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Analytical Essay

Fernando Henrique Cardoso: The *Astuzia Fortunata* of Brazil's Sociologist-President

Laurence Whitehead

Contemporary political science is uncomfortable with the topic of leadership.¹ The concept is seen as diffuse, many of the key attributes are both subjective and hard to measure. The topic is not easily reducible to statistical generalizations or probabilistic regularities. It is hard to say much without entering into the detailed analysis of personal careers and individual cases, but to be “scientific” is thought to require abstraction from such treacherous and impressionistic material. However, the course and outcome of major political processes can only be adequately explained by including a plausible account of how the most powerful political actors have acquired and used their public authority. Despite the constraints, there is an inescapable margin of discretionality in the strategies and choices available to political leaders; and they inevitably operate under conditions of uncertainty and surprise (“contingency”) that test their inventiveness and adaptability. Thus any plausible analysis of a real political process must consider how leaders are selected and prepared for their responsibilities, and what baggage they carry with them.

Niccolò Machiavelli resurrected the Roman tradition of analysing statecraft from this perspective, and subsequent social theorists, most prominently Max Weber, have taken up similar issues. But this kind of work is no longer so academically respectable. Journalists and some historical biographers have taken over this field, largely abandoned by the political science community. There are few useable biographical studies of Latin American political leaders, and the literature on leadership in new democracies focuses on questions of institutional design to the disregard of this crucial topic. This article is a small scale corrective to what I consider this gross scholarly neglect. It looks at the career trajectory of a democratic leader, and attempts to demonstrate that larger comparative questions about the changing nature of political leadership can be seriously addressed in this way.

Even in the Renaissance, there were not that many Renaissance men. But if it was hard to live many lives in one even for the best placed of Renaissance Europe it is surely harder in contemporary republican Brazil. And

1 A more extended version of this article will be published in D’Incao and Martins (2009).

yet Fernando Henrique Cardoso or FHC achieved it. How was this possible and at what cost in terms of conflict between the different specialized roles he occupied? What does this tell us about “politics as a vocation” in twenty-first century democratic Brazil? And what light does it shed on the scope for and limit of political leadership in contemporary democracies?

There are few other cases known of a leading social scientist/professional public intellectual who also achieved and sustained such a position of leadership in the politics of a nation. In particular, he is the only professional sociologist to serve as a country’s president and Chief Executive. There are various more or less professional economists who occupied similar positions (Ernesto Zedillo, for instance). Perhaps the closest contemporary analogy might be the career of Václav Havel, who achieved international distinction as a writer and public intellectual before becoming the first President of post-communist Czechoslovakia. But neither Zedillo nor Havel combined the two identities as completely as FHC. They were both “accidental” political leaders, whereas FHC who describes himself as the “accidental President of Brazil” was more full-blooded (Cardoso 2007).

There are more comparators, such as Thomas Jefferson and Alexis de Tocqueville, but they refer to a period before modern specialization and mass politics. Woodrow Wilson and Winston Churchill provide early twentieth century names for consideration. But Fernando Henrique Cardoso achieved international scholarly recognition in a period of far greater academic formalism (he declined the offer of a top chair at the University of California, Berkeley as late as 1982). This is not the kind of career trajectory to be expected of democratic leaders in the twenty-first century. In addition to his undoubted qualities and efforts, FHC owes his considerable historical success to an exceptional and probably unrepeatably set of contextual circumstances.

Does Brazil’s social structure or traditions of elite recruitment have distinctive features that might account for FHC’s unusual career record? Gilberto Freyre said of Brazilian intellectuals that “their predominant – though not exclusive – tendency since pre-national days has been to allow for non-logical elements in their analysis and interpretation of social situations.” He then developed this idea with specific reference to József Bonifácio de Andrade e Silva, who – in contrast with men like Balthazar Brum, Francisco García Calderón, Estanislau Zeballos, José Vasconcelos, Woodrow Wilson or Adlai Stevenson who seemed “too intellectual for their political positions” but like the Viscount and the Baron of Rio Branco, Brazil – was not “overlogical or rational handling problems that involve certain irrational or illogical considerations” (Freyre 1986: xxi-xxii)

