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Brazil

# The (weak) arguments of the governmentalist left

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**This article deals with the difficulties of the "governmentalist left" in justifying its positions. The term "left" is used here to designate those sectors which are still guided by a socialist project, at least in their discourse. We do not therefore refer to the ruling sectors of the "majority camp" of the Workers' Party (PT), or to those who see no major problems in the orientation of the Lula government.**

We mean by "governmentalist left" those sectors which formulate significant criticisms of the Lula government while continuing to defend it, and who, when they can, participate in this government and are preparing to support it in the 2006 elections. This term does not then apply to everyone who remains inside the PT or inside other parties like the Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB).

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/Joao3.jpg>]

Joao Machado

Thus we will analyze here the arguments used to justify participation in the Lula government and not those employed to justify participation in the Workers' Party (or in the PCdoB), with the exception of those that justify belonging to those parties in order to defend governmental participation. We will not formulate any critique here of those who defend membership of the PT or PCdoB without deducing from this a defence of the Lula government.

## The strengthening of the social-liberal character of the Lula government

Now in the third year of its term in office, the Lula government leaves us in no doubt of its general social liberal and thus conservative orientation. Three linked processes, still underway, confirm and consolidate this characteristic.

First there is the strengthening of the position of finance minister Palocci and all the explicitly neoliberal sectors of the government. These sectors have been strengthened in the government's internal debate by the expansion of the Brazilian economy in 2004.

It is true that this expansion was not sufficient to increase substantially the level of employment. It has only compensated for the growth of unemployment in 2003, leaving the Lula government at level zero in this area, whereas it had promised the creation of ten million new jobs. And this expansion has in no way allowed the reversal of the huge concentration of income.

It is also true that the basic explanation of the expansion is not to be found in the policies followed by Palocci. The year 2004 was a year of significant growth of the world economy and in particular that of the so-called "emergent countries". Brazil was moreover among the "emergent countries" which has least benefited from this growth. And more significantly still, Latin American countries which have adopted economic policies much less submissive than those of Brazil, like Venezuela or Argentina, have experienced stronger growth.

It is true finally that the economic policy implemented has already begun to slow expansion. The rise in interest rates and in the exchange rate of the Real have already begun to have negative effects (since September 2004 industry has not experienced any growth) and the perspectives for 2005 are for a reversal of the tendency, independently of the international conjuncture.

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None of this worries Lula and his government and the very modest economic results are seen as proof of the genius of Palaccio and the other declared neoliberals responsible for economic policy.

The second process underway is the erosion of policies which can be seen as or used to be seen as breaking with the general framework.

Since the beginning of the government the sector in which the general neoliberal orientation was least prominent was that of international relations. It never amounted to a complete rupture, for part of Brazil's foreign policy is under the control of the Finance ministry and the Central Bank. Nonetheless it is true that foreign minister Itamaraty has resisted (and, it seems, continues to resist) the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), or at least the US version of this project, and opposed the imperialist countries at the inter-ministerial meeting of the WTO at Cancun in 2003 and so on.

But in the course of recent months the negative signs have multiplied in this sector also. In the WTO negotiations Brazil has adopted a position of collaboration with the US. [1]

In the Mercosur negotiations with the European Union - which happily have not ended up in agreement - Brazilian diplomacy adopted an approach of collaboration with the US, accepting measures that it had rejected in the framework of discussions on the FTAA. [2] That said, the most negative act of the Lula government's foreign policy is the maintenance of Brazilian troops in Haiti, in close collaboration with the US government.

The third negative process underway concerns the changes already made or anticipated in the composition of the government - all for the worst.

The departure of Carlos Lessa from the presidency of the National Bank of Social and Economic Development [3] means the suppression of the sole focus of resistance to neoliberal economic policies inside the government (the other governmental personalities in this sector who were not or did not appear to be neoliberals, like the former minister and current president of the BNDES, Mantega, are already subject, broadly, to the fundamentally neoliberal orientation of economic policy).

Other members of the government who were more resistant to neoliberalism or to conservative policies in general have also left the government. A departure as significant as that of the economist Lessa is expected: that of Marina Silva, environment minister, who has suffered a series of defeats in struggling to make the Lula government respect its ecological commitments (she has shown signs that she will no longer resist and if she remains minister she will appear as completely demoralized in the eyes of environmental sectors).

Finally, the ministerial reform which is expected shortly will strengthen the weight of the conservative sectors in the government, with the entry of the most right wing Brazilian party, the "Progressive Party" (PP) of Paulo Maluf.

To conclude this chapter, note that it is every day harder to hide the fact that the Lula government is a conservative government, occupying the same political space as that of its predecessor Fernando Henrique Cardoso (FHC). To avoid any misunderstanding, this does not mean that the Lula government is strictly identical to that of FHC, but the differences between the two are relatively secondary and it belongs to the same political camp as the former government, essentially defending the same class interests.

