

## AMERICA E AMERICHE

*Storia, relazioni, immagini*

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# AMERICA E AMERICHE

*Storia, relazioni, immagini*



*Les nations de nous jours ne sauraient faire que dans leur sein  
les conditions ne soient pas égales; mais il dépend d'elles que l'égalité  
les conduise à la servitude ou à la liberté, aux lumières ou à la barbarie,  
à la prospérité ou aux misères*

ALÉXIS CLÉREL DE TOCQUEVILLE, 1840

*Yo deseo más que otro alguno ver formar en América  
la más grande nación del mundo,  
menos por su extensión y riqueza  
que por libertad y gloria*

SIMÓN BOLÍVAR, 1815

La collana pubblica contributi originali relativi alla storia delle Americhe dal momento dell'incontro tra Nuovo e Vecchio Mondo fino ai giorni nostri. La collana si occupa anche, in una prospettiva atlantica o continentale, delle relazioni internazionali tra l'Europa e i paesi americani, tra gli americani di origine europea e gli indigeni, nonché tra nazioni indigene diverse. Il tema delle immagini reciproche, dalla prima età moderna fino ai giorni nostri, rientra a pieno titolo negli interessi della collana.



JACOPO BOTTACCHI

# LAMENTO SERTANEJO

NEW CITIZENS, MESSIANIC  
LEADERSHIPS AND THE NEW  
CENTRALITY OF THE NORTHEAST  
IN BRAZILIAN POLITICS



aracne



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*Questo libro è per te, papà.  
Hai sempre parlato poco, proverò a fare lo stesso:  
grazie, ti voglio bene.*





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## INTRODUCTION

Rising inequalities had been one of the most important global economic trends of the last decades. The debate about spatial inequality, the unequal distribution of goods, wealth and services based on geographical variable, is now more important than ever before.

Spatial inequality is a dimension of overall inequality, but it has added significance when spatial and regional divisions align with political and ethnic tensions to undermine social and political stability (Kanbur, Venables, 2005, 3).

Since the XIX century Brazil had always been an example of unequal federalism, and the same economic formation of the country was characterized by the inequalities between regions, both in term of economic and human development. However, with the exception of brief period in the history of the country, it was only at the beginning of the XXI century that spatial inequality became a fundamental issue for national politics.

The new centrality of the northeast is a consequence of fourteen years of PT's administrations at the Federal level, between 2002 and 2016. While PT and its historic leader, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, had already been the argument of many books, both the historiographic and political debate have neglected important elements behind their affirmation and persistence: spatial inequality, the politicization of the *questão nordeste* and how those two elements are linked to two different processes, the creation of new citizens and of new messianic leaderships during the XXI century.

This research aims to provide some insights about those processes, focusing on historical changes and continuities, showing how Brazilian politics transformed itself after the democratic transition, and why we are talking about a new centrality of the northeast.

We will see how the *questão nordeste*, the historic condition of underdevelopment and inequality of the northeast, was already identified as a fundamental problem for the unity and the development of the nation by Celso Furtado in the '50s. The golpe of 1964 however interrupted Furtado's attempt to solve spatial inequality and Brazilian politics almost forgot about the problem for the rest of XX century; it was only with PT as the ruling party that the *questão nordeste* became a central element both for the persistence of PT as ruling party and for the democratic stability of the country.

This task today is more important than ever, in particular after 2022 elections, with a country divided in two almost equal groups, with Lula and Jair Bolsonaro divided by less than 1% of the votes and with the northeast as the region making the difference, with Lula obtaining 13

million votes more than his opponents there, despite losing in all the other macro-regions.

In order to understand how that became possible, it will be inevitable to start from the analysis of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT), the party that more than any others had shaped the history of Brazil in the last forty years

Born as an anomaly, being the first real authentic mass party created bottom up<sup>(1)</sup>, within social movements and not as a by-product of a well-known leader<sup>(2)</sup>, PT was able to stay relevant though different decades, occupying the left and then center-left of the political spectrum, creating a strong identification between the party and the voters, in a system that normally is characterized by high level of electoral volatility.