Freyre is referring to a pragmatic inclination to adjust abstract theoretical constraints to take into account popular attitudes. Politicians everywhere must

temper doctrinal commitments with an intuitive sense of the political climate, but in Brazil the gulf between intellectually approved theories and popularly generated collective assumptions has been especially acute, and Brazilian thinkers have often enjoyed particularly broad latitude to “make it up as they go along.” In the 1990s, for instance, almost all academic opinion accepted the political science orthodoxy that a democratic Brazil required a parliamentary regime. FHC and the Brazilian Social Democracy Party (PSDB) were united on this point. But in the April 1993 plebiscite in which the Brazilian people were offered the chance to follow “rational” best practice prescriptions for institutional design, the parliamentary option was roundly defeated. In order to secure parliamentary consent for this plebiscite, it was necessary to win the support of the monarchists by offering that option as well – a manoeuvre FHC regarded as “a bit pathetic,” but unavoidable. It was, perhaps, an indication of FHC’s political flexibility that he not only acquiesced to this outcome, but embraced it with sufficient enthusiasm to secure election as the republic’s next President, and then to use that incumbency to modify the Constitution further in the direction of a strengthened federal executive. Intellectual consistency might have required a more “logical” stance, but this pragmatism was both politically effective and in keeping with the Brazilian tradition identified by Freyre.

However strong that Brazilian tradition may have been, it could hardly provide a complete guide to the role of intellectuals in Brazilian politics in the last third of the twentieth century. International expertise and recognition obviously came to play a larger role in the assignment of scholarly status; and at the same time, the massification of higher education in Brazil, following directly on the military regime’s purges and exiling of the most prominent of dissident intellectuals, created an extraordinary and unrepeatably cycle of opportunity. FHC was the right man, at the right time, and in conditions of extreme turbulence the luck of the draw dictated that he would be the beneficiary of rare opportunities denied to his closest contemporaries. He was also astute in seizing these opportunities. In Machiavelli’s terms, to become the ruler of a constitutional principality “né a pervenervi è necessario o tutta virtù o tutta fortuna, ma piú tosto una astuzia fortunata” (Machiavelli 1995: 62-63).

FHC acknowledges the unusual advantages associated with his intellectual background in the Brazil of his youth.

In some countries, academics are perceived as people who have failed in life, unable or unwilling to participate in the real world. But in Brazil in the 1950s and 1960s, this could not have been further from the truth. The intellectual elite were unbelievably small... So men and women with degrees were accorded almost reverential importance.

Top academics had influential roles in government and business. Universities were seen as the perfect place to educate oneself in preparation for a full active life... After twenty years a professor could go on to become a senator or a business executive. As a young professor I had no intention of entering politics; I was happy to teach and to learn. But I always felt I was preparing myself for *something* (Cardoso 2007: 48).

Already, in his early twenties he achieved international visibility as part of a UNESCO research project team led by Roger Bastide and Florestan Fernandes investigating the realities of race relations in Brazil. This provides a very early illustration of a crucial contextual factor that differentiates the Brazilian intellectuals of his generation from their predecessors. After the Second World War, comparative social science quickly became universalized. The consequence was that, on a long list of vital topics, someone was required who could represent the Brazilian case (on race, class, urbanization, the emergence of an industrial bourgeoisie, and in due course also on the national security state, dependent development, and even democratization). Brazil was such a large and significant exemplar of all these phenomena that the international academic community almost demanded a spokesman, an intermediary, an interpreter who could speak to the Brazil case, deploying the theories, concepts, and analytical techniques of the advanced centres of enquiry. FHC's base, the University of São Paulo was in pole position to meet this demand.

The outside world, with its insistent requirement for a Brazilian contribution, but its limited engagement in the inwardness of Brazilian academic and intellectual life, created a market for a small number of instantly identifiable "star" performers. International travel, familiarity with French and English, and a flexible capacity to communicate national realities in terms that were accessible to outsiders, were all attributes that carried an exceptional premium at this time. Moreover, once an international reputation and network of contacts had been established it tended to be self-sustaining. It was hard for local rivals to break in to the established charmed circle. And that made the politics of scholarly recognition a highly contested and deeply uneven field.

Similar patterns can be detected in other Latin American countries in these post-war decades, but the Brazilian case was the most extreme... the huge size and internal diversity of the continental social formation we call Brazil made the task of synthesis – of representing all that complexity in an intelligible form to a largely uninformed outside world – required more than the usual academic levels of self-confidence and versatility. Some solid local research base was also important, but the

scattered pockets of capacity to undertake such work were too incipient and thinly distributed to generate a stable professional stratum of expertise. In its place, there rose to prominence a small galaxy of international star performers (Burns 1993: 408).

This was the setting in which FHC rose to prominence.

In his autobiographical accounts FHC presents himself as a moderate, a realist, someone capable of understanding the viewpoints of both right and left, and then of striking a detached balance between them (he claims, for example, to have identified both with the Emperor Dom Pedro [deposed in 1889] and his grandfather “a fiery young man who had hotly urged the execution of the emperor”) (Cardoso 2007: 16). But until his forties, his reputation was that of a left-wing radical. On his own account, he notes that

virtually all of us in Brazil who were young, progressive and above all, romantic, had toyed with the idea of becoming Communists at one time or another. Myself included, it was love at first sight. In a country with such massive disparities between rich and poor, communism's appeal was completely understandable. It offered an alternative to an existing scheme we all believed had failed (Cardoso 2007: 61).

