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# A tale of two Brazils

*Lula vs Bolsonaro in the shadow of the military dictatorship*

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## Books discussed in this review

### Lula

A Biography  
Translated by Brian Mier  
320 pp. Verso.

### Fernando Morais

### Bolsonarismo

The Global Origins and Future of Brazil's Far Right  
252 pp. Rutgers University Press.

### Fernando Brancoli

While the political temperature has lowered since Brazil's last presidential election in 2022, the energies that threatened to wrench the country apart still simmer below the surface. The dominant figures of recent political history, the current president Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva and his predecessor Jair Bolsonaro, now represent two Brazils, with diametrically opposed outlooks and conceptions of the country's history and identity.

In contrast to Bolsonaro's relatively nondescript backstory, Lula has lived many lives during his seventy-eight years, encompassing childhood poverty, unemployment, multiple periods in prison, the loss of two wives, one with his unborn child, throat cancer, decades of political defeat and disappointment and, extraordinarily, two-and-a-half, and counting, terms as Brazil's president. In the first part of a two-volume biography, translated by Brian Mier, the Brazilian journalist Fernando Morais splices the story of Lula's arrest and time in prison in 2018-19 with his subject's reminiscences from his childhood of poverty and formative years as a union leader. Lula's struggle for the presidency in the 1980s and 1990s, and his twenty-first-century presidential terms, will be addressed in the second volume. Based on extensive interviews with Lula, this is an affecting portrait which, while sympathetic, Morais repeatedly criticizes the elite disdain, media bias and politically motivated lawfare Lula has suffered, feels emotionally true.

Lula was born in 1945 in the bone-dry, scrubby backlands of Pernambuco state in northeastern Brazil, a region so blighted by drought and poverty that, as late as the mid-twentieth century, life expectancy was thirty-five and three-quarters of the population were illiterate. This included Lula's erratic and often violent father, Aristides, "he couldn't even read the letter 'O'," who would walk around with a newspaper under his arm to hide the fact.

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In 1952, Lula's mother Dona Lindu joined Aristides in São Paulo state, where he had found work hauling sacks of coffee at the Santos docks. She travelled for thirteen days and nights along a 2,500-kilometre trail of dirt roads in the back of a truck with her seven children, including Lula, then aged seven. The family initially lived in penury in the coastal town of Guarujá. But Aristides's violence caused Dona Lindu to flee with her young children, first to a shack and then to São Paulo. There, they rented a room and kitchen behind a bar. "Seven or eight people slept on folding beds in the kitchen," recalls Lula. The toilet "was known as a 'Turkish drain', a squat toilet, like those used in Brazilian prisons", which they shared with drunken bar clientele. Lula had to make do, over a whole year at school, with three articles of clothing: denim shorts, which his mother had made from leftover cloth, a white shirt and cotton shorts for sleeping in. Obsessed with the chewing gum brand Ping Pong, the boy would ask his friend to give him his used gum, which he would carefully wash, sprinkle with sugar and chew "until all that was left was a thin, flavourless paste".

Lula was working by the age of fifteen, sweeping the factory floor for metal scraps. He received "the key to paradise" when he managed to get on an apprenticeship metalworking training programme. This would transform his life from one of destitution to one of a more regular type of poverty to be found among Brazil's burgeoning working class in the ABC Paulista, an industrial hub where transnational companies, including Volkswagen and Mercedes-Benz, had set up production.

Morais portrays the young Lula as a timid, conservative man. He looks shy and withdrawn in family photos. Sexually inhibited, he loses his virginity in São Paulo's Boca do Lixo red light district to a sex worker "who must have been 70 years old". He is initially afraid of participating in the union, having swallowed propaganda that union activists are crooks and terrorists, until he is convinced to join by his more radical brother, "Friar Chico". Once in leadership roles, he finds public speaking difficult, sweating profusely after taking the microphone.

What is never fully explained is how Lula managed to transform himself during the 1960s and 1970s from this diffident man into the fearless national leader that he would become. The book culminates with the military dictatorship's gradual relinquishing of power, a series of ultimately successful strikes that Lula led, and the founding of the Workers Party in February 1980. But its first half covers events that took place almost four decades later: the tense run up to Lula's arrest on corruption charges, which were subsequently quashed, as a part of the Lava Jato investigation in April 2018, and his 581 days spent imprisoned in a Curitiba federal police lock-up.

