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# The Worker's Party, from Contention to Public Action: A Case of Institutionalization

Camille Goirand

**Abstract:** The Worker's Party (PT) was created in 1980 during the liberalization of authoritarian rule in Brazil, in the context of contentious mobilizations, which were especially strong in the union sector in São Paulo. The PT then attracted increasing support at the polls and won a number of local executives before winning the federal presidency in 2002; this process has often been labeled as “institutionalization”. This paper defines the notion of institutionalization and proposes an approach for observing institutionalization processes at the grass roots of party organization. The paper then analyzes the PT's transformation at the national level, whereby it became a majority, consolidated its organization, and moderated its ideological discourses. We also analyze the social components of the institutionalization of the PT. Based on the case of rank-and-file PT members in Recife, we show that this process included upward social mobility for local party leadership, included party leaders as professionals in the political arena, and created a growing distance between the party organization and the contentious space.

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**Keywords:** Brazil, Worker's Party, activism, activist careers, institutionalization

**Camille Goirand** is a professor in political science in the Institute for Latin American Studies at the Sorbonne-Nouvelle University in Paris, and she is a member of the Lille Center for Politics and Administration (CERAPS), University of Lille 2. Her research work focuses on the political behavior of popular classes in Brazil. Currently, she is researching political participation and associative and partisan engagement in the Northeast of Brazil. Her main publications are: *La politique des favelas*, Paris, Karthala, 2000; “Penser les mouvements sociaux d'Amérique latine. Les approches des mobilisations depuis les années 1970”, in: *Revue française de science politique*, 60, 3, 2010, 445–466; and “Participer: de la contestation à la démocratie participative”, in: *Revue internationale de politique comparée*, 19, 2013, 7–28.

E-mail: <cgoirand@wanadoo.fr>

## Introduction

We used to gather a little money, to make sacrifices. Nowadays, they distribute T-shirts, they pay guys for street campaigning. This is not a socialist party! [...] If you look at João Paulo's first campaign, it was different.<sup>1</sup> A crowd in the street. A red wave. We had almost no resources. The people were in the street. In the neighborhoods, there were marches. But, with Lula's campaign, it's been different. [...] Now, there are more resources. João Paulo trusts marketing experts very much. Like Duda Mendonça (Antonio).

The work has turned very professional. Today, we no longer have activists who would accept waving a banner in the street just from political conviction. No. He wants to be paid. Because, nowadays, we are in power. Thus, we have money. So, we can pay (Maria).

The words of these two long-term Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) – Brazilian Worker's Party – activists were recorded in Recife in 2010. They echo obvious changes in the campaign practices of local PT candidates.<sup>2</sup> At the end of July that year, Isaltino Nascimento, a PT state deputy who was campaigning for the renewal of his tenure in the Pernambuco's Legislative Assembly, organized a meeting for the opening of his campaign. This festive event took place in a colonial house in the center of Recife, accompanied by deafening music, regional dances and pyrotechnics. The room had been arranged as if hosting a gala dinner reception, with tents and white tablecloths decorated with white and blue flowers, with inflatable balls of the same colors, and with symbols of northeastern popular culture, such as *farró* musician figurines and cordel prints. In the room, there was no sign of PT symbols or banners, and very few people wore the famous red shirts. Stickers on people's clothes bore only the name of the candidate, without any mention of the PT. After a while, Isaltino arrived, dressed in a white and blue shirt, and accompanied by his wife and daughter. While people danced and sang, the candidate climbed onto the stage to take his place alongside several famous local political figures from various allied parties. None of them showed obvious symbols of PT membership. In a series of very flat and

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1 João Paulo Lima e Silva is one of the historical leaders of the PT in Recife. He won a seat as a State deputy of Pernambuco in 1994 for the first time and was elected as mayor at the end of 2000.

2 I would like thank the Centre for Administrative, Political and Social Studies (CERAPS), University of Lille 2, for financing the translation of this paper; and also its director, Jean-Gabriel Contamin, for putting his trust in me.

conventional speeches, they called the public to vote for the candidates of the allied parties – for Eduardo Campos for governor, and for Dilma Rousseff for president. Happily, the emptiness of those uninspired and repetitive speeches was accompanied by noise, drinks, crowds and fun. This campaign event in Recife gives some indication of the transformations that have taken place in the Workers' Party since its formation in 1980: accumulation of huge financial and human resources, disparities between candidates, content that is ideologically light or poorly planned, increasing individualization of electoral strategies, political professionalization of the leaders. Alongside the changes in the party's organizational framework, activists' identities have also changed, as well as PT's roots in the local environment. Those drastic changes have often been interpreted as a "normalization" of the party, or as its institutionalization, a process that this paper will analyze in order to explore its meaning in terms of social standing, behavior and identities.

The PT was created in February 1980, during the slow liberalization of the Brazilian authoritarian regime. After the 1964 *coup d'état*, the military removed fundamental liberties and prohibited leftwing opposition, although it maintained regular elections and imposed a controlled bipartism until 1980. The amnesty law in August 1979 and the return to multipartism in December 1979 took place at a time when opposition to military rule was gaining in strength. This was especially evident with the protest cycle that began in May 1978 in the industrial outskirts of São-Paulo, and with the strengthening of a contentious opposition within metal-workers' trade unions. Plans for creating a workers' party were launched in January 1979, during the congress of the metal-workers union of the state of São Paulo. When it was eventually created in 1980, the PT incorporated various branches of the radical left. As well as unions – clearly its strongest component – the PT also included: leftwing figures who had returned from exile; contentious student groups, such as União Nacional dos Estudantes (UNE) – the National Union of Students – which was recreated in 1978; human rights movements; various armed struggle organizations that had fought against the military regime after 1968; movements linked to the progressive Catholic Church; and various popular "grassroots" movements. All those components shared a common trajectory, in the sense that they mostly came from an illegal opposition to the authoritarian regime or from contentious movements that emerged in the late 1970s.

During its early years, the PT had limited electoral success, hardly extending its reach beyond the state of São-Paulo. However, it soon expanded to encompass the Southeast of Brazil, for example gaining

office in the town of Porto Alegre in 1988. During the following decade, the PT gradually consolidated its electoral power. The number of its deputies increased progressively during the 1990s, while its presidential candidate, Luis Ignácio Lula da Silva, repeatedly led in the opinion polls, only to be defeated in the 1989, 1994 and 1998 elections. The PT's candidate eventually won the presidential election in 2002, before being re-elected in 2006, and then being replaced by Dilma Rousseff in 2010.

The PT's victory in 2002 was characterized by a clear switch in the electoral geography of Brazil. During its first twenty years, PT had been a minor party, if not an absent one, in the northern and northeastern states; whereas, since 2002, an overwhelming majority of citizens in those regions have voted for PT's presidential candidates, Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff.<sup>3</sup> Those electoral victories are profoundly linked to the transformation of the PT from what was a minority party, supporting a revolutionary discourse and formed through the encounter of a great variety of contentious, leftist, social movements, into what is now a moderate government party. Those changes are part of the institutionalization of the PT, a complex process exhibiting many facets: the party progressively embraced the institutions that it had first opposed radically, and its members learned to modify their behavior and preferences as they accessed new political and social positions. Thus, by analyzing various aspects of those changes, this paper examines the process of the institutionalization of a former contentious organization that has become a public administrator. In a larger, comparative perspective, this is a central issue for democratic consolidation and for the implementation of local "good governance".