## The initial arguments of the governmentalist left

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The globally conservative and social liberal character of the Lula government was clear before it even took office - at least from the announcement of its composition, with the tucano-neoliberal [4] team at the Central Bank and the strong presence at the Finance Ministry of people having the same profile.

Nonetheless a great part of the Brazilian left was not prepared to come to this conclusion. This was even true of that part of the left which was still guided by a socialist project (a great part of the Brazilian left, and in particular the leadership of the PT "majority camp", had long since abandoned a socialist perspective).

For the left which did not wish or was not ready to conclude what reality already indicated, it was indispensable to build an argument to justify its position - that of the defence of the government, including participation in it. It should be stressed that most of those who have presented this argument believed in it and that in general it was not a case of bad faith. On the other hand it is clear that we were faced with a case of wishful thinking in the extreme.

The main arguments of the governmentalist left could be grouped under five themes:

1. The Lula government is the fruit of two decades of accumulation of forces of the left and the Brazilian social movements; in 2002 the Brazilian left and the people won the greatest victory of their history.
2. The defeat of the Lula government (and the PT) would be a historic defeat for the whole of the Brazilian left - which would not recover from it for some decades. It is important to note that in this case, what is called "the defeat of the Lula government and the PT" is the abandonment of a left project and not what Lula himself and the "majority camp of the PT" saw as a defeat. The two things are however very different.
3. The first steps of this government did not correspond to its "real character"; they only signaled a "transition" to a real PT government.
4. Although its economic policy (or its macro-economic policy for those who wish to reduce the critique still further) is neoliberal and there was obviously a strong neoliberal presence inside the government, this was only part of the story. The government is "the object of a dispute". Moreover the PT is also the object of a dispute and the two disputes are linked.
5. If there is a strong presence of neoliberal polices, there is another side to the government which does good things and should not be ignored.

Another argument that is sometimes put forward is that the relationship of forces, Brazilian and international, would not allow the government to go beyond what it was doing. This argument cannot be analyzed here, since it implies a position of little or no criticism of the Lula government and is thus outside of the camp that we refer to here as "the left".

All these arguments are fragile and sometimes logically incoherent. For example, to say that the Brazilian left could not recover for decades after the defeat of the Lula government (in the sense of the characterization of it as a left project) might or might not prove true (for my part I don't share this viewpoint), but it in no way clarifies the character of this government. Nonetheless our objective is not to discuss or to criticize these arguments as many others have already done so (for example the authors of the text "The Brazilian left at the crossroads", published in IV, November 2004).

Curiously the governmentalist left has been little concerned by the thorny problem of the constitution of a "basic alliance" which includes a great part of the Brazilian right. In general it has been little spoken of. And nobody has sought to explain how a government whose basic alliance was to this point conservative could be left, or favorable to the left, or at least merit being supported and defended by sectors of the left.

## The arguments of the governmentalist left

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Having presented the initial argument of the governmentalist left we can pass to the central theme of this article which is the current argument of this left.

What remains today of the initial arguments summed up here?

Let's begin with the third, concerning the "transition".

This argument no longer plays any role today and nobody serious could defend it. However an argument presented currently can be considered as a variant. It is argued that the Lula government acts in very difficult conditions, that the relationship of forces is still favorable to conservatism, big capital and so on.

This is the central argument of the recent "Letter to members of the PT", approved by the majority of the leaderships of the Socialist Democracy Tendency and the Left Articulation: "The federal government headed by our comrade Lula works under very hard conditions. A lot of time and conflict will be necessary to repair the damage done to the country by a decade of neo-liberal hegemony and two decades of military rule. A lot of firmness in strategy and tactical flexibility will be necessary to survive and overcome the threats posed by American imperialism. A lot of struggle both in the political and ideological arenas will be necessary to change a balance of forces which still favors conservatism and continuity. A lot of political, administrative and technical ability will be necessary to face the difficulties inherent to the government of a country like Brazil". [\[5\]](#)

Instead then of speaking of a "transition" as first stage of the government, we should speak today of a historic process of indefinite duration.

If this was true - which remains to be proved - we should then take an interest in the role played by the government in this relationship of forces. Has it contributed to changing it in favour of the popular sectors or has it done the contrary? If it is difficult to find examples where the Lula government has contributed to improving the relationship of forces in favour of the popular sectors, examples of situations where it has assumed the offensive against the popular sectors and allied itself to the dominant classes and the right are many and obvious.

