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## *Migration Theory in the Domestic Context*

### **North-South Labor Movement in Brazil**

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**Abstract:** Sugar cane has remained central to the Brazilian economy, and increasingly so as rising petroleum prices spark an increase in the demand for ethanol. As a world leader in sugar cane based ethanol production, Brazil has a need for low-skilled, low-wage workers in this industry. As petroleum prices rise, and with them the demand for biofuels, the incentives to produce more sugar cane in Brazil have fueled the demand for labor on plantations and in sugar mills. In Brazil's sugar-producing regions of the central and southeastern states, the labor demands in the fields are primarily filled by migrants. However, these migrants are not foreigners, but Brazilians who migrate seasonally from northern and northeastern states such as Maranhão, Bahia, Alagoas, Pará, and Minas Gerais. Although these workers are Brazilians traveling and working in their home country, they face many of the difficulties that international migrants in other countries face, including discrimination, poor wages, and inhumane working conditions. This article discusses theoretical approaches to domestic sugar cane labor migration in Brazil.

#### **INTRODUCTION**

According to the theory of the New International Division of Labor, access to employment is not only based on the skills or education of individuals. Some jobs are targeted toward particular members and groups of the population. Certain jobs, most often the menial, strenuous, and low-paying, are reserved for those who, in theory, have the fewest skills and lowest levels of education. However, in reality it is those

with the most limited resources and even more limited access to these resources who find themselves in these difficult forms of employment that offer them little compensation. In more industrialized states of Western Europe, the United States, Canada, and Australia, among others, these jobs are often filled by immigrants, especially those who have recently arrived and are undocumented. The jobs vary from domestic work to agriculture and meatpacking, among other sectors.

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With its rapidly growing economy and wide range of industries, Brazil has a need for low-skilled, low-wage workers. Brazil is a world leader in ethanol production, and has been engaged in the widespread use of ethanol since the mid-1970s.<sup>1</sup> With increasing fuel prices worldwide, there is a growing demand for alternative sources of energy. Biofuels, including sugarcane-based ethanol, are considered by some people to be a viable alternative (Goldemberg 2007). Consequently, ethanol production has increased in both the United States and Brazil, the world's two leading producers. In the former, ethanol is mainly produced from corn, while in the latter sugar cane is the main source. In addition to global concerns regarding energy availability, there is a high local demand for ethanol within Brazil, driven by three main factors. First, ethanol is 35% less costly than gasoline. Second, ethanol is taxed at 9 cents per liter, in comparison to the 42 cents per liter charged for gasoline, also influencing the overall cost. Finally, flex fuel vehicles, which use both ethanol and gasoline, have become increasingly economical in Brazil, encouraging their popularity (Luhnow 2006).

In Brazil, the incentive to produce more sugar cane has resulted in an increased demand for labor on sugar cane plantations and in sugar mills. In Brazil's main sugar-producing regions of the center-south states, the labor demands are filled by migrants. However, in this case the migrants are not foreigners, but Brazilians from the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. In some cases the migration is permanent and the workers live in slums, land reform settlements, and other poor communities. However, many of the workers are temporary labor migrants who migrate seasonally from northern and northeastern states

such as Maranhão, Bahia, Alagoas, Pará, and Minas Gerais. Although these workers are Brazilians traveling and working in their home country, they face many of the challenges that migrant workers in other countries face, including discrimination, meager wages, and inhumane working conditions.

Migration is a hot topic in academia, and a range of theories has arisen to explain, discuss, or otherwise dissect the process of migration. Among them, several approaches have emerged as accepted, dominant theories of migration. Some of them explain the reasons for migration, while others explain how and why the process continues once it has begun. It has also become accepted among scholars of migration that these theories do not operate independently of each other, but are all complementary. However, these models all emphasize international migration. Within the field of migration studies, international migration is certainly dominant. Furthermore, rural to urban migration dominates discussions of domestic migration, further marginalizing migrants such as Brazilian labor migrants who have very different experiences in their movement from poor urban settings to agricultural spaces. This article proposes an alternative way of perceiving internal migration, one that considers the similar plights that they share with international migrants. Case studies of Campos dos Goytacazes in the state of Rio de Janeiro and Guariba in the state of Sao Paulo are used to illustrate the complexities of domestic labor migration in Brazil. Information from these two regions is based on interviews conducted there from summer to fall of 2007. The following section describes the major theories of international migration, emphasizing the ways in which these theories are applicable to domestic migration, particularly in the context of Brazilian labor migrants.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: [http://www.epa.gov/reg3wcmd/Ethanol\\_Workshop/Bauman\\_Ethanol\\_workshop.pdf](http://www.epa.gov/reg3wcmd/Ethanol_Workshop/Bauman_Ethanol_workshop.pdf)

## THEORIES OF INTERNATIONAL MIGRATION

For the last several decades, beginning perhaps with Everett Lee's (1966) pioneering "push-pull" theory of migration, scholars have attempted to explain the causes and trends of international migration through a range of theoretical perspectives. Several theories have emerged as dominant and generally accepted approaches to international migration, some of which explain the reasons why and the ways in which the process begins, while others explain the perpetuation of migration. A consensus has developed that these approaches are not mutually exclusive, but are complementary and applicable to different types of international migration. The models of neoclassical economics, new economics of migration, segmented labor market, and world-systems theory are the dominant models that explain the initiation of the migration process, while networks explain its continuation. These approaches are discussed below.

