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# Brazil: A Laboratory of International Migrations in the 21st Century

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(*in memoriam*)

## ABSTRACT

If Latin America can be understood as a laboratory for the new regional systems of the 21st century, the protagonism of Brazil, a country that has undergone profound political, economic and social changes in the last two decades, was its main ingredient. One of the fields that stood out was that of international migrations towards the country, which has consolidated as one of the main destinations for Latin Americans, West Africans and East Asians in the global South. After observing an unprecedented immigration flow of Haitians, Senegalese, Cubans, Bengalis and Venezuelans, Brazil today has a geopolitical paradigm: It has one of the most modern migratory laws in the international system and, at the same time, governments and anti-immigration, anti-integration and anti-globalisation institutions. This work will present Brazil's immigration profile in the last two decades and a brief discussion about the country's migration governance, its new agendas and perspectives. It is an interdisciplinary work of Geography, International Relations and Political Science.

## KEYWORDS

Brazil, international migrations, agendas, perspectives, governance

## RÉSUMÉ

Si l'Amérique latine peut être comprise comme un laboratoire des nouveaux systèmes régionaux du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle, le protagonisme du Brésil, pays qui a observé de profonds changements politiques, économiques et sociaux au cours des deux dernières décennies, en a été le principal ingrédient. L'un des domaines qui s'est démarqué a été celui des migrations internationales vers le pays, une des principales destinations des Latino-Américains, des Ouest-Africains et des Asiatiques de l'Est dans les pays du Sud global. Après avoir perçu un flux d'immigration sans précédent d'Haitiens, de Sénégalais, de Cubains, de Bengalis et de Vénézuéliens, le Brésil fait aujourd'hui face à un paradigme géopolitique : il a à la fois l'une des lois migratoires les plus modernes du système international et des gouvernements et des institutions anti-immigration, anti-intégration et d'antimondialisation. Ce travail présentera le profil d'immigration du Brésil des deux dernières décennies et une brève discussion sur la gouvernance migratoire du pays, ses nouveaux agendas et perspectives. Il s'agit d'un travail interdisciplinaire de géographie, relations internationales et science politique.

## MOTS CLÉS

Brésil, migrations internationales, agendas, perspectives, gouvernance

## INTRODUCTION

Brazil is a country of multicultural and historically tensioned immigration, as already pointed out by Pierre Monbeig (1954) at the beginning of the 20th century. Throughout its history, as one of the main elements of the laboratory called Latin America, the country has received the most diverse immigration flows, especially those whose geographical origin was Western Europe (Germans, Italians, Spaniards and Poles), Asia (Japanese and Chinese), and from the American continent as well, as expatriates from the USA and refugees from Latin American dictatorships, in addition to the Arab and Israeli flows from the Middle East.

The racial, cultural, religious and linguistic tensions brought about by or causing immigration in Brazil were also aggregated by territorial tension, since the geographical concentration of formerly called settlers (or "*colonos*") forced each new group to set up on the margins of urban centres and, consequently, to form new migrant territorialities. Nowadays, these territorialities are easily identifiable in cities like São Paulo, Belo Horizonte, Recife, Porto Alegre and in the transbordering regions.

In 21st-century Brazil, a country that has undergone profound social, economic and political shifts in two decades, from a progressive society open to globalisation to a country governed by the far-right and averse to cordial diplomacy, the immigration –and the immigrants– also faced a new territory and a new scenario. As a result of the foreign policy for migration of the Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff governments, as described by Uebel (2018), about 2.1 million immigrants chose Brazil as their destination and as an alternative to traditional and no-longer attractive destinations, such as the USA, the European Union (mainly France, Spain and Italy), the United Kingdom, Australia and Japan. The new context then made it possible to identify peculiar immigration flows, such as of Senegalese, Haitians, Cubans, Bengalis, Filipinos and Venezuelans who, although not all being the largest groups in the Brazilian immigration ranking, grew the most proportionately in the last two decades.

