If you were talking to someone who knew very little about Brazil, what are some of the central issues you would encourage them to become aware of?

John French: Since this is an American audience, [Brazil] has the distinction, and it’s not the distinction people usually mention – which is that it’s one of the world’s most unequal countries, that it’s won more World Cup victories that any other – but rather it is the largest, least-known country in the world. That is very very true in the United States: Portuguese is a language that has very little prominence in the U.S. context, and Brazil has very little visibility in the United States compared to other parts of Latin America. So the point that is interesting about Brazil is that some of the most exciting political things that have happened in the world have happened in Brazil in the last thirty years, but most Americans are completely ignorant of this. And there is a reason why we would gain a lot if we paid more attention to the story of what is happening in Brazil, and it would also encourage us to understand better the challenges we face. Young people being very disappointed has to do with the need to develop some larger and more mature understanding of politics and about the ways in which you move forward, step-by-step, not like night and day. So I think there are a lot of things that would be encouraging to young people, especially to rethink how they think about politics.
Alexandre Fortes: Brazil is becoming more important in its role in the financial economy. In eight years it became the tenth largest economy and it’s positioned to become the fifth largest economy in the world in some years. For the first time it’s experiencing its economy growing with income distribution and political stability and democracy, so it’s a very important case study for the prospects of the world.

You mentioned that there are certain things Brazil does regarding its policies, government and economics that would benefit the world. Can you provide some specific examples of models that would be useful for the U.S. and other economies to adapt and implement?

AF: The main lesson to be extracted from the last years is that creating a type of consensus around the importance of social issues, such as income distribution, is very important. First [it can] strengthen democratic values, and it also can be very healthy for the economy. So that’s why if you take a look at the great economies of the world, Brazil was one of the ones least affected by the international crisis, basically because of the way it was exploring the potentials of the domestic market. Also in different ways: increasing minimum wage and providing better wages. I think that’s something that can be aspirant.

JF: The fact is that the political scene in the United States has been so depressing for so long that everybody has developed very defensive attitudes. I don’t think we have handled the Obama presidency very well. People in the United States still want to see Obama as Clinton and being neo-liberal, [b]ut the fact is we are in a post-neo-liberal world and we don’t know where we’re going, but we do know the past doesn’t work. In fact, by almost any measurement, most of what Obama has done has not been neo-liberal: the expansion of government programs, the expansion of the healthcare program, the enhanced use of government regulation of the economy, the expansion of student loans, the cutting out of some of the profiteering that has been done by the banking systems and the private sector, like online universities exploiting poorer students.

The question about politics is how do we present things to people. We need an optimistic attitude; we need an attitude that emphasizes what’s been gained, not solely how it’s so much less than what we want. That’s a larger lesson about how to do politics, and that’s a lesson the Left in Brazil has to teach people. [Democrats] would have done much better in this election (2010) if everybody [who] had gone out in 2008 – especially young people – had not been sitting on their butts, saying ‘well why hasn’t the world changed?’ As Lula said when he was elected in 2002, a president cannot change a country if you hold onto the idea that someone’s supposed to solve all the problems for us. No, it’s the whole society. It’s the people who support the president who are supposed to work for it, and that’s the important point, political point, that needs to be done. We wouldn’t have lost as many elections and we wouldn’t be facing what’s going to be a desperate defensive battle for the next two years. Everybody will get themselves back to, ‘yes we must act, we must fight,’ instead of blaming the White House and the Democratic Party establishment. Why should we expect the White House to do that?

AF: And another thing, relating to this issue: we can learn a lot from the debate on the trajectory of Brazil and Lula’s two terms. We have had ups and downs, expectations and frustrations and now it is quite clear that it has been quite a strong story. Because the [Lula] government has 60% of approval rates and has elected his successor, who was a little known minister, people who have never run for any elected office before are getting elected and it’s been an amazing political success.

JF: There’s immense similarity [between Obama and Lula] in terms of the historical rhetoric of the two and also the unlikelihood of their two presidencies. Lula’s thing from the very beginning has always been ‘hope is the only thing that motivates people,’ and it’s not denunciations, and it’s not lamentations, and it’s not whatever. It’s about hope, and the question is how do you create hope? And hope can be an escapable thing that is so gigantic like, ‘I am going
to go to heaven,’ or something like that, or it can be
so much more limiting with the capacity to inspire
hope in people, to see beyond themselves, to imagine
some direction. We don’t know where we’re going,
but somewhere different, and that’s where Obama,
the election of Obama – even if he is a one-term
president – is an amazing accomplishment. And it
would be an amazing accomplishment even if he
hadn’t succeeded in passing certain things that may
get undermined in the next few years. But even if he
didn’t, the fact is it changes things, and it changes
things in a positive direction in terms of race and
the United States. And that sense that you can
make a difference is really what’s important to have
and that’s what Brazil teaches you.

