Goodbye Brazil: Émigrés from the Land of Soccer

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Book Review


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This book summarizes the recent history of Brazilian immigration to Europe, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand, as well as to other countries in South America. Maxine Margolis is the right person to write it because she has collected hundreds of articles, books, and news reports about Brazilian emigration and built an international network of Brazilian emigrants and scholars over the last two decades. In addition, she has advised many new scholars of Brazilian migration to the United States.

Framed within well-known and accepted theories of migration, the book provides a broad picture of the Brazilian diaspora, its origins and geographical and temporal patterns. Its narrative can be understood by scholars of international migration as well as by policy makers and practitioners. Margolis writes as an anthropologist who conducts qualitative research but also delivers her message to a broad audience by avoiding scientific or technical jargons and translating social science concepts into lay language.

One of the main issues raised by this book is the dynamic nature of Brazilian migration, wherein Brazilian sojourners emigrate from and return to Brazil in a relatively short period — a pattern that may be comparable to those who migrate from Mexico to the United States and back. Scholars of international migration should consider this pattern as an example of migratory flows that result from the economic insecurity of today’s globalized world. Traditional economic push–pull factors may change quickly between developed and so-called emerging countries, such as Brazil, if and when conditions in the homeland improve and deteriorate in the destination country. Brazilian migration to the United States and Europe could thus be a harbinger of similar patterns in other continents.

A particularly interesting aspect of this book is the development of transnational practices among those who have been called transmigrants, that is, those Brazilians who divide their lives between Brazil and the destination country. These transmigrants have developed transnational networks and may in the future become a larger component of Brazilian migration. There is some evidence that Brazilian migrants who have higher socioeconomic status tend to have strong and regular interactions with both Brazil and the destination country, especially in the United States, Japan, and Europe.

For the most part, this book provides accurate information on the Brazilian diaspora. However, due to the strengths and weaknesses of the Brazilian migration literature, the quality and quantity of information reviewed are uneven. International migration scholars will find a reasonably large peer-reviewed and scholarly literature on Brazilian immigration to the United States in English, but some articles and reports are only available in Portuguese. There is also a paucity of scholarly research on Brazilian migration to Africa or elsewhere in South America. The number and depth of studies on Brazilian migration to a few countries in Europe, such as Spain and Portugal, fall between these two poles. As a result, the book is on more solid ground when reviewing Brazilian migration to the United States than to other destinations.

Also contributing to this unevenness is the fact that most studies and reports reviewed by the author are time bound and do not account for changes in the last two decades. For example, the socioeconomic profile of Brazilian migrants has
changed in terms of gender composition and types of jobs held over the last twenty years in the United States. Brazilian immigrants now work in a much broader variety of jobs in the service sector than before. In addition, Brazilian migrants in different parts of the world were impacted by significant economic, political, and cultural shifts over the last two decades in Brazil and in destination countries. If in the late 1990s, Brazilians could easily go back and forth between Brazil and the United States or Europe, restrictive immigration policies enacted in the 2000s in both the United States and Europe reduced the flow of migrants and created significant stress in Brazilian communities. As a result, new social problems developed in Brazilian communities in these destinations, such as fear of contact with authorities or the police.

This book may influence academic research, policy debates, and/or advocacy efforts by providing evidence, mostly qualitative in nature, that Brazilian migrants fit within a pattern that is probably common to many other groups of recent economic migrants. These migrants contribute to the economies and societies of both developing and developed countries in ways which cannot be reduced to the number and types of jobs held or the taxes paid in the cities and countries where they live. Yet, their overall contribution has systematically been ignored or disputed. As Margolis’s book clearly suggests, international migration is not a zero-sum game where destination countries lose and Brazil wins or vice versa.