It is convenient to note that this argument implies a significant reduction of the tenor of the critiques addressed to the Lula government (in comparison with the critiques formulated by the same people in the past). To stress the difficulty of the Lula government's tasks constitutes a step in the direction of the general justification of his policy. In adopting this argument sectors like the majority of the leadership of the Socialist Democracy Tendency and the Left Articulation Tendency place themselves at the limit of this governmentalist left. One more step in this direction and it will be more precise to characterize them simply as "governmentalist". Nonetheless, as their justification of the Lula government is still incomplete, it is convenient to consider them as part of the "governmentalist left".

That said, this argument is linked to a new group of arguments which represent the axis of defence of the "governmentalist left" that we will analyze below.

Let's move on to the fourth theme, that concerning "the government (or the PT) as object of a dispute of orientation". It is clear that this argument - which was perhaps the most important in the months following its initial formation - has lost nearly all its force. But it survives still in a residual manner. We will see how this argument reappears, in a certain way, in examining further the new line of the argument. The victory of the PT left at Fortaleza is sometimes cited in its favour - but it is hard to say that this victory compensates for all the other defeats suffered by the PT left. On the other hand this argument can be reinterpreted so as to claim that it is possible to improve aspects of the government's policy, even if a general dispute on its orientation is no longer possible. That obviously leads to legitimating a general orientation in exchange for some crumbs.

An argument which stands up a little better is the first, that the "Lula government is the result of an accumulation of forces of the popular movement over two decades", that is an argument stressing the identification of the left and the

people with Lula and his government (or with the PT). We still find people who forcefully defend the idea that “Lula's victory was the biggest historic victory for the workers and the popular classes” or who say - to justify the fact that they remain inside the PT and the government - that the “PT is the heir of big struggles” without examining seriously the role of the PT today.

The axis of the argument has however undergone an inflexion. We hear less talk of a “great victory” represented by the election of Lula and more of the fact that “popular hope is still alive”. The weight of the PT and particularly Lula inside the popular sectors is stressed and it is pointed out that “the majority of left activists are still linked to the PT”. What is never discussed is whether the influence of Lula or the PT strengthens or weakens the socialist cause and accordingly whether it should be supported or fought.

When they speak of the identification of the popular sectors with Lula and (in a more limited way) with his government, the question is never posed as to whether Lula and his government have acted in their favour, what interests the Lula government has essentially defended. This is, however, the decisive question, that of the practical action of the Lula government. It is more important to know whether Lula identifies in practice with the popular interests than whether the people identify with him.

Another fairly curious variant of this line of argument recognizes that the Lula government is bad, while saying that we have not been able to obtain a better government. No need to comment.

A particularly strange version of the argument on the identification of the PT and the workers was presented in the article by Valter Pomar published in the journal “Socialist Democracy” (in August 2004). For him “the PT still channels the interests of the workers and cannot cease to do so”.

This leader of Left Articulation, who has become the main ideologue of the governmentalist left, claims that “the PT only represents an “interest” for the sectors of the dominant classes if it is capable of channeling the workers on the political and electoral terrain”. So the PT will keep these links. Without entering into discussion on whether this corresponds to reality, it is hard to understand how such a reasoning can be used as an argument in favour of left activists staying inside the PT (and thus inside the Lula government).

What is the socialist left doing in a party which serves the dominant classes?

Another argument which, after some redefinition, still has a certain weight is that “the defeat of the Lula government will be a historic defeat of the Brazilian left”. The contention is that the real polarization of Brazilian society today is around the axis PT (left) - PSDB (right). Thus there is no space for a conflict between the more radical left and the Lula government as well as the traditional right. The (traditional) right would be the main beneficiary from the defeat of the Lula government.

From this one passes to the attack against the alternatives to the PT, who are supposedly playing the game of the right.

Yet the very announcement of the argument destroys it. When Valter Pomar, in the article already quoted, says that it “is not possible to impose simultaneously a defeat on the Lula government and the traditional right”, he recognizes, almost explicitly, that the Lula government represents a “non-traditional right”. Would it not then be more correct to say that those who support this new right are playing the game of the right?

What's more, the numerous alliances of the PT with the PSDB and PFL, like the fact that all these parties are allies in imposing pensions reform, approving public-private partnership \*6, defending neoliberal economic policies and so on show that the conflict between the PT and PSDB is similar to the conflict between the Democrats and Republicans in the US, a political rivalry without polarized class projects.

Finally the argument that “this government does good things” still survives, but even though it was initially the weakest of all the arguments mentioned it has been still further weakened.

# “Continental war of position” and new lines of argument

It should however be remarked that a new line of argument is being developed by the governmentalist left and that it is progressively taking the place of the preceding arguments. Its essence is to withdraw Lula's government from the centre of the analysis. Coming from those who wish to argue in favour of participation in this government, it is a fairly comical ruse.

One of the ways of expressing it is to argue that “it is not the government which is at the centre of the struggle, but society, mobilizations, and so on”. Or that the most important thing is “to put the working class in movement”.

