

(DRAFT - Do Not Quote)

Brazilians in New Bedford and Fall River

By

Maria Gloria Mulcahy
Brown University

Introduction:

This paper examines recent Brazilian immigration into the cities of New Bedford and Fall River Massachusetts. It investigates how this migration is related to cultural and familial ties linking the Portuguese of Southeastern Massachusetts to Brazil and how the arrival of the Brazilians has transformed the Portuguese-speaking communities of the two cities.

Manuel Castells (1997), among others, has argued that as the forces of globalization diffuse throughout the world, bringing most peoples and cultures under the homogenizing forces of industrial capitalism, they, at the same time, lead to the erosion of statism and especially the state's ability to provide social protections to its populations. These two contradictory forces, then lead to a renewal of the importance of social ties based on religion, ethnicity, and kinship. I propose that Brazilian immigration into Southeastern Massachusetts can be seen as the result of these processes. On the one hand, Brazilians came to Massachusetts as the result of macro-level transformations in their country of origin and at the global level, related to the international movements of investment capital, as has been argued by Sassen (1988). On the other, their establishment in the midst of the Portuguese communities of Fall River and New Bedford is the result of the mobilization of cultural, familial and religious networks to help them cope with process of adjusting to life in the U.S.

At the moment, the coexistence of the two communities appears to be symbiotic. Brazilians can take advantage of the institutions and economies that developed to serve the needs of the Portuguese immigrants of the 1970s and 1980s and at the same time these institutions are renovated, or at least kept afloat by the influx of the Brazilians, given that Portuguese immigration has virtually come to a halt. But while at the individual, and perhaps even at the group level, both Brazilians and Portuguese have benefited, it is unclear as to how the influx of these new immigrants is affecting the cities as a whole. New Bedford and Fall River are depressed cities with few job opportunities, an increasingly impoverished population and declining budgets for social programs. The new immigrants, through their cheap labor are contributing to the development of the economies of the richer communities where they work, like Boston and Hyannis, but their demand for services falls upon the cities where they live, at a time when these are the least prepared to meet their needs.

Background:

Like the United States and Canada, Brazil has traditionally been a country of immigration not of emigration. In contrast, Portugal has a long history of emigration, especially to Brazil. Until the middle of the 20th century, Brazil was the largest destination of Portuguese emigration, absorbing more than half of all Portuguese emigrants from 1900 to 1950 (Arroteia, 1985), for example. In the early sixties, there was a shift in Portuguese emigration away from Brazil and into other European countries, Canada and the United States, but emigration to Brazil continued, albeit at a lower rate.

In the United States, Southeastern Massachusetts, especially the cities of New Bedford and Fall River, has been the major area of destination of Portuguese immigration. Many of the Portuguese immigrants of the area are connected to Brazil by means of familial ties, which have been used by some Brazilians to come to the U.S. In fact, the earliest Brazilian immigrants to the area usually arrived shortly after the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act, relying on Portuguese family connections. But in the 1960s and early 1970s, when the most recent wave of Portuguese immigration took place, the Brazilian economy was doing relatively well and the need to emigrate was low (Goza, 1994). The few Brazilians that came to Fall River and New Bedford at the time tended to blend into the larger Portuguese community and were not easily identifiable except by other Portuguese speakers.

After peaking during the 1970-1980 decade, Portuguese immigration declined rapidly due to the amelioration of the economic and political conditions in Portugal and has now come to a virtual halt. When the figures of the 2000 census were made public, community leaders were surprised to find out that the Portuguese proportion of the populations of New Bedford and Fall River had declined relative to 1990 and there was some concern over the future of agencies and programs that had developed to serve the needs of the Portuguese immigrants as well as the political future of the group. With duration of stay in the U.S. Portuguese immigrants improved their economic status, learned the language and moved into the suburbs leaving behind empty tenement houses, and ethnic neighborhoods and institutions that had depended on the presence of Portuguese speakers for survival.

While Portuguese immigration was declining, Brazilian immigration to the U.S. was developing. According to Goza (1994) until 1980 the Brazilian population of the United States was miniscule (about 50,000) and of very recent arrival, but as economic conditions deteriorated in the late seventies and eighties, Brazilians began to emigrate. According to data provided by Sales (1998:15), between 1985 and 1988 1.25 million Brazilians left their country. Many went to countries from where they had previously received immigrants, like Portugal, Italy and Japan, but a large proportion also came to the U.S. In 1990, the U.S. census counted slightly over 57,000 persons of Brazilian ancestry and in 2000, according to the same source, there were 181,076 Brazilians living in the U.S. By all estimates, however, this appears to be a severe undercount.¹

