The Worker’s Party, from contention to public action: a case of institutionalization

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At the end of the 1990s and during the 2000s, an important number of Latin American countries experienced a change in power when leaders coming from leftwing parties won presidential elections after years in the opposition. In spite of its extreme diversity, the Latin American left as a whole changed profoundly during this period, in relation to party organization structures but also of ideology. In the first step, most of those parties abandoned references to marxism and, in the second step, accepted economical liberalism. Those transformations also meant the redefinition of activism and a reshaping of the relationships between parties and social movements. Strategies for winning power were revised and shifted from armed struggle or contention to electoral mobilizations, after most political systems liberalized (Garibay 2005). Moreover, assuming power at the local level and, afterwards, at the national level, was linked to a process of institutionalization that went hand in hand with the progressive transformation of former contentious parties into government parties. By the end of the 1990s, and after their conversion to representative democracy during the 1980s, they had accepted liberal economic policies, like European social democrats had, however much earlier. The Brazilian Worker’s Party (PT) is one of the most striking cases, but it can be compared to other organizations such as the FMLN in Salvador, the PRD in Mexico or the MAS in Bolivia (Combes 2011). In the case of the PT, gaining legislative representation and assuming executive power was linked with deep redefinitions of the meaning of political action for rank-and-file activists. For those who had experienced the political repression of the authoritarian period and had taken part to the foundation of the party in 1980, the most meaningful transformations of the 2000s were linked not only to their relations to the political institutions, but also to the meaning they gave to their own commitment, and to the identity of a party which came from contentious social movements and now had taken office.

The PT was created in February 1980, during the slow liberalization of the Brazilian authoritarian regime. The military, after the 1964 coup d’état, removed fundamental liberties and prohibited leftwing oppositions, although maintaining regular elections and imposing a controlled bipartism until 1980. The amnesty law in August 1979 and the return to multipartism in December 1979 took place in a moment when oppositions were gaining forces, especially with the protest cycle

\footnote{PT : Partido dos Trabalhadores ; FMLN : Frente Farabundo Marti de Liberación Nacional ; PRD : Partido de la Revolución Democratica ; MAS : Movimiento al Socialismo. See Goirand 2005.}
that began in May 1978 in the industrial periphery of São Paulo and with the strengthening of a contentious opposition within metal-workers trade-unions. It is in January 1979, during the congress of the metal-workers unions of the State of São Paulo, that plans for creating a worker’s party were launched. When it was eventually created, in 1980, the PT gathered various branches of the radical left. With its union’s component — clearly the strongest — the PT also included leftwing figures back from exile, contentious student groups especially from the National Union of Student (UNE) which was recreated in 1978, human rights movements, various armed struggle organizations which had fought against the military regime after 1968, movements linked to the progressive catholic church, and various popular “base” movements. All those components shared a common trajectory, in the sense that they mostly came from illegal oppositions to the authoritarian regime or from the contentious movements that emerged in the late 1970s.

During its first years, the PT had limited electoral successes, hardly going beyond the state of São Paulo. However, it soon expanded through the Southeast of Brazil, and, for example, it gained office in the town of Porto Alegre in 1988. The following decade was that of a gradual electoral consolidation for the PT. The number of its deputies increased progressively during the 1990s, while its presidential candidate, Luis Ignácio da Silva, was repeatedly considered as a favorite by opinion polls, even if he eventually was defeated in 1989, 1994 and 1998. It is in 2002 that the PT’s candidate won for the first time the contest for President, before he was re-elected in 2006 and then was substituted by Dilma Rousseff in 2010.

In 2002, the PT’s victory was characterized by a clear switch in the electoral geography of Brazil. During its first twenty year, PT had been a minor - if not absent- party in the Northern and Northeastern polls, whereas, since 2002, an overwhelming majority of citizens in those regions voted for PT’s presidential candidates, Lula and Dilma Rousseff. In Recife and in the state of Pernambuco, in the Northeast of Brazil where our field work took place, the PT formed later than in the Southeast. Its first significant electoral victories occurred fifteen years after São Paulo and Porto Alegre, in 2000, when João Paulo Lima e Silva was elected as a mayor in Recife. Until 1994, the state of Pernambuco didn’t send any deputy to Brasilia and, during many years, the PT didn’t have more than 2 or 3 representatives in the Legislative Assembly of this state. Thus, our case study takes place in a town where the change in the PT’s position has been late and sudden.