We will analyze Lula's importance for PT's successes, showing how over the course of his political career he played many roles, starting as an *operário em construção*, becoming almost another *pai dos pobres* and then closer to a holy figure, accepting to be another messianic leader, as the *criança nordestina* who redeem the region guiding people to the promise land of citizenship. Looking to his transformation, we have to remember that

the leaders are not always the only responsible of the artificial production of myth and political ritual, to trick and govern the masses; myth and rituals can be also the spontaneous expression of the masses, produced by their need

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(1) The only exception was the Partido Comunista Brasileiro (PCB), for many years banished and illegal, that didn't reach significant results, both electorally or in term of affiliation even when allowed to compete; therefore, it will be hard to consider PCB as an authentic "mass" party.

(2) Even in the midst of the democratic transition, most of the parties were founded or re-founded as expression of local leaders, influential groups or well-known politicians or intellectuals.

of faith and beliefs, that they meet with the dedication toward the leader or an ideology that promise well-being and salvation (Gentile, 2007, 13).

We will show how the inclusion of the outsiders, the true recognition of a political, social and economic citizenship for millions of Brazilians previously marginalized, was the defining element of Lula's era.

When we will talk about new citizens, we will refer to the recognition of fundamental rights, the extension of the welfare system, the reduction of inequalities and the creation of a new political narrative that place under the spotlights those previously excluded. We will look at both the concrete and the symbolic value of this transformations, explaining how it was one of the fundamental reasons behind Lula's success. We will also see how the recognition of citizenship was one of the key elements behind the transformation of the *questão nordeste* from a developmental problem into a political cleavage, that must be explained to understand the reasons behind PT's and Lula's persistence as the most important actors of Brazilian politics.

While Lula's era is considered, for good reason, as a period of important changes and progresses for Brazil, we will also see how PT's era was characterized by a "weak reformism", with the party renouncing to radical reforms of the institutional system. Continuity rather than changes characterized Brazilian politics, if compared not only to the beginning of the *Nova República* but even to older ones; we will use the presidential succession between Lula and Dilma Rousseff to show how "politics as usual" was still an influential element during PT's era and how malfunctioning institutions and political practices have

regained centrality during the political crises that begun in 2013.

To conclude, we will see how Lula became once again a centerpiece of Brazilian politics after 2016, being re-elected as President in 2022, in a context of political, economic and social crisis, and how the dichotomy *lulismo/antilulismo* had produced another political cleavage; we will see how in the latter stages of his political trajectory Lula embraced the national tradition of messianic leadership, what is his legacy for the present and the foreseeable future of Brazilian politics and for the overall quality of democracy, in a context characterized by high level of polarization and institutional fragility.

We will use an historic approach, believing that the knowledge of historical, political and social context in a necessary pre-condition to understand the new social cleavages; we will follow the chronologic order of the events, focusing on the period between the '70s and 2022, while at the same time showing the roots of Brazilian unequal development since the XIX and XX centuries.

A quote attributed to Tom Jobim says that “*O Brasil não é para amadores*”, which can be roughly translated into “Brazil is not for beginners”. Being aware of how difficult it is to understand and explain complex social processes in a country of a continental size like Brazil, we’ve spent almost a decade studying the *Nova República*. This book is the product of an extensive research, started in 2014, and of two different missions on the field that lasted almost a year, in 2016 during the most heated period of Rousseff’s crisis and in 2019 as part of my PhD investigation. Aside to literature review, we have had access to the archive of the *Fundação Perseu Abramo*, that collects all the documents published from the Partido dos Trabalhadores since its foundation.

We have made extensive researches on the archive of the most important Brazilian newspapers, in particular the one of the *Folha de São Paulo*, but also on international and local ones; we have had access to quantitative data coming from various institution, Brazilian or internationals.

Last, but not least, we have done extensive use of semi-structured interviews with both politicians, member of PT or from other parties, member of the academic community and of grassroot-level organizations.



## CHAPTER I

### PROLOGUE

The creation of new citizens, or to say it in other terms the inclusion of the outsiders into political, economic and social citizenship, was one of the most important elements in Lula's political discourse. We firmly believe that political discourse and symbolic variables matter when we are talking about consensus building; however, to fully understand the new centrality of the northeast in Brazilian politics, we have to focus also on the reduction of inequalities, the overall improvements of the economic performances of the country and most importantly of the individual economic well-being.

In order to do it, we have to start from an analysis of the structural inequality among different regions and of the *questão nordeste*; our goal is to analyse how spatial inequality changed between 2002 and 2016 and how those changes produced a new political cleavage. To understand the importance of this phenomenon first we have to look back at the historical condition of Brazilian economic development.

