Local Book Summary

Goertzel, T. (2011) *Brazil’s Lula: The Most Popular Politician on Earth*. Boca Raton, FL: Brown Walker Press. 226 pages.

Chapter 1: An Abusive Father and a Courageous Mother – Lula grew up in the Northeast Region of Brazil, known for its poverty and harsh conditions. His father left the family was he was still a young boy, leaving his mother to raise him and his brothers on her own. Because Lula was somewhat of a “mama’s boy” he learned to express his feelings, and was unashamed to break into tears, even when in the spotlight of the presidency. It also taught him the strength and tenacity of his mother, as well as how to empathize with others. All abilities that helped endear him to the hearts of the Brazilian people.

Chapter 2: Coming of Age in São Paulo – Through his brother’s manipulation of their mother, Lula moved with his family to São Paulo. While he and his brother worked, their mother required that they also attended school so they could go on to have better futures. Lula was first exposed to the realities of being a *trabalhador* in an urban setting during this time. At 15 years old he took part in a workers strike. Later, the workers union helped him buy his first house with his pregnant wife. However, both his wife and unborn baby died shortly thereafter because of a misdiagnoses at the hospital. These experiences shaped Lula’s future ambitions.

Chapter 3: The Struggle for Workers’ Dignity – Lula became key leader in the Worker’s Party, really a workers union, in São Paulo. He was of the Third Way mentality, not supporting Soviet style socialism or American style Capitalism, and sought to recast organized labor as “a respectable and dignified part of Brazilian society” (17). The labor movement grew in São Paulo and the rest of the country, with strikes and support of the opposition party, Party of the Brazilian Democratic Movement (PMDB), under the military government. Eventually, the authorities intervened and removed Lula from leadership. In response to a 100,000 person workers strike, the same authorities arrested Lula trying to dissuade the protestors. Lula’s mother died while he was in prison. When he was escorted by armed guards to visit the grave, 2,000 people showed up to support him and demand for his release. Eventually, as the opposition party grew, its members began to have divergent ideology. Fernando Cardoso (another future president of Brazil, and Lula’s predecessor in the office) made many attempts to keep the party unified. However, it eventually split, with Lula and Cardoso ending up in different parties, Lula with the newly formed Worker’s Party and Cardoso staying with PMDB. This new party worked more like a movement, requiring true involvement from their members, both financially and actively.

Chapter 4: The Long Struggle for the Presidency – Lula ran for president several times before he finally won the 2002 election. His first attempt was in 1988 when Brazil changed their voting system from an electoral college to a direct vote. Due to his completely lack of political experience, he failed. He tried again 1994, but was overshadowed by Fernando Cardoso, who had put an end to the inflation problem during his time as finance minister. He faced and lost to Cardoso again four years later. This third loss signaled a change in Lula’s demeanor. He quit being as combative and started being a cheerleader for the country. When he ran again, he insisted to party leaders that he have more control of his campaign. Finally, due to “his inspiring personal history, his effectiveness as a union leader, and his personal charisma,” he won the election, convincing the middle class that he had matured and calmed down a bit, that he was no longer the rambunctious, ideological youngster they remembered from previous campaigns (p. 34). The key to his election was in the dramatic, though vague, language of change used for the general public but demonstrating continuity in the boring details for the businessmen. Finally, in 2003, “for the first time in its 500-year history, Brazil had a left-of-center president from the working class” (p. 23).

Chapter 5: Keeping the Economic Ship Afloat – The most important issues facing Lula when he entered office was the economy. He was expected to keep inflation down, stimulate the economy, and address the national debt. He made some hard choices, like creating a budget that didn’t spend more than it made in taxes, but overall, he maintained policies started by Fernando Cardoso. This was a very touchy subject, though, as Lula had cast himself against Cardoso and his ways. He refused to admit it outright, but only ever came as far as saying he deepened policies began by his predecessor so as to increase their effect.

Chapter 6: Vote-Buying and Corruption Scandals – Corruption is such a normal thing in Brazil that it was barely notable when Lula’s government was first accused of corruption. A high up in Lula’s administration was caught on video accepting a bribe from a gaming operator. Lula moved him to a less visible position, and hoped to move on. Then in 2005, Lula’s party was accused of Vote Buying. As more evidence came forward of more people being involved, Lula was forced to publically apologize and promise to clean it up himself. Lula was saved from personal guilt when one of those accused admitted to vote buying buy claimed that Lula had no knowledge of what was going on. In order to win reelection, Lula had to make changes to how he ruled. He moved away from his party and sought coalitions with other smaller parties through cabinet positions.

Chapter 7: Ending Hunger with Family Allowances – The only promise that Lula made during his campaign was to end hunger while in office. He built a program called The Zero Hunger Project, a complex program. “The plans for Zero Hunger incorporated 41 programs including agrarian reform, support for family farms, nutritional education programs, nutritious food at low prices in popular restaurants, programs to teach fishing, microcredit programs for rural enterprises, literacy projects, support for cooperatives and programs to collect and distribute food around the country building” (p. 71). It wasn’t marketed as a welfare program, but as a program for social change. There is a lot of debate over whether or not this program is as effective as it claims it to be; will it really bring social transformation? But what is certain is that it has allowed thousands of people to eat three meals a day, pregnant woman to get examinations, and children to go to school, especially in the Northeast Region where poverty is the harshest.

Chapter 8: Rural Development, Land Reform and the Environment – For a long time, the government hadn’t really been able to do anything about deforestation in the Amazon or enforce property titles in rural areas. Many people had bought large tracts of land to protect their money against inflation. But that land had gone unused for years and squatters used the land either to live or farm. Further, there were outrageous claims coming out of the Amazon about what developers were doing to the natives. Marina Silva, a Worker Party senator, became very outspoken about how poorly Lula was handling land issues. Lula eventually named her environmental minister so she could be more involved in dealing with such issues.