2 For example, in 2006, Lula gathered 48.6% of the total votes at the national level and 70.9% in the state of Pernambuco (1st turn). Source: Electoral Superior Court, www.tse.gov.br

3 For the first time in 1994, Pernambuco elected two PT federal deputies. In this state, PT won 5 seats in the federal Chamber of Deputies in 2006 and only 4 in 2010. In the Legistive Assembly of Pernambuco, PT won its first 2 seats in 1994, had 3 seats in 1998, and has 5 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 substituted in 2008 by his former municipal Secretary for Participatory Planning, João da Costa. In 2012, he was defeated by Geraldo Júlio, a member of the PSB (Partido Socialista Brasileiro). Source: Electoral Superior Court, www.tse.gov.br and Electoral Regional Court, www.tre.gov.br.
Those electoral victories are deeply linked to the transformations of the PT, first a minority party supporting a revolutionary discourse, and formed through the encounter of a great variety of contentious, leftist, social movements, and now a moderate government party. Those changes are part of the institutionalization of the PT; a complex process that presents multiple facets: this party progressively entered into the institutions it first opposed radically. As they accessed to new political and social positions, its members modified their behaviors and preferences.

The analysis of those evolutions may be relevant for too different purposes, at least. First, the political debate about the institutionalization and the so-called “reflux” of contentious organizations in Brazil -social movements or parties- has been very simplistic and incomplete (Cardoso 1994). It still needs to be revisited is we wish to achieve a better understanding of today’s Brazilian political system. Second, scientific approaches of institutionalization should be renewed in order to account for the complexities of processes that are embedded in social as much as regime changes. For this, a focus at social interactions may help broaden existing attempts at deconstructing party organizations and enrich our look at the processes at work in democratic consolidation. The first section of this paper will discuss the notion of institutionalization in itself. In the following sections, this paper will analyze the different aspects of this process in the case of the PT, in order to show how the transformations of the organization interacted with the changes in the political and social position of its members. In the second section of the paper, the argument will be contextualized at the national level. In the following sections, evidences will be drawn from our field study in Recife.

Analyzing the institutionalization of a political party

A process with various facets

The notion of institutionalization may be understood according to various approaches, that are linked to a narrower or larger definition of an “institution” (Hall & Taylor 1997): in the first kind of approaches, institutionalizing means entering into existing formal institutions and accepting their main rules (Piven-Cloward 1979, Tarrow 1994), whereas in a more open and sociological meaning, it refers to the process of being socialized to the norms, values and practices shared by a group, and taking part to their reshaping or change. If we follow Jacques Lagroye and Michel Offerlé, the process of institutionalization may be understood as complex, permanent and endless. Much more than the mere “adaptation” of individual and collective actors to stabilized rules, this process means that “a set of rules, knowledges, 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, knowledges and beliefs” that modify the rules through which the institution emerges (Lagroye-Offerlé 2010 : 13, 331).

At the first glance, those two approaches may be seen as antithetical. However, they may enrich one another. As a matter of fact, in the case of a political party, it may be complementary to observe at the same time how it is “made 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 of the Brazilian PT during the 1990s and the 2000s, when it turned to be an “unavoidable partner”, playing the part of a loyal opposition, integrated in the local and national representative system. All 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 et al. 2006: 236). For this research, 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 inside, at the moment when its organization reached a new position in the political system. Thus, we observed jointly how the PT became part of the party system and how this process interacted with the sedimentation of a “group style” (Eliasoph & Lichterman 2003). The latter was shaped by the memory of passed commitments, by the intensity of electoral mobilizations, and by the representation of the party and its members as coming from a long-term combative activism. In this sense, “institutionalization” is a process by which the party itself was progressively turned into an institution, through the consolidation of its organization, through the construction of local, identity tales, through a shared activist ethos. It means that the PT’s organization was gradually constructed through the diffusion among its members of specific group styles and representations that came from contentious mobilizations, but that also served as a basis for the pacific, legal conquest of power through the ballots.

As a consequence, for this research, ethnographic work dealt with the changes in activists’ behaviors, and with the transformations of their relationships with the party as an institution, which itself changed permanently. As it entered into the political system, this organization also transformed its internal routines and their meanings. However, the PT also preserved a specific “group style” which is still a powerful resource for the loyalty of its long-term activist. But it is precisely because they feel that this style is being transformed that some activists feel disenchanted, criticize the new practices that emerged after PT took office, or even choose to quit. The observation of the PT in Recife has been based on the analytical distinction between three different aspects of the process of institutionalization. First, the progressive moderation of PT’s revolutionary discourse is a symptom of a change in public action preferences among party leaders. Second, while the PT won majorities, its local and national leaders professionalized and, as a consequence, their relationship with social movements transformed. Third, since the end of the 1990s, the transformation of the former extremely committed activism into a more distant and often disenchanted participation came along with the growth of a distance, within the party, between a professional elite and rank-and-file activists, on the one hand, and with a change in the activist ethos and party identity, on the other. Thus, through the analysis of the various aspects of those changes, this paper addresses 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 consolidations as well as for implementing local ‘good governance’.

The entry of the PT into the institutions: a compromission or a complex process of change?