The antecedents help to explain the range of his academic interests, the background to his writings on “dependency,” and some of the sources of his intellectual prestige in the 1970s. They also shed light on what the military coup of 1964 meant for both his hopes and his political prospects.

In the early 1960s, FHC tells us, he declined an invitation to participate in the National Economic Development Council, since he believed the political situation was too unstable. Shortly before the 1964 coup “I took some shelter in the academic universe... I withdrew into something of a shell. I declined invitations to teach at the University of Brasilia – it was too close to the eye of the storm” (Cardoso 2007: 73). His father's opposition to the coup was well known, and many of his friends were disappearing, so he chose within a few weeks to go into exile. He later reflected:

In retrospect, I believe I probably could have stayed behind in Brazil without my life being endangered, at least in the short term... However, I would have been placed under severe restrictions in my academic work, and I would have been subject to stifling intellectual climate and persecution of all suspected leftists. I would not have grown professionally (Cardoso 2007: 84).

Had he stayed behind he would either have had to play safe – and look the other way while his colleagues were arrested or persecuted – or to have defined himself as a more committed radical than he wished to become. In exile, by contrast, he acquired a post at the United Nations Economic

Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC/CEPAL) headquarters in Santiago (the first sociologist ever employed by the UN) together with diplomatic status. But his reputation as a left-wing intellectual was also enhanced with the launch of “dependency theory.”

When his father died, he had to return to Brazil for the funeral. At this point, his elite family and military connections kicked in. An influential General with an intellectual background spoke up on his behalf and the arrest warrant issued against him was quashed. As he recalls:

Looking back I have sometimes felt guilty for having survived the struggle against the dictatorship... Although I never explicitly used my family’s connections to get me out of danger, it is probable that my social status and my degree of professional renown spared me greater trauma (Cardoso 2007: 118).

Indeed, his professional renown was such that in 1967-68 he was invited by Alain Touraine to teach at the industrial sociology lab at the new Nanterre Campus in Paris (thus obtaining a front seat to observe *les événements* of May 1968).

On his return to Brazil, when he applied for a cátedra position at a university in São Paulo, he reports that he found himself “pinned in on both sides. If the radical left merely disliked me” (accusing him of “betrayal” for attempting to change the system from within), “the extreme right was rigidly opposed. The Minister of Justice himself contacted the university dean and made it known that my candidacy for a senior professorship would not meet with official approval” (Cardoso 2007: 108). Again, his international standing came to the rescue. The Ford Foundation supported the creation of an independent research centre, the Centro Brasileiro de Análise e Planejamento (CEBRAP) under his leadership. This proved possible even during the most reactionary and repressive phase of military rule, because, he says, of what the Brazilians call the *jeitinho*, “a peculiarly Brazilian way of breaking the rules in which, as long as you insist you are obeying the rules, you can get away with pretty much anything...” (Cardoso 2007: 112). (Or, at least you can if you are sufficiently prominent and well-connected).

For a decade after the military coup, he led something of a charmed life as a radical intellectual, widely identified outside Brazil as a key symbol both of resistance to the coup and of openness to international progressive thought, while also managing to flourish and build support networks at least in educated circles in São Paulo. Until the emergence of the Worker’s Party (PT) in the late 1970s, no other type of political opposition was tolerated, so in this period the problem of choosing between alternative career paths did not arise. But from 1974 (when President Ernesto Geisel proclaimed *distensão*) to 1982, there was a gradual resurfacing of his original and still unre-

solved dilemma (preparing himself for *something* – but what?). Having lived in Chile in the 1960s and having witnessed from afar the rise and fall of the Allende government (in many ways an eerie but more extreme re-enactment of the João Goulart experience of 1964), he – like all leftists of his generation – was deeply affected by the coup of September 1973.

A key inflexion point came in 1974 when – to his surprise – the new leader of the “tame” opposition party, the Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (PMDB), came to CEBRAP and invited his think tank to help draw up the electoral programme. With this, the academic began his entry into reformist politics. These international developments and this domestic opportunity probably contributed to the big shift in his academic position that occurred when he decided to distance himself from the excesses that had grown up around dependency theory (Cardoso 1977).² Although his was the most famous name connected to this faddish international bandwagon, he was by no means its sole proprietor; nor did he wish to be associated with the radical *dependentistas* (for whom only extreme “de-linking” from global capitalism – perhaps even the North Korean approach – would suffice to fend off the controlling power of international capital). As a sociologist FHC had closely studied the industrial bourgeoisie of São Paulo (Cardoso 1971), and knew that it was too reductionist to assign them a single inevitably reactionary and anti-national political role as some theorists of “class fractions” were increasingly inclined to do. And, as a prime beneficiary of the enlightened outlook of the Ford Foundation he was also aware that some international linkages and lines of influence could support integrative development, even though others might (in times of crisis at least) only serve to suppress majority aspirations.

