

Migration in Brazil: Research during the 1980s

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Abstract

Many studies during the past decade dealt with various aspects of migration in Brazil. Two flows appeared dominant. First, as in many other Third World areas, a significant rural-urban population shift occurred. Land holding consolidation, improved transportation, and agricultural capitalization were the most often listed causes. The process of movement to and among cities, return migration to rural areas, and aspects of migrant assimilation within the urban environment were important issues. Second, many people moved to the Amazon North, primarily to the state of Rondonia. Much of the investigation focussed on the impact of new settlement at destination locations and concluded that the region will not likely be able to support high densities. Government policy designed to attain geopolitical goals and based on a poor understanding of the tropical environment was a contributing cause of the migratory movement.

Any attempt to summarize the professional literature on a topic as broad as the one defined for this report must fall short in some ways. Human migration, generally defined as a permanent change of residence beyond the immediate community, is universal behavior that influences, and is modified by, almost all other significant activities. The decision to move is not a trivial one. An individual's kinship ties, financial welfare, personal values and survival itself may be affected by the choice to abandon one location for another. More broadly, source and destination areas can be fundamentally shaped by migration flows, and ramifications often extend throughout a nation's economic, social and political systems.

Rather than attempt to describe all research pertinent to migration in Brazil, this survey was limited in several ways. First, only very recent or current trends were considered. Though the present is a function of the past, migration patterns or causal conditions antecedent to the 1970s were not considered. The literature review was restricted to sources no earlier than the late 1970s.

Second, international movement was not included nor was an effort made to compare Brazilian patterns to those occurring in other countries. For example, migration from rural to urban areas happens throughout the developing world, but a review of international comparisons or a search for universal causes was not undertaken.

Third, the focus of this study was the migration process not the source or destination areas. Though migrants arriving in cities, for example, shape the urban environment in countless ways, no attempt was made to comprehensively analyze the literature on urbanization in Brazil. Similarly, aspects of life in rural source areas were probed only when they related directly to population movement.

Finally, no attempt was made to fully review the body of migration theory. Most of the included sources described empirical studies and though they illuminated broad patterns, they were not primarily concerned with building theory or establishing universal laws of migration.

Scholars have researched migration in Brazil from many different perspectives. Some have described inter-regional movement by analyzing data from government sources (Dawsey 1983; Goodman 1989; Merrick 1989) while others have focussed more narrowly on communities and based their findings on interviews with local residents (Banck 1986; Muller 1986; Lisansky 1990). Most of the studies have incorporated hypotheses or drawn conclusions regarding possible mechanisms causing observed migration patterns, and the impact on destinations has also been of interest. Migration can be thought of as a response of labor pools to macro-

economic forces and the distribution of resources, or as the action of people making individual decisions based on a comparison of their current situation to perceived conditions elsewhere. Migration results if basic need satisfaction at a potential destination is perceived to be substantially greater than at the present location. The improvement must be great enough to override the negative elements associated with the move. Whether or not explicitly stated, most research included elements of Ravenstein's (1885) classic "push/pull" motivation framework which compares repelling elements in source areas to attracting features at destinations.

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The investigation of migration in Brazil has been limited by some significant factors. The Brazilian census lists only three items useful for studies of human movement: the current residence; the previous residence; and the place of birth. Important patterns such as return migration or multiple step migration over short periods of time are not documented by the census tables. Furthermore, longitudinal study at the county (*município*) level has been hampered by the bureau's practice of frequently redefining boundaries between census takes. As population expands new area units are created and old borders modified.

Another set of problems concerns the condition of always identifying migrants after the move has taken place. Interviews of families of migrants are recollections of events after the fact and memories of perceived motivations may be tainted by subsequent experiences.

Given the qualifications listed here, what can be said about the patterns of internal migration in Brazil? Because census data are collected each decade, much of the statistical information that served as the bases for research during the past decade was gathered in 1980. The relative distribution of people among broad regions at that time was slightly changed from the previous decade with the Southeast and North regions registering small percentage gains. Though the correspondence is not exact, these regions have been the ones most closely linked to the two dominant migration flows in Brazil during the 1980s: movement to cities and movement to the Amazon frontier.