In this sense, this work, which is the result of an interdisciplinary research between Geography, International Relations and Political Science, will present a summary of Brazil immigration profile (1), will discuss Brazil migratory and territorial governance based on new legal instruments such as the new Migration Law and the humanitarian visa (2), and will underline the new perspectives and agendas of migration in Brazil, considering the country as the main element of the Latin American regional laboratory (3).

From these three sections, we seek to present a social, spatial and territorial panorama of immigration in Brazil regarding the transformations experienced by the country in the first two decades of the 21st century. The challenges of the contemporary global scenario of increasing anti-immigration, anti-integration and anti-globalisation sentiments were also considered, which Latin America itself has been presenting as an active actor and a laboratory, see the recent cases of Chile, Venezuela and Bolivia, where the immigration issue was also present, in addition to its connected themes, such as issues of gender, borders, securitization of society and militarization of institutions.

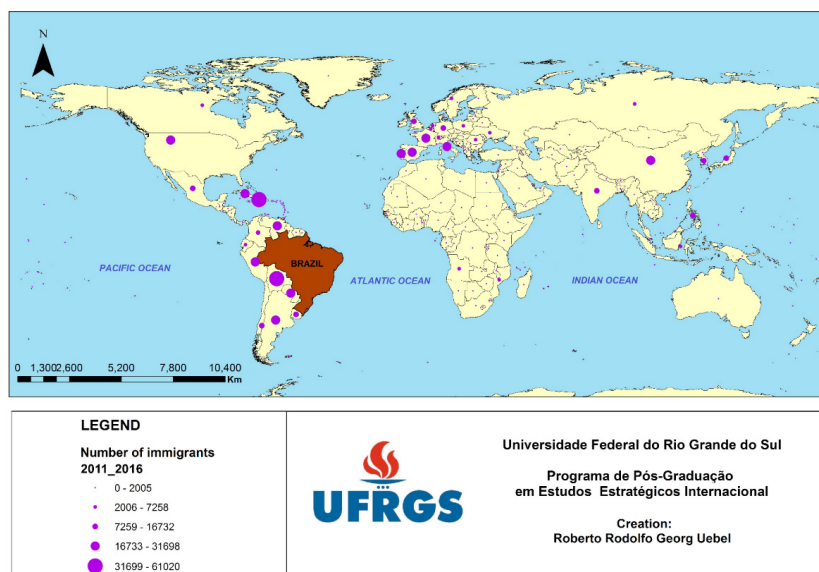
## 1. BRAZIL'S IMMIGRATION PROFILE

According to data from the Federal Police (Brazilian immigration authority), the total sum of admissions of new immigrants in Brazil reached 2.1 million between 2013 and 2018, which corresponds to a 600% growth from 2003, when the country registered about 300 thousand immigrants.

With regard to net migration rates, there is still a great challenge in Brazil for geographers, demographers and researchers to establish an approximate quantification, as the data provided by the Federal Police account only for regular emigration, and the censuses carried out by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics make data available every ten years: the latest census statistics date back to 2010, when Brazil had not yet gone through a process of immigration boom or transformed into an “eldorado” for new immigrants, even if temporarily (Silva & Assis, 2016).

Despite these issues, it is possible to estimate, as shown in figure 1 below, the main origins of these approximately 2.1 million immigrants, who chose the country based on a perspective of reception linked to Brazil's own strategic insertion in their countries of origin, a sub-agenda of the Brazilian Foreign Policy for Migration, which we will discuss later.

Figure 1. Number of immigrants in Brazil according to their country of origin (2011-2016)  
Elaborated by the authors.



The map makes it possible to draw the following panorama: migrations to Brazil originated mainly in South America and the Caribbean, followed by flows originating from Western Europe, China and India, and African countries. As Uebel (2018) discusses in his thesis, the flow of Africans was the one which grew most between 2003 and 2018 (about 173% in fifteen years), compared to 90% for Europeans' inflows.

Figure 2 summarises the proportion of the ten largest groups of immigrants in Brazil according to their countries of origin.

