide variety of formal and informal economic activities and side hustles.

Bádue and Ribeiro (2018) show how women who receive Bolsa Família have to make ends meet through a series of strategies and improvisations which include: acquiring a new credit card in order to pay for the overdue installments of other credit cards; paying one bill

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<sup>24</sup> On these criticisms, see Lorey, 2015.

<sup>25</sup> The correspondent of which in Argentina and most of Hispanic America is the notion of “*cuentapropismo*”. See Gago, 2018.

and not paying another, and inverting this order on the following month, so as to avoid having basic services (like water, electricity or telephone) cut off; resorting to family and friends in order to obtain personal loans; shopping in street vendors who parcel the total sum spent in monthly installments, instead of big stores; last but not least, appealing to local loan sharks. These strategies show how, in the Global South, the neoliberal expansion of credit and consumption goes hand in hand with the reproduction of local forms of domination, such as the infamous mechanism of "favor". Modern banking techniques are inextricably intertwined with "old" and re-signified dispositives of power, once again showing how progress and barbarism are associated in the peripheries of capitalism.

The idea of accumulating assets as the formation of human capital is also a typical neoliberal phenomenon which gained importance in the Workers' Party administrations. One can perceive this prominently in the expansion of the education system in Brazil in the last 14 years, especially in the form of privatized higher education. An exam of some of the policies implemented by the Workers' Party administrations can shed light on this issue. Moreover, it helps to understand how those set of public policies contributed to the conformism of working-class subjectivity to neoliberal ideology.

### **Private education and entrepreneurship**

A specific public policy illustrates the analysis of the social processes related to the new entrepreneurial facet of São Paulo's periphery: the fund for Programa de Financiamento Estudantil (Financing Students in Higher Education, FIES) – a type of student loan program. We chose to write about FIES because, like Bolsa Família, it was also regarded by the PT as an anti-neoliberal policy aimed at upward social mobility from lower class students and as a way to include historically excluded classes in higher education. However, upon a closer inspection, the FIES is a privileged laboratory to analyze the rise of the “entrepreneur of himself”, as well as the PRONUNI<sup>26</sup>. The choice was also guided by the personal experience of teaching in private universities where almost every single student holds this kind of funding.

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<sup>26</sup> However, we could also address other programs such as PRONATEC (National Program for Access to Technical Education and Employment), which aimed at the technical education of lower classes and their immediate insertion in the job market. PRONATEC promoted the professionalization of hairdressers; professional chefs; mechanics; operatives; accountants and so on. Therefore, the program is also a model of the promotion of entrepreneurial selves.



The best-ranked colleges in Brazil are public, and their admission process is not simple. Consequently, they tend to accommodate individuals belonging to higher classes, while, after Lulism, lower classes attend private universities. In 2016, Brazil had 2.407 higher education institutions, of which 87,7% were private. On the same year, the public university system offered 750.850 available posts for students, whereas the private system offered 9.911.651. The most substantial courses in private universities are Business, Education (Pedagogy) and Law (Censo da Educação Superior, 2016)<sup>27</sup>. These data can illustrate the reach of the private educational system in Brazil and how they are market-oriented.

The FIES was created in 1999, but it was not until Lulism, which also created a Programa Universidade para Todos (PROUNI), that it achieved its current dimensions. PROUNI is a program based on a *quid pro quod* between private universities and the government, namely, scholarships for tax exemption. FIES, on the other hand, is a credit loan program which finances an entire university degree, usually undergraduate studies. It includes a contract signed by the student, the Higher Education Institution (which usually means college, but also universities or technical institutes) and the bank. It works in three distinct phases. In the first, during the period of the degree, college students have to pay the maximum amount of fifty Reais (R\$ 50.00) every three months. This sum concerns the payment of interest rates over the financing<sup>28</sup>. After the completion of the course, students have an 18-month period during which they have to continue paying the maximum amount of R\$50.00 every three months. Finally, the students' remaining balance has to be paid in a period lasting up to three times the funded period of the average course duration. Together, these programs transformed small private universities in big educational corporations with shares in the stock market<sup>29</sup> (Almeida, 2014; Queiroz, 2015). From 2002 to 2015, the government spent around 70 billion Reais with the FIES program (Chaves, Amaral, 2016, p. 62).

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<sup>27</sup> One of the most important features of these courses is that the students perceive them as a way out of the proletarian condition. The Pedagogy course, for instance, is an excellent example of that. It has a large number of enrolled students, and the majority of them are women who were housemaids and dream of a teaching position. In other courses, such as business, the goal is to get a job in the tertiary sector. Many of the students financed by FIES look for a position closer to middle-class activities. In that sense, a university degree appears as a symbol of social mobility (Costa, 2015).