In his autobiography FHC presents his celebrated work (with Faletto) on “dependency” in Latin America as a forerunner of subsequent literature on “globalization,”³ and it is true that his contribution shifted the focus of structural analysis from the domestic to the international level. But for the first decade after the publication of his best seller, most of those who regarded themselves as practitioners of “dependency theory” emphasized the inequalities and injustices generated by the global market economy, and downplayed its potential for accelerating what the rival structuralist theory (“modernization”) regarded as its typically positive features (a rising “middle

2 For the left-ward shift of successive editions of *Dependency and Development in Latin America*, see Packenham (1982) and Love (1990: 167).

3 Much of the 1990s literature on globalization was celebratory in tone, and now seems very one-sided. As President, FHC may have been slightly influenced by this, but always with reservations. By 2006, when he published his Portuguese-language autobiography, he had become quite forceful about its negative aspects.

class,” and more opportunities for broad-based development, including democratization). As one of the most prominent creators of the dependency approach, and as a dissident intellectual trying to keep afloat under an arbitrary and intermittently brutal military regime, it was not to be expected that FHC would overtly espouse the modernization perspective, but both his daily praxis and his academic commitments made him increasingly uncomfortable with the revolutionary directions being taken by many of his more enthusiastic followers, and in due course he felt obliged to distance himself from what he saw as the uncritical “consumption” of dependency theory.

Three major questions were at issue. First, were the radicals justified in presenting dependent development as an inevitable dead end, from which it was only possible to escape through radical de-linking or socialist revolution? Or was it more of an adverse international tendency, whose negative features needed to be understood so that they could be counteracted (by means of appropriate strategies of reform and alliance-building)? Secondly, even if the radicals were right about some countries and developmental impasses, should their model be generalized, so that everywhere – even in Brazil and Chile where the left had been politically defeated – presented only one stark disjuncture? Thirdly, and perhaps most crucially for FHC’s own strategy and career prospects, were political outcomes pre-determined by economic and class structures, or was there still an autonomous sphere for political creativity, reform-mongering, and alliance-building within a dependent national political system?

On all three points FHC became increasingly clear that the radicals were mistaken, and indeed that they were misinterpreting his most famous work. After all, Cardoso and Faletto had always stated that there could be no single theory, as there were different “situations” of dependency in different economic and historical contexts. And although they had said that political institutions “can only be fully understood in terms of the structure of domination because these express the class interests behind political organization,” they had also suggested that in “decisive historical moments, political capacity (which includes organization will, and ideologies) is necessary to enforce or to change a structural situation” (Cardoso and Faletto 1979: 14 and xi).

In practice, from the late 1970s onwards, it was the building of a (reformist) political capacity to change Brazil’s (dependent) structural situation that engaged FHC’s commitment and absorbed his creative energies. Class interests might hamper some of his objectives and favour others, but these were often more malleable, more open to persuasion, or manipulative reinterpretation, than may initially have been assumed. In scholarly terms, the focus of his interest shifted from questions of structural political economy

(where Karl Marx was the obvious reference point) towards the theory of the state (a more Weberian approach) and then to Brazil's political institutions (leading to his later focus on democratization and institutional design issues). In any case, as the scion of a very long-established and well-connected political lineage, he was hardly disposed to see his country as one more "pawn" passively subject to external control; nor was he likely to overlook the opportunities of political crafting from within that were so much a part of his family's patrimony.⁴

It is important to underline the fact that despite shifts in Cardoso's analytical positions on the nature of the international system, and the scope for Brazil to alter its position by means of domestic political creativity, and despite the claims of some of his critics, FHC says he never simply dropped his earlier arguments. He always sought to rework and update them, for example, by linking the dependency perspective to emerging (more positive) accounts of "globalization," or by extending the reform-mongering perspective into a more fully developed account of "democratization" (in which the autonomy of the political realm necessarily expanded, whereas the constraints of class politics faded from view). In this sense he has remained true to the academic side of his *persona*.

His Portuguese-language autobiography retraces this continuing intellectual commitment, in that he tries to reflect theoretically on his experiences and to educate his readers into the realities of political life, rather than merely to justify his actions (although he recognizes the inevitable subjectivity of all such exercises). No doubt the wide ranging, provisional, and rather loose structure of his scholarly contributions made it possible for him to morph into a variety of political roles and ideological positions without explicitly liquidating any part of his intellectual inheritance. Most probably, the narrower, more tightly structured, and more rigid academic specialization that currently dominate the social sciences would have been more unforgiving and less easily reconciled with this political trajectory.