The analysis of those changes may be relevant for at least two different purposes. Firstly, the political debate about the institutionalization, and the so-called "reflux" of contentious organizations in Brazil – whether social movements or parties – has been very simplistic and incomplete (Cardoso 1994; Goirand 2010). It needs to be addressed further if we wish to achieve a better understanding of today's Brazilian political system. Secondly, scientific approaches to institutionalization should be renewed in order to account for the complexities of processes that are embedded in both social and regime changes. To that end, focusing on social interactions may help broaden existing attempts to deconstruct party organizations, and to enrich our understanding of the processes at work in democratic consolidation. Based on ethnographic

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3 For example, in 2006, Lula gained 48.6 percent of the total vote at the national level and 70.9 percent in the state of Pernambuco (1st turn). Source: Electoral Superior Court, online: <[www.tse.gov.br](http://www.tse.gov.br)>.

work and on the analysis of the life trajectories of activists, this paper shows that the institutionalization of a political party is a complex process that goes hand in hand with the social trajectories of its members, which in turn produces changes to the organizational framework of the party. Thus, institutionalization means much more than a mere “adaptation” to a political system (Hunter 2010), an *aggiornamento* or an integration “into normal political channels” (Piven and Cloward 1979: 33). Our case study suggests that it also implies a redefinition of the social meaning of engagement; it interacts with changes in the social standing of agents, and it includes drastic revisions of their behavior and their understanding of politics.

The first section of this paper will discuss the notion of institutionalization itself, and propose some research strategies that may seem relevant if we wish to go beyond the limits of mainstream approaches to this process. In its second section, this paper will analyze the different aspects of this process in the case of the PT, contextualizing the argument at the national level, and giving insights into various facets of the process. In the sections that follow, the paper will turn to the case study and explore the interactions between the changes of the PT's organization in Recife and the trajectories of its long-term activists.

## Analyzing the Institutionalization of a Political Party

The notion of institutionalization may be understood with respect to various approaches that are linked to either the narrower or the broader definition of an “institution” (Hall and Taylor 1997): in the first narrower definition, institutionalization means adapting to existing formal institutions and accepting their main rules. With a more open and sociological meaning, it refers to the process of being associated with the norms, values and practices shared by a group, and taking part in reshaping or changing them (Lagroye and Offerlé 2010). We propose that, although the first approach may be correct, it is insufficient if we wish to grasp the concrete, social meanings of the process.

### Institutionalization as the Integration into “Normal Politics”

Although the aim of this paper is not to present scientific arguments about institution analysis, a brief summary of it may be useful. One of the contributions of neo-institutionalism, even if its different branches

are very heterogeneous, has been to encourage sociologists to pay more attention to the way institutional order shapes political practices and processes. As a whole, it may be seen as an attempt at “redefining institutions, taking into account their autonomy and their influence on the behaviors of social and political actors” (Freymond 2010: 36). The point of similarity of the different varieties of neo-institutionalism is the analysis of how institutions may influence actions, and structure behavior (Hall and Taylor 1997).

A considerable part of the research work on social movements and activist commitment recognizes this process as the adoption of electoral strategies and alliances between contentious organizations and political parties; and, either analyzes their institutionalization as a failure, or links it to their demobilization (Goirand 2010). This approach is based on a tendency of social movement observers to assume that they act within extra-institutional arenas by nature, and that they risk demobilizing when they act in other spheres. Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, in their study of four “poor people’s movements”, show that concessions of the elite are “measures to reintegrate the movement into normal political channels and to absorb its leaders into stable institutional roles”, which is a strategy for “disintegrating” a movement (Piven-Cloward 1979: 33). Here, institutionalization is understood to provide an explanation for the decline in the intensity of mobilizations. Moreover, Sidney Tarrow shows that “protest cycles” not only begin, but may also continue, when changes in the political opportunity structure occur. According to him, protest cycles end with the re-shaping of institutional politics, including the integration of contentious group leaders into the political system (Tarrow 1994), even if they remain loyal to their former companions in the contentious arena.

Generally, it is the understanding of institutionalization as “a process by which organizations and procedures acquire stability” (Huntington 1968: 12) that has been applied to the analysis of changes within parties. For example, Angelo Panebianco, in his famous work on political parties, focuses on the processes by which organizations form, whether by “penetration” or by “diffusion”. He sees the process of their institutionalization as a moment of organizational consolidation, when the party structure becomes more complex and presents a higher degree of “systemness”. Endorsing a similar perspective, Randall and Svasand argue that institutionalization should be understood to be “the process by which the party becomes established both in terms of integrated patterns of behavior and in terms of attitudes” (Randall and Svasand 2002: 12). Peter Mair and Richard Katz’s analysis of the changes in party or-

ganizations may also be seen as a way of understanding institutionalization. According to their model, the organizations of “cartel parties” are more distant than those of mass-parties from the population: not only do they consolidate the power of their leaders, but they also define strategies for employing the resources of the state (Katz and Mair 1995). Here the focus is still on the consolidation of the party organizational framework.

Even if these approaches to party institutionalization address fundamental issues, such as systemness, charisma routinization, autonomy, or even party members’ identification and commitment, they present obvious methodological limits. Firstly, those elements “cannot be directly quantified or measured”, as Randall and Svasand put it, even if they define a rather general model for the analysis of this issue (2002: 15). Secondly, these approaches generally rely on simplified typologies that cannot grasp the “competitive processes of definition and drawing” of party frontiers, nor the “plurality of the actors that participate” in the formation of a party or in its internal changes (Combes 2011: 25). Thirdly, they explain little about institutional construction and change, since they mainly consider institutions to be not only stable, but also fixed (Hall and Taylor 1997: 481–486). Fourthly, institutions are mostly thought of as being separate from the agents who accept, reform or contest them, when in fact the agents should also be seen as constructing and inhabiting them (Freymond 2010). Last but not least, most of those approaches are removed from the real world. They discuss quantitative data, and forget to address how complex processes of change are carried out by flesh and blood party members. In an attempt to avoid these pitfalls, we propose to define institutions as “all the universes marked by the existence of rules, procedures and stable uses that bear weight on social actors beliefs and behaviors [...] structured by collective rules, roles and statuses” (Nay and Smith 2002). In this paper, the focus will be on institutionalization processes, identified as institution-shaping, and observed from the point of view of party members.

## The Dynamics of Institution-Shaping: Role Definition and Interactions

If we concur with Jacques Lagroye and Michel Offerlé, the process of institutionalization may be understood to be complex, permanent and endless. This process is seen to be much more than the mere “adaptation” of individual and collective actors to stabilized rules and institutions, but rather it means that “a set of rules, knowledge, provisions,



regularities and roles tend to be seen as necessary and functional. [...] The forms of the institution” are designed by “the sedimentation of prescriptions, practices, knowledge and beliefs” that shape the rules through which the institution emerges (Lagroye and Offerlé 2010: 13, 331). According to this definition, political agents hold institutional roles that are associated with practical and symbolic resources, which they mobilize for political struggle. Instead of thinking of institutions as having effects on actors, this approach analyses the uses of “institutional roles as the products of a dialectic game between objective institutional prescriptions and actors’ interiorised dispositions” (Freymond 2010: 48).