RURAL-URBAN MIGRATION IN BRAZIL

The percentage of Brazil's population living in areas classified as urban reached 67 in 1980, almost double the value for 1950. Between 1970 and 1980 the urban population expanded by 54.5 percent while during the same period the rural segment declined by 5.9 percent. This expansion of the urban component of the population occurred in all regions of the country (Merrick 1989, 38). Some of the difference between rural and urban growth can be attributed to variations in the rates of natural increase but most resulted from migration. During the 1970s an estimated 17 million rural residents left for the cities, and both rate and total number were highest in Brazil's most populous state, São Paulo (Merrick 1989, 40). Though the 1990 census figures are not yet available, the urban growth pattern of the 1970s appears to have continued during the 1980s.

Rural-urban migration is characteristic of much of the third world, so many of the causes for the population shift in Brazil may reflect universal trends. On the other hand, important differences exist between Brazil and other countries. For example, Berry (1986) and Gugler (1986) have pointed out that the high level of industrial development in Brazil and some other Latin American countries sharply differentiates these areas from nations in Africa where the urban population is also expanding.

THE RURAL SETTING

A significant number of studies have pointed to conditions in rural source areas as important factors causing

migration. Among other things, the lack of credit and the soaring cost of land were found by Pinare (1985) to be important determinants of a tendency to migrate. The increasing scarcity of rural labor opportunities resulting in a higher level of employment in non-farm jobs, the growing dependence on commercial crops, the enlarging size of farms and the expanding use of machinery have all been related to out-migration (Saint 1980; Butterworth 1981; Goodman 1989). The Brazilian government has played an important role by providing incentives for the capitalization of agriculture while doing little to implement an effective land reform program (Muller 1981; Michaels 1990).

Rural life for most Brazilians has always been difficult. The combination of infertile soil, inadequate medical and educational services, little economic mobility and a rigid social setting controlled by the *fazendeiro* or *cacique* encourage many to leave when the means for moving become available. Because a certain amount of wealth is necessary to pay for transportation and to sustain life for an initial time period in the new environment, the very poorest often don't migrate (Butterworth 1981, 41).

Transportation has been a major factor. Road building and paving in rural areas of the Southeast and Northeast have accelerated commercialization by providing improved access to urban markets. The boom and subsequent depopulation of soybean producing areas in western Paraná exemplifies the consequences of an expanding highway system (Dawsey 1983; Figueiredo 1984).

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Better transportation facilitates migration itself and provides farm laborers with the option of living in cities rather than rural areas. The dramatic increase in the number of commuting farm workers, known as *boias frias* (cold grubs), is a direct result of improvements in transportation (Saint 1981; Guimarães 1984). The phenomenon is most common in the interior of the state of São Paulo where workers are hired by truck owning overseers who collect their employees each morning in the poor neighborhoods of town and return them long past sundown after a full day in the fields. The exploitation formerly imposed by the landowning *fazendeiro* is now carried on by these often unscrupulous overseers, known as *gatos* (cats), who pay low wages and often cheat the workers by under-measuring their output. Despite such difficulties an urban residence does provide a farm laborer with measures of freedom and opportunity that do not exist in rural areas.

Finally, the expansion of communication networks and the resultant flow of information to rural areas has been important. Television signals can be received far into the interior of Brazil, and shortwave radio receivers throughout the country tune in to stations from Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. Elementary and adult education campaigns have helped transform the everyday lives of the rural *caboclo* and his family. Most importantly, they are made aware that upward economic mobility is often contingent on horizontal mobility to cities where advanced study and technical training can be obtained.

THE URBAN SETTING

A false picture of rural-urban migration is often presented. Migrants have been depicted as poor subsistent farm families who become overwhelmed by fantasies of glitter and excitement in the big city. They abandon all and move, only to find themselves in a squatter settlement on the urban perimeter where they survive in unproductive idleness and abject poverty. Though compelling, the scenario seldom reflects reality. While many migrants ultimately end up in a large city, the move is usually marked by short stays in small towns, returns to the rural hearth, some experience in intermediate sized cities, arrival in a primate city and relocations after the metropolitan area has been reached.