According to most accounts, Brazilian immigration to the U.S. appear to have taken off in the second half of the 1980s as a result of economic difficulties such as racing inflation and unemployment (Goza, 1994; Margolis, 1993; Sales, 1998). Lacking an emigration tradition, and the close family connections necessary for immigrant visas, most Brazilians that have come to the United States did so as tourists, with the intention of staying only temporarily, making some money, and returning to Brazil (Margolis, 1993). The majority of these sojourners ended up in the so-called global cities, such as New York, Boston and Miami and entered the low paid, often informal, service sector that has evolved to meet the needs of the high-income, professional and managerial elites

¹ Given that a very large proportion of Brazilians are undocumented the fear of detection by immigration authorities is likely to have led many not to participate in the census as was argued by Margolis (1995) in relationship to the 1990 census.

(Sassen, 1998). They have become dishwashers, waiters, janitors, housekeepers, nannies and chambermaids, often working more than one job to make ends meet.

In Massachusetts, most of the Brazilians were initially concentrated in the Boston area, especially in Cambridge and Somerville, and then began to radiate outward to Alston, Framingham, Quincy and other surrounding towns. Currently, the largest concentration outside the Boston area is Hyannis, where most are employed in the tourism sector.

The movement into the communities of Fall River and New Bedford appears to be of recent development (the last five years or so) but dependable statistics are hard to come by and often contradictory. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in the year 2000 there were only 1,272 persons of Brazilian ancestry living in Bristol County, where New Bedford and Fall River are located. For the state as a whole, the number was 30,583, but this appears to be only a small fraction of the actual number of Brazilians residing here. *O Jornal*, a Fall River-based Portuguese weekly, has quoted estimates by the Brazilian Consulate in Boston that put the number of Brazilians living and working in the Bay State at 180 to 200 thousand. Following the same ratio of census to consulate figures, one might expect the Brazilian population of Bristol County to be about 5,000. Indeed, a source from the consulate told me this week that they estimate the current Brazilian community of Fall River to number about 4,000. They had no estimate for New Bedford, but thought that it was considerably lower. One of my informants, a New Bedford shop owner who lives in Fall River, thought that this was an overestimation. According to him, there must be about 2,000 Brazilians in Fall River and 500 in New Bedford. Both

he and the source from the consulate suggested that I contact “religious leaders” to get a more accurate sense of the community.

During the short period I was in the shop, which sells an array of Brazilian goods, such as music, videos, books, candy, personal care items and lingerie, several Brazilians and Portuguese came into the store to shop; a Portuguese immigrant who owns the restaurant next door delivered the shop owners lunch; and a young Brazilian man came in asking for information about renting an apartment and finding workers for his janitorial business, which is based in Framingham where he now lives. “The rents up there make our life impossible,” he offered as an explanation. The shop owner gave the Brazilian entrepreneur a copy of the *O Jornal*, the Portuguese weekly mentioned previously, and the phone number of a minister of a Protestant church in Fall River. “Look at the ads in here and talk to Pastor ...,” he advised.

As it turned out, the Brazilian young man did not have to look very far, the owner of the Portuguese restaurant next door had a vacant apartment that he would be more than glad to rent to him and his wife. These interactions are illustrative of the types of networks that are bringing the Brazilians to New Bedford and Fall River and the transformations ensuing from them.

The “Brazilianization” of the Portuguese Communities of New Bedford and Fall River:

The ties that bind the Portuguese and Brazilians go beyond the commonalities of their history and language. Because of the continual migration of the Portuguese to Brazil over half a millennium, these ties have remained vital and often personal. With

the emigration of both groups to other parts of the world these ties have expanded beyond the geographical confines of both countries, including the U.S.

As mentioned before, many of the Portuguese who came to the U.S. after 1965 had familial connections to Brazil. In addition, they had been widely exposed to Brazilian popular culture in Portugal. As they settled in the Fall River and New Bedford areas, this background was influential in creating a web of economic and cultural institutions, such as import businesses, travel agencies, radio and television programs, that made use of this social and cultural capital and maintained the Portuguese-Brazilian networks current. Brazilian music and soap operas, for example, constitute the mainstay of local Portuguese television and radio programs and over the years, Brazilian singers, musicians, and actors have routinely toured the major Portuguese settlements in the area.

At first, the exchanges were primarily cultural and economic, but soon the profane was joined by the sacred, and the businessmen and the artists were followed by the preachers. Initially almost one hundred percent Roman Catholic, in the last 20 years or so, the Portuguese communities of New Bedford and Fall River have been the subjects of a steady stream of protestant proselytizing campaigns conducted primarily by Brazilian ministers. These developments have made some Portuguese talk about a reversal of colonization, which is not only cultural, but also religious—the Portuguese are being rechristianized by the Brazilians.

