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Direct Democracy in Action

Edited and translated by Iain Bruce

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List of Abbreviations

BARISUL  Publicly owned state bank in Rio Grande do Sul state
CRC    Community Relations Council, coordinates relations between participatory budget and Porto Alegre city hall
CUT    Single Workers’ Centre, trade union confederation linked to PT
DS     Socialist Democracy, one of the largest left-wing currents in the PT
FTAA   Free Trade Area of the Americas
GMOs   Genetically modified organisms
IPTU   Buildings tax, most important local source of revenue for municipal governments in Brazil
MDB    Brazilian Democratic Movement, only legal opposition party under the military dictatorship, which later became the Party of the Brazilian Democratic Movement (PMDB)
MOVA   Literacy Movement
MST    Landless Workers’ Movement
PB     Participatory budget
PCB    Former Brazilian Communist Party (Moscow-line)
PCdoB  Communist Party of Brazil, largest left party outside the PT, of Maoist origin
PDT    Democratic Party of Labour, populist party in tradition of Getulio Vargas
PT     Brazilian Workers’ Party
UAMPA  Union of Neighbourhood Associations of Porto Alegre
Brazil, showing the location of Porto Alegre
Introduction:
From the PT to Porto Alegre

Iain Bruce

This book is about an alternative. It’s about an alternative kind of democracy, one that is not limited to electing representatives once every few years and does not assume that freedom is the same thing as consumer choice. It’s about an experience of direct democracy in southern Brazil, which for the last decade and a half has been seeking to demonstrate that another world is indeed possible. It’s about the system of participatory budgets developed by the Brazilian Workers’ Party (PT) in the city of Porto Alegre, which stands in such sharp contrast to the behaviour of the same party since its candidate Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva was elected President of Brazil in 2002.

The origins of that alternative, and this book, go back a long way – to before the birth of the PT a quarter of a century ago.

That is when I first lived in Brazil, in the dying days of the military dictatorship, at the end of the 1970s. Just out of college, for a living I taught English at Itamaraty, the Brazilian Foreign Ministry. For a vocation, I fell in love with Brazil, with Brazilians and with the peculiar combinations of Brazilian politics. The novel approach to democracy that this book deals with has its roots back there, as Brazil prepared to bury two decades of authoritarian military government.

In the end it took the generals some time to pass away. The transition to civilian rule didn’t come until 1984. But on the campus at the University of Brasilia, where I’d enrolled as a part-time student, it was already clear that a new period in Brazilian history was beginning. A stream of rallies, occupations and marches, shadowed by military police cordons and occasional tear-gas incursions, fed into a nationwide campaign for a political amnesty for the country’s political prisoners and exiles.

After helping to hand out leaflets in the capital’s bus station denouncing the arrest and torture of two friends, I found myself, too, briefly detained, threatened, followed by unmarked pick-ups, phoned by unidentified voices, and eventually dismissed from my job at Itamaraty. The policemen who interrogated us shouted angrily about the defence of traditional values and foreign interference. But
the tide was moving against them – and it was moving not from without, but from deep within.

That May, a more potent force overtook the campaigns of the students and mainly middle-class opposition. On Friday, 12 May, 2,500 workers on the day shift at the Saab-Scania plant in São Bernardo do Campo clocked on as usual, went to their positions, but refused to switch on their machines. On the Monday 9,500 workers at Ford joined the ‘arms-crossed’ strike. Within ten days the action had spread to 90 engineering plants across the sprawling industrial belt around São Paulo, known as the ABC. Volkswagen, Mercedes, General Motors and the rest, these motor industry giants that were the precursors of today’s corporate globalisation, with their vast factories 30,000 or more workers strong, had engendered an inventive and audacious new trade union movement, which in turn gave birth to a new kind of party, the PT.

One person symbolised this movement. With a ragged beard, unfashionable flares and unbounded charisma – but almost no political baggage – Luís Inacio da Silva, known as Lula, a former machine-tool worker and president of the São Bernardo Metalworkers’ Union, was the undisputed figurehead of the strike movement that did more than anything else to hasten the restoration of formal democracy in Brazil.

It wasn’t till nearly two years later, when I was back in Europe, commuting between film school in London and my Brazilian girlfriend’s doctoral studies in Paris, that the political expression of this movement, the Workers’ Party or PT, finally took form – with Lula, of course, as its undisputed leader.

The person who introduced me to that world, and who later played his own part in developing the Porto Alegre experience of participatory democracy, was an impressive example of the other key element that went into forming the PT. Flavio Koutzii had been a member of the Communist Party youth in Rio Grande do Sul and Porto Alegre in the 1960s, alongside Raul Pont, one of the main contributors to this book. He was expelled along with Raul, but then left Brazil. By the early 1970s he was leading one of the guerrilla organisations in Argentina. After several years of imprisonment and horrific torture at the hands of the military government there, he was now in Paris, and like other exiles, coming to terms with his own personal tragedy and the political failures that gave rise to it. Like others of his generation, he was looking for a new way of doing socialist politics. For many long hours he took me painstakingly