Brazilian Americans

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In 2000, the Brazilian census counted 171,684,688 persons in Brazil, making it South America's largest and most populous country. That same year, Brazil's Ministry of Foreign Affairs counted 1,887,893 Brazilians living abroad, mostly in the United States. From the U.S., between 1971 and 2001, the INS admitted 98,947 documented Brazilian immigrants, and the U.S. census counted 44,940 Brazilian immigrants in 1980, 94,407 in 1990, and 222,836 in 2000.

In 2000, Brazilian immigrants settled primarily in Florida (21.0%), Massachusetts (15.9%), California (10.6%), New Jersey (10.0%), and New York (9.9%). Greatest recent growth has occurred in South Florida and greater Boston, as Florida and Massachusetts have replaced California and New York as Brazilians' top two destination states. While there are some visible Brazilian communities – such as in "Little Brazil" near 46th street in Manhattan or in Framingham, Massachusetts – Brazilians are more residentially dispersed than most Latin American immigrant groups.

Before the mid-twentieth century, Brazil was best known as an immigrant receiving, not sending, country. The Portuguese colonized it in the 1500s, about four million African slaves were imported there over the next three centuries, and during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Portuguese, Italian, Spanish, German, Japanese, and various other immigrant groups made Brazil their home. However, Brazilians have been migrating to the U.S. for almost a century now, in three broad phases.

During the first phase (World War II to the 1970s), famous Brazilian intellectuals, artists, and politicians – including Carmen Miranda, Antônio Carlos Jobim, Cándido Portinari, and Juscelino Kubitschek – spent time in the U.S. Emigration during this phase was primarily economic; only a small number of political refugees left during a military government (1964-85). Overall, growth and employment opportunities in Brazil were relatively good, and so middle-class Brazilians had little reason to leave. However, during this phase other laborers also migrated to fill industrial demands. For example, it was during this period that an important link between Governador Valadares (Minas Gerais) and Boston was established. American airplanes took off regularly from Governador Valadares during WWII carrying *mica*, a material used for making radios. After the war, the link was maintained by American businessmen and the U.S. government, who were interested in the region's valuable semiprecious stones.

The second phase began in the 1980s, when extreme economic crises transformed Brazilian emigration into an exodus of "economic refugees." Hyperinflation, failed macroeconomic packages like the Cruzado Plan in 1986 and the Collor Plan in 1991, and

in general falling real income and declining standards of living during the 1980s gave middle-class Brazilians greater incentives to look for mobility elsewhere. For the first time in Brazil's history, Brazilians began leaving en masse – primarily for the U.S., but also for Paraguay, Japan, Europe (primarily Portugal and Italy), Canada, Australia, and other South American countries. One estimate, by Teresa Sales, shows the number of Brazilians living in other countries increasing by approximately twenty percent each year in the 1980s. It was also during this phase that large-scale emigration from Governador Valadares and Minas Gerais began to attract greater attention. Widely cited as a "pioneer" emigrant flow, 1980s *valadarense* and *mineiro* migrants were building upon the social networks and experiences of previous emigrants from the region.

The third phase of Brazilian emigration (mid-1990s through today) began when then Finance Minister Fernando Henrique Cardoso released his Real Plan in 1994. The Real Plan reduced inflation and stabilized much of Brazil's economic crisis. Thus, emigration levels stabilized somewhat, operating more according to the internal dynamics of migrants' social networks than to economic "push" factors. However, starting in 1999, with the devaluation of the Real Plan following the Asian financial crisis, frustration over (President) Cardoso's economic policies, and uncertainty leading up to the election of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in October 2002, emigration increased. For example, the number of Brazilian immigrants admitted by the INS in 2000 rose 78 percent to 6,959, up from 3,902 in 1999 – the largest annual increase since 1990-91.

Brazilian immigrants are heterogeneous. They come from different states, cities, and towns in Brazil – like *cariocas* from Rio de Janeiro, *paulistas* from São Paulo, and *baianos* from Bahia. Cristina Martes has identified at least three profiles of immigrants in Boston: (1) "target earners" – Brazilians of all ages and both sexes primarily interested in making money and returning home to Brazil; (2) "human capital migrants" – Brazilians interested in broadening their personal horizons by experiencing life and culture in the United States; and (3) "family reunification migrants" – older and younger Brazilians who migrate to reunite with their families. As Brazilian emigration has matured over the years, human capital and family reunification migrants have grown in relation to target earners.

Many Brazilians are highly educated, well integrated into the U.S. labor market, and fluent in English. In 2000, 34.1 percent of Brazilian immigrants ages 25-64 had a bachelor's degree or higher, 26.4 percent were employed as professionals and managers, and 32.2 percent of those admitted by the INS entered under official employment-based preferences. Other Brazilians, however, are less educated, less skilled, and speak English poorly. Many get locked into low-wage and informal construction, service, and housekeeping jobs (such as Soraya Fleischer poignantly documents among Brazilian housecleaners in Massachusetts). Finally, many Brazilian immigrants of all classes are undocumented. In 2000, Brazilians ranked among the top fifteen estimated undocumented immigrant populations in the U.S. for the first time (at 77,000), and 73.7 percent of Brazilian immigrants surveyed in the 2000 U.S. census were non-citizens – the highest among all South American immigrant groups.

In contrast to most Latin American immigrants, Brazilians speak Portuguese rather than Spanish. Most identify themselves racially as white, some as black, and still others as a mix of European, Amerindian, African, or even Asian heritages. In the U.S., Brazilian immigrants confront new American ideas of race, which emphasize African and indigenous features more than is done in Brazil. That is, many Brazilians who were accustomed to seeing themselves as "white" in Brazil suddenly find that they are seen as "non-white" in the United States. This includes confronting the American racialized ethnic category "Hispanic/Latino" for the first time; in Brazil, they were not accustomed to identifying themselves this way. Even moreso than other South Americans, Brazilians are confused by their inclusion within this group, which they see as a derogatory label directed at poor and uneducated Caribbean and Central American-origin minority groups instead of accurately reflecting their own historical and racial background. Other researchers and I have suggested that over time, even if not today, Brazilians may be able to escape the Hispanic/Latino category more successfully than other Latin American groups. In fact, I have found that second-generation Brazilians identify more as "whites" and "blacks" in the United States, and less as "Hispanics/Latinos." If this trend holds into the future, including Brazilians in research on U.S. "Latinos" will remain controversial.

Finally, there are now many Brazilian immigrant organizations and institutions in the United States. Among them are various newspapers such as *The Brasilians* in New York and *The Brazilian Times* in Boston, larger Brazilian-American chambers of commerce as well as smaller Brazilian businesses (especially in the restaurant and tourism industries), immigrant advocacy groups such as the *Brazilian Immigrant Center* in Boston and the *Brazilian Women's Groups* in Boston and Los Angeles, and an even larger variety of Brazilian churches, restaurants (such as *churrascarias*, or Brazilian steakhouses), soccer leagues, and music, dance, and cultural groups (such as the *Brazilian Cultural Center* in Coconut Grove, Florida, the *Brazilian Cultural Society* in Pompano Beach, Florida, and the *Cultural Gaucho Center* in Los Angeles). All of these institutions help Brazilians maintain valuable cultural values, manage adaptation pressures, organize politically, and promote greater knowledge of Brazilian history and culture in the United States.

Suggested Readings

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