<sup>28</sup> These values refer to the lulist period. See <<http://sisfiesportal.mec.gov.br/?pagina=condicoes>>. Access on September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

<sup>29</sup> In 2016, an analyst from an investment company named Kapitalo, wrote a report called "La FIESta" concerning the Kroton Educational Corporation. It showed that the government paid the full tuition fees for Kroton's students that are financed by the FIES program, while students who were not FIES beneficiaries got many discounts in specific "sales". In sum, the report showed that Kroton raised purposely the tuition fees in order to receive more money from the government, but it encountered many ways to decrease the same fees

Factually, the program benefits private institutions and banks and synthesizes the Workers' Party project of conservative compromise: it includes a part of the precariat in the higher education system but, at the same time, it creates an enormous market for private educational corporations and immense opportunities for the financial market.

It also creates a logic of indebtedness which colonizes the future of these students, whose prospects are to have an income between one and one and a half minimum wages (around 300 US dollars; Pochman, 2012), but contract a debt which might escalate to over 50 thousand Reais. These educational programs comply with PT's class compromise project. On the one hand, they attend to the needs of the bourgeoisie, not only by creating a market that private universities can explore but also by investing in the population's "human capital". On the other hand, they are an answer to an old demand of the precariat, that is, their inclusion in the educational system, something that had not been achieved prior to these programs.

On a subjective level, there are also many consequences. Some of them are subtler than data can show and can only be accessed by empirical and ethnographical studies (see Costa, 2015) and by the lived experience of teaching in one of these private institutions. The first and more obvious is the following: the students' FIES contract is signed with a bank. Thus, it does not appear as a public policy, even if the bank in question is public. From their point of view, students are not receiving a benefit from the government, they are contracting a debt<sup>30</sup>. The awareness of FIES as a benefit from the government is very cloudy among them – the dislike they manifest towards other PT social programs, such as Bolsa Família, expresses that. The major part does not know the difference between public Universities and private FIES-funded institutions.

Most of the beneficiaries live in peripheral neighborhoods. The choice of which course to take is often related to mobility issues, such as the educational institution vicinity to subways and bus stops (Costa, 2015). Many of these students work during the day and take classes at night, and most of them are head of household. The students also face many financial difficulties related to other costs like transportation, photocopies, books, refreshment in the university, and so on. Therefore, from the perspective of these students, the

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when non-financed students had to pay for college. The report also showed that all this was enabled by the government. The analyst who wrote the report, Thiago Ring, was fired shortly thereafter.

<sup>30</sup> This debt undermines ten to fifteen years of an individual's work. In that sense, the FIES program and the other programs that involve debt could be understood as a form of social pacification, because it does not colonize only the future work, but these individuals' political energies, all spent in their fight for social reproduction. The concerns related to the debt and the impossibility to assume future projects because of this debt is a factor that favors demobilization.

achievement of a higher educational level is based on personal sacrifice: they do not perceive educational policies as a public act of the government, but rather through the angle of the self-made man or woman. Because many are obligated to abandon their studies halfway, those who do graduate tend to grasp their achievements from the perspective of the one who “made it by him/herself”.

To be eligible for FIES, one has to self-proclaim as an impoverished individual, which also entails many subjective consequences. The vast majority of students find this practice very humiliating. If one connects that feeling of degradation with the promise of social mobility brought by a university degree and advertised by the Workers’ Party – Lula da Silva once stated that the bricklayer’s son would be able to become a medical doctor (Costa, 2015, p. 11) –, the result is a fertile ground for the entrepreneurial discourse and ideology. The individual no longer wishes to be interpellated as “poor”. Because capitalist society has competition as one of its yardsticks for personal success, that is demeaning. It promotes identification with those “above”, with dominant classes. The Perseu Abramo Foundation research shows that most of those interviewed classified themselves as belonging to the middle-class, even if they were indeed poor. The private educational institution is marketed as a mean to overcome poverty. One of the political consequences of that, well mapped by Perseu Abramo’s research, is that students relate to the idea of self-merit.

A particular case from our experience as professors in one of these corporations<sup>31</sup> powerfully illustrates this idea: in a debate in class about progressive taxes, a male student in his mid-twenties who worked as a motorcycle courier (“*motoboy*”) and lived in Campo Limpo (a consolidated periphery in the South side of São Paulo) declared himself against it. When asked why, he answered: “I am against taxing the rich because, once I become one of them, I do not wish to pay taxes and give money to the government”. This is a popular discourse among the beneficiaries of the educational programs (see Costa, 2015) and was also present in Perseu Abramo’s research. The opposition between working classes and the bourgeoisie is not clear to the interviewed. According to their perspective, workers and bosses are certainly different, but a discourse of exploitation is not present, since one needs the other. For the interviewed, the main conflict does not lie between rich and poor, capital and labor, corporations and workers – the true antagonism is perceived as one between the state and its

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<sup>31</sup> The name of the University and the names of the people quoted in the article will not be mentioned for legal and ethical purposes.

citizens. The student mentioned above felt harmed by the state. Consequently, he imputed social inequality to it.