In New Bedford and Fall River the majority of the Portuguese Protestant churches have Brazilian ministers or ministers of Portuguese origin trained in Brazil. Although initially aimed at the Portuguese immigrant community, these ministers have played a major role in helping Brazilians settle among the Portuguese.

According to articles published in the *O Jornal*, and information provided by various informal sources, a large proportion of the Brazilians who came to New Bedford and Fall River relied on help from these ministers to find housing and jobs, enroll their children in school and obtain other services and information. These Brazilians came not directly from Brazil, but from other areas of Massachusetts where the rents were too high for their low wages, and where language barriers made it difficult for them to access services. In new Bedford and Fall River they found affordable tenements left vacant by the Portuguese; bilingual Portuguese programs in need of children to keep the Portuguese-speaking teachers employed; and social services agencies designed to meet the needs of Portuguese immigrants, such as ESL classes and advocacy programs. Some of these agencies and programs were languishing due to the slowing down of Portuguese immigration and are now dependent on Brazilians for clients. However, the shift toward serving the Brazilians has not been without costs.

Many of the Brazilians who reside in Fall River and New Bedford continue to work elsewhere. One of my informants told me that the two cities are just bedroom communities; most Brazilians work in Boston or Cape Cod.² Although at some level the influx of Brazilians has helped maintain some of the social programs designed to meet the needs of the Portuguese, budget cuts and the characteristics of the Brazilians, where a large majority are undocumented, present a challenge to these institutions. Their staffing and funding is geared to the problems of legal immigrants and given the new budgetary constraints it is difficult to obtain grants and services to meet the needs of the Brazilians.

² This appears to be especially true of New Bedford where the Brazilian population has a larger proportion of single men.

One of the major problems facing the community is health care. An informant told me of a case of Brazilian who works as a janitor in a local upscale supermarket and has been diagnosed with hepatitis B. He is not being treated because he cannot afford the medical visits and medications. The provision of adequate educational services is another example of the inability of cities to cope with the influx of the Brazilians. Although they have the personnel to offer bilingual education to the newcomers, for example, they may not be able to provide it due to the dismantling of the bilingual programs at the state level. This is likely to lead to increases in the drop out rates in the area, a problem that is already quite severe. A similar problem is occurring at the college level, many of the Brazilians who have graduated from secondary schools are now finding out that they cannot enroll as residents in state colleges because of their undocumented status.

Given these challenges, it is likely that religious and other private institutions, based on ethnic and familial connections will be called upon to play an even larger role in helping Brazilians adjust to life in America. As such, the Brazilian presence in Fall River and New Bedford is expected to increase and give a Brazilian flavor to what for more than a century was very much a Portuguese cultural stronghold. Already, Brazilian shops and restaurants are cropping up in both cities; Brazilian telecommunication companies are beaming music and soap operas into Portuguese households; Brazilian professors are becoming common in Portuguese studies programs at local universities (including the former president of Brazil, Fernando Enrique Cardoso, who will be teaching at Brown starting in July) and more and more Brazilian expressions and idioms are creeping into the speech of the Portuguese of the area. Although many may welcome the changes,

some will no doubt be as shocked as I was when a Portuguese client of an agency I used to work for in Fall River told me “I don’t like to watch the television programs coming from Lisbon; I understand the Brazilians better.”

Bibliography

Arroteia, Jorge Carvalho. 1985. *Atlas da Emigração Portuguesa*. Porto: Secretaria de Estado da Emigração, Centro de Estudos.

Castells, Manuel. 1997. *The Power of Identity*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing.

Goza, Franklin. 1994. “Brazilian Immigration to North America.” *International Migration Review*, 28(1):136-152.

Margolis, Maxine L. 1993. *Little Brazil: An Ethnography of Brazilian Immigrants in New York City*. Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press.

_____. 1995. “Brazilians and the 1990 United States Census: Immigrants, Ethnicity and the Undercount.” *Human Organization*, 54:52-59.

O Jornal. [http:// www.ojornal.com](http://www.ojornal.com). Special Reports, “The Brazilians Among Us.”

Sales, Teresa. 1998. *Brasileiros Longe de Casa*. Sao Paulo, Brasil: Cortez Editora.

Sassen, Saskia. 1988. *The Mobility of Labor and Capital*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

_____. 1998. *Globalization and its Discontents*. New York: The New Press.

U.S. Census Bureau. American FactFinder. <http://factfinder.census.gov/>