### *Neoclassical Economics*

The neoclassical economics approach to international migration is based on the premise that individuals will migrate in order to improve their standard of living. This approach recognizes the imbalance between the supply and demand of labor and capital such that there is an abundance of labor in developing or migrant sending countries, while capital is more readily available in developed or migrant receiving countries. According to this theory, migration will continue as long as this imbalance exists. Massey et al. (1994) use the example of Puerto Rican migration to the United States mainland to support the claims of the neoliberal economics model, although they agree that it does not adequately explain fluctuations in the international

movement of people. The case of Puerto Rican migration to the United States represents an unusual case, as it is not considered international migration. Although the move from the island to the mainland involves linguistic and cultural adaptation, Puerto Ricans hold U.S. citizenship. Similarly, this model could also be applied to domestic migration in the contexts in which the unequal distribution of wealth is geographically based, as in the Brazilian case.

The neoclassical economics model of migration could certainly be used as an explanatory tool for migration from Brazil's northeastern to center-south states, as the former represents an area that is abundant in labor, while the latter boasts higher wages and a greater availability of resources. Brazilian sugar cane cutters in the center-south earn an average monthly income that is about 15-22 percent higher than the monthly wages in the northeast (Romero 2000). For example, in Pernambuco in the northeast, sugar cane cutters earn a median monthly salary of US\$167, while in São Paulo they earn US\$195 (Kenfield 2007). Consequently, the migrant flow moves in a north-south direction, from the labor-abundant regions to the capital-abundant areas, despite the obstacles or difficulties.

Although domestic migrants in Brazil do not face the same legal issues as international migrants, or the linguistic and cultural concerns of Puerto Ricans in the United States, they are nonetheless migrants, leaving the familiarity of their homes and settling in sometimes unfriendly locales. However, one of the critiques of the neoclassical model is that, by assuming that migrants are individual rational actors who make migration choices based on the propensity for upward socioeconomic mobility, the model has significant limitations and ignores a range of other considerations.

### *New Economics of Migration*

Like the neoclassical approach, the New Economics of Migration assumes that there are global economic imbalances that enable people to make rational choices in order to maximize their socioeconomic potential. However, this approach does not assume that the individual makes these choices independently. Rather, the inclusion of the nuclear or extended family, or in some cases even the community, facilitates the sharing of both the costs and the benefits of migration.

Community and familial relationships are central to the migration flows of Brazilian sugar cane workers. Male workers interviewed in Guariba indicated that their quality of life improves in several ways when they are accompanied by their partners or spouses. Most importantly, the partners are able to share the household duties, enabling the male workers to focus solely on their paid labor. While most female sugar cane cutters face the double burden of household and paid work, they are also in some cases aided by the extended family, most often in the form of child care. As such, this model is a useful lens through which to view domestic labor migration in the case of sugar cane workers in Brazil, although as with the neoclassical model, there remains an assumption that individuals and family members are rational actors.

### *Segmented Labor Market*

The segmented or dual labor market approach to migration is based on the assumption that there are jobs that have, over time, become labeled as migrant jobs. Occupations such as domestic and agricultural work, for instance, often receive a majority of foreign-born workers. In California, for example, 95 percent of farm workers in 2000 were foreign born, with 100 percent of newly arrived workers also foreign born. An estimated 50 percent of

this work force is believed to be undocumented (Martin 2001: 3).

The structure of sugar cane labor in Brazil is such that cane cutters, who engage in arduous manual labor, fall to the bottom of the hierarchy. This level of labor is usually reserved for migrant workers. While other positions in the industry are by no means trivial, the "indoor" positions, such as those inside of the factories, are typically reserved for permanent workers, or those who are native to or have settled in the communities in which the sugar mills are found. Workers are recruited from the less affluent states of Brazil's northeast to work in the cane fields of the southern and central states. That migrant labor work in the fields while local labor work in the factories, suggest the type of segmented labor market that this theory describes. This type of labor organization was observed in both Campos dos Goytacazes and Guariba, where the overwhelming majority of the sugar cane cutters are migrants from the northeast.

### *World-Systems Approach*

As in the cases of the other major theories of international migration, the world-systems analysis is also applicable to domestic migration in the Brazilian context.