The largest city of northeast Brazil, Recife, is growing more rapidly than others in the region, but the two

dominant cities in the nation, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, are not experiencing rates of in-migration as great of the next 25 largest cities (FIDEPE 1981; Baldwin 1983).

Though much of the movement is ultimately rural-urban, migration is really a process that may span a lifetime during which most relocations are actually urban-urban. Matsuda (1985) has shown that migration in Brazil primarily involves continuous circulation among four centers: Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Minas Gerais and Mato Grosso. Rossini (1985) highlighted an additional component to the rural to urban population shift: foreign immigrants who once preferred rural areas are now more likely to go to cities.

The activities of urban residents who have come from rural areas may also not fit common stereotypes. Former migrants do not usually form enclaves but they live dispersed among the general population (Correia 1976). They are not commonly politically active but they do participate in informal action groups. The level of participation in such groups, however, does not appear to be related to the migrants' length of residence in the city (Almeida 1981). Most evidence has indicated that groups of people arriving from rural areas do not form anything like "parasitic cancers" or "festering sores" (terms once used on a network news broadcast) around otherwise healthy cities.

Urban residents who were once migrants are confirmed to be fully integrated in the urban environment. Whether this means that migrants in general are adaptable to city life cannot, however, be affirmed because the people who get interviewed and measured are the very ones who have established permanence by not moving on. The problem has been a hindrance to understanding the process of migrant integration into the urban economy (Martine 1979).

In evaluating rural-urban migration in Brazil according to the classical "push/pull" framework, the dominant motivators appear to be "push" conditions in rural source areas. Scarcity of resources, consolidation of land holdings and agricultural mechanization have forced many people off the land even when the ultimate destination is not very attractive. Though city life offers certain advantages, migration is a risky proposition that entails venturing into the unknown. For many, however, it is perceived as the only available option.

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MOVEMENT TO THE NORTHERN FRONTIER

Except perhaps for the Colombian coca connection no news story from South America has received as much continuing coverage during recent years as the account of the destruction of the rain forest. Though migration into the Amazon lowlands and the devastation of ecological systems has occurred east of the mountains in Andean countries, most of the clearing has taken place in Brazil, the country that controls by far the greatest amount of land in equatorial South America. Several groups have been responsible for cutting the forest but most damaging has been the extensive clearing by land-hungry cattle ranchers and small scale farmers looking for homesteads. New settlement has occurred throughout the country's northern region, but the greatest number of migrants have arrived in Rondônia. The population of this western Amazonian state increased from about 70,000 in 1960 to over 113,000 in 1970 to almost 500,000 in 1980, and the growth appears to have continued during the past decade (IBGE 1981).

A combination of many events has spurred the rush to the Amazon. The same "push" conditions of land consolidation, mechanization and commercialization in established farming areas of the Southeast and Northeast, described previously as important causes for the rural-urban flow, have also driven people to the northern interior (Lisansky 1990). Also important have been changes occurring in the western Paraná frontier where subsistence farming has been replaced by extensive soybean production (Robaratti 1979; Muller 1986). The rapid population expansion that had occurred during the 1960s and early 1970s has been followed by a

dramatic outflow during the late 1970s and 1980s, and many of the settlers have found their way to Rondônia (Figueiredo 1984; Mahar 1989).

The federal government's development policy has arguably been the most important factor causing migration to Amazonia. Following the coup in 1964, several of the military administrations promoted programs to bring growth to the North and integrate the region into the national economy. The effort was a response to the perceived need to redistribute Brazil's population by causing people to move to the empty interior of the country. The desire to "fill Brazil's empty heart" a few years earlier had led to the construction of Brasília, and it is an old imperative that is based, in part, on geopolitical interests. An underlying assumption, proven largely to be false, was that under the canopy of the forest existed a wealth of resources waiting to be extracted and a physical environment capable of supporting a substantial population.

