

Brazilians in the United States: A Study of Immigrants in Massachusetts

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INTRODUCTION

In only three years (1985-1988), almost 1,250,000 Brazilians left their home country, never to return. This number is significant, in that it represents an entirely new phenomenon in the history of Brazil, which, like the United States, was traditionally seen as a country of immigrants. Since this stream of immigrants is largely undocumented – consisting of Brazilians who leave their country on a tourist visa and overstay the expiration date – there are no government statistics which can quantify the exact number or identify the final destination of Brazilian emigrants. Some projections suggest that Brazilians are largely migrating to North America, especially to the United States (approximately 619,130). In the United States, the two largest concentrations of Brazilians are located in the New York City metropolitan area (approximately 230,000 Brazilians), and in Massachusetts (approximately 150,000).

How can we explain Brazilian emigration? Why are Brazilians leaving their country? The first chapter of the book presents a discussion of contemporary scholars (in particular, Michael Piore, Alejandro Portes, and Saskia Sassen), who have developed alternative approaches to the “push and pull theory” to explain recent international migratory movements. My objective here is to analyze the strengths and limitations of these approaches for the Brazilian case.

Who are the Brazilians who emigrate to Massachusetts? What are the socio-demographic characteristics of this population? How do social and demographic differences, which I identified in the course of fieldwork, affect patterns of social

relations within the group as a whole? These are some of the questions that I discuss in the second chapter, based on a survey of 300 Brazilian immigrants living in Massachusetts. One of the things that most surprised me at the beginning of my research was the way in which Brazilians referred to one another. In the course of my fieldwork and interviews, complaints about the lack of solidarity, the focus on making money and the lack of community participation suggested a panorama full of ambiguities. In the midst of these criticisms, the immigrants displayed a tremendous love for Brazil and for the Brazilian people. From the very beginning of my fieldwork, there appeared clear indications of a certain tension between financial interests (earning money) and solidarity (that is, helping others), within the Brazilian “community”.

With these findings, I began to see the theme of solidarity (or lack thereof) as one of my principal areas of concentration in the course of research. This approach seemed especially suggestive, as I began to compare my data with recent scholarship by U.S. researchers. Overwhelmingly this bibliography emphasizes relationships of solidarity within each immigrant group. The immigrant is represented as being “in solidarity” with his or her own immigrant group. An example of this can be seen in a revealing passage written by sociologist Alejandro Portes, a prominent scholar of Latino immigrants:

“Since the 19th century, immigrant groups in the United States have been renowned for the solidarity displayed by members and for their success in promoting each other’s enterprises. This pattern continues today and is supported by similar forces. With their education and skills from the home country devalued in the host society’s labor market and facing persuasive discrimination by native-born, immigrants have little recourse but to band together in search of moral support and economic survival.” (Portes, 1995 : 256).

This statement is revealing because it clearly illustrates the way in which U.S. research tends to overemphasize solidarity within immigrant “communities”. Few

studies have tried to take other approaches.¹ In fact because solidarity is assumed, to date there is little research on competitive or conflictive relations, or exploitation within groups, relations which take place within the same networks that promote solidarity in various forms.

The data that I obtained early on in my research contrasted with this romantic vision of immigrants and their “communities”. Therefore, in my research I began to devote more attention to manifestations of solidarity, which I felt was essential, in order to be able to describe its true nature and extent. In my work I treated solidarity not as an assumption, but rather as a subject of research.

“Did you know that here Brazilians even sell jobs?” Interviewees often asked me this question, with a tone of indignation. Quickly I discovered that the commercialization of jobs was common among Brazilians working in housecleaning. However, the large majority still believed that this practice meant selling a good that should be given, with the goal of helping someone in need. Even those who themselves engaged in buying and selling jobs shared this opinion. It is precisely in the “world of work”, which I cover in the third chapter of the book, and especially in the sale of jobs, that this ambiguity appears in its most explicit form.