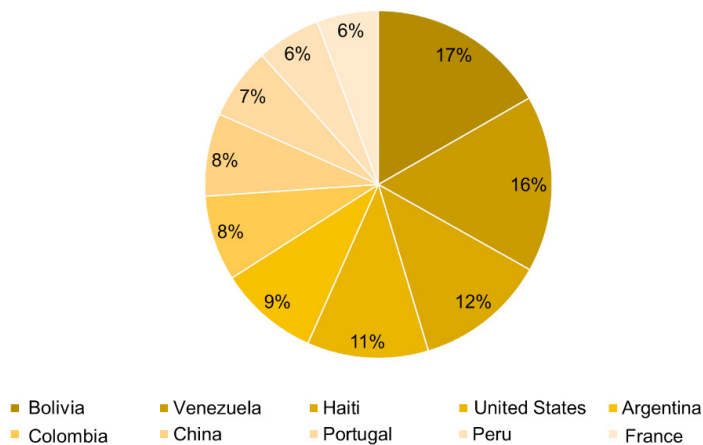


Figure 2. Ten countries that sent most migrants to Brazil (2003-2018)  
Elaborated by the author.

The aforementioned data therefore point to an almost exclusive concentration of Latin Americans in Brazil immigration profile in the period –about 475 thousand– which, added to the approximately 46 thousand new African immigrants, will represent the largest immigration contingent in the country, surpassing, for the first time, the historical flows of Europeans and Asians. It thus represents a new stage in the geopolitics of migration in Brazil and in the global South as well (Wenden, 2016).

This new geopolitical scenario of immigration will be strongly influenced by

the Brazilian Foreign Policy for Migration, which we will discuss in the next section about Brazil migration governance.

## 2. MIGRATION GOVERNANCE

The migration governance of Brazil, as well as the migration flows, has undergone a series of structural shifts over the last decades, starting with the revocation of the old Foreigner's Statute in force since the military dictatorship and the withdrawal of the country from the Global Compact for Migration of Marrakesh in January 2019, shortly after the inauguration of the far-right president, Jair Bolsonaro.

During this period, two new legal instruments came into force in Brazil: the Refugee Statute, in 1997, and the new Migration Law, in 2017, that are considered a reference for similar laws in other Latin American countries, and have an innovative character in the treatment of migrants, refugees, stateless persons, asylum seekers and victims of human trafficking.

Brazil's migration governance has also brought innovations in the formulation of government policies for the care of asylum seekers and vulnerable immigrants (see *infra*): the humanitarian visa, and the "general amnesties" that have granted migration regularisation to thousands of Haitians, Syrians, Senegalese and Venezuelans over the past five years.

To understand the migration governance in Brazil, it is first important to highlight its federalised and decentralised outline: not only is the federal government one of its main articulators, but also the states, municipalities and the judiciary and legislative powers, in addition to the recognised performance of the Federal Prosecution Service in defending the rights of migrants and refugees.

This peculiarity therefore implies an exclusive character in the formulation, application and monitoring of public migration policies, as highlighted by Rua (2009), which brings paradoxical consequences: the emergence of a care network for migrants, but also anti-immigration episodes such as the recent cases of the state of Roraima (northern Brazil) which requested the closure of the Brazilian border with Venezuela in order to prevent the arrival of Venezuelan asylum seekers (Maia *et al.*, 2018).

Thus, the territorial issue is very present in Brazilian migration governance. Since the decentralisation of migration and territorial management policies, an "aménagement migratoire" (migratory improvement) forced different actors from the Brazilian state to be present, both for logistical coordination and for the effectiveness of these policies. Among them, the Brazilian Army, which is responsible for "Operation Welcoming" (Operação Acolhida), a government programme dedicated to receiving migrants, especially Venezuelans, in a situation of vulnerability when admitted to Brazilian territory.

To complement the state action, the creation of the humanitarian visa and migratory regularisations through administrative orders, mark the migratory governance of Brazil, since they emerged as a solution to the legal limbo of those undocumented migrants who could not be recognised as refugees, hosted as political asylum seekers or authorised to work and reside in the country. Instituted during the government of Dilma Rousseff, these instruments were adapted by bordering countries such as Peru, Paraguay and Uruguay, in addition to being adopted by Ecuador.