The transition from academic to political leader was neither quick nor smooth. Although it was not until 1982 that FHC declined the Berkeley chair, his commitment to a political career was already apparent in the late 1970s. He became Franco Montoro's *suplente* in the 1978 senatorial elections in part because, unlike many other possible candidates, he had not been banned from standing (although he had been barred from occupying any public academic post). His campaign was boosted when his candidacy was declared illegal, after which the Supreme Court reinstated him. But despite this electoral achievement, he was still primarily in academia until his unex-

4 For family antecedents see Cardoso (2007: 2).

pected elevation to the Senate. It was not until the late 1980s (after a serious setback in 1985, when Jânio Quadros defeated him in the contest for *prefeito* of São Paulo) that his efforts to establish himself as an electoral competitor and a key figure in Congress bore fruit.⁵

There followed another quite extensive learning cycle, when he took up cabinet positions in the Federal Executive. And then in 1995, in a manner that he characterizes as “accidental,” he made the final transition from party leader and public intellectual to President of the Republic – a post he eventually occupied for eight years. No doubt, his congressional and ministerial careers were suitable preparation for his last reinvention as a democratic head of state, but each phase was a major shift, demanding the cultivation of new skills and disengagement from prior commitments and expectations. These were “many lives in one,” and to make a success of them all evidently required an unusually favourable context, and a considerable degree of agility (an *astuzia fortunata* of a high order).

Just as the entry into full-time politics required boldness, luck, and good timing, so also the choice of entry vehicle was critical. In view of his public reputation and credentials, FHC might have been expected to have joined other social scientists (such as the sociologist Francisco Weffort) in helping to found the PT. Instead, he accepted nomination by the military approved opposition party (the MDB) to run for the Senate in São Paulo. This option was made easier for him by the loose organization and ideological heterogeneity of the early MDB. In 1974, it was only organized in 28 percent of São Paulo municipalities, but by 1976 this had risen to 80 percent, after the left joined to undertake *trabalho de base*. FHC’s preference for this less confrontational option also makes sense from the standpoint of his family background, and can also be understood in terms of the *jeitinho* instincts he displayed when taking on CEBRAP. (If you insisted that you were acting within the limits of legality, you might get away with quite a lot). But perhaps there was an additional factor: The organizational core of the PT was the underground trade unions of São Paulo. If one wanted to broker alliances between diverse interests, and to preserve the flexibility that was necessary for intuitive “reform-mongering” (Albert Hirschman’s phrase) the early PT was not such a promising vehicle. In fact, the PT repeatedly opted for the confrontational stance on issues that FHC and the PMDB/PSDB judged more pragmatically. Moreover, FHC’s reputation and talents won him access to the educated elites, not to shop-floor workers.

5 As FHC reports: “Because I had essentially arrived in Congress by accident I never felt I had to compete in order to succeed. I had the luxury of acting more like a mediator...” (Cardoso 2007: 165).

His first electoral campaigns were highly indicative of these strengths and weaknesses. In the university quarters of São Paulo, he polled well above the basic strength of the PMDB; but in the southern industrial belt the party delivered its voters to their nominee, despite rather than because of the candidate. And in the backlands he fell short (for example, he made nothing of his links to his birthplace in the rural interior). His elevation to the Senate owed more to luck and elite contacts than to his skills as a vote-winner. In fact, the professor accustomed to explaining complex propositions to an attentive academic audience initially found it a major challenge to give an effective stump speech.⁶ Perhaps the most revealing indication of these difficulties came a little later, in his failed 1985 campaign against Quadros. He had negotiated with the TV journalist on the scope and limits of the topics to be discussed when he agreed to a live interview, and believed he had an assurance that one particular question would not be asked. So he was taken aback when, with the cameras already rolling, he had to respond to the fatal enquiry “do you believe in God?” His evasive reply not only reflected the fact that he was unprepared for the question, but also how difficult it was to reveal himself to his educated and secular friends and progressive admirers as just another politician willing to misstate things in order to secure election.

Another episode of the same kind concerned the smoking of *macomba*. It was no easy matter to communicate with the Brazilian electorate on such issues without laying oneself open to absurd rumours. After the mid-1980s, he became more experienced and successful in managing such challenges,⁷ although he never overcame his aloofness, and remained a distant figure for most Brazilian voters.⁸ He was also lucky: he was pictured cheering the Brazilian team in the World Cup, for example, and admits that this was unfair (Lula was more of a football enthusiast than he was). But he was also lucky (Brazil won the Cup only 16 days after the launch of the Real). In Brazil in the 1980s, it was still widely held that the people would never trust an uneducated man to occupy top public office. This was one serious impediment to Lula's electoral endeavours on behalf of the PT – until 2002, when to

6 He says he preferred television interviews to mass rallies, because he could be more didactic and “professorial” (Cardoso 2006: 66).

