

International Migrant Workers in Brazil

Charles P. Gomes, researcher at Casa de Rui Barbosa

Introduction:

THIS STUDY ANALYZES THE INSERTION OF INTERNATIONAL MIGRANT workers in the Brazilian economy. The current situation of foreign workers is understood in the historical context of the immigration that existed and still exists in Brazil. The historical analysis of the migratory flow is presented under a demographic lens. The study supports a demographic thesis: Immigration is, above all, a matter of numbers. A study on international migration or national identity cannot be separated from the phenomenon of population growth and decline¹. Multiple examples show the importance of demography to understand the social, economic and political factors of immigration. For instance, contrary to the first decades of the 20th century, Brazil no longer suffers demographic pressure from outside: the number of asylum seekers, international migrant workers and all type of immigrants has fallen to very low levels. International migrants constitute only 0.4 % of Brazil's population. This decline in immigration has a strong impact on the way society and politicians deal with the issue. Immigration policy is largely absent from public and political debates, in stark contrast with the importance given to the issue in the beginning of the last century when immigrants composed 7% of the Brazilian population. At that time, nationality, migratory control or the right of immigrants to vote in local elections

¹ The best study on this correlation was written by Michael Teitelbaum & Jay Winter, *A question of number: High Migration, Low Fertility, and the Politics of National Identity*, New York, Hill & Wang, 1998.

constituted a lively debate both in Brazilian newspapers and in the political arena. Nowadays, when immigration appears in the public debate, the discussion generally focuses on the growing number of Brazilians leaving the country in search of a better life abroad. Since the end of the 1980's, Brazil has become more a country of emigration and less a country of immigration. Certainly, one can explain the concentration of Brazilian immigration policy in one agency of the government and its insulation from the Legislative power and public opinion by the lack of demographic pressure that immigration flow represents to the country. In summary, the goal of this study lies in the basic assumption that scholars need to see and understand numbers before elaborating any sociological or political hypothesis.

In the first part of this study, a brief history of immigration in Brazil is reconstituted under a demographic lens. Apart from the analysis of numbers, the historical section also provides a background of the immigration policies created in the country. The following section focuses on the insertion of international migrant workers in the Brazilian labor market. The data presented in this section is concentrated on the changes that occurred in the last decade. The major sources of information are the Ministry of Labor, Ministry of Justice, the census of the Brazilian Institute of Statistics (IBGE) and the Institute of Economic Politics (IPEA).

A Historical Summary:

Brazil has always been a country of immigration. During the colonial period, slaves, mostly from Angola, composed the first large foreign population inside Brazilian territory. The forced migration of Africans started in 1531 and remained until the middle of the 19th century despite the decision of the Brazilian government to cease the **slave trade in the 1830's**. The government only implemented a more severe policy of control against slave traders in the 1850's. Finally, in 1878, a new law abolished slavery inside national territory. Hebert Klein estimates that from 1531 until 1700, the arrival of 610 thousand Africans was registered in the ports of Bahia². Between 1700 and 1810, this

² Hebert Klein, "Trafico de Escravos", in: Estatísticas Históricas do Brasil, Rio de Janeiro.

number increased to 1 million 900 thousand new African migrants, from which 1 million 300 thousand were natives of Angola. But no consensus exists among scholars about the number of the Africans that migrated to Brazil. According to Robert Conrad's detailed analysis on the subject, the number of migrants was much higher. He estimated the number of migrants as follows: about 100 thousand in the 16th century, 2 million in the 17th century, 2 million in the 18th century, and, finally, 1 million 500 thousand in the first half of the 19th century.

During this whole period, the slave labor force was used in the sugar plantations located in the northeast region of the country and, later in the 18th century, in the gold mines concentrated in the state of Minas Gerais. In the second half of the 19th century, the most important sector of the economy shifted to the coffee plantations of the Southeast region that includes the states of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Minas Gerais. The end of the forced migration of African slaves and the need for a new labor force on the coffee plantations set off a new wave of immigration from Europe. Portuguese nationals composed the majority of the new migrant population until the 1870's. From there on, state governments started to implement policies to attract new migrants from other parts of Europe and Italy, Spain and Germany joined Portugal as the major emigrant countries.

The arrival of about 2 millions new Europe an migrants was registered in Brazilian territory in the last two decades of the 19th century, most of them from Italy and Portugal. In the beginning of the 20th century, Italian migration decreased due, for the most part, to the decision of the Italian government to prohibit free migration to Brazil (the Prinetti decree of 1902)³. During the first three decades of the 20th century the number of new migrants is estimated to be 2 million 200 thousand new migrants to

³ Ângelo Trento, "Do Outro Lado do Atlântico: Um Século de Imigração Italiana no Brasil", São Paulo, Nobel, 1989, p. 58.

Brazil with a strong decrease of the international migration flow during the first world war. An interesting aspect of the period after 1920 is the increase of the number of migrants, mainly Jewish, from Eastern Europe and countries and Russia.

The global economic crisis of 1929 brought about a shift in the international migration flow to Brazil. After the implementation of a more restrictive policy in the 1930's, the number of new international migrants decreased by more than half compared to previous decades.