As André Singer (2012) argued, Lulism promoted a displacement of the social conflict from a class perspective to an income perspective, which also has consequences from a subjective point of view. If the individual is interpellated as a worker, there is still a possibility of raising a collective consciousness, since this condition does not necessarily imply humiliation. From the individual's perspective, to be a worker means to produce society's wealth, to belong to a social category, in sum, it entails an active element: "Worker" might be seen as an economic and a *political* category. To be interpellated as "poor", on the other hand, is problematic, since "poverty" is solely an economic category. The students want to *overcome* this condition – and not *belong* to it.

It explains why entrepreneurial discourses are often uttered by these students, and why the voters in the "consolidated peripheries" chose a businessman over the Workers' Party candidate. Identification is also a process that involves affection and Dória knew how to mobilize not only the affect of fear (the fear of misery), but also an affect related to a projection process: the individual, such as the aforementioned student, sees his or her future in the dominant classes.

### **Concluding remarks**

The entrepreneurial discourse was entangled in Lulism because it was a way of promoting social and economic integration from an individual perspective without confronting financial institutions and corporations. Besides, it involved many social agents such as the financial system and private institutions. It should not have been a surprise to find that the "consolidated periphery" would sustain such values and attitudes. Class compromise had in its core the avoidance of class struggle – even if, paradoxically, it ended up engendering class hatred from the upper classes towards the new lower classes (Boito and Saad-Filho, 2016, p. 196). By interpellating this population as "poor" and not mobilizing them as a working class, the PT left a single way out of poverty: the individual way out of the entrepreneurial self.

The conservative pact led the Workers' Party to employ neoliberal governmental dispositives to promote economic growth and a considerable decrease in social inequality in

Brazil. Thus, we argue that, unlike what the Perseu Abramo Foundation research suggests, the entrepreneurial discourse is not *only* an effect of the income raise or the power of media – though these are undeniably elements to be taken into consideration. It also included an element present *within* the Lulist immanent logic: it was a subjective result of the deployment of neoliberal mechanisms (such as financialization and “bankarization”), of interpellation through individual and income categories (in lieu of class) and, fundamentally, of a class compromise-based project.

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### **Neoliberal unfoldings of Lulism: remarks on the strained relationship between class and entrepreneurship**

#### **Abstract:**

the article analyzes some traits of the relationship between the public policies implemented during the Workers' Party's administrations between 2003 and 2016, and the constitution of a neoliberal subjectivity among sections of Brazilian working classes. Such arrangement promoted the idea that social conflict revolves around the opposition between rich and poor, putting aside the individual's relations with class. Meanwhile, “Lulism” favored the development of individualism and entrepreneurship among Brazilian workers. To do so, we will refer to some researches regarding their situation, especially in the outskirts of large Brazilian cities. Besides, we will resort to some observations made by Michel Foucault, since they are helpful to explore those questions.

**Keywords:** Lulism; Neoliberalism; Working class; entrepreneurship.

### **Desdobramentos neoliberal de lulism: observações sobre a relação tensa entre classe e empreendedorismo**

#### **Resumo:**

este texto pretende discutir alguns aspectos da relação entre as políticas públicas implementadas durante os governos do Partido dos Trabalhadores entre 2003 e 2016 e a conformação de traços da ideologia neoliberal em parcelas dos trabalhadores urbanos no Brasil. Tais políticas favoreceram a ideia de que o conflito social gira em torno da oposição entre ricos e pobres, deslocando para segundo plano a relação dos indivíduos com a classe. Ao mesmo tempo, o lulismo propiciou o crescimento do individualismo e do empreendedorismo entre os trabalhadores brasileiros. Para tanto, faremos usos de algumas pesquisas a respeito da situação dos trabalhadores das periferias das grandes cidades no Brasil. Além disso, serão levadas em conta algumas considerações de Michel Foucault sobre o neoliberalismo que fornecem uma perspectiva pertinente para entender estas questões.

**Palavras-chave:** lulismo; neoliberalismo; classe trabalhadora; empreendedorismo.

## **Desarrollos neoliberales del lulismo: comentarios sobre la tensa relación entre clase y emprendimiento**

### **Resumen:**

Este texto pretende discutir algunos aspectos de la relación entre las políticas públicas implementadas durante los gobiernos del Partido de los Trabajadores entre 2003 y 2016 y la conformación de rasgos de la ideología neoliberal en parcelas de los trabajadores urbanos en Brasil. Tales políticas favorecieron la idea de que el conflicto social gira en torno a la oposición entre ricos y pobres, desplazando a segundo plano la relación de los individuos con la clase. Al mismo tiempo, el lulismo propició el crecimiento del individualismo y del espíritu empresarial entre los trabajadores brasileños. Para tanto, haremos usos de algunas investigaciones acerca de la situación de los trabajadores de las periferias de las grandes ciudades en Brasil. Además, se tendrán en cuenta algunas consideraciones de Michel Foucault sobre el neoliberalismo que proporcionan una perspectiva pertinente para entender estas cuestiones.

**Palabras-clave:** lulismo; neoliberalismo; clase trabajadora; espíritu empresarial.