A lot of research work on social movements think their institutionalization as a failure or even as a compromission. Most of them limit the understanding of this process to the adoption of electoral strategies and to alliances between contentious organizations and political parties (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 (Piven & Cloward 1979). Thus, institutionalization is understood as an explanation for the decline in the intensity of mobilizations. Moreover, Sidney Tarrow showed that “protest cycles” begin, but may also continue, when changes in the political opportunity structure occur. According to him, protest cycles end with reshapings in the institutional politics, including the integration of contentious groups leaders into the political systems (Tarrow 1994), even if they may be loyal to their former fellows in the contentious arena.

However, in order to address the “reflux” or failure diagnosis, and if we aim at bypassing Meyer & Tarrow’s proposals on “movement societies” (Meyer-Tarrow 1998), we should look at individual activist trajectories, and identify the nature of their social and political mobility during the process of institutionalization. According to Jack Goldstone, social movements are part of an environment that gives shape to various institutions such as political parties, assemblies or elections. « Understanding how social movements give rise to parties, shape political alignments, and interact with normal political institutions has become essential to comprehending political dynamics » (Goldstone 2003 : 12). In the case of democratic constructions, individual participation in social movements and political parties are not alternatives but may be complementary activities, and, to a larger extent, electoral and contentious politics are not automatically opposed. In the cases when an opposition party wins local or national elections, like the PT during the 1990s, its members still circulate within the social movement spaces and continue interacting with their actors. It is only progressively that they adapt their behaviors, discourses, strategies and aims to their new positions.

Until now, researches on the Brazilian PT have followed institutional and national lines and have been rarely based on ethnographical methods and sociological perspectives (Keck 1991; Meneguello 1989; Ribeiro 2010; Hunter 2010; Power & Amaral 2013). Other approaches, based on interactionist sociology and on the analysis of activist behaviors, may be necessary if we wish to understand better the social changes that occurred within the party, as a part of the process of its institutionalization. In this paper, the usual focus is redirected toward the local level and toward rank-and-file party activists. In doing so, 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 meant 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 at observing the transformations of a party organization through the life stories of its members and through their interactions, this paper intends to deconstruct it further. For this, it observes the local differentiations of the party organization, as well as the social interactions that link its members at the basis, within but also outside the party, in its social milieu. Thus, it is through the analysis of activist trajectories at the intermediate and low levels of the PT hierarchy that we observe the process of institutionalization.

This approach enables to take into account the complexities of institutionalization dynamics, during which various processes overlap: 1)- interactions between individuals and organization, when activists participate to collective actions, socialize, identify with internal groups, learn practices, and eventually are themselves transformed by an organization that they also contribute to change; 2)- growing social differentiations within the party organization, with a distance between politically deprived activists and professionalized politicians that control various types of resources, such as electoral support, professional skills, finances; 3)- longterm changes of
the meaning and practices of engagement, either for individuals or for groups, parallel to the changes they brought to their own organizations. For this purpose, 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.

In Recife, activist itineraries were profoundly re-oriented by the sudden changes in the position of their organization in the local party system. After being a minority during thirty years, the PT won the municipal election in Recife in 2001, and got access to the local executive power for the first time; a victory that meant not only changes in the political position of the party but also in the professional and social places occupied by its leaders. This new position transformed activists’ identities and the way they looked at the PT. At the same time, it meant that its leaders had to learn how to be professional politicians and to behave as such. It also implied to redefine the relationship between the party and the social movement organizations from which its members were coming, and to which most of them still belonged.

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 place for good in the political space of the New Republic. Its organization was now present on the whole national territory and won a growing number of seats in the local and federal assemblies. For PT activists, as the period of clandestinity and precarity moved away, winning offices and professionalizing as politicians was associated with obvious changes in behavior and discourse. Most PT representatives, who still fell at home in the social movement space and still had resources for contention, opposed the federal government firmly, in a combative and determined style, during Fernando Henrique Cardoso’s administration between 1994 and 2000. Meanwhile, this virulent and systematic opposition to the PSDB-PFL coalition gradually routinized and institutionalized, in the sense that it became usual, expected, legal and that it respected the rules of the representative system. In doing so, it gave a legal political expression to leftwing oppositions and played a part for stabilizing the new political institutions, in a position comparable to that of the French Communist Party (PCF) in the 1970s when it had a “tribune function” (Lavau 1981 : 37).

In this section, this paper analyzes the different facets of the process of institutionalization through which the PT passed since the 1990s. First, it “entered” into the political institutions via the administration of several state capitals and via the conquest of legislative mandates. For party leaders, it implied learning how to practice power and absorbing dominant norms of behavior of the Brazilian political field; even if they tried to change those rules from within (Fleischer 2004). Second, the institutionalization of the PT was the product of “initial ajustements, successful experiences or failures, compromises” (Lagroye et al 2006 : 147). We will show it in the case of PT activists who, once clandestine opponents, have left contentious collective action behind them when they reached

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4 This paper is based on field work in Recife, between 2003 and 2010. For this research, sources of information are semi-direct interviews (3 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 in various occasions.

power positions. Now legal and legitimate within the political system, PT activists began to inhabit its institutions and respect its rules. This institutionalization also had consequences for the party organization itself, which was reformed several times between 1991 and 2001, and whose equilibria were redefined by the new social positions of some of its members.