The effectiveness of the Brazilian migratory governance also presents a last peculiarity related to the territorial issue: it begins at the terrestrial borders of Brazil and has institutional support concentrated in the twin cities and transbordering regions (Carneiro, 2016). In this sense, one cannot talk about governance and migration management in Brazil without considering the specificities of the country's borderlands.

There are numerous examples of this complex shared chain of Brazilian migration governance: the internalisation of migrants through the coordination of the Brazilian Army and the operation of the Brazilian Air Force, healthcare by the Ministry of Health, referral to the labour market through the Brazilian Service of Support for Micro and Small Enterprises (SEBRAE) and under the supervision of the Labour Prosecution Service, as well as the provision of access to public education by state and municipal education departments and by federal universities. The governance is verticalised in the application and horizontal as to the norms arising from the Brazilian Foreign Policy for Migration, something unprecedented in the global South and which serves as an experimentation laboratory for Latin American neighbours.

In this sense, we will present in the next section the agendas and outlook of the migration issue in Brazil considering the shifts in migration flows and in the views of the new government regarding the immigrant's theme, which had already been considered as "scum of the world" (Romero, 2016).

### 3. AGENDAS, OUTLOOK, AND FINAL REMARKS

As complex as the Brazilian territorial management, the country's migration agenda and the perspectives for the coming years also present relevant issues and gaps to be resolved by the country's migration governance, starting with the state treatment that changes according to the immigration group. Venezuelans are considered refugees for political reasons, while Senegalese and Haitians are considered economic immigrants and Syrians as asylum seekers.

In this context, the political geography of migration, so much inspired by the contributions of Elias' political sociology (1994), presents a paradoxical scenario for the Brazilian migration agenda, which can be divided into the following topics: 1) protection of national borders; 2) state sovereignty in migration control; 3) compliance with international agreements to protect migrants; 4) building an own and "innovative" foreign policy; 5) political mechanisms.

Considering these five topics, it is possible to assert that the Brazilian state has sought a position of affirmation both as a country that receives immigrants and refugees, and as an actor who has failed to fulfil its obligations soon after receiving these groups. This dual character is not exclusive to Brazil, obviously, but it draws attention because it is one of the few nations in Latin America that have managed to maintain it for so many decades, with the alternation of the different governing political agendas, from the military dictatorship to social democratic, progressive, liberal and far-right governments.

National sovereignty, understood by the Brazilian authorities as territorial sovereignty above all, ends up placing a central role in the country's terrestrial borders for the control and restraint of migration. It has happened to Senegalese and Haitians in the mass migrations of 2011 to 2014, and more recently to Venezuelans since 2015. This ends up justifying the participation of the Armed Forces as the main agents in the issue and in Brazil's migration governance.

From this complexity of agendas, it is possible to outline some migration perspectives for the near future, at least in the next two years of the current government: 1) An increase in domestic social tensions, especially in the state of Roraima, with an equal increase in xenophobia, anti-immigration and anti-globalisation discourse, supported by local, state and federal government authorities as well; 2) The political use of Venezuelan migration to support the Brazilian government's discourse against Nicolás Maduro regime in Venezuela, and also with an electoral feature, to prevent the rise of leftist governments internally and regionally in Latin America; 3) An alignment with the countries whose governments have been opposed to immigration, regional integration and globalisation, such as the USA, Hungary, Italy, Poland and Israel; 4) The review of the 2017 Migration Law, such as through the recent Executive Order 666/2019 which dealt with the issues of deportation and expulsion of immigrants; 5) A greater presence of the Armed Forces in migration control, replacing the Federal Police, and a kind of Brazilian Frontex in border regions so as to avoid social tension and the entry of irregular migrants.

These outlooks on Brazil's migration agenda are not exclusive to the current government. However, according to Martins (2019), they gained weight and prominence after the country left the Global Compact for Migration and since part of the population legitimates the anti-immigration discourse; this phenomenon is simultaneously happening in other Latin American countries, each with its own population and territorial specificities.

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