Lula, who always protested his innocence, passed his days receiving visitors from around the world, including Moraes, running on a treadmill and reading books that he piled neatly by his bedside, declining a sentence reduction for each book read. Under Brazilian law, prisoners can reduce their sentence by four days per book read, up to a maximum of forty-eight days per year. Many in Brazil, in fact roughly half the voting population, are unlikely to be convinced by this portrait of a simple, dignified man, fighting for the rights of the poor. While Moraes's book, which originally appeared in Portuguese in 2021, the year before Lula was re-elected, was a bestseller in Brazil, there were also reports of customers knocking over piles of it in bookshops in Morumbi, an upscale neighbourhood in São Paulo. How Lula left office on January 1, 2011 with an approval rating of 83 per cent only to become a lightning rod for right-wing fury is in part explained by Fernando Brancoli's *Bolsonarismo: The Global Origins and Future of Brazil's Far Right*.

For Brancoli, the far right in Brazil was consolidating even at the peak of the Workers Party's power and popularity during Lula's first presidential term, 2003-07. As the redemocratization narrative coalesced, a story embodied by Lula's own remarkable trajectory, so too did a counter-narrative on the right. In this

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account, Brazil was not a flourishing, diverse, tolerant democracy, finally shaking off the shackles of its authoritarian past, but a conservative, Christian nation whose values had been subverted by years of corruption, for which Lula became the scapegoat, and “cultural Marxism”.

Within this battle, the meaning of the military dictatorship, 1964-85, under which Bolsonaro had served, Lula suffered persecution and his successor, Dilma Rousseff, had been tortured, re-emerged as a key contested site. When it came, the turning of the tables was swift. With the post-commodity-boom economy teetering and the PT beginning to falter under Rousseff in the midst of Lava Jato, a scandal that cut across the political spectrum, it was a re-energized right that took to the streets in mass demonstrations.

For Brancoli, Bolsonaro was the lucky inheritor of this movement, which drew from both domestic authoritarian traditions and a transnational far-right political grammar and vocabulary. The author identifies three elements that constitute “Bolsonarismo”: “militarism and milicianism”; “evangelical neo-Pentecostalism”; and “neoliberal entrepreneurship”. Each of these strains was well established before Bolsonaro, then a relatively obscure ex-army captain and long-term federal deputy, began his unlikely campaign from a rickety platform in Rio de Janeiro promoting the “marriage of God and Brazil”.

Journalists often described Bolsonaro as the “Tropical Trump”, but Brancoli shows that his brand of conservatism, while borrowing from US populism, was distinct in many respects. Immigration, for example, was absent from Bolsonaro’s discourse, as was Trump’s protectionist, anti-neoliberal agenda. Bolsonaro represented not the losers from globalization but neoliberal strivers within a more conventional small-state ideology, one that was horribly exposed during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In poststructuralist mode, Brancoli’s interest is in the discourse, not the personality; movements, not individuals: “Bolsonaro is a subset of Bolsonarismo, which is not contingent on his performance or even his existence”. While in some respects a useful framing, this does leave questions of personal motivation hanging. Corruption scandals have proliferated around Bolsonaro and his family, including one cynical scheme to siphon off public funds involving the creation of ghost workers and another involving the theft of millions of dollars’ worth of jewellery given to him and his wife by Saudi Arabia. In many ways Bolsonaro fits into a different, but equally well-established, Brazilian political tradition, that of the corrupt sinecure, shamelessly exploiting political life for private gain.

With or without Jair Bolsonaro, who has been barred from running for president until 2030 for abuse of power, Bolsonarismo lives on. As Brancoli points out, the 2022 election was the most competitive since redemocratization, and it resulted in the election of a slew of far-right candidates to Congress and state governorships. In recent polling the left-right balance is still on a razor edge. These two books, in very different ways, show how volatile politics in Brazil is likely to continue to be, in a fight not just for political power but the very meaning of the country’s turbulent history since the 1960s, and what it is to be a twenty-first-century Brazilian.

### **Chicago style references**

Morais, Fernando. *Lula: A Biography*. Translated by Brian Mier. London: Verso, 2024.

Brancoli, Fernando. *Bolsonarismo: The Global Origins and Future of Brazil’s Far Right*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2024.

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This PDF is a clean reformatted version of the review text contained in the uploaded file, preserving the article's author and publication details and adding Chicago-style references for the two books discussed.