**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. In the party system as a whole, they became more common, and usually lacked ideological coherence, as leftwing and rightwing parties often allied (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 supports 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 Jose Sarney, a former member of the pro-military ARENA. For the same reason, PT representatives voted against the new Constitution in 1988. In the following years, the PT was very selective when it allied with other parties. For the first ballot of the 1989 presidential election, it formed the “Brazilian Popular Front” with two little leftwing parties, the Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB) and the Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB). For the second turn, Lula accepted Brizola’s support, a former exile and then a Governor of the state of Rio de Janeiro. However, he denied Ulysses Guimarães’ support, a conservative member of the PMDB 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 little rightwing parties have turned a usual practice, especially since 2002 when the PT and the PL (Partido Liberal) joint in the same presidential ticket, Lula-José Alencar. This strategy, as well as the successful negotiations for gaining the support of Jose Sarney and PMDB in Congress for Lula’s government after 2003, created a public controversy and was seen as a serious betrayal by numerous PT militants.

The comparison of the results of the PT in the municipal, state and federal elections, since it was created until 2002, reveals a gradual growth of the votes in favor of its candidates, in all levels of government, but also a persistent geographical disparity of its electoral victories (Samuels 2004). During the 1990s, the increase was particularly clear at the federal level. In the Chamber of Deputies, it moved from the 7th position in 1990 to the 1st in 2002, with 91 deputies; moving to the 3rd position in the Senate at the same time (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 of more that 200 000 inhabitants, with 6 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 in relation to 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 if, at that time, it gained much more forces in the Southeast than in the Northeast.

It is at the beginning of the 2000s that the PT reached a second turning point. By 2002, it had not only won the federal Presidency but it had also turned into a central actor at Congress, with

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6 The ARENA (Aliança de Renovação Nacional) was the rightwing party that supported the military regime between 1965 and 1980. Since then, it has been replaced by several parties, successively: the PDS (Partido Democratico e Social), the PFL, and the DEM (Democratas).
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, 11 in 2006 to 14 in 2010, out of 81 senators. Between 2002 and 2010, the PT candidate in the presidential election won with very high result, always over 45% of the vote in the first ballot, and 55% in the second. In 2002, PT’s electoral forces expanded to the whole national territory, and by 2006 it had consolidated in the Northeast. This switch, from the Southeast in its first years, to the Northeast in the 2000s, which was already obvious in 2002, was confirmed in 2006 and 2010. Between 1989 and 2007, São Paulo’s share in the support for the PT moved from 55% to 20%. In the Northeastern states, in 2006, Lula gathered from 60 to 85% 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 Brazil”, that could be compared with Lula’s defeat against Fernando Collor de Melo in 1989; however with a switch in the social distribution of the vote between 1989 and 2006 (Hunter-Power 2007 : 7).

**The consolidation of the organization**

As the PT acquired a growing force in the ballots, its organization was reformed in various ways: it was consolidated, it expanded, the number of its members grew significantly, and its apparatus passed 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 was an attempt to homogeneize the organization. This change in the vocabulary was not only symbolic. It is also the result of a strategy of controlling 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.

In 1994, still looking for a better control of the organization under its militant groups, the national direction, then headed by the *Articulation of the left*, chose to replace the traditional “cells” by groups defined either by the geographical “zone” where they lived or according to their social “sectors”. Until then, party members joined in “cells” of at least 9 persons, that were implemented in their working places, in their neighbourhoods, universities, unions or other social movement headquarters. Radical groups at the left of the party were usually more active in university cells and in some workers’ groups that came from communism, whereas reformists acted closer to popular social movements and unions coming from the ABC strikes of the last 1970s. In the party, there was a clear opposition between class activism that took place in the working places and another type of activism, with diverse social profiles, and that was structured according to territorial or sectorial logics (Davis 1997). After 1994, as a consequence of this reform, each “zonal” group gathered more members than “cells” did in the past, which meant a loosening of the social ties that used to cement

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7 Source : Electoral Superior Court, [www.tse.gov.br](http://www.tse.gov.br)

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 the majority of the members of the *Workers’ Cause* and of *Socialist Convergence*. This episode may be seen as a successful attempt at gaining 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).

9 In portuguese: *núcleos, zonais and setoriais*. 
the party at its basis. The places were activists used to meet, debate, and socialize were now further from the spaces of everyday life, and, at the same time, party leaders got less conscious of the issues linked to ordinary life experiences of the members. For anonymous rank-and-file PT members, those organizational changes meant a growing distance with the party leadership.