This reasoning sometimes seeks to make a “left” critique of the alternatives being built, and especially the PSoL (it should be said that all those who use this argument are not part of the “governmentalist left” and some don't in any way defend the Lula government). In one way this argument is linked to the claim that the relationship of forces is unfavorable, in the context of a more left wing strategic vision.

The big problem of this line of reasoning is that it abandons the terrain of debate on the nature of the Lula government. Whether or not it is at the centre of the struggle, what role does it play there? Does it favour the socialist project or not? Does it help or hinder the mobilization of the working class? To strengthen the evasive character of this argument, it is sometimes combined with affirmations which, in reality, have no relation with the Lula government, as in the (correct) assessment that “the process of the struggles in Latin America has not been defeated”.

The reference to the Latin American political process opens, moreover, the way to another way of arguing. The claim is made that the Lula government (and the Brazilian political process) should be understood in the framework of the process underway throughout Latin America, where we will have a prolonged struggle against US imperialism, a struggle in which the Chavez government and the most combative social movements will be the most advanced actors, where the Cuban government will occupy also an important and positive role, while the Kirchner and Lula governments will play an ambiguous role.

The reference to the process of anti-imperialist struggle in Latin America certainly constitutes the strongest and most correct point of this argument. But the manner of inserting the Lula (or Kirchner) government in the argument seems a little caricatured, on the one hand the Gramscian idea of the “war of position”, with a reprise of some of the worst consequences drawn from it a long time ago, on the other the conception of the state developed by Poulantzas in his last works - the state as a “social relationship”, internally traversed by class struggle, that could gradually be appropriated.

This reasoning also involves the ideas of “transitional government” and above all a “government in dispute”, while giving the impression that it should not be accorded a disproportionate importance.

The goal of this article is not to discuss this vision of the Latin American political process. It is no longer necessary to insist here on the fact that the Lula government does not occupy any ambiguous place in the Brazilian and continental political process, since we have already said it. I just want to stress a decisive point: even if we do not want to place the Lula government at the centre of the analysis, if we discuss from its character and if we ask ourselves if it is correct to participate in it (and thus accept its discipline, like the PT, PCdoB and other parties) we cannot then flee from the simple and essential questions: What is the character of this government? What

fundamental class interests has it defended? What is its role; in favour of what social sectors does it act? Is it correct (and legitimate) that socialist activists subordinate their line of action to the demands of the Lula government (for example voting for its counter-reforms, wages policy, budgets etc, voting which is obligatory to stay in this government)? Is it possible to defend all the interests of the exploited and oppressed sectors in accepting subordination to this government? And so on.

When we analyze the question from this viewpoint, it is hard not to conclude that the new arguments of the "governmentalist left" avoid the questions that need to be answered if we are seriously concerned about our place in the Brazilian (and Latin American) political process.

## Conclusion

The life of the governmentalist left is not easy, in particular the life of its rational arguments. Taken together, in the light of reason, its arguments are very weak.

At the beginning of this article it was said that the argument of the governmentalist left is a particular case of believing in what one wants to believe in - but that it did not amount to bad faith. Shouldn't we conclude that we now have to resort to pure bad faith to justify a presence in the government? Or at least a predominant dose of bad faith?

*\* João Machado is one of the founders and national leaders of the Workers' Party (PT). He is also one of the founders of the Socialist Democracy Tendency and a member of the Fourth International's International Committee. Following the expulsion of Senator Heloisa Helena (also a member of the Fourth International's International Committee) and federal deputies Babá, João Fontes and Luciana Genro from the PT, he left the PT to help build the Party of Socialism and Liberty (PSoL).*

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[1] As analyzed in the article by Walden Bello and Aileen Kwa "Divide and rule", published in Brazil by the weekly "Fato" number 80, September 9-15, 2004.

[2] See, for example, the documentation of the Agência Carta Maior of September 16, 2004, "Quem ganha e quem perde com o acordo Mercosul - União Européia" ("Who wins and who loses with the Mercosur-EU agreement").

[3] The BNDES was supposed to finance development, but under the government of Fernando Henrique Cardoso it has mainly financed privatization. Carlos Lessa had begun the reorganization of the BNDES to return it to its original function, thus becoming the target of the sectors most linked to finance capital (including the finance minister, Palocci). It seems the new president, Guido Mantega, wants the BNDES to serve primarily to finance the public-private partnership (PPP), a form of shameful privatization inspired by the first measures of Margaret Thatcher, which is currently one of the priorities of the Lula government.

[4] The "tucano" (toucan) is a typical Brazilian bird. It was chosen as the emblem of the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB, neoliberal right) of former president Fernando Henrique Cardoso.

[5] "Letter to members of the PT", January 2005.