7 By the early 1990s, the redoubtable Governor of Bahía and leader of the Liberal Front Party (PFL) wryly commented about FHC's performance as a campaigner: “O senhor esta melhorando” (Cardoso 2006: 207).

8 He learnt that campaigning is about an exchange of physical energy since people literally want to touch you: “o político está expressando para aquelas pessoas que tem empatia con elas, que vai respeitá-las... É um gesto, e política é também gesto...” But as a result, the campaign is a test of stamina, with the candidate feeling like “uma corda de violino permanentemente esticada...” (Cardoso 2006: 214).

widespread astonishment it turned out that a plain-speaking metallurgical worker and a trade unionist *could* effectively occupy the Presidency. That almost certainly closed the brief “window of opportunity” that had temporarily allowed a sociologist to retain his professional integrity while also securing mass electoral endorsement. The transition from politics as the preserve of a small inbred elite to the professional management of mass opinion of a twenty-first century democracy was a brief and exceptional interlude. FHC was *fortunato* as well as *astuto* to learn this office precisely when democratic transition from military rule created the requisite space.

As a leading São Paulo intellectual and social scientist, FHC had the benefit of easy access to the best concentration of scholars and policy analysts in Brazil. He also knew when to defer to the superior expertise of others in his team who shared his general outlook and academic formation, but who had specialised in other disciplines. He was never a solitary individual: he was always the leader (and facilitator) of a broad network of ambitious, talented and self-confident policymakers. At crucial junctures in his career (including when Itamar Franco more or less obliged him to take on the Economy Ministry ahead of the Real Stabilization Plan), he received encouragement and protection from quite conservative figures – even those associated with the military dictatorship. But above all, his claim to leadership arose from his interest in, and his understanding of the dynamics of political democratization in Brazil. He had the comparative insight that many others of his generation lacked, and he used his skills and flexibility on this topic to build a leading position in Congress (thus helping to shape the 1988 Constitution), as well as to establish the PSDB as a leading player in the processes of elite accommodation, popular reconciliation, and institution-building⁹ that were an integral part of regime change in Brazil. For this purpose, it was critical not only that he personally keep firmly in view the strategic agenda of democratization, but also that he build a strong team of like-minded collaborators. That was the key to his ascendancy in the PSDB in the 1990s.

The memoirs contain many scattered reflections and illustrations of how FHC selected and managed his team. Economic policy was a crucial responsibility for which he was not personally well-prepared. He was able to draw on the expertise of such advisers as Pedro Malan and Edmar Bacha, who were both extremely able and well-trained, but who also recognized that the ultimate political responsibility lay elsewhere. When the experts tried to brief him on the technical aspects of the Real Plan, he kept telling them they had to put it in a more simple language, since that is how he would need to explain it to

9 Lourdes Sola and I developed the theme of “state crafting” to explain Brazil’s incremental democratization in Whitehead and Sola (2005).

the Brazilian people (Cardoso 2006: 174). When he found himself required to brief his nominee as President of the Central Bank, I was told that his key instruction was “I’d like you to run it as if it were the Bundesbank.”¹⁰

As Foreign Minister, and then as President, he was also required to lead Brazil’s foreign policy. Again this is not necessarily a strongpoint for the majority of sociologists, although FHC had more experience of the world than most (both theoretical, as a dependency theorist; and personal, as an exile and then an academic globetrotter, being the President of the International Sociological Association in 1982, and a direct interlocutor with figures such as Jacques Chirac and Bill Clinton, among others). He was also well assisted in this area by the highly professionalized *Itamaraty* (the Ministry of External Relations).

With these background considerations in mind, it is worth turning to his own comments about the relationship between his sociological formation and his presidential activities.

Perhaps in a developed country like Germany or the United States, a sociologist would not have been such an asset as President; but in Brazil, where so many of the problems stemmed from social injustices, I was in an advantageous position. It was surprising how often a dilemma could be solved by taking an honest, objective look at the different groups involved and then imposing the fairest solution for everyone. A little common sense proved to be much more effective than throwing money at the problem – and a lot cheaper too (Cardoso 2007: 206-207)

On the other hand, he also concedes to his critics that

sometimes I was so eager to see Brazil with a sociologist’s eye that I was shy with the use of power. This was surely one of the biggest flaws of my presidency. I was still too much of a sociologist. I was so keen to remain above the fray that I missed opportunities to convince other people of my beliefs or to take substantive action. I needed to see the big picture better than the small one, and my scientific instincts could make me seem aloof (Cardoso 2006: 206).