Those changes led to a reform of the party internal representation system in 2001, with the introduction of “direct” primaries for the selection of national and local party directions. They also opened an acute electoral competition between the leaders of the party, both at the national and local levels; a competition that became harsh because what was now at stake for leaders was being invested as a candidate or not. The final resolution of the PT’s National Congress in 1999 stated that the aim of such primaries would be to stimulate “an intense political debate during the 30 days before each ballot” (PT 1999 : 39). However, the implementation of the primaries had mostly the effect of turning the competition between tendencies an individual issue, especially for those who aimed at being invested as candidates in the following elections. The transformation of the PT’s organization went along with, on the one hand, the definition of a strategy for winning the presidential race. On the other hand, at the local level, it was also necessary for recently elected local PT leaders who needed to stabilize their new professional positions. In a general manner, those reforms, that aimed at consolidating the party and securing its electoral growth, went hand 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 administrate the big cities of the country. Behind this new public image, in depth transformations had occurred. In the competition that opposed party leaders, at stake was now 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. Although the PT continued to show itself as a “different” party during the 1990s, it gradually adopted electoral strategies that are very similar to those of its competitors. While it won executive and legislative power in a growing number of towns as well as in federal ballots, the PT moderated its ideology and its leaders adapted to the institutional game. All those processes interacted. On the one hand, the leaders of the party got new social positions and political statuses, now belonging to a party in office. On the other hand, now integrated in the party system, with an organization recentered on its elected leadership, the PT erased the radical side of its political objectives.

*From « democratic revolution » to « participative democracy »*

Along the 1990s, the issue of participative democracy took a growing place in the PT’s discourses, in Recife and in the whole country, which may be seen as a mark of its institutionalization. Revolutionary connotations lost ground gradually, 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 “participative democracy” proposal. Now aiming at reforming democracy through popular participation, the PT was acting within the frame of the existing representative system, and it recognized the legitimacy of its values and norms, only proposing to change its practises.
As soon as 1980, the issue of participation had been central among PT members, who debated at length and with passion 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, during a long time the PT has understood “political participation” as extra-institutional, even when it linked it to the action of its elected representatives within existing political institutions. Until the mid-1990s, PT still presented itself as an anticapitalist, socialist, mass party. It put economic and social liberties as a priority for its demands, and thought the liberties acquired through institutionalized participation as second place (PT 1980).

As a consequence, between 1980 and the end of the 1990s, PT’s texts mostly defined participation as electoral. It referred both to the appearance of citizens 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 to contentious action. Institutional participation was considered as secondary because the priority was still given to popular mobilization. This can be exemplified by a 1999 text, used for the formation of party leaders, whose style is still full of revolutionary appeals: “PT claims its commitment for a full democracy, practiced directly by the masses. Therefore, it declares that its electoral participation and its parliamentary activities will be subordinated to the aim of organizing the exploited masses and their struggle” (PT 1999 : 73).

However, starting from the beginning of the 1990s, references to « socialismo » were gradually replaced by « democracy ». A “participative imperative” was introduced progressively –and rather lately- along with explicit references to participative “radical democracy”, and with the implementation of specific institutional designs for it. During the 1990s, the participative discourse began to be part of the PT’s image, and in the 2000s it was turned into its image de marque. Meanwhile, the meaning given to “participation” shifted, as it now referred more explicitly to institutional mecanisms for the participative elaboration of municipal budgets. It is not before the 2000s that references to “the PT’s government way - O modo petista de governar” became a label, an instrument for showing the specific features of PT municipal administrations and for keeping their “differences” in mind (Genro 1999).

By of the 1990s, PT leaders continued to oppose the politics of their adversaries in government, but they didn’t reject representative institutions anymore. As a matter of fact, they had managed to occupy a large space within them and now only proposed to change their practice. They still referred to “change“, but now contemplated it within the institutions. As an hypothesis, we suggest that “participative politics” were not a mere legitimation ressource or a guarantee that PT was still at the left after the latter 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 also got along with, or even counterbalanced, the political professionalization of PT leaders and the institutionalization of the party as a whole. For PT’s local leaderships, attached to their identities as activists coming from the popular movements, appealing to the “people” and asking “inhabitants” to participate was a way to bring politics and citizens closer, to give proofs of their authentic will to change politics, and to show that, after all, they didn’t change.

However, the institutionalization of the PT is not only made of the electoral victories that enabled its leaders to access power, nor is it limited to a change in its political proposals or discourse. The insertion of the PT into the party system opened professional opportunities for a relatively high number of militants, in the close social circle of each party representative. The reforms of the party organization interacted with upward social mobilities for some of its members.
Institutionalization and public action – The PT and its activists in Recife