The efforts of the government were concentrated in two areas. First a massive road building program was initiated and, second a package of financial incentives was implemented. Both were established to entice people and enterprises to relocate to the remote North and thus bring new settlers as well as new economic growth to Amazônia.

The highway construction effort involved three major routes. The Belém (Pará) - Brasília and the Pôrto Velho (Rondônia) - Brasília highways were completed in the 1960s, though paved later, and during the 1970s the widely publicized Trans-Amazônica was cut from the poor *Sertão* of the Northeast to the interior of the upper Amazon basin. Though the construction of the Trans-Amazônica was accompanied by a program to establish rural agricultural communities, its prime function since opening has been to provide loggers and cattle ranchers with access to markets near the coast. The resettlement scheme failed not only because of poor soil and the small acreage of the grants but also because the financial incentive programs were heavily weighted in favor of short-term profits and not permanent land use (Becker 1979; Smith 1982; Collin 1986; Fearnside 1986).

More significant have been the effects of the other two highways. The road to Belém is now a major route strung with towns serving truckers as well as several growing local population clusters. Most important of all has been the opening of the Pôrto Velho highway that made the marginally more fertile lands of Rondônia accessible. Many studies have focussed on the characteristics of the migrants to this area, the impact on the land of the massive settlement and events surrounding territorial conflict with cattle ranchers and rubber tappers (Wesche 1978; Wood 1984; Mougeot 1985; Mahar 1989).

The second element of the government's effort to promote development in the Amazon region has consisted of a group of financial incentives provided through the Superintendency for the Development of Amazonia (SUDAM) and the Bank of Amazonia (BASE). Investments in the Amazon region, legally defined to encompass most of northern Brazil, were tax exempt for 10 to 15 years and exports were permanently duty free. Plans for development projects had to be submitted to SUDAM for approval, and one of the most popular types of enterprises approved by the agency was beef cattle production. Ranching was an attractive investment because it required a minimum amount of capitalization, operating costs were low once the land had been cleared and meat could be exported duty free. Though ranches were readily approved as development projects they were often no more than **[end p. 112]** a cover for speculative land holding by wealthy banks and individuals of Southeast Brazil (Mahar 1989). For various reasons, including most importantly the poverty of the land resource base, the economic viability of cattle ranching in the Amazon has yet to be proven (Hecht 1985).

Serious doubts exist regarding the permanence of rural occupation in Rondônia. Farmers are often taken advantage of by shady land dealers (locally known as *grileiros*), and some cattle ranchers have not been averse to using violence to convince small holders to sell out. Many farmers have little knowledge of the

fragility of tropical soils so they give up their land when productivity drops after a few years of cultivation. Martine (1980) has documented the resulting concentration of holdings in Rondônia, and Lisansky (1989) has described the dominating power of cattle interests in northern Mato Grosso. Ultimately, depopulation and reduced land productivity results.

The government incentives aimed at promoting development in the Amazon have done little to foster a stable agricultural economy or to provide land to the landless. The programs have mainly benefitted local entrepreneurs and bureaucrats and non-local banks and speculators (Miller 1983; Henriques 1984). Mougeot (1985) concluded that the government policies have really produced instability by encouraging traditional activities to move away from core areas of the region and by causing farmers to abandon subsistence for commercial crops. Though the new government of president Collor de Mello has promised to protect the rain forest environment and to implement a carefully planned rural settlement program, the record of federal intervention from Brasília has been mixed at best (Michaels 1990).

In conclusion, many of the studies carried out during the past decade have shown that migration in Brazil is a complex process of movement from place to place, generally toward cities and the latest booming rural frontier. People move for many reasons ranging from basic structural economic changes in traditional rural areas to government incentives designed to establish hegemony over the remote interior. Regardless of the combination of motives particular to any individual the act of residential relocation is an important personal decision, and when combined with the decisions of others affected by similar conditions it can have significant consequences for the nation. In a large and dynamic country such as Brazil migration will likely continue to be an important phenomenon.

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