

Lula's Brazil: The Management of Hope

Directed by Gonzalo Arijón

Paris: Dissidents & Arte France, 2005

Distributed by First Run/Icarus Films, New York

62 minutes; \$390 (DVD)

This excellent documentary by Uruguayan filmmaker Gonzalo Arijón was shot two years into the first presidential term of Luis Inácio Lula da Silva of the Brazilian Workers' Party (PT). Elected in 2002, the former trade unionist embraced the neoliberal economic policies he had long opposed, including fiscal austerity that precluded an immediate increase in social expenditures. By the time this sixty-two-minute color film was released, Lula's administration had been devastated by a disgraceful 2005 corruption scandal that led to a barrage of resignations, talk of presidential impeachment, and a major drop in Lula's personal popularity. Rather than rendering the film irrelevant, subsequent developments underline its prescience in capturing the dynamics that led to Lula's stunning reelection in 2006 with 61 percent of the valid runoff vote.

So wherein does one find the hope referenced by the film's title? The answer begins to emerge when Chico Whitaker, one of the Brazilian architects of the World Social Forum (WSF), founded in 2001 in Porto Alegre, describes the extraordinary hope at Lula's 2003 inauguration as an emotion so powerful as to be painful. Sticking close to Lula's rhetoric, Whitaker describes Brazil as a nation sundered by violent inequalities with 50 million at the top, fully integrated into the modern capitalist system, and 140 million poor on the bottom. Making use of Lula's campaign ads, he describes Brazil not as a poor country but as a country with many poor people, while Lula declares that hunger is the result not of a lack of food but of a lack of shame on the part of those who govern the country.

From this opening, the film retraces Lula's personal trajectory while giving center stage to a dozen humble and eloquent voices from that "other Brazil, Lula's Brazil." We hear from the legendary cook at the São Bernardo metalworkers union, where Lula led famous strikes between 1978 and 1980, as well as from Gilberto dos Santos Souza, a rank-and-file autoworker and PT member of African descent. Their words provide clear evidence of a powerful sense of identification that is bound up with Lula's origin in the misery of rural Pernambuco, where the film starts, through his migration to the big industrial city of São Paulo and eventual election as the country's first working-class president. In Lula's home town, we meet his cousin Antonio de Mello Ferreira (Lula's antihunger program "is little but it helps," he says) and accompany health workers who visit the homes of the rural poor to weigh malnourished children as part of the government's Zero Hunger campaign.

The film then moves to São Paulo, where we visit squatters (*sem teto*) who have taken over an abandoned apartment building: families who mix struggle, resignation, and hope for their children while being helped by the government's hunger grants. It is in São Paulo, where so many millions flocked at midcentury, that Lula entered into the lowest part of the top 50 million as a worker in modern industry. After visiting the Daimler-Chrysler factory, we witness an extended barroom discussion among metalworkers who are proud that "one of their own" is running the country and doing so competently despite the predictions of economic disaster before his election. As they weigh their political disappointment

against the fragility of hope, they show an acute awareness of the constraints on government action (“he’d like to move quickly, but Brazilian voters didn’t give him a congressional majority”). We then follow them on a march to Brasília to demand a minimum wage increase, a demand only partly met; at least this time, Gilson says, the police did not beat us up, and we marched right in to meet the president (we see their hearty exchange of hugs and greetings); besides, Lula promised to make up the rest of the increase before the end of his term.

The film then turns to the rural dimension of the balancing act involved in managing a country. It juxtaposes the critical views of rank-and-file members of the landless workers movement with those of large landowners who, as Whitaker notes, may not be part of Lula’s base of support but whose firepower certainly cannot be ignored by the president. One landowner notes that Lula has been reasonable, lighting one candle to capitalism and one to socialism, but the government should stop nitpicking because Brazil’s economy is sustained by the trade surpluses generated by Brazilian agribusiness; family farming may be a social priority but it certainly is not an economic one.