Despite his progress in learning the arts of modern political communication, he acknowledges that it was a continuing liability that he still seemed aloof. There are various illustrations of this reality, but perhaps the most revealing is a comment he makes about his relationship with the leaders of the land-

10 FHC was not a prisoner of the orthodoxy of central bank autonomy, and instead used Brazilian state-crafting techniques to engineer a stabilization framework that proved more durable and effective than most comparable institutions in Latin America. See Sola and Whitehead (2004).

less movement (the MST). As a *sociólogo de campo* he felt that he understood the plight of the landless, and was committed to trying to solve that problem (Cardoso 2006: 69). But when MST leaders came to see the President, and addressed him as “Fernando” he responded severely in defence of the dignity of the office of the presidency, saying (in a variation of the classic Brazilian putdown, the origins of which have been acutely analysed by Guillermo O’Donnell [1984] and by Roberto da Matta [1990]) “o senhor está falando com quem” (Cardoso 2006: 69). The contrast with Lula is striking here: “Lula’s greatest skill then (1978) as now (in the Presidency), was his ability to relate to people. He never, ever forgot his roots” (Cardoso 2007: 135). Nor did FHC.

The ethical dilemmas of state-crafting – how to combine prudence with virtue, to meld an ethic of responsibility with one of conviction, to prosper in the struggle for power, and to preserve public authority while also serving the collective interest – are matters of central concern to FHC. Indeed, his Portuguese-language autobiography is designed explicitly as a meditation on these issues, and as a source of guidance for those who wish to be politically both progressive and realistic, rather than as a justification of his own record. More than any other Western Hemisphere leader I can call to mind, he addresses these questions in a sophisticated and theoretically informed manner. In this respect, he appears more as an old-style public intellectual, more as a European social theorist, than as a contemporary professional sociologist. Hence, it seems worth concluding this belief sketch of this “Renaissance man,” by commenting on how convincing his answers are in theoretical terms, and how well they are illustrated by his personal career and his political praxis.

For FHC the art of politics is a process of persuasion, which requires listening fair-mindedly to alternative views, and seeking imaginative solutions that reconcile opponents even though they may involve sometimes messy compromises:

O jogo político não se desenvolve contando aritmeticamente os “contra” como se o fossem para sempre, e os “a favor,” sendo estes os bons e maus os outros. Pelo contrário: dialeticamente, trata-se de transformar “maus” em “bons”: a política implica um processo de convencimento, por motivos e com objetivos variáveis, que, olhado de forma individual, podem ser moralmente aceitáveis ou discutíveis, mas cujo significado histórico será julgado por suas consequências (Cardoso 2006: 99).

He therefore sees real scope for the politically creative individual:

Caminhadas novas requerem líderes. Líderes democráticos e inovadores são líderes morais que podem ser também políticos. Não são heróis nem super-homens, e muito menos santos. São pessoas capazes de apontar caminhos e dar exemplos (Cardoso 2006: 780).

Worthwhile and insightful though these conclusions may be, they are also quite loose. They also bear a considerable resemblance to the mainstream positions taught in the *Faculdade de Direito* in São Paulo in the nineteenth century. They illuminate the outlook of a thoughtful and experienced democratic political leader, but they do not provide a rigorous analytical framework for an ethical political sociology. Both Machiavelli and Weber, to whom FHC refers extensively, injected far more structure and precision into their arguments.

Like FHC, both Machiavelli and Weber also aspired to occupy positions of political leadership as well as to analytical insight into the nature of politics. But the more rigorous theorists were less successful than the more intuitive thinker, and I am inclined to detect a causal relationship here. It is true that luck and historical accident also played a part: FHC was the right man in the right place at the right time. FHC's theoretical commitments were of intellectual importance in their time, but they were less penetrating and more improvised. Even so, they could have been an impediment to the success of his political career, had he not worn them so lightly and reinterpreted them so freely. The international structural constraints that he highlighted in his early career became the opportunities (and dangers) of globalization in the 1990s. The class interests that lay behind political organization proved so malleable that by the end of his presidency only such dogmatic sectors as the MST remained un-reconciled. However committed he may be to democracy as a value-in-itself, he drew strength and support from many of the political interests that had flourished under the protection of the military regime. This flexibility and agility was a key ingredient of his political success, but it would have been more of a problem in his previous career in the social sciences.