*Political professionalization and upward social mobility*

For the analysis of the social components of PT’s institutionalization, at least three types of trajectories may be distinguished. First, part of the long term rank-and-file members followed an upward trajectory since the 1980s. For them, commitment was linked to a new socialization that favored the acquisition of skills and, in some cases, it was parallel to the decision of going back to school or giving a complement to their school education. Several factors may explain it. Within militant groups, political information circulated, opportunities for debating political issues were numerous, as well as interactions with authorities. When they became members of the party, those individuals, already acting in other mobilized groups, found new resources for the access to information and social networks, thus reinforcing their dispositions for increasing their competences, for studying, or for learning new norms of behavior. For those activists, engagement opened the doors of professional careers that would have been more uncertain otherwise. In the case of the Federal District, in Brasilia, Daniella Rocha compared the professions of rank-and-file PT members to that of their parents. According to her survey, most of them came from the low scales of the social pyramid and showed an obvious tendency for upward social mobility (Rocha 2007: 74-78). The itineraries that we observed in Recife confirm that, for the most engaged individuals, opportunities for further education and jobs appeared, and gave them social resources to be used in the political and professional field. For example, their organizations sometimes could pay for the transport from the countryside to the state capital. Or, through the jobs they sometimes got in the contentious space, they acquired new professional skills as well as financial conditions for studying further. In some cases, they were even given scholarships. In a more general manner, even for the majority who didn’t benefit from those direct retributions, the insertion into a group of activists launched an acculturation process, that was favorable to the construction of new social dispositions.

Some of the militants interviewed in Recife followed such itineraries. Coming from very modest families from the countryside, they had their first contacts with contentious politics through the local progressive catholic church, or through local unions in the working sphere. Social interactions in the contentious field made them go on or back to school education or enabled them to access to qualifying jobs. In several cases, militants studied at university and practiced qualified professions, in the same sector where they participated to contentious collective action. At the time of the interviews, they were high or middle-level professionals, such as layers, university teachers, journalists or NGO coordinators. Thus, for rank-and-file militants, engagement brought various types of indirect retributions such as acculturation, political skills, access to education and formations. In their trajectories from the countryside to the regional capital, social and geographical mobility were generally intertwined.

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10 For some details about the trajectories of PT activists in Recife and indirect retributions of their engagement, see Goirand 2013.
A second type of itinerary is that of low-level, unelected professionals who work in the political entourage of PT’s leaders. In Pernambuco, the PT had no deputy in the 1980 and it had never more than 5 federal deputies and 5 state deputies during the 1990s and 2000s. Even if those seats weren’t numerous, winning them gave the possibility for recruiting a staff for each deputy, mainly for helping in the administrative and political administration of their legislative mandates (Ribeiro 2009). Generally selected among PT members close to each representative and among his long term fellow comrades, this staff was employed on the large variety of jobs necessary backstage of politics, from cabinet heads to office help.

Thus, a new category of PT members emerged in the direct entourage of its elected representatives. For them, the party social milieu was not only a space were they could mobilize, but also a way to get a living and a professional space in which a career was now possible. Generally, those unelected colaborators managed to get a payed job in the political field because of their professional skills associated to an activist savoir-faire they had acquired during a long lasting period of mobilizations. In interviews, they spoke of their occupation with a mixture of political conviction and professional logics. Their recruitment follows various lines but most of the time it has two prerequisites. First, a lot of office helps have personal links with a party leader, such as neighbourhood relationships, family links or early militant intimacy at the grass roots. Second, skilled collaborators are generally chosen according to their technical knowledge of a particularly sensitive issue for their deputy, along with their acquaintances in the social movements of their professional sector. For example, before he quitted the PT in 2007, Paulo Ruben, a federal deputy at the left of the party, had a staff composed of individuals corresponding to each of those two categories. Some of its members, that had mobilized in the neighbourhood movement and in the union of secondary teachers of Pernambuco, were called by the deputy after being indicated by relatives. Others, with a longer and tougher activist experience, for example in rural workers unions or in the student movement, got in charge of sectorial activities within the cabinet, such as communication or campaign coordination, according to their professional skills.

In those careers, the access to administrative and political jobs within the party milieu and in the staff of its elected leaders is a result of double memberships, for individuals that are envolved both in the PT and in a social movement organization at the same time. This double location means that they are familiar to the political issues of a specific sector and part of its social networks; two ressources that are strategic in a deputy cabinet. It is this close articulation between party or associative engagement and professional activities that turns activism into a career; a career which was transferred into the field of professional politics when the PT won its first legislative seats in Pernambuco (Louault 2006, Fillieule & Mayer 2001).

Learning to be a professional politician

The third category is composed of a little 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 necessity of learning how to manage their new positions, as well as a clear and fast social mobility. According to André Marenco dos Santos, PT local leaders have longterm itineraries of political professionalization, that depend more on militant that personal ressources (Santos 2001). Most PT representatives in Pernambuco professionalized in the political sphere after a long lasting contentious engagement. Their entry into
the professional political sphere was anchored on activist networks formed previously in the social movement space, now an electoral basis. At first, they have learnt political action from two positions, in the party and in the contentious space, but their main engagement originally took place in their professional sector, mostly in unions. This is the case of Roberto Leandro, a state deputy who won a seat in 2002 for the first time. After engaging in the student movement during the 1970s, he became a member of the bank employees’ union of Pernambuco. He was elected a president of this union just before his first legislative campaign as a candidate in 1994; it is only after two more attempts that he was elected. In this long itinerary, the entry into the political sphere stays in a direct continuity with union activism in the professional space; a space where he mobilized supports for political action and electoral campaigning.