Chapter 9: From Participatory Budgeting to Advisory Councils – Lula managed the budget different than presidents in the past, seeking to be more involved. Many considered his involvement to be illegal and an “affront not only to representative democracy and especially to elected city councilors, but also to the elements of organized civil society, such as legally recognized neighborhood, business, and professional associations” (p. 96). But Lula saw himself as casting a new vision for the people of Brazil that was more equal.

Chapter 10: Building National Self-Esteem – Lula changed the normal foreign relations policy of Brazil in an effort to raise national self-esteem. He refused to see Brazil as subordinate to world super powers like the US and Western Europe. Instead of blaming their choices for the hard realities in Brazil, he shifted the blame to Brazil’s past choices. Neither did he feel the need to suck up to governments of the global North, often calling them out for their failure to live up to their dialogue of free trade, continuing to pour immense subsidies into agriculture. He called out the aid culture that perpetuates mismanaging of funds. While ambivalent towards the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (because he neither wanted to support the US and push for it because of their protectionist policies, but neither did he want to join in on the anti-American rhetoric of neighboring countries), he encouraged US President George W. Bush to lower subsidies to American farmers to creating space for foreign products from impoverished nations a chance to be competitive in American markets. Most other attempts and being an international presence were less than successful, full of failed attempts at promoting democracy in Honduras, human rights in Cuba, dialogue in the Israeli/Palestine Conflict, and diplomacy in Iran. Instead, he was often seen as supporting dictators in his efforts to be independent of the influence of the US on the international scene.

Chapter 11: Winning Reelection in 2006 – Re-election for Lula in 2006 proved to be far easier than anyone expected it to be. Because of the corruption scandals in 2005 and his moderate policies that somewhat alienated his own party, many considered him to be finished. But Lula connected with the people, especially the poor. When the campaigns of every politician sounded the same, Lula’s background made him stand out. In the runoff election between Lula and Alckmin, Lula pulled ahead primarily because people seemed more comfortable with what they knew than with the mostly unknown Alckmin. Many people had varying opinions about why Lula won, and what it meant. Ultimately, what was important was that he won.

Chapter 12: Making Brazilian Capitalism Boom – Lula’s economic policy in his second term, The Accelerated Growth Plan, was largely criticized by both sides for not being “enough” in anyway. Very few people believed that the economy would grow the 5% a year he promised at the beginning of the term. Shortly after announcing this plan, economic statistics from his first term were re-evaluated, and ended up showing a larger increase in the economy and a decrease in unemployment. The people were quick to give him credit, though nothing but evaluation of numbers had changed. The country seemed to be advancing in every way. The growth was likely do to investor confidence of the consistency between Cardoso’s and Lula’s policy, as well as the increasing demand for natural resources abundant in Brazil. Brazil, though not unaffected by the global financial crisis in 2008, was well prepared for the affects, as it had undergone its own banking crisis in the 1990s. They did not fall into recession, but growth slowed considerably in 2008 and fell slightly in 2009. However, in 2010, it soared due to increased spending on infrastructure programs, a diversification of foreign trade, beginning oil production off the coast, and the enthusiastic domestic response to the first three causes.

Chapter 13: Socialism, Economic Solidarity, and Micro-Capitalism – This chapter focused on whether or not Lula is actually a socialist. While his party sites the philosophy as a guiding principle, he has often shied away from labeling himself as such and only talks about the topic when he is pressed by reporters. He has never been happy with Socialist theory and thought, always pressing those who claim to support it to actually try to put it in practice, noting that socialist ideal is hard to achieve, given the examples of Socialist countries such as Russia and Cuba. Instead he often advocated for what is referred to as a Solidarity Economy. “Economic Solidarity enterprises help these workers integrate into the formal structure of society. Economic Solidarity also works with individuals released from mental hospitals and prisons. Funding is raised through federal and community banks, credit cooperatives and rotating funds… [the] secretariat has been working with poor and impoverished populations that have few alternatives… it is an alternative for those who have not found inclusion in the capitalist evonomy or who prefer working in a cooperative environment. If it ever replaces capitalism, it will be by building a better world one enterprise at a time” (kindle location 3112-3130). Lula was primarily concerned with if people were getting they help they needed, not with what form said help came in.

Chapter 14: Electing a Successor – Lula endorses Dima as his successor. It happened originally just after his second term started, but very privately. She became his chief of staff in order to learn just how he did things. So, while he didn’t seek to change the law in order to stay in office, he hand selected and trained a successor, if they people would have him. Dilma’s only really competition was José Serra, the govenor of São Paulo. The election was a contentious one, mud slinging and last minute scandals. Ultimately Dilma won in the second round of elections.

Chapter 15: The Son of Brazil in Power – A summary of the book, the author recaps everything previously stated. There is a small focus on how he left office with an 80% approval rating. The author pruposes, “Lula promised ‘change’ but he knew that the change Brazilians really wanted most was relief from change. Brazilians were tired of being told their institutions needed to be reformed, tired of losing the security of government jobs and early retirements, tired of being hectored from environmentalists and other activitists. They wanted a president who was a cheerleader, not a critic. They liked being paid in money that held its value and they wanted to enjoy spending it. It was Lula’s good fortune to be elected at a point in time when the Brazilian economy could provide economic growth with some redistribution of income and without reigniting inflation. He seized the opportunity and took full credit for giving Brazilians what they wanted.”