According to the world-systems approach to international migration, since the sixteenth century there has been a global division of states and regions into a core, which is abundant in capital, a periphery, which is abundant in labor, raw materials, and consumer markets (Massey et al. 1993:444), and a semi-periphery that combines elements from core and periphery. Migration, according to this approach, is the inevitable result of the problems that are created by capitalist development. Although this may not be immediately apparent, the world-systems approach to migration is appropriate because Brazil, as a semiperipheral region, is divided geo-

graphically along socioeconomic lines, the north being considerably poorer than the south.

Although world-systems analysis emphasizes global divisions, a similar structure exists within the large semi-peripheral geographic space that is Brazil. While natural resources and raw materials are found throughout the country, the North has long been an area with an abundance of labor. Furthermore, during the sixteenth century, which marks the inception of the global division of core and periphery states, Brazil's northeast was the primary area for the development of the sugar cane plantation economy, and the accompanying importation of slave labor. As such, labor migration will continue to take place from the north to the south of Brazil as long as there remains an unequal distribution of wealth, resources, and cheap labor between the regions. The effects of the abundance of labor in Brazil's northeast are compounded by the fact that the region, once the main sugar cane growing area, has been largely desiccated. Sugar cane remains prominent in the region mainly because of the historical dependency on this commodity. However, production in the center-south is more widespread, intensive, and efficient, as the figures below indicate.

### *Networks*

Networks represent a key component of the migration process, as they affect migrants' decisions regarding their destination locale. Information about the destination is channeled to prospective migrants through those who have already made the journey (Thomas-Hope 2002). As such, the networks, which are comprised of prospective migrants, migrants, and returned migrants, among others, are involved in the decision-making process. Furthermore, these networks are crucial to migrant adaptation, as networks facilitate the processes of securing employment and

housing. Networks may consist of family, friends, or others, but are most closely linked to geographic space. Migrants typically form or join networks with those from their town, region, or country.

Within the context of Brazilian migrant sugar cane workers, networks are fundamental to the migration process. All of the migrant sugar cane workers interviewed in both Guariba and Campos dos Goytacazes noted that they were informed of the employment opportunity through someone they knew, most often a relative or friend. Consequently, there is a spatial pattern that is consistent with Levitt's (2001) findings in her study of Dominican migrants in Boston. Levitt emphasizes the value of migrant networks and ethnic enclaves in her study of transnational migration between the Dominican Republic and Boston. Specifically, she underscores the relevance of networks in the decision to migrate to a particular city, as her research was centered on migrants from the Dominican town of Miraflores. In this case, the overwhelming majority of Miraflores migrants choose Boston as their destination city. Similarly, migrant sugar cane workers interviewed in Guariba were exclusively from the state of Maranhão, and the majority of them were from the city of Timbiras.

Another way in which the role of networks is articulated within the context of Brazilian sugar cane migrant labor is through the role of labor contractors or recruiters, known in Brazil as *empreiteiros*, or more commonly but derogatorily as *gatos*. *Empreiteiros* are typically from the same community, city, or state as the workers they recruit, as this fosters a more trusting relationship. Playing essentially the same role as labor recruiters in California's agricultural labor market, many *empreiteiros* begin as workers, become supervisors, and are eventually promoted to the multifaceted position of recruiting workers (Ortiz 2002:402). In addition to recruiting, *empreiteiros* also transport workers to the work

sites and supervise in the fields. Many scholars argue that *empreiteiros* exploit workers (Pereira 1992:174), hence the common use of the term *gatos*—literally, cats—to describe them as deceptive, untrustworthy, and even traitors to their kin. However, other scholars, though few, observe the benefits of the *empreiteiros*, who play a mediating role between seasonal agricultural workers and their employers. Rezende and Kreter (2001), for example, argue that *empreiteiros* facilitate communication between the two parties and reduce labor costs for employers. As such, they play an important role in the producers' economic productivity. In either case, *empreiteiros*, considering their role in facilitating housing, transportation, and employment for migrants, are key players in the networks of migrant sugar cane workers.

## DOMESTIC MIGRATION

In 1969, Fischlowitz and Engel argued that there were two main reasons for domestic migration in Brazil. The first is the unequal distribution of land, which remains concentrated in the hands of relatively few individuals and families by means of the perpetuation of the *latifundia* system of large-scale agriculture. Their second reason represents the characteristics of migrant sending regions, which they describe as having, "alarmingly low income, underemployment, undernourishment, ill-health and illiteracy." Migration flows, they argue, reduce population pressures in the less developed areas and encourage economic expansion in more developed areas (Fischlowitz and Engel 1969:41-42). Although much has changed in Brazil since 1969, it remains among the world's most unequal countries (Birdsall 1998:78), and some of the poor conditions that Fischlowitz and Engel describe remain evident today. The *latifundia* system remains a reality in Brazil, although land reform movements