In the trajectory of Isaltino Nascimento, also a state deputy in Pernambuco, some common points may be identified. Like Roberto Leandro, he followed an activist itinerary during a long time before he professionalized in the political field. A president of the social security workers’ union of Pernambuco during 14 years, he was also a member of the PT but had no charges during this period. After the PT launched his campaign, his was first elected in the Municipal Chamber of Recife in 2000, and in the state Legislative Assembly two years later. It is because the PT’s dominating tendency asked him to, that Isaltino Nascimento accepted to be a candidate, in spite of his little experience of party games and although he had very limited school education. In an interview, he remembered with straightforwardness how intense it has been for him to discover politics in parliament, the rituals of assembly life, and the expected behaviors of professional politicians. He remembers that his entry into the field of professional politics had an impact in terms of social ascent, but also required for him to learn how to behave according to rules that were specific to the professional group he was integrated into. For this former employee and unionist, learning to be a politician meant discovering “the behavior of the language”, how to listen, how to talk pleasantly with his adversaries, and how negotiate in the corridors...

Those two deputies professionalized in the political field in a direct continuity of their former commitment as union leaders, a period during which they acquired political skills and resources, that they were able to mobilizing afterwards for political action (Matonti & Poupeau 2004). The process of incorporating the informal rules of parliamentary life is part of the PT’s institutionalization, when its representatives adopted norms and practices of professional politics and learnt to comply with the routines of these institutions (Lagroye et al 2006: 146; Goirand 2006). As a consequence, the PT was progressively populated by individuals whose professional career and social ascent depended on their position in the party organization. For a large part of local PT leaders, this upward mobility was based on resources that emerged through party work; resources such as political skills, activist savoir-faire, social networks, and also, resources made of growing 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 culture.

The PT and the contentious space: “it is not a struggle strategy anymore”

In the 2000s, the way rank-and-file PT members looked at their party had drastically transformed in comparison with former periods. In interviews, most of them emphasized changes, in their various aspects: growing gap between party leaders and base members; electoralist turn; weakening of the contentious spirit... Most of them, blaming nowadays PT, remembered past
struggles with an evident desapproval of their fading, and also showing an unconfessed feeling of nostalgia. Today’s professionalized party is opposed, in their memories, to the PT of the 1980s’, “a leftwing party, able to protest”. Today, as one of the interviewees put it, for individual party leaders “what is dominating is a perspective of getting a power share”. Here, a former period of genuine struggles in the opposition is compared with the current position of the party at the head of public administrations. It is now described as a machine, conceived for winning elections and that got rid of the troublesome weight of “socialism”. In the PT depicted by interviewees in Recife, individual strategies and personal political careers prevail, as if the party was useful only as a springboard for accessing political positions: “it is not a struggle strategy anymore, 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’...” From them, the PT 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’ mobilization within the party. As one of them put it, reading the Capital was 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”11.

Activists feel that they lost their space in a party that doesn’t look like the one of their past engagement anymore, even if they declare that they wish to be loyal to it (Michels 1971; Mair 2004; Aucante & Dézé 2008). Those transformations of 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 basis, with the segmentation of the support for individual party leaders, as well with the individualization of the resources of the latter (Montambeault-Goirand 2013). The growing distance between the elected, their staffs and militants located out of the power field deeply modified social equilibria within the organization of the PT. In Recife, ethnographic observation of several electoral campaigns showed an acute territorialization of the resources of PT candidates in popular neighbourhoods. In these spaces, social mobilization networks interwin with individual party supports for the construction of electoral loyalties. During PT’s campaign at the grass roots, individual rivalries and strategies structure according to two factors, at least. First, the permanent competition between tendency leaders is shaped by the electoral agenda. Second, those power relations rest on an opposition between electoral and popular legitimacy, on the one hand, and positions occupied by leaders in the party apparatus, on the other hand. The conflict between Humberto Costa and João Paulo Lima e Silva is a significant example for this. The former is the local leader of the dominant tendency Unity in Struggle12 and uses his internal position in the party as his main political resource, while the latter benefits from a huge popularity among the electorate, that he mobilizes through the activation of networks formed during the period when he was a union leader in the Catholic worker’s movement.

Thus, since the beginning of the 2000s, electoral victories changed the meaning of militant action, recentered the organization on its elected representatives, redistributed resources within the party and strengthened individualized strategies. As a matter of fact, some leaders control resources that the party itself lacks, be it logistical and financial resources or human resources.