It is important to differentiate between astuteness and flexibility, on the one hand, and careerism or manipulative deception on the other. FHC's political commitments may have been somewhat fluid, but they persisted, and helped to guide his conduct. He had a lasting desire to see the establishment of a more successful and more democratic Brazil and through *astuzia fortunata* he did much to advance that objective. Even at the end of his career, his objective is not to fight partisan battles but to offer guidelines for those who will continue on that path, and to promote the education of the Brazilian people at large. He came from a very privileged background, and enjoyed the benefits of becoming a citizen of the world (not an option

open to Machiavelli or Weber). He helped manage the transition from closed Brazilian elite politics to mass politics in a way that softened the pain and minimized the violence, so that when a genuine man of the people did at last ascend to the highest electoral office Brazilian society (and even most Brazilian elites) were able to accept it. He helped construct an institutional framework to steer state policy in a responsible and coherent direction, which compares favourably with many other cases. All this required flexibility not too many preconceptions, a *poder de convocatoria*, and a sense of public spiritedness. Too much academic inflexibility would probably have clashed with much of this.

What broader conclusions can be extracted from this exploration of one vivid and exceptional political-intellectual career? FHC tells us that for his small cohort of public intellectuals there was no contradiction between acquiring academic expertise and doing *something* successful and important in the world. Freyre argues that in the Brazilian tradition this combination of intellectual ability and practical efficacy was achieved through not being overly logical. Machiavelli's category of *astuzia fortunata* can be understood as a formula for minimising collective danger and the need to resort to violence by acting judiciously and without illusions when the opportunity presents itself. Weber views politics as a vocation, or calling, which implies an underlying conviction about the purposes of political action (which for him necessarily involves imposing one's domination on others), but in which likely results (consequences) may have to be weighed against intentions. FHC's trajectory can be seen as an expression of the old Brazilian traditions invoked by Freyre, and as an astute set of responses to the exceptional circumstances presented by his privileged background, his international academic standing, and the restrictive practices of a successful and long enduring military regime. The opportunity to stay inflation came only once, and crowned his career. His *astuzia* required the questioning of illusions that held sway (and still hold sway) among most currents of opposition to the military, but it also required an enduring attachment to broadly "democratic" convictions.

The democratization of Brazil did not take the form of a "one step" transition – it was an extended and interrupted process of collective persuasion and complex renegotiation. Leadership can make a difference in the steering of such processes, and it helps if there are some democrats available before there is democracy. Brazil was more fortunate than some of its neighbours, in that its traditional elites and republican institutions could nurture the requisite praxis, and that not all this potential was destroyed when authoritarian repression took hold. Under contemporary conditions of mass democracy, the baton has passed to a very different stratum of political operatives, far more narrowly focussed on the calculus of competitive advantage. In the future,

Brazilian academics may be more specialized and boxed in; the scope for *virtú* in political careers may also be more restricted and professionalized; policy “results” may be more closely monitored and narrowly evaluated; the era of intense “politics of conviction” and regime change could lie behind us. Future presidential candidates will not “accidentally” address the voters as if they were students in a seminar for they will all be intensively schooled in expensive modern marketing and campaigning techniques. If so, this reconstruction of the key elements in FHC’s political career will soon seem as remote as the study of rulership in Renaissance Italy.

The fortunate accidents and agile adaptations of FHC’s political trajectory confirm the salience of contingency, and the inevitability of discretionary choice, as key factors shaping and constraining the opportunity structure confronting such leaders. To interpret his behaviour purely in terms of some kind of rational calculus of career advancement would be to suppress most of what is worth studying in such cases. Equally well, to deduce his options from some abstractly conceived incentive structure derived from proportions about institutional design in presidential systems would be to mis-specify his predicament almost completely. The discretionary power arising from his leadership position granted him tremendous latitude (in a democratic transition) to construct or dismantle institutional incentives according to his best judgement. Naturally, he had to attend to basic requirements of career preservation and advancement, and to the broad incentives and constraints associated with the public offices to which he was elected or appointed. But such guidelines left him broad room for manoeuvre.

In contemporary democracies, the basic rules may be clearer and more stable than in earlier times, and the sanctions for failure may be less harsh. There is a limited term of office, and leadership must be exercised in interaction with other elected officeholders also facing term limits. Loss of office, and return to private life is no humiliation but the normal end to every political career. Poisonings, beheadings, abdications, and enforced exiles should no longer be an integral part of the career structure. But there is a great deal that a democratic president of Brazil can choose to do right – or wrong – even in a single four year term. To understand how those choices are made we need to consider what motivated the career; what baggage the leader brought into office (ideology, family background, character traits, life experiences, debts to sponsors); what team of ministers were assembled and how their talents were used; what rivals (or enemies) spurred the leader into self-definition; what ethics (of conviction, of responsibility, or opportunism) were in play. This factorial grid may be unmanageably large, and the strands within it may be somewhat amorphous and entangled. But they are not arbitrary or beyond systematic analysis. And they require the kind of attention illustrated in this

essay, because they are what mostly explain how democratic leaders behave. A political science that screens them out renders itself mute on some of the most vital dimensions of democratic performance.

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