Following this perspective, our analysis of the transformation of the PT doesn’t focus on its organizational logics or on its strategic rationality. As Julien Fretel states regarding L’Union pour la Démocratie Française (UDF), “a French centrist party, the point is not that a political party is an ‘institution’ as opposed to an ‘organization’ or a ‘political enterprise’, but rather that we wish to approach political parties as ‘institutions’” (Fretel 2010: 196, emphases as in original). This means focusing on how people engage in a party, how they model the rules of the organization, or how they internalize its legitimate practices; and how those logics are reassessed when the party’s position within the party system changes. Party institutionalization is thus linked to the adoption of certain practices, and to the definition of rituals, routines and rules based on representations about the meaning of those practices. When activists gain access to institutional positions, such as positions of authority or public jobs, not only do they control new material and symbolic resources, but they also hold new roles. In those new positions, individuals learn how to perform their institutional roles, but their behavior is also shaped by their prior socialization, for example by their long-term experience of activist mobilization, and by their long-term participation in the social movement. To examine those processes, we will base our research strategies on the observation of activists’ behavior and interactions, as well as on interviews focusing on the way activists portray their party and their life trajectories. This method enables us to observe how behavior, interactions and meanings changed within the party, along with the social and political standing of its members.

At first glance, those different approaches may seem antithetical. However, they may also enrich each other. As a matter of fact, in the case of a political party, it may be complementary to observe *simultaneously* how its organization may be “turned into an institution” *and* to identify how it inserts itself into a political system, for example when it reaches executive power through the electoral victories of its leaders. This was

the case with the Brazilian PT during the 1990s and the 2000s, when it turned out to be an “unavoidable partner” by playing the part of a loyal opposition, integrated in the local and national representative system. All the actors in this system recognized the PT as legal if not legitimate: it had learnt how to “conform to the norms that dominated” interactions within this system, and its presence within the political institutions had an impact “on the strategies and behaviors of all actors” (Lagroye, François, and Sawicki 2006: 236). For the research presented here, both approaches of ‘institutionalization’ have been mobilized, with the aim of understanding how routines, norms, values and behaviors that were once specific to a party, changed from within at the moment when its organization reached a new position in the political system.

In order to observe this double-faced process, two kinds of research design have been followed. The first adopts a rather “classical” understanding of institutionalization and identifies factors such as electoral victories at the national and local level, or the moderation of ideologies. For this part of the work, second-hand published sources have been used. The second design follows a sociological perspective, and focuses on activist trajectories in order to gather information on their social mobility, on the sedimentation of informal rules within the party, and on their perception of its identity; but it also focuses on transformations of the meaning of being a member of the PT.<sup>4</sup> This part of the research is based on field work carried out in Recife, in the Northeast of Brazil. The case of Recife was especially relevant for observing those transformations because, in this town and in the state of Pernambuco, the PT was founded later than it had been in the southeast of the country. Its first significant electoral victories occurred fifteen years later than in São Paulo and Porto Alegre, in 2000, when João Paulo Lima e Silva was elected as mayor in Recife. Until 1994, the state of Pernambuco didn’t send any PT deputies to Brasília and, for many years, the PT had no more than two or three representatives in the Legislative Assembly of that state. Thus, our case study takes place in a town where the PT occupied a marginal position in the local party system for almost 20 years. When it won office in 2001, the local organization of the party changed rather abruptly, and the changes were still ongoing when we did our

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4 This paper is based on field work in Recife, conducted between 2003 and 2010. For this research, sources of information are semi-direct interviews (three waves of 10 to 15 interviews each), local archives of the PT, a survey made during internal party elections in 2009, and the observation of electoral mobilization on various occasions.

research.<sup>5</sup> For this research, ethnographic work focused on changes in the behaviors of PT activists, and on the transformations of their relationships with the party as an institution, which itself changed permanently. As it became part of the political system, this organization also transformed its internal routines and their meanings, while still preserving a specific identity. But, it is precisely because some activists feel that this historical identity has been transformed, that they have become disenchanted, and criticize the new practices that emerged after PT took office. Some have even chosen to quit.

## Approaches to the PT: The Need to Contextualize Change

Until now, research on the Brazilian PT has followed institutional and national lines, and has rarely been based on ethnographical methods and sociological perspectives. Generally, these studies have combined two perspectives. The first, primarily based on the theories of democracy developed by Robert Dahl and Giovanni Sartori, focuses on institutional issues, the main concern being the contribution of political parties to democratic consolidation and the functioning of representative institutions (Dahl 1971; Sartori 1973). There is a substantial amount of literature that deals with Brazilian political parties in general, addressing issues such as: the role of political parties in the construction of the political offering (Kinzo 2004); the practice of political institutions by parties and members of Congress (Ames 2001); the fragility of Brazilian political parties (Mainwaring and Scully 1995); candidates' strategies (Samuels 1997); party migrations (Melo 2000; Fleischer 2004); and party discipline (Amorim Neto 2002). Secondly, most studies of the PT focus on the party system at the national level, and approach party organizations as collective wholes, viewed from the perspective of their leaders, their strategic choices, their conflicts and ideological debates. These studies deal with the social characteristics of its representatives in Congress

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5 For the first time in 1994, Pernambuco elected two PT federal deputies. In that state, PT won five seats in the federal Chamber of Deputies in 2006 and only four in 2010. In the Legislative Assembly of Pernambuco, PT won its first two seats in 1994, had three seats in 1998, and has had five seats since 2002. In 2000, João Paulo Lima e Silva won the city of Recife, the state capital. He was reelected in 2004, before being replaced in 2008 by his former municipal Secretary for Participatory Planning, João da Costa. In 2012, da Costa was defeated by Geraldo Júlio, a member of the Partido Socialista Brasileiro (PSB). Source: Electoral Superior Court, online: <[www.tse.gov.br](http://www.tse.gov.br)> and Electoral Regional Court, online: <[www.trc.gov.br](http://www.trc.gov.br)>.

(Rodrigues 2002), or analyze party identifications at the national level (Samuels 2008). Local studies, mostly about the PT in the region of São Paulo, adopt a very similar approach (Braga 2006). Focusing on the formation of the PT, Rachel Meneguello studied the process of its “insertion into the political market”, while Margareth Keck focused on the power structure within the organization and on the strategies defined by its leaders (Meneguello 1989; Keck 1991). This organizational and institutionalist perspective is also dominant in the studies of the PT during the 2000s, for example, in Wendy Hunter’s general examination of the party (Hunter 2010), and more acutely in Pedro Ribeiro’s account of the transformation of the PT into a “cartel-party” (Ribeiro 2010), following the model first proposed by Richard Katz and Peter Mair (Katz and Mair 1995), or in Oswaldo Amaral’s analysis of the changes to the internal organization of the party (Amaral 2010).

This paper doesn’t aim to present an exhaustive summary of research on the PT, or to recreate the scholarly debates about the relevance and limits of models of party analysis (Aucante and Dézé 2008). Rather, it suggests that existing research, however valid and useful it may be, has left many issues unexplored, while sometimes oversimplifying complex and heterogeneous processes of change. As ethnographic work on flesh and blood activists is virtually unavailable, mainstream research work on the PT neglects some fundamental aspects of party change linked to the construction of the organization through heterogeneous and changing behavior, representations and identities that are embedded in everyday-life political practices within the party.