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

12 Unity in Struggle - Unidade na luta is still the usual name given in Pernambuco to a national tendency, Constructing a New Brazil - Construindo um Novo Brasil, that substituted Articulation in 2009. Luis Ignácio da Silva and Dilma Rousseff both come from this moderate center tendency.
Structured by gatherings around its elected leaders, the PT now organizes according to the loyalties of its militants to its public personalities. Behind the official scene or the media, in the social spaces were leaders interact directly with their electorate or through the mediation of local brokers, tendencies have lost their ideological contents. The mobilization of militant support for electoral campaign is now the instrument of a fierce individual competition, between politicians seeking to secure their professional career.

The introduction of party primaries in 2001 may have clarified or publicized the ideological debates at the national level (Samuels 2004). However, local observation reveals another scenario: individual and non-ideological competition, but also a frequent use of illicite practices for capturing votes for each tendency... In Recife, militant groups structure according to their loyalty to a leader who organizes their mobilization, which is a central ressource for the definition of his positions in the competition for investitures. This personalization of loyalties within the party suggests that the PT’s ideological turn and its movement to the center have been simultaneous to the recruitment of activists and young professionals in the staff of its more moderate representatives. Those collaborators need to secure their positions indeed.

**PT activists and the « banalisation » of their party**

The rank-and-file militants we interviewed oppose the collective memory of past mobilizations and the current normalization of their party. It arouses intense questioning about the changes in the meaning of commitment and about the redefinitions of the PT’s identity. For those who have been socialized to politics in a period of opposition and contention, remembering past struggles is a way to legitimate present action, a way to cement the group through its memory, and to keep 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 discordance with the politics of Lula’s government in Brasilia, as well as with PT’s new discourse, that some consider as a renunciation or a betrayal

Alongside with public critics, PT has faced desenchanted, individual desengagement and silent exits. It had the effect of limiting the intensity and frequency of activist circulations and, thus, it reduced the party local space. Historical PT militants still like to activate the old identity tale of the party, which now gets along with other tales, that refer to the participative administration of cities, to “the PT’s government way”, to competence, efficiency and good governance or to social policies for the deprived. While the party organization consolidated, the identity tales produced by its members diversified (Hastings 2001).

Today, the memory of the heroic contentious past of a “different” party obviously contradicts the disparaging looks at the “normal” organization that has taken shape since the 2000s. The disillusioned words of long term militants express the feeling that their party turned similar to others and that, with the lost of transparency and probity, it also lost its exceptional characteristics. For people that mobilized during years of uncompromising opposition, institutionalization and the

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13 See, for example, the Letter to the President Lula (Carta ao Presidente Lula) published in the media by a collective of famous leftwing figures on May 1st, 2004. Then available on the webside of the Landless Rural Workers’ Movement, http://www.mst.org.br.

14 For an example, see the website of Perseu Abramo’s Foundation, the PT’s cultural foundation in São-Paulo, http://www2.fpa.org.br
practice of local and national power mean much more that an aggiornamento or a mere “adaptation” to reality (Hunter 2010). It implies a redefinition of political engagement, in its social meanings.

Conclusion : from institutions to social interactions. The need to contextualize change.

Field research in Recife didn’t aim at observing how PT “adapted” to the political system. Of course, its governmental programs moderated with the switch from revolutionary references to discourses of ethics, later replaced by participative democracy. It is also obvious that PT leaders adopted behaviors that “conform” to the rules and demands of the political system, and that they now play the game of elections much more than that of contention. However, complex dynamics of change are not limited to those processes. The institutionalization of the PT, observed at the local level, and from the individuals and the groups it is made of, was composed of the mixt of gradual transformations of political positions of the party, of its social identities, of the skills of its leaders, of their individual interests and professional careers.

The insertion of the PT in existing institutions interacted with individual trajectories, and both produced changes at different scales such as the party system, the orientation given to public policies at the national and local level, the social roots of the party, its identity in the electorate but also among its members, or the way collective action is organized within the party. It was translated into a reconfiguration of militant practices as well as into a bifurcation of militant trajectories, that split between distance and professionalization, between exit and loyalty. Since the beginning of the 2000s, being a member of the PT turned less requiring, since militants are more distanced and intermittent than they used to be, and because they often express doubts, and act at the side of professionalized party leaderships. Between militant fatigue and questionings, on the one hand, and the career expectations of the loyals, on the other hand, the transformations of the PT have various facets.

Finally, the focus on militant itineraries confirms that, in representative democracies, the frontiers between party politics and contentious politics are fluid, instable and blurred. When the PT was created, activists circulated only within the social movement space and they were located in opposition to the regime without any ambiguity, first as illegal groups then as a minority. Today, the contentious space and the power sphere straddle, and the party networks penetrate public administrations at all levels. Those networks include actors of very different status and nature: representatives, unionists, members of neighborhood associations, social workers, municipal, state and federal agents... (Tatagiba-Dagnino 2010) Those actors occupy multiple and much of the time instable locations, they circulate and change status. As a consequence, there is no obvious frontier anymore between the local state and the party milieu, whose organization is linked to the local social movement spaces but also to the public administration it governs. Thus, the logics of contentious and institutional politics, once opposed, may also encounter.

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