

Book Review

Brazilians Away From Home

Teresa Sales
Center for Immigration Studies of New York,
2004, 225pp. Paperback
ISBN 1-5770-3032-X

Teresa Sales' *Brazilians Away From Home* was first published as *Brasileiros Longe de Casa* by Cortez Editora, São Paulo, in 1999. It was the second book published in Brazil about the theme of Brazilian immigration to the United States, the first being Maxine Margolis' *Little Brazil – An Ethnography of Brazilian Immigrants in New York City*, in 1994. Different from Margolis, intellectually grounded in US scholarship, Sales sees and speaks from a Brazilian perspective, which adds additional flavor and questions to this recently founded field of studies.

In *Brazilians Away from Home*, Sales studies the lives of Brazilians who have migrated to Framingham, the greater Boston area, site of the second largest Brazilian population in the United States. Although her sample has more women (60 percent) than men (40 percent), she is aware that this does not necessarily represent the reality of the Brazilian population in the city. As in the case of Margolis (1994) for New York, Brazilians in Boston are fairly young (85 percent of the sample are under 30) and are also well educated (47 percent had attended college). However, unlike the Brazilians in New York, their occupations seem to be more varied since there is a larger array of

jobs available. Only about half of the sample (44.9 percent) hold unskilled jobs. She also found journalists, teachers, and other salaried white-collar workers.

Even though she started her research by doing participant observation in a Brazilian church in Framingham, Sales focuses mainly on conducting interviews with immigrant individuals, following the snowball technique. Her sample comprises 70 individuals, 21 of whom work with organizing the Brazilian community in the area.

The book is organized in four chapters, along with an Introduction, a Conclusion, Appendixes, and a Glossary of expressions most used by Brazilian immigrants in the area. In the Introduction, Sales discusses the recent transformations of capitalism which have promoted flows of people everywhere in the globe, and then moves on to focus on the specific reasons for the Brazilian emigration initiated in the mid-1980s. She contends that the Fernando Collor Government played an important role in deepening the disillusionment of the Brazilian middle classes concerning their expectations of upward mobility or at least conditions of remaining in the same social position as their parents. However, no theory is presented to explain Brazilian immigrant flow specifically to the United States, not even when the author discusses the significance of social networks, which she considers to have been a more important determinant of migration than the Brazilian crisis in the 1980s.

The following four chapters are interspersed with immigrant narratives, making the reading more exciting and giving the



reader an opportunity to get closer to the lives of these immigrants and to ask his/her own questions.

In Chapter 1, Sales begins to analyze the integration of Brazilian immigrants in the greater Boston area, raising various questions around which the study revolves: how do these immigrants (generally belonging to Brazilian middle classes) see Brazil from abroad and how do they see themselves as Brazilians? How do they redefine their self-image as well as the image of their motherland in contrast to another hegemonic culture and in a situation of interaction with other ethnic groups?

She addresses these questions throughout the first and following chapters by researching, first, the socio-cultural baggage Brazilians take with them when they migrate to the United States. She focuses specifically on two myths: one, she names “the fetish of equality”; the other, is the “the myth of the rural person” (*mito do roceiro*). Following on Margolis’ findings in the case of Brazilians in New York, Sales argues that Brazilians always need the illusion of people whose situation is worse than their own. Thus the *roceiro*, on whom this myth was first based, is, according to many interviewees, an (im)migrant who left the rural areas of the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais and headed straight to the greater Boston area with no previous experience of migration or even urban life. It is by comparing their lives with that of an imaginary poor, illiterate, and backward rural person that many of the Brazilians researched in this study are able to feel their superiority and, consequently, their social value. In other words, coming from an extremely hierarchical and unjust social structure, in which only those who are hierarchically superior have any social value, Brazilians need to feel superior in order to

feel they have any social importance. Therefore, the idea of value based on being, for instance, a worker, does not exist there. Instead, this idea and its practical implications is only found by experiencing the lowest social position in the United States. This apparent paradox which she synthesizes in the Conclusion is what I consider to be one of the most interesting findings of Sales’ study.

Indeed, how can Brazilians be at the social bottom, usually in social positions lower than the ones they held in Brazil and, yet, still feel they are more valued than in Brazil? Sales explains that by being respected regardless of the job they might hold or the kind of clothing they wear, Brazilians finally have the opportunity to feel they are someone, because they are an equal (*sentir-se alguém sendo igual*) instead of only being able to feel they are someone because they are superior (*só se sentir alguém sendo superior*).

Although this might seem to be an interesting finding, it does not take into consideration the fact that in the racialized and racializing context of US society, Brazilians are often labeled *Hispanics* or *Latinos* and discriminated against on this basis. Thus, if not treated as *really* equal how can they feel equal? While acknowledging that Brazilians in Framingham live in Hispanic neighborhoods, Sales, unfortunately, does not pay much attention to the relationship between Brazilian immigrants and Hispanics, except to explain that the identity of *hard workers* that Brazilians have constructed in the area, contrasts with a stereotype according to which “Hispanics do not work; they live off welfare, and sell drugs”. Sales does not differentiate between Hispanics who live off welfare and those who are undocumented. They seem to be all the same. However, a

careful look at the immigrant narratives in her chapters does allow the reader to note that in Framingham as much as in Los Angeles (see Beserra, 2003, 2005), Brazilians live around or within the same geographic space of the Hispanic community, and (poor?) Brazilians also benefit from the services created for Hispanics and other minorities.

Thus, although the central theme of the study is ethnic identity, there is no effective dialog with US scholarship on the issue, especially with research most related to the case of Brazilian immigrants: that which focuses on Latin American immigration to the United States, or on US Latinos. Had this dialog been established, one would not get the feeling that the researched Brazilians in the Greater Boston area seem to live in limbo, beyond the determinations of a historical society. In other words, as portrayed by Sales, Brazilians do not seem to be living in the context of a racist and prejudiced society that classifies them as Hispanics or Latinos and that oftentimes applies to them the same discriminating treatment that is applied to the Latinos, from whom Brazilians seek to distinguish themselves.

But, if Sales' study does not add much to the discussion on Brazilians as Hispanics/Latinos, it certainly does provide a significant contribution to the understanding of Brazilian immigrants in the United States, themselves. Thus *Brazilians away from Home* is a welcome and much needed contribution to the recently founded field of Brazilian immigration studies.

References

- Beserra, Bernadete. (2003). *Brazilian Immigrants in the United States: Cultural Imperialism and Social Class*. New York: LFB Scholarly Publishing.
- Beserra, Bernadete. (2005). From Brazilians to Latinos? Racialization and Latinidad in the Making of Brazilian Carnival in Los Angeles. *Latino Studies* 3(1): 53–75.
- Margolis, Maxine. (1994). *Little Brazil – An Ethnography of Brazilian Immigrants in New York City*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Sales, Teresa. (1999). *Brasileiros Longe de Casa*. São Paulo: Cortez Editora.

Bernadete Beserra
Universidade Federal do Ceará,
Fortaleza, Brazil