We will start with a brief analysis of the economic formation of Brazil, following a seminal book from Celso Furtado published in 1959. Covering all Brazilian history is not our goal; we will just focus on few important moments, starting from the economic “foundation” of Brazil to the proclamation of the Republic. We will then move to the '50s, with the formalization of the concept of *questão Nordeste* from Celso Furtado, and the role of SUDENE.

### 1.1. The origin of spatial inequality in Brazil

The northeast was the first place of Brazil where the Portuguese created settlements, when the economic system of the colony was based on sugar production; to be more precise, it was an economy based on export and slavery.

Sugar economy “resistiu mais de três séculos às mais prolongadas depressões [...] sem sofrer nenhuma modificação estrutural significativa”<sup>(1)</sup> (*Furtado, 1959, 61*).

Two factors affected the development of the region: first, the great success of the sugar market guaranteed not only the possibility to defend the settlements, but created the conditions to expand the exploration to the rest of the country; second, the northeast was so closely linked with sugar production that, when at the end of XVII century other colonies joined the same market, causing the decreases of sugar prices, it was impossible for the region to change its vocation.

When the stagnation of sugar economy begun, a lot of people found new occupations or at least a way to survive

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(1) Resisted more than three centuries to the longest recessions without going through any structural change.

as breeders, while population was increasing, leading to a very peculiar situation:

No Nordeste brasileiro, como as condições de alimentação eram melhores na economia de mais baixa produtividade, isto é, na região pecuária, as etapas de prolongada depressão em que se intensificava a migração do litoral para o interior teriam de caracterizar-se por uma intensificação no crescimento demográfico. [...] A expansão da economia nordestina durante esse longo período consistiu, em última instância, num processo de involução econômica: o setor de alta produtividade ia perdendo importância relativa e a produtividade do setor pecuário declinava à medida que este crescia (Furtado, 1959, 71).<sup>(2)</sup>

The introduction of cotton plantations in the semi-arid didn't improve the situation, because that sector too was characterized by very low productivity; on the contrary, it increased the concentration of land property and limited even more the possibility of other kinds of economic organization different from *latifundium*.

Once gold was discovered in the southeast, at the end of XVII century, mining became the most attractive sector of national economy; due to the absence of any other relevant activities aside to mining, when the quantity of precious metals extracted declined, the southeast rolled back to subsistence economy. At the end of the XVIII century the economic development of the different regions was pretty similar; it

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(2) In Brazilian northeast, since food security was better in the economy of lower productivity, the breeding system, the phase of a long depression, in which migration from the coast to the rural areas increased, was characterized by a demographic growth. [...] The expansion of northeast economy during this period was, at the end, a process of economic involution: the sector with higher productivity lost its importance and productivity of livestock decreased due to the increase of the sector itself.

was only at the beginning of the XIX century that two great changes created the condition for spatial inequality: with the arrival in Brazil of the royal family the capital of the Empire was moved to Rio de Janeiro, in 1808; while by itself this isn't enough to explain structural changes of the economy, it was a great impulse from the development of the southeast, suddenly the centre of the political and economic life, in particular after the independence and the creation of the Brazilian Empire in 1822; as a consequence. Larger part of tax revenues started to be used to develop the region.

Desde a independência e, particularmente, desde o início do Segundo Reinado, quando se deu a consolidação do governo central e da economia cafeeira na província adjacente a cidade passou a ser o centro da vida política nacional (Carvalho, M, 2002, 13).<sup>(3)</sup>

Another important change was linked to the increasing importance of coffee, cultivated since 1830.

No primeiro decênio da independência o café já contribuía com 18 por cento do valor das exportações do Brasil, colocando-se em terceiro lugar depois do açúcar e do algodão. E nos dois decênios seguintes já passa para primeiro lugar, representando mais de 40 por cento do valor das exportações (Furtado, 1959, 115).<sup>(4)</sup>

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(3) Since independence, and especially, from the *Segundo Reinado* (1840-1889), when the consolidation of central government and coffee economy in the near provinces happened, the city became the center of national political life.

(4) In the first decade after independence coffee contributed to 18% of the exportations of Brazil, in third place behind sugar and cotton. In the next two decades it became the first, covering more than 40% of the exportations.