Other approaches, based on interactionist sociology and on the analysis of activist behavior, may be necessary if we wish to understand better the social changes that occurred within the PT as part of the process of its institutionalization. In this paper, the main focus is redirected toward the local level and to rank-and-file party activists. It is inspired by various research works that have renewed the study of political parties since the end of the 1980s in France, and more precisely by Bernard Pudal’s proposals for the study of the French Communist Party in 1989. Following Michel Offerlé, Bernard Pudal sought to “de-construct the collective actor in order to re-construct historical and social processes by which individual actors, in their diversity, aggregate, exclude one another, institutionalize” (Pudal 1989: 14). Aiming to observe the transformations of a party organization through the life stories of its members and through their interactions, this paper intends to de-construct it further. To that end, it examines local differentiations of the party organization, as well as the social interactions that connect its members at its core,

both within and outside the party, to its social *milieu*. Thus, we observe the process of institutionalization through the analysis of activist trajectories at the intermediate and low levels of the PT hierarchy.

This approach allows us to take into account the complexities of institutionalization dynamics, during which various processes overlap: 1) interactions between individuals and the organization when activists participate in collective actions, socialize, identify with internal groups, learn practices, and eventually are themselves transformed by an organization whose changes they also contribute to; 2) growing social differentiations within the party organization, with a distance between politically deprived activists and professionalized politicians that control various types of resource, such as electoral support, professional skills, and finances; and 3) long-term changes to the meaning and practices of engagement, either for individuals or for groups, matching the changes they have brought to their own organizations. To that end, the analysis of activists' itineraries and careers at the local level is a relevant instrument for identifying the various forms of institutionalization, its limits and ambiguities, as well as its meanings for the social basis of the party.

## The PT, from Contention to Institutionalization

During the 1990s and the 2000s, the insertion of the PT into the party system was confirmed. After the 1989 presidential elections, the PT took a permanent place within the political arena of the New Republic. Its organization was then present nationwide, and won a growing number of seats in the local and federal assemblies. For PT activists, as the period of clandestinity and precariousness was mitigated, the winning of offices and political professionalization were associated with obvious changes in behavior and discourse. During Fernando Henrique Cardoso's administration between 1994 and 2000, many PT representatives who still felt at home in the social movement arena and still had resources for contention, firmly opposed the federal government by using a combative and determined style. Meanwhile, this virulent and systematic opposition to the coalition of the Partido da Social Democracia Brasileira and the Partido da Frente Liberal (PSDB-PFL coalition) gradually routinized and institutionalized, in the sense that it became usual, expected and legal, and that it respected the rules of the representative system. In doing so, it accorded a legal political expression to leftwing oppositions, and played a part in stabilizing the new political institutions, in a similar way to that of the French Communist Party (PCF) in the 1970s when it had a "tribune function" (Lavau 1981: 37).

## Becoming a Majority

Even if the PT claimed, during the 1990s, that it was still “different”, it nevertheless accepted the complex game of electoral alliances and coalitions (Schmitt 2005). Until the beginning of the 1990s, the PT had a strategy of opposing the construction of the New Republic, as well as its political conservatives and former supporters of the authoritarian regime. The PT, which participated actively in the mobilizations for the direct election of the president of the republic in 1984, refused to support Tancredo Neves’ campaign in 1985, because his vice-president was José Sarney, a former member of the pro-military Aliança de Renovação Nacional (ARENA)<sup>6</sup>. For the same reason, PT representatives voted against the new constitution in 1988. In the following years, the PT proved very selective when it allied itself with other parties. For the first ballot of the 1989 presidential election, it formed the “Brazilian Popular Front” with two small leftwing parties, Partido Socialista Brasileiro (PSB) – the Brazilian Socialist Party – and Partido Comunista do Brasil (PCdoB) – the Communist Party of Brazil. For the second round, Lula accepted the support of Brizola, a former exile and then a governor of the state of Rio de Janeiro. However, he rejected the support of Ulysses Guimarães, a conservative member of Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro (PMDB) – the Brazilian Democratic Movement Party – but a historical figure of the legal opposition to the military regime during the 1970s and 1980s. In contrast, since the beginning of the 2000s, at the national level, alliances between the PT and small rightwing parties have become common practice, especially since 2002 when the PT and the Partido Liberal (PL) united behind the same presidential ticket of Lula-José Alencar. This strategy, and successful negotiations gaining the support in Congress of both José Sarney and the PMDB for Lula’s government after 2003, created public controversy and were regarded as a serious betrayal by numerous PT militants.

Comparison of the results of the PT in the municipal, state and federal elections, shows that the votes in favor of its candidates steadily increased at all levels of government from the moment it was created until 2002, but with a persistent geographical disparity of its electoral victories (Samuels 2004). During the 1990s, the increase was particularly apparent at the federal level. In the Chamber of Deputies, it moved up from seventh position in 1990 to first in 2002, with 91 deputies; at the

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6 ARENA was the rightwing party that supported the military regime between 1965 and 1980. Since then, it has been replaced by several parties, successively: the Partido Democrático e Social (PDS), the PFL, and the Democratas (DEM).

same time it moved up to third position in the Senate (Kinzo 2004). For municipal elections, the comparison between 1992 and 2000 by regions reveals that the PT regularly won a growing number of cities in all regions. In November 2000, it won 29 cities with more than 200,000 inhabitants, with six state capitals, including São-Paulo and Recife. In the country as a whole, the PT tripled the number of city executives it won in 2000 compared with 1996. Thus, the 1990s were a first turning point for the PT, which progressively won voters in regions outside its historical birthplace of São-Paulo, even though, at that time, it gained much more in strength in the Southeast than in the Northeast.

The PT reached a second turning point at the beginning of the 2000s. By 2002, it had not only won the federal presidency, but it had also become a central actor at Congress, with 91 deputies out of 513 in the chamber in 2002, 83 in 2006 and 88 in 2010. Meanwhile, the number of senators from the PT fluctuated from 12 in 2002, to 11 in 2006, to 14 in 2010, out of 81 senators. Between 2002 and 2010, the PT candidate in the presidential election always won by a very high margin with more than 45 percent of the vote in the first ballot and 55 percent in the second.<sup>7</sup> In 2002, the PT's electoral forces expanded across the whole national territory, and by 2006 it had consolidated in the Northeast. Between 1989 and 2007, São-Paulo's share in the support for the PT moved from 55 percent to 20 percent. In the northeastern states, in 2006, Lula gathered between 60 percent and 85 percent of the votes. As Wendy Hunter and Timothy Power put it, in terms of region and class, this election showed an obvious divide between "two Brazils", that could be compared with Lula's defeat against Fernando Collor de Melo in 1989, but the social distribution of the vote between 1989 and 2006 had been reversed (Hunter and Power 2007: 7).