Large numbers of Brazilians in Massachusetts engage in a series of occupations that have little social prestige in Brazil. To leave a job as a teacher, accountant, small landowner, student, or homemaker in Brazil, to become a dishwasher, gardener, babysitter, cook, busboy or housecleaner in Massachusetts, involves a significant loss of professional status. However, in return there are other forms of compensation. The difference in earnings is an important, while not a sufficient, explanation for why Brazilians accept these jobs. Relationships at work, viewed as more formal, professional, and given to respect, and the very nature of work,

¹ Only two studies question, and then only vaguely, this idealized view: Mahler (1995) and Pessar (1995). Both criticize the emphasis of most other scholars on solidarity within immigrant groups.

especially in housecleaning, are equally important in understanding the significance of this change in occupational status. Despite the contrast between occupations held in Brazil and in the United States, my research data reveal that Brazilian immigrants, as in the case of other undocumented immigrants living in the United States, work largely in jobs limited to the informal sector. This is interesting, given that large numbers of the Brazilians who emigrated were engaged in the informal economy of Brazil prior to migrating.

How do Brazilians obtain jobs in Massachusetts? What kind of support can they count on? How and where do they socialize? Churches are the institutions that provide the greatest amount of support to Brazilians. Yet the ways in which this support is institutionally organized varies significantly. In the fourth chapter I point out the main differences between evangelical and Catholic churches in their religious work. Regardless of denomination, these churches are perceived and valued by participants as institutions that, for Brazilians, create a secure social space for the practice of solidarity and reciprocity. In other words, Brazilians seek churches out of a need to socialize, and churches establish mechanisms of social control that they see as acceptable.

While solidarity is a central part of identity and religious practice in the Catholic and in the three Protestant churches which I studied, evangelical pastors tend to see the sale of jobs as entirely normal, while priests and nuns tend to identify this practice as a sign of lack of solidarity. Still, both evangelical and Catholic Brazilians who work in the area of housecleaning sell jobs. All of them criticize the lack of solidarity among Brazilians, and declare themselves to be at least uncomfortable with this rare style of commercialization.

What are Brazilians' relationships with one another, how do they interpret their experiences as immigrants and what are their perceptions of North American society? These are the principal questions that I raise in the fifth chapter, regarding Brazilian immigrant views of North American society. In exploring

these questions, I was especially interested in understanding why those Brazilians I interviewed had, in general, a positive view of the United States, in spite of their undocumented status, and the fact that they worked in jobs devoid of prestige and considered poorly paid and unqualified. Understanding this perception involved consideration of how Brazilians experienced certain aspects of American society, especially those involving conceptions of rights and citizenship. In the same way, I recognized that as Brazilians drew assessments of American society, they also reevaluated their prior experiences in Brazil.

What does Brazilian migration to Massachusetts pose in terms of future perspectives? Some of the questions I address in the conclusion include: What are the possibilities that these immigrants will return to Brazil or remain in the US? How does the second generation perceive their condition, the situation of their parents, and their relationship to their country of origin? The conclusion is not so much a synthesis of the main results of each of the chapters, but an attempt to highlight some considerations regarding the future potential of Brazilian emigration, a migration that no longer appears to be temporary, but which is tending to increase and gain permanence.

[To date there are no studies in English on Brazilian immigrants in Massachusetts. The only book on Brazilian immigrants in the United States was written by Maxine Margolis, based on her research on Brazilian immigrants in New York. According to some estimates, there are 150,000 Brazilians resident in Massachusetts, and, according to a recent publication by Citizens Bank, Brazilians make up the second largest population of recently arrived low wage immigrant workers in the state, after Puerto Ricans. Furthermore, according to the evidence that I present in this book, the emigration of Brazilians to Massachusetts has tended to increase.]

Biographical note

Ana Cristina Braga Martes is a Professor of Sociology at the Fundação Getúlio Vargas in São Paulo. From 1994 to 1996, she was a Visiting Scholar in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, with support from a Fulbright/CAPES fellowship. During this period Martes carried out research for her doctoral dissertation, which she defended at the University of São Paulo in 1998, resulting in the Portuguese edition of this book. The author has also published several articles on Brazilian emigration.

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