When Lula founded a radical party that wasn’t even
where other parties on the left – that were much
larger than it – [were], and he had his first election
in 1982, it got three percent of the national vote
and it now, in his two presidential campaigns, got
61 percent of the vote and in the election that just
ended, 56 percent of the vote. So they went from
three percent of the vote to well over the majority
in a very short period of time. For a fourth-grade
educated manual worker in a society immensely
authoritarian and immensely elitist, it’s a pretty
remarkable story. In the same way, Obama’s from
a modest background. Not an impoverished
background, but he’s from an extremely unusual
background, and the question of race is so prevalent
in the U.S. political world. He also has very high,
very fancy education credentials and things like that
that make him different as well. He’s an intellectual
in that sense, but he’s an outsider in terms of the race
thing in the way that Lula is an outsider in terms
of the class thing in Brazil. The issue is, how do we
 teach people politics and political commitment?

How is it that the Brazilian Workers’ Party
(PT) was able to accomplish what those who
support Obama have not been able to do?

JF: I mean on the one hand, it’s not about the
idea. You can’t make politics by having everybody
think the same way. Politics is best when people
don’t think the same way and the question is do
you recognize that plurality of voices. Do you say,
approach an anti-choice Democrat as completely
unacceptable to me under any conditions, or do you
say, ‘I don’t want somebody [else].’ The Democratic
Party, especially in the U.S., has a sector of the super rich, a minority section, it has most of the popular classes and most of the organized social movements, things like that. So the fact is, the only way it works is if people understand that you have got to be able to work across differences and find common spaces of conversion. I am writing a book on Lula’s leadership and continuities and it’s all about creating spaces of convergence. It’s not that everybody is giving up their differences; it’s that they are coming in a space around a figure like Obama and Lula, and to the extent which you can keep people there, and [they] are not driven away by their differences and are kept together around a particular thing, then power emerges, and power begins to change, because people are around. And power begins to change events and people’s ideas change and new configurations and understandings of our past differences and ideas emerge.

AF: For the very trajectory, the very origins of the Workers’ Party and Lula as a leader, the party and the social movements were very connected within them, and Lula himself was aware of the importance in nourishing people’s belief in politics, in political participation. It’s important to think that you can accomplish things through active participation, and that was very important in creating many long-term changes in Brazilian political culture.

Of course this is not something that can always sustain. We are a nation and many moments we have to deal with frustrations from these kinds of things; that hope is framed in a quite naïve perspective or something, under the assumption that we are different, that we are not involved with any of the shows [of] old politics and that we are good, the others are evil and so-so, and that experience of conquering governments, local governments, big governments has produced new experiences and plans, frustrating at first for a while. But in the end the most important thing has been to expand that belief in political participation to larger sectors of society.

People cannot organize, cannot take any active role in defining the politics, economy, society and so-so; that’s changing. Of course, the country’s huge; it’s complex. Change doesn’t happen at the same speed, same depth, it has to. It’s quite a complex.

JF: Yes. Obama could do a lot more. Something that the Lula government has done is to sponsor large-scale social movement summits under the auspices of the president: national conferences of the black, women’s and LGBT movements, for example, which the president and cabinet members attend and that are covered by the press. I had a Brazilian-American student, Andrea Dinamarco, who was interested in women and politics in Brazil, so I suggested she research women and the PT – which recently elected a woman as Lula’s successor – because two of the most successful women politicians were from the PT: a black woman, Benedita da Silva, from a favela (shantytown) in Rio and Marta Suplicy, a psychoanalyst and sex therapist from the most elite social class in São Paulo. Both of them have been very successful in Rio and São Paulo as mayors, deputies, senators and governors. When Andrea went on her research trip, she attended the national women’s meeting with 2,800 delegates, women of all racial backgrounds and social classes from around the country. She opened her thesis quoting from Lula’s keynote speech in which he called on women to organize.

“Politics is best when people don’t think the same way”

- John French

1 For an example of one such speech, see Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, “Speech of the President of the Brazilian Republic at the Opening of the First National Conference of Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals, Transvestites, and Transsexuals” in The Politics of Sexuality in Latin America: A Reader on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Rights, edited by Javier Corrales and Mario Pecheny (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008), 265-69.
and declared that it was time for Brazil to have a woman president, and to put an end to the idea that women’s place is in the kitchen or behind the scenes. The response among the all-female participants was ecstatic; however, Andrea was skeptical as to whether Lula was just charming the crowd or genuinely supporting feminist ideas. In any case, she rightly concluded that it represented a victory for the women’s movement.