## The Consolidation of the Organization

As the PT acquired a growing strength in the ballots, its organization was reformed in various ways: it was consolidated; it expanded; the number of its members grew significantly; and its structure went through several changes. In 1991, as PT leaders aimed at consolidating the organization, a new charter was adopted. It recognized the existence of internal "tendencies", thus prohibiting the "organizations" that had founded the party from following their own strategies, defining their own rules, publishing their own journals, or handling their own financial resources; in short, it

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7 See Electoral Superior Court, online: <[www.tse.gov.br](http://www.tse.gov.br)>.

was an attempt to homogenize the organization. This change in the vocabulary was not only symbolic. It was also the result of a strategy to control the groups that acted inside the party, because of the need for its local and national directions to unify the organization and manage more tightly its ramifications.<sup>8</sup>

In 1994, the national leadership headed by the *Articulation of the left*, looking for more control over the organization which was still under the influence of its militant groups, chose to replace the traditional “cells” by groups defined either by the geographical “zone” where they lived or according to their social “sectors” (in Portuguese: *núcleos*, *zonais* and *setoriais*). Until then, party members had joined in “cells” of at least nine people, which were implemented in their working places, neighborhoods, universities, unions, or other social movement headquarters (Davis 1997). After 1994, as a consequence of this reform, each “zonal” group gathered more members than “cells” had done in the past, which meant a loosening of the social ties that had previously cemented the party at its grassroots. The meeting places where activists used to debate and socialize were now further from the spaces of everyday life; and, at the same time, party leaders became less aware of issues relating to the everyday lives of its members. For anonymous rank-and-file PT members, these organizational changes meant a growing distance from the party leadership.

Those changes led to a reform of the party's internal representation system in 2001, with the introduction of “direct” primaries for the selection of prospective national and local party candidates (PT 1999b). They also fomented robust electoral competition between the leaders of the party, both at the national and local levels, a competition that became ruthless because what was now at stake was whether or not they would be invested as a candidate. Typically, the implementation of the primaries had the effect of turning the competition between factions into issues of an individual nature, especially for those who aimed at being invested as candidates in the upcoming elections. Generally, those reforms, which aimed to consolidate the party and secure its electoral growth, went hand

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8 As a consequence of this reform of the PT's statute, the “organizations” that refused to transform into “tendencies” were excluded, which was the case for most members of the *Workers' Cause* and of *Socialist Convergence*. This episode may be seen as a successful attempt to gain control of the whole party machine by Lula's tendency, *Articulation – Unity for struggle*; a tendency that has always been the leading majority since the creation of the party, except during a short period, between 1993 and 1995 (Angelo 2009).



in hand with other changes, both in the image of its leaders and in their political discourses.

During its first years, the image of the PT was that of a contentious party, formed by radical democrats, an *avant-garde* of the working class. By the mid-1990s, the PT needed a new identity; that of a party with a skilled and honest leadership, able to administer the big cities of the country. Behind this new public image, in-depth transformations had occurred. Now, the issue at stake for the competing party leaders had become the control of the access to mandates and executive charges, via investitures – a logic that widened the gap between the professionalized elite of the party and the rest of its members. As it won executive and legislative power in a growing number of towns as well as in federal elections, the PT moderated its ideology, and its leaders adjusted to the institutional game. All those processes interacted. On the one hand, the leaders of the party acquired new social positions, and the political status of belonging to a party in office. On the other hand, now that it was integrated into the party system, with an organization centered on its elected leadership, the PT abandoned the radical side of its political objectives.

## From “Democratic Revolution” to “Participative Democracy”

During the 1990s, the issue of participative democracy became prominent in the PT’s discourses, which may be seen as a mark of its institutionalization. Revolutionary connotations gradually lost ground, while new priorities were defined, such as the invention of a full, substantive and “improved” democracy. The adoption of “good governance” references for public action was based on two processes: a change in the meaning given to “participation”, and the progressive introduction of a proposal for “participative democracy”. Now aiming at reforming democracy through popular participation, the PT was acting within the framework of the existing representative system, and it acknowledged the legitimacy of its values and norms, only proposing to change its practices.

As early as 1980, the issue of participation was central to PT members, who passionately and extensively debated the participative experiments launched by the first PT municipal executives, for example in Diadema in 1983, and of course in Porto Alegre in 1988. However, between 1980 and the end of the 1990s, the PT’s texts generally defined participation as electoral. They referred both to the appearance of citi-

zens in the polls, and to the actions of the elected within existing institutions. “Direct” democratic practice meant making use of the right to vote, in association with contentious action. Institutional participation was considered as secondary because they still gave priority to popular mobilization (PT 1999a: 73). However, from the beginning of the 1990s, references to “socialism” were gradually replaced by “radical democracy”. During the 1990s, participative discourse began to become part of the PT’s image, and in the 2000s it was turned into its brand image (Genro 1999).

By the 1990s, PT leaders continued to oppose the politics of their adversaries in government, but they no longer rejected representative institutions. In fact, they had managed to occupy a large spot within them, and now only proposed to change the way they functioned. “Change” was still referred to, but this was now contemplated within the institutions themselves. As an hypothesis, we suggest that “participative politics” was not merely a legitimization resource, or a guarantee that the PT was still on the left after it had abandoned references to Marxism and revolution; nor was it only a useful instrument for bypassing municipal assemblies, in which the PT was usually a minority. Participative politics worked alongside, or even counterbalanced, the political professionalization of PT leaders and the institutionalization of the party as a whole. For local leaders of the PT, attached to their identities as activists coming from the popular movements, appealing to the “people” and asking “inhabitants” to participate was a means of bringing politics and citizens closer, of providing proof of their true will to change politics, and of showing that, after all, they had not changed.

However, the institutionalization of the PT comprised not only the electoral victories that enabled its leaders to access power; neither was it limited to changes in its political proposals or discourse. The insertion of the PT into the party system created professional opportunities for a relatively high number of militants, inhabiting the close social circle of each party representative. Reforms to the party’s organization interacted with upward social mobility for some of its members.

## **Institutionalization and Public Action – The PT and its Activists in Recife**

The general view on the PT’s trajectory at the national level describes a context in which members of the party progressively adjusted their own behavior, beliefs and social identities. In Recife, activists’ itineraries were profoundly re-oriented by the sudden repositioning of their organization

within the local party system. Having been a minority for thirty years, in 2001 the PT won the municipal election in Recife and gained access to local executive power for the first time. This victory changed not only the political position of the party, but also the professional and social position of its leaders. The identities of activists changed, as did the way they viewed the PT. At the same time, the party's leaders had to learn how to be professional politicians, and to behave as such. This meant redefining the relationship between the party and the social movement organizations from which its members had originally come, and to which most of them still belonged.

For our case study in Recife, our observations of the PT were based on an analytical distinction between two different aspects of the institutionalization process. Firstly, while the PT won majorities, its local and national leaders became professionalized and, as a consequence, their relationship with social movements was transformed. Secondly, from the end of the 1990s, the transformation of committed activism into a more remote and often disenchanting participation, went hand in hand with an increasing distance within the party between the professional elite and its rank-and-file activists, on the one hand, and with a change in the activist *ethos* and party identity, on the other. The following sections will firstly present three types of activist trajectory, underlining some biographical impacts of engagement and ways in which individual careers may interact with organizational change. Next, it will analyze the changes in militant behavior.