The film thus sets up its overall objective: to “gauge the long and bumpy path ahead, a narrow path where hope and economic interests often clash.” But is it really possible to “manage” hope under these tight constraints? Here the film expresses the mature, critical, and balanced judgment that characterized the Brazilian left in the middle of Lula’s first term. We hear Frei Betto, a famous liberation theologian, who explains that one cannot demand results as if Lula had led a revolution when all he did was win an election, which allows at best for the conquest of small parcels of power. While recognizing Lula’s limited space for maneuvering, Frei Betto expresses the hope that Lula will know how to conduct the process of change through paths unfamiliar to the left. So here the film presents us with hope as trust in a politician to whom you are bound deeply, powerfully, and personally. While not abandoning radical desire, the mainstream of Brazil’s left understands that hope is something that cannot be allowed to be lost in a political war of maneuver. In the words of WSF leader Candido Grzyowski, Lula’s government would do better if it *were* subject to more pressure from social movements paralyzed in the face of a government protected by its image. Or as Whitaker explains, “a political victory helps. It is necessary but it is not the answer to our problems. We are all co-responsible for this government” and “our civil society has to mobilize to confront this monster of inequality, and that development would be welcomed by Lula.”

The film also shows us the anger of disappointed hope when Lula spoke at the January 2005 WSF in Porto Alegre. Having been cheered in 2003, Lula’s return is met by steady booing from a significant sector of the stadium audience who call him a “traitor” while chanting “Lula, how sad, a worker governing for the elites.” This frustrated leftist hope would turn to rage, after the film was shot, when it became clear in mid-2005 that the PT was “just like any other party” in Brazil’s notoriously corrupt political system. Indeed, the defections of voters furthest to the left frustrated Lula’s effort to clinch his second term in the first round of the election on October 1, 2006. He fell short of the required 50 percent because nine million Brazilians, 9.5 percent of valid votes, gave their support to two politicians who had exited the PT in harsh protest against the government’s inadequacies.

Yet this WSF scene illustrates the complicated dynamics of hope because his critics are demanding an end to hope’s betrayal and not all in the stadium are booing. Once Lula gets up to speak, we see the effectiveness of politics as embodied work done with words. In the face of hostile chants, Lula declares that hunger is a political and not a social problem

and criticizes Brazilians for looking northward toward Europe and the United States and turning their backs not only on South America, but on Africa as well. “We are the second largest black country after Nigeria,” the Brazilian president declares, and this takes even his hecklers by surprise. As he reviews Brazil’s leadership in the fight against the World Trade Organization, the applause grows as Lula ends with his trademark statement, “I am from a poor state, Pernambuco, and whoever doesn’t die by the age of five is an untiring fighter.” When next shown, Lula is on a panel at the Davos World Economic Forum with Bill Gates, where he is unceremoniously cut off after calling for hunger’s elimination through an international campaign to be financed by a Tobin tax on international currency transactions or a tax on arms sales.

Having seen Zero Fome (his Zero Hunger program) stumble, Lula replaced it with the Bolsa Escola program, which was effectively and thoroughly implanted by 2006, with 11.1 million families receiving its benefits (he swept the poorest regions with 60–85 percent of the vote). Even the real value of the minimum wage was increased by a quarter in 2006 compared to 2002, as promised. And when leftist anger frustrated his first-round victory, Lula not only won back those 9 million votes but gained 2.5 million from the first round total of his opponent (Wendy Hunter and Timothy J. Power, “Rewarding Lula,” *Latin American Politics and Society* [2007]). Lula, the untiring fighter, had once again won and now, in his second term, faces the even stiffer challenge of growing hope as well as managing it.

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DOI 10.1215/15476715-2007-068

The Devil’s Miner

Directed by Kief Davidson and Richard Ladkani

Urban Landscapes Productions, 2005

Spanish and Quechua; subtitles

82 minutes; \$19.99 (DVD)

The Devil’s Miner, a documentary film, presents a compelling first-person account of the daily lives of two adolescent brothers who work as silver miners in Potosí, Bolivia. Most of the film’s narration is provided by the elder brother, Basilio Vargas. High-quality film footage transports the viewer to the sights and sounds of Potosí. Fourteen-year-old Basilio describes the action as we watch him work, shop, attend school, and worship both the Christian God of the surface and the miners’ *Tío* of the underground. Occasionally some additional narrative is offered by younger brother Bernardino, the local priest, adult miners, and the boys’ Quechua-speaking mother. What the film primarily offers, however, is a well-illustrated and edited version of Basilio’s story. The bonus feature *One Year Later* provides a happy ending. Fifteen months after the shooting of the feature, Basilio and Bernardino travel to Cochabamba for a showing of the film. They no longer work in the mine. A non-governmental organization called Kindernothilfe (“Help the Children”) has rescued them.

This narrative strategy has a power and an irresistible authenticity that will leave few, if any, viewers unmoved. Indeed, the box containing the DVD is covered with snippets from reviews that range from the gushing (“flawless”) to the gushingly odd (“conjured