Now that Dilma Rousseff is the 36th and current president of Brazil, one might prefer it if the women’s movement had been directly responsible for her electoral success (the third biggest vote-getter candidate was another female minister of Lula’s who ran on the Green Party). But for a society that is characterized by male supremacy, electing the first woman President is going to change a lot for every young girl born in the future. Cynical parents might tell her: ‘no, it’s not a big deal, a man, Lula, put her in office.’ And it is true that his personal support was absolutely crucial, but they don’t have to tell their daughter that and, even if they do, their daughter can think of her country as a place where, ‘somebody like me can be president.’

That’s the difference that having Lula, the first worker in office, has already made, and with Dilma’s election the way is cleared for a black President in a country that, as Lula says, has the largest population of African descent outside of Africa.

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Can you contextualize some of the issues we are likely to hear about with the increased media attention that Brazil will be receiving because of the Olympics and the World Cup?

JF: The U.S. media has its favorite tropes when dealing with countries, but there are actual real problems. You are going to hear in vast amounts at these upcoming events about Brazilian inequality, about Brazilian racism, about Brazilian violence, about the 50 people killed when the army had to occupy favelas that are controlled by drug dealers in Rio. We are going to get all these sensationalistic stories about this. They fit into the idea that these other parts of the world are uncivilized, and out of control and they’re not like us, and actually Brazil is a lot [more] like us than we really think it is. It’d be really good if people were able to develop more of a perspective, instead of seeing it looking down on it, as a group of people that are poor, the black people [who] need to be saved. They are fighting to advance their society. Why aren’t we doing this more? We’d rather think of it as looking down on it in a more maternalistic way. I admire all the college students who want to go to Latin America and help people, but if they want to help people it’d be much better to change the systems that lock people into prisons of their own lives and prevent them from having the opportunities they could have. This doesn’t even require you to open up the whole society to have the opportunities for people. There’s lots of things you could do short of overturning the entire structure of power, but you have got to develop a political understanding of the problems you face.

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Anything else you would like to add?

JF: You want to say something about why Brazil should have a UN seat [in the Security Council]?

[All laugh]

AF: Brazil of course is a natural candidate for a seat, as to the size of the country, its economic importance. Brazil is a global player on many different fronts. Only Argentines wouldn’t agree with that. So basically it depends on how much the UN is going to reform itself to become more representative of the global situation today.
Tecnobrega: A New Model for the Music Industry

Affirmative Action in Brazil

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In December 2010, the Gallatin Student Council organized “Brazil in a Global Context: Culture, Foreign Policy and Development,” a conference that brought together prominent Brazilianists in an effort to demystify public perceptions and deepen understandings of a country rapidly rising to global prominence, yet still largely defined by soccer, the Amazon and Carnival. Through lectures, film screenings, panel discussions and audience question and answer sessions, the conference engaged in a critical conversation of Brazilian culture, politics and economy. The conference introduced a level of inquiry rarely brought to the subject of Brazil and affirmed the country’s importance as a serious topic of study. Because the influence of the conference could only extend so far, the Gallatin Journal of Global Affairs decided to join the conversation and provide the opportunity for others to do so as well.

This publication embraces the vision of the conference by presenting multiple and dynamic perspectives of Brazil and raising awareness of a country that is widely considered to be an emerging economic superpower. True to the philosophy of the Journal, the works included are diverse both in style and content. The authors and artists perceptively convey their ideas and observations through many mediums, reflecting a fluidity of expression emblematic of Brazil.

This journal is a fitting addendum to the entirely student-organized conference, which set a precedent for translating ideas developed in students’ studies into inspired projects, invented courses and large-scale events. In this same vein, it is the mission of the Journal of Global Affairs to move conversations from the classroom into the larger community.

The published works include scholarly analyses of current political climates, an examination of shifting frontiers in Brazil’s music industry, and creative explorations of memory and experience. Most importantly, the following pieces highlight the global extent of local issues, as the ripples of Brazil’s successes and failures reach foreign shores. They remind us to look closer at a country that was once in the periphery of our imagination and is now demanding inclusion in the conversation.

This special edition of the Journal of Global Affairs affirms our commitment to provide the Gallatin, New York University and greater academic communities with new perspectives on international topics. We sincerely hope that this collection of work inspires deeper thought about Brazil and that our upcoming annual publication will provoke further discussion and awareness of broader global issues.

Sincerely,

[Signatures]
Comparative Perspectives on Politics
An Interview with Dr. John French and Dr. Alexandre Fortes

Jóia de Guanabara
Danny Herman

Favela Santa Marta
Shimrit Lee

Affirmative Action in Brazil
Thomaz Marcondes

A noite
Jordan Lee Schnee

Tecnobrega: A New Model for the Music Industry
Samantha Gongol

Wasteland
Shimrit Lee

Here + Dip
Luke StormoGipson

The Definition of Revolution in Contemporary Latin America
Rick Stern

Imagining Latin America
Emma Young

Notes

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