## Upward Social Mobility

To analyze the social components of the PT's institutionalization, three types of life path have been identified. Firstly, some of the long-term rank-and-file members have followed an upward trajectory since the 1980s. For them, engagement was linked to a new socialization that favored the acquisition of skills. In some cases, this was associated with the decision to go back to school, or to complement their education. Several factors may account for this. Within militant groups, political information circulated, and there were many opportunities to debate political issues and interact with authorities. When these individuals, already acting in other mobilized groups, became members of the party they found new resources to access information and social networks, thus reinforcing a disposition to increase their skills, to study, or to learn new norms of behavior. For those activists, engagement opened the doors to professional careers that would have otherwise been harder to access. In the case of the Federal District in Brasilia, Daniella Rocha compared the

professions of rank-and-file PT members with those of their parents. According to her survey, most members came from the lower levels of the social pyramid, and showed an obvious tendency to upward social mobility (Rocha 2007: 74–78). The life paths that we observed in Recife confirm that, for the most strongly committed individuals, opportunities opened up for further education and jobs appeared that gave them social resources to use in the political and professional fields. For example, their organizations sometimes paid for the travel from the countryside to the state capital; or, through jobs they sometimes obtained in the contentious field, they acquired new professional skills as well as financial resources for further education. In some cases, they were even given scholarships. More generally, even for the majority who didn't benefit from these direct retributions, the insertion into a group of activists initiated a process of acculturation that helped construct new social dispositions.

Currently a journalist Paula works as a communications coordinator in a solidarity association in the center of Recife. Of very humble origins, she was first engaged when she was a young teenager, living in the city of Palmares, in the southern part of Pernambuco. As a member of the youth group of the local church, she had contacts with the Catholic social movements and with local PT activists, a party she joined in 1986. Her involvement in those groups gave her access to opportunities to acquire further secondary formation and professional skills, which she was able to use later away from the activist field. In 1988, at the age of 24, she went to live in Recife, where she got a job at the documentation center of the Diocese of Olinda, and drew a salary from Ação Cristão Rural (ACR), a Catholic militant organization. This center, located in the heart of Recife in a building owned by the diocese, hosted several other organizations linked to the “church of the poor” that were active in various sectors, such as human rights and housing. According to Paula, her job in Recife opened new militant, professional and personal horizons for her. While working in a social movement organization, she acquired new non-militant skills, such as writing papers, conducting interviews and coordinating a group. In 1994, she enrolled to study journalism in the Catholic University of Pernambuco (UNICAP), and was granted a fee-exemption by the diocese. After graduating in 1997, she worked in communication for the Bank Workers' Union of Pernambuco, one of the biggest local branches of the Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT). In 2003, she was recruited by an association devoted to rural development. During these years, Paula was a member of the PT and participated in the activities of her local group (*núcleo*), where she met her

future husband, another member of the group. In her life path, engagement has created job opportunities, which in turn have given her the chance to resume her university education. At the same time, she dedicated her professional activities to militant action, and continued to work for social movement organizations into her forties. However, by the time we interviewed her, she was becoming more distant from the social movement field. Her job was less connected with her former mobilizations, and she now kept away from the church. She even expressed doubts about her membership in the PT.

Paula's case is not an isolated one, as her life path is comparable with that of other activists interviewed in Recife. Coming from very humble rural families, they had their first contacts with contentious politics through the local progressive Catholic Church, or through local workers' unions. Social interactions in the contentious field led them to resume their schooling, or gave them access to professionalizing jobs. In several cases, militants chose to study at university, and practiced as qualified professionals in the same sector in which they had participated as activists. At the time of the interviews, they were high or middle-level professionals, such as lawyers, university teachers, journalists or NGO coordinators. Thus, for rank-and-file militants, engagement brought various types of indirect compensation, such as acculturation, political skills, access to education, and qualifications.

## Political Professionalization behind the Scenes

A second path is that of low-level, unelected professionals who work in the political entourage of the PT's leaders. In Pernambuco, the PT had no deputy in the 1980s, and it never had more than five federal deputies and five state deputies during the 1990s and 2000s. Although the numbers of those seats were few, winning them made it possible for each deputy to recruit staff, mainly to help with the administration of their legislative mandates (Ribeiro 2009). The staff members were generally chosen from PT members close to each representative, and from his long-term fellow comrades. They worked on a large variety of jobs necessary behind the scenes in the political backstage, from cabinet heads to office assistants. Thus, a new category of PT members emerged from the direct entourage of its elected representatives. For them, the party's social *milieu* not only provided an arena in which they could mobilize, but also enabled them to make a living, and to find a professional opening in which a career was now possible. Generally, those unelected collaborators managed to get a paid job in the political field because of the professional skills associated with an activist know-how, which they had ac-

quired over a long period of mobilization. In our interviews with them, they spoke of their work with a mixture of political conviction and professional logic. There are various ways in which these people may be recruited, but most of the time one of two paths can be distinguished.

Firstly, many office assistants or cabinet collaborators have personal links with the party leader, such as neighborhood relationships, family links, or early intimacy as grass roots militants. This is the case with Maria, who was the coordinator for Pernambuco, working on the staff of Federal Deputy Fernando Ferro at the time of the interview. She had her first contact with politics at the end of the 1980s when she was a sociology student at UNICAP. Although she was interested in politics, she chose to keep her distance from student mobilizations because, as she confesses, she felt reluctant to join any political party since she was afraid of feeling “imprisoned” if she did so. She was first politically mobilized in 1986 when she took part in the campaign for governor of Miguel Arrães, who was heading a leftwing coalition. In 1990 Fernando Ferro, with whom she was acquainted because they were neighbors and members of the same neighborhood association, hired her as a cabinet collaborator. Maria joined his staff as a communications professional, without having had any previous party involvement. According to her, her only motivation was professional, and it was only after some time that she decided to become a formal member of the party, in 1994 – in order to “defend our positions” in the local organization, as she explains. In Maria’s trajectory towards a job as a collaborator of a local PT leader, there was no pre-requisite beyond being a leftwing sympathizer. Having no previous long-term involvement with activist networks, Maria became a political professional by activating the personal links she had with her boss as a neighbor, and because she had specialized skills to offer.

Following another type of path, skilled collaborators are generally chosen according to their technical knowledge of a particularly sensitive issue, along with their acquaintances in the social movements of their professional sector. For Victor, who grew up in a very humble family in the rural interior of the state of Pernambuco, education and activist engagement went hand in hand. He first encountered politics in 1980, when he was only 16 years old, through Padre Gusmão, a Catholic priest of the liberation theology. Victor took part in the activities of the local church’s youth group, and got in touch with activists who were beginning to organize a local PT branch. In 1983, he left Palmares for Recife in order to study at the Instituto de Teologia do Recife (ITER), a Catholic seminar owned by the Olinda Diocese, well-known for its defense of progressive Catholic stances. During his training as a seminarist, Victor

would study during the weekdays and mobilize in support of sugar cane workers at the weekends, in the southern part of Pernambuco. In 1986, after he decided to quit his religious vocation, Victor chose to study law in order to “get educated in the area of human rights”. For this, he received a grant from a Catholic social movement organization, the Comissão Pastoral da Terra (CPT), which also hired him as a lawyer working in support of rural communities in the sugar cane regions of Pernambuco, Alagoas, Paraíba and Rio Grande do Norte. After he graduated in law, in 1988, Victor made use of his specialized professional skills and his know-how as a long-term activist. The combination of those two types of resources enabled him to work for various PT representatives after 1988. From 1993 to 1996, he worked as a legal advisor specializing in land issues for Jorge Leite, one of the PT’s *vereadores* in Recife. Afterwards, he began to work for Humberto Costa, and was still collaborating with this federal deputy at the time of our interview. Victor’s engagement in the PT is associated with an upward social mobility. In Victor’s life path, socialization into the social movement field opened up education and job opportunities for him, thus changing what it meant to be a member of the PT.

For two out of three of these careers, the access to administrative and political jobs within the party *milieu* and in the staff of its elected leaders was a result of a simultaneous membership of the PT and a social movement organization. This dual membership makes the individual familiar with the political issues of a specific sector, and with its social networks – two resources that are strategically important for a deputy’s staff. It is this close articulation between party or associative engagement and professional activities that transforms activism into a career, a career that was transferred into the field of professional politics when the PT won its first legislative seats in Pernambuco (Louault 2006; Fillieule and Mayer 2001).

## Learning to be a Professional Politician

The third category is composed of a small number of elected professional politicians who won legislative mandates during the 1990s. Their entry into the institutions had several consequences and social meanings: a growing political legitimacy; the need to learn how to manage their new position; and a clear and rapid social mobility. According to André Marinho dos Santos, PT local leaders have long-term itineraries of political professionalization that depend more on militant rather than personal resources (Santos 2001). Most PT representatives in Pernambuco professionalized in the political sphere following a lengthy contentious en-

gement. Their entry into the professional political field was anchored in activist networks that had been formed previously in the social movement space, now an electoral basis. At first, they learned about political action from two positions – the party and the contentious space – but their main engagement originally took place in the professional sector, mostly in unions.

This is the case with Roberto Leandro, a state deputy who won a seat for the first time in 2002. Roberto Leandro first engaged when he was a student in the Public Administration department of Pernambuco's Federal University. He was elected president of the student council (*diretório acadêmico*) in 1977, and at the same time was also a member of the clandestine Partido Comunista Revolucionario (PCR). In 1979, he represented his university in the first national congress held for the re-founding of the União Nacional dos Estudantes (UNE) in Salvador. After being hired as a bank worker in 1979 for Bandepe (Pernambuco's state bank), he became a member of the bank employees' union of Pernambuco. During the 1980s, Roberto Leandro acted as a union leader as well as a party activist, first as a member of the Partido Comunista Brasileiro (PCB), then as a member of the PT. In 1991, he was elected president of the bank workers' union of Pernambuco, a powerful organization affiliated with the Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT), the PT's long-term ally. His first legislative campaign as a candidate was in 1994, and it took no fewer than two more attempts before he was elected in 2002. In this life path, the entry into the political sphere proceeded concurrently with union activism in the professional sphere, a sector where this deputy mobilized support for political action and electoral campaigning.

Some points of similarity may be identified with the path of Isaltino Nascimento, another state deputy in Pernambuco. Like Roberto Leandro, Isaltino Nascimento followed the path of an activist for a long time before becoming a professional politician. A president of the social security workers' union of Pernambuco for 14 years (from 1985), as well as a president of his neighborhood association in Casa Amarela, he was also a rank-and-file member of the PT, and had no responsibilities during this period. Thus, his main resource was his links with various activist networks. This is why the PT's largest faction urged him to be a candidate. Despite having little experience of party machinations, and although he had very limited education, Isaltino Nascimento agreed to be a candidate because he was asked by the PT's dominant faction. After the PT launched his campaign, he was first elected to the Municipal Chamber of Recife in 2000, and to the state Legislative Assembly two



years later. When we interviewed him, he recalled frankly how intense it had been for him to discover politics in parliament, the rituals of assembly life, and the expected behavior of professional politicians. He recalled that his entry into professional politics affected his social position, and also required him to learn how to behave according to rules that were specific to the professional group of which he was now a part. As a former employee and unionist, learning to be a politician meant discovering how to control “the behavior of the language”, how to listen, how to talk pleasantly with his adversaries, and how to negotiate in corridors.

The professionalization of these two deputies in the political field followed on directly from their former commitment as union leaders, when they acquired political skills and resources that they were able to mobilize afterwards for political action (Matonti and Poupeau 2004). The process of incorporating the informal rules of parliamentary life became part of the PT’s institutionalization, as its representatives adopted the norms and practices of professional politics, and learned to comply with the *routines* of these institutions (Lagroye, François, and Sawicki 2006: 146). As a consequence, the PT was increasingly populated by individuals whose professional careers and social ascent depended on their position in the party organization. For a large number of local PT leaders, this upward mobility was based on resources that emerged through party work; resources such as political skills, activist know-how, social networks, and increasing power and incomes. In return, this process interacted not only with the obvious changes in the organization’s position in the party system, but also with its identity and with the everyday behavior of activists.

## Institutionalization and the Meanings of Activism

### The PT and the Contentious Space: “it is not a strategy of struggle anymore”

In the 2000s, the way rank-and-file PT members viewed their party was drastically altered. In their interviews, most of them emphasized various aspects of the changes: the growing gap in the party between its leaders and its grassroots members, the priority given to electoral strategies, and the weakening of the contentious spirit. Most of them remembered past struggles, and blamed the PT for their decline. They also displayed unconfessed feelings of nostalgia. Today’s professionalized party is in stark

contrast to the PT of the 1980s that they remember as “a leftwing party, able to protest”. As one of the interviewees put it, for individual party leaders today, “what dominates is the perspective of getting a power share”. Here, a former period of genuine oppositional struggles is compared with the current position of the party at the head of public administrations. It is now described as a machine, one that is designed to win elections, and one that has gotten rid of the troublesome burden of “socialism”. In the PT that the interviewees from Recife depicted, individual strategies and personal political careers prevail, as if being a member of the party was useful only as a springboard for accessing political positions: “it is not a strategy of struggle any more, it is not socialism anymore. It is a competition for power, for electors, for government. Now, what dominates is: ‘my space, my power, my seat, my salary’”. The PT has lost its identity as a leftwing party because it now acts “within the system” and “nobody debates on the issue of socialism anymore”. In the interviews, some members complained about the marginalization of activists within the party. As one of them put it, reading the *Capital* has been replaced by the analysis of city budgets: “now, the issue is: participative budget and all those affirmative politics. But it takes the fighting spirit away”.<sup>9</sup>

Activists feel that they have lost their space within a party that has very little in common with the one with which they were previously engaged, even if they declare that they wish to be loyal to it. Such transformations in the PT went hand in hand with an increased personalization of party identifications within its electorate and its militant groups, with the territorialization of the party networks at its base, and with the segmentation of the support for individual party leaders, and the individualization of their resources (Montambeault and Goirand 2013). The growing distance between elected representatives and their staff, and activists outside the field of power, deeply altered the social equilibria within the PT as an organization. In Recife, ethnographic observation of several electoral campaigns showed an acute territorialization of the resources of PT candidates in popular neighborhoods. In these spaces, social mobilization networks intertwine with individual party supporters to create electoral loyalties. During PT's grassroots campaigns, individual rivalries and strategies are structured around permanent competition between tendency leaders.

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9 All the quotations are extracts from interviews by the author with rank-and-file PT militants in Recife (2010).

Since the beginning of the 2000s, electoral victories have changed the meaning of militant action within the PT, refocused the organization toward its elected representatives, redistributed resources within the party, and strengthened individualized strategies. Some leaders control resources that the party itself lacks, whether it be logistical and financial resources, or human resources. Structured by gatherings around its elected leaders, the PT is now organized according to the loyalties of its militants to its public personalities. Behind the party's official face in the media, in the social spaces where leaders interact directly with their electorate or through the mediation of local brokers, factions have lost their ideological content. Mobilizing militant support for electoral campaigns is now the instrument of a fierce individual competition between politicians who are looking to secure their professional careers.

The introduction of party primaries in 2001 may have informed or publicized the ideological debates at the national level (Samuels 2004). However, local observation reveals another scenario. Individual and non-ideological competition, as well as a frequent use of illicit practices for capturing votes for each tendency. In Recife, militant groups align themselves according to their loyalty to a leader who organizes their mobilization, which is a central resource for defining his position in the competition for the nominations of candidates. This personalization of loyalties within the party suggests that the PT's ideological transformation, and its movement toward the center, have coincided with the recruitment of activists and young professionals to the staff of its more moderate representatives. Those collaborators do indeed need to secure their positions.

## Disenchantment in an "Ordinary" Party

The rank-and-file militants we interviewed oppose, on one hand, the collective memory of past mobilizations, on the other hand, the current normalization of their party. This process gives rise to an intense questioning of changes in the meaning of commitment, and redefines the PT's identity. For those who were socialized into politics in a period of opposition and contention, remembering past struggles is a way of legitimating present action, a way of cementing the group through its memory, and of keeping the contentious component of its identity alive. During the 2000s, the PT and the social movement organizations that had accompanied its struggles since the 1980s gradually broke up.

Since 2003, some unions, associations and political figures at the left of the PT have clearly expressed their disagreement with the politics of

Lula's government in Brasilia, as well as with the PT's new discourse, which some consider to be a renunciation or even a betrayal.<sup>10</sup> As well as public criticism, the PT has faced disenchantment, individual disengagement and silent withdrawals. These have limited the intensity and frequency of the circulation of activists, and thus reduced the party's local space. Longstanding PT militants still like to discuss the party's old identity, which is now reinforced with other stories that refer to the participative administration of cities, to "the PT's way of government", to competence, efficiency and good governance, or to social policies for the deprived. While the party organization was consolidating, the identity narratives produced by its members diversified (Hastings 2001). Today, the memory of the heroic contentious past of a "different" party<sup>11</sup> obviously contradicts the "normal" organization that has taken shape since the 2000s. The disillusioned words of long-term militants give voice to the feeling that their party has become similar to others and that, with the loss of transparency and integrity, it has lost its exceptional characteristics. For those who mobilized during years of uncompromising opposition, institutionalization and the practice of local and national power mean much more than an *aggiornamento*, or a mere "adaptation" to reality (Hunter 2010). They imply a redefinition of the social meaning of political engagement.

## Conclusion: A Growing Distance between Professionals and the Rank-and-file

Our field research in Recife didn't seek to observe how the PT "adapted" within the political system. Of course, its governmental programs moderated with the transformation from revolutionary references to discourses of ethics, and later participative democracy. It is also obvious that PT leaders adopted behaviors that "conformed" with the rules and demands of the political system, and that they now play the game of elections much more than the one of contention. However, complex dynamics of change are not limited to those processes. The institutionalization of the PT, observed at the local level, and through the individuals

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10 See, for example, the *Letter to President Lula (Carta ao Presidente Lula)* published in the media by a collective of famous leftwing figures on 1 May 2004. Then available on the website of the Landless Rural Workers' Movement: <[www.mst.org.br](http://www.mst.org.br)>.

11 For an example, see the website of Perseu Abramo's Foundation, the PT's cultural foundation in São-Paulo: <[www2.fpa.org.br](http://www2.fpa.org.br)>.

and groups which constitute it, was composed of a combination of gradual transformations of the following: the party's political position; its social identities; the skills of its leaders; and their individual interests and professional careers.

This paper has shown that the institutionalization of a political party is a multi-faceted process. Firstly, the PT "entered" into the political institutions via the administration of several state capitals, and through winning legislative mandates. For the party leaders we interviewed in Recife, this meant learning how to practice being in power and absorbing the dominant norms of behavior of the Brazilian political field, even if they tried to change those rules from within (Fleischer 2004). Secondly, the institutionalization of the PT was the product of "initial adjustments, successful experiences or failures, compromises" (Lagroye, François, and Sawicki 2006: 147). PT activists, once clandestine opponents, left contentious collective action behind them when they reached positions of power. When legal and legitimate within the political system, PT activists began to inhabit its institutions and to respect its dominant rules. During this period, they also changed their social position, constructing new militant and professional identities, and adopting new social behavior; these were symbolically expressed by the replacement of the red T-shirt by the conventional suit of professional politicians, and by the adoption of marketing-based campaigning practices. This institutionalization was also based on transformations of the party organization itself, which was reformed several times between 1991 and 2001. Not only was the party consolidated, but also the balance of its internal structure was redefined by the new social and political standing of some of its members.

This paper's focus on activists' life paths has shown how diverse logics interact at both the individual and organizational levels. Upward social mobility and political professionalization require intense learning processes, and have implications for social identity and behavior. Biographies also give a good overview of the logics by which parties and social movement organizations, once intertwined, become remote from each other; or by which collective action behavior becomes more professionalized, while long-term activists disengage and share feelings of disenchanted loyalty towards their party and its leaders. Of course, those processes interact with others that may be observed "from above", namely the consolidation of the party organization, its insertion into representative institutions and the moderation of the politics implemented by its leaders in office. Nevertheless, caution is needed when interpreting those interactions. However obvious they may be, there is no evidence as to how each factor affects the other, or whether there is a

direct causal link between them. For example, it would be too simplistic and deterministic to explain programmatic moderation by a mere allusion to logics of status, such as social mobility and access to power. Nonetheless, explaining one of those processes requires looking at the others. For some PT leaders, winning office meant changing their social position as well as learning formal and informal institutional rules and rituals, which was also translated into individual behavior and social identity. Those changes cannot be separated from the reorientation of political strategies and repertoires, for example for electoral campaigning.

Generally, the insertion of the PT into existing institutions interacted with individual life paths, and together they produced changes at different levels, such as the party system, the orientation given to public policies at the national and local levels, the social roots of the party, its identity in the electorate and among its members, or the way collective action is organized within the party. From this perspective, the transformation of the Brazilian Worker's Party during the last decade is part of the multi-faceted process of consolidation of the representative system in the country, a process which includes the possibility of integrating some formerly contentious groups and attending to some of their demands. However, this is a process that is always fragile and incomplete.

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## **O Partido dos Trabalhadores, da contestação a ação pública: um caso de institucionalização**

**Resumo:** O Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) foi criado em 1980, durante a liberalização do regime autoritário no Brasil, em um contexto de intensas mobilizações, especialmente fortes no setor sindical na região de São Paulo. Desde 1980, o PT cresceu nas urnas e o número de executivos locais controlados por esse partido cresceu até a conquista da Presidência em 2002. Esse processo é comumente rotulado como “institucionalização”. A primeira parte do artigo propõe uma definição dessa noção assim como uma abordagem para a observação dos processos de institucionalização nas bases do partido. A segunda parte do artigo analisa as transformações do PT ao nível nacional segundo o qual o PT obteve maiorias, sua organização foi consolidada, e seu discurso ideológico moderado. Na última parte do artigo são analisados os componentes sociais da institucionalização do PT. Baseado no caso dos membros de base do partido na cidade do Recife, o artigo mostra que esse processo incluiu uma mobilidade social ascendente das lideranças locais, a profissionalização dos líderes partidários na arena política, e criou um distanciamento crescente entre a organização do partido e o espaço de conflito.

**Palavras-chave:** Brasil, Partido dos Trabalhadores, carreiras militantes, institucionalização