have gained much support (Wolford 2004). Migration flows in Brazil continue to be driven by inequality, in particular regional inequality. Figure 1 below illustrates Brazil's regional income inequality. Although these approaches do not directly refer to domestic migration, they are certainly applicable. Internal migration is often omitted from migration theories, which tend to emphasize movements across borders. However, internal migration is a prevalent phenomenon that deserves greater attention. In addition to the millions of people who are internally displaced because of wars, natural disasters, or other emergencies, countless others are also migrants in their home countries. While international migrants have concerns regarding citizenship, discrimination, and acculturation, their experiences are not as different from those of domestic migrants as they might initially appear. Domestic migrants may not share citizenship concerns, but in some cases such as China, for example, they need authorization to migrate even within their home countries (Pieke and Mallee 1999). Domestic migrants also face difficulties acculturating, particularly in large, culturally and socio-economically divided countries such as China, India, and Brazil. There are further instances in which citizens become foreigners in their birthplaces, warranting a greater theoretical consideration. South Africa, in which the majority, indigenous population was reduced to foreign status under apartheid, is one example. Palestine, in which another population with an historical memory of citizenship has become restricted to particular areas, is another.

## INEQUALITY IN BRAZIL

Brazil's northeastern region accounts for 18.3 per cent of the country's land and 28.5 per cent of its population.<sup>2</sup> However,

<sup>2</sup> Figures in this paragraph are based on 1996 statistics.



this region provides only 13.5 per cent of the national income and has a per capita income of US\$1,836. In contrast, the southeast contains 10.9 per cent of the national territory and 42.7 per cent of the population. This region produces 58.1 per cent of the national income and has a per capita income of US\$5,443 (Azzoni 2001:135). The sharp contrast between economic conditions in the two regions is reflected in the higher unemployment rates in the northeast. In the northeastern city of Salvador, for example, the unemployment rate was 12.1 per cent in July 2008 while the unemployment rate in the southeastern city of São Paulo during the same period was 8.3.<sup>3</sup>

## SUGAR CANE PRODUCTION IN BRAZIL

As the approaches to migration discussed above suggest, Brazilian migrants move from areas where there are fewer employment opportunities to areas where the prospects for employment are greater. Migrant sugar cane workers travel from their homes in the poorer Northeastern region to the Southeastern and Central regions, where about 80 percent of Brazil's sugar cane is produced. Although the Northeast

<sup>3</sup> Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE) monthly employment survey, retrieved from [http://www.ibge.gov.br/english/estatistica/indicadores/trabalhoerendimento/pme\\_nova/defaulttab2.shtm](http://www.ibge.gov.br/english/estatistica/indicadores/trabalhoerendimento/pme_nova/defaulttab2.shtm), September 23, 2008.

**Table 1: Regional Sugar Cane Production**

	Center-South	Northeast
Sugarcane production	75-80%	20-25%
Raw sugar production	60-65%	35-40%
Ethanol production	80-85%	15-20%
Sugar for export	25-30%	70-75%

(Source: Bolling and Suarez 2001)

has historically been the primary sugar cane region, desertification has rendered much of the area unsuitable for agricultural production. Because of the region's historical dependence on sugar cane production, the Brazilian government has continued to invest in sugar cane production in this area. However, only about 20 percent of the country's sugar cane is produced in the Northeast. Table 1 and Figure 2 below show the proportion and concentration of sugar cane production in the two dominant regions.

## SUMMARY

While migration is an increasingly salient topic globally, the process is too often assumed to be uniform. On the contrary, migrant experiences vary widely, depending on such factors as the type of migrant (temporary, permanent, student, highly skilled, undocumented, for example); the origin and destination regions, countries, and cities; and the types of employment opportunities that they are offered, to name a few of these factors. While the Brazilian sugar cane migrant experience has some unique qualities, it is comparable with other examples of temporary labor migration. For example, West Indian agricultural workers who travel seasonally to the United States face hardships such as family

fragmentation, discrimination at the destination, and harsh living and working conditions.

The harvest period in Central and Southeastern Brazil lasts on average six months, from about May to November, depending on weather conditions and variations in crops. During this period, workers, mainly men, leave their Northeastern homes and travel to the center-south, where they live on the plantations or in the neighboring towns, often in tenement-style dwellings. They spend this period working in the fields cutting sugar cane. Research conducted during the harvest season of 2007 indicated that the most urgent concerns among migrant workers include, among other problems:

1. Long hours of work under difficult conditions
2. Sub-standard living conditions
3. Inadequate nutrition
4. Health concerns pertaining to working conditions and poor quality of drinking water.
5. Work-related injuries
6. Discrimination in the communities in which they live

Ortiz (1981: 97) found similar concerns as he gathers from other studies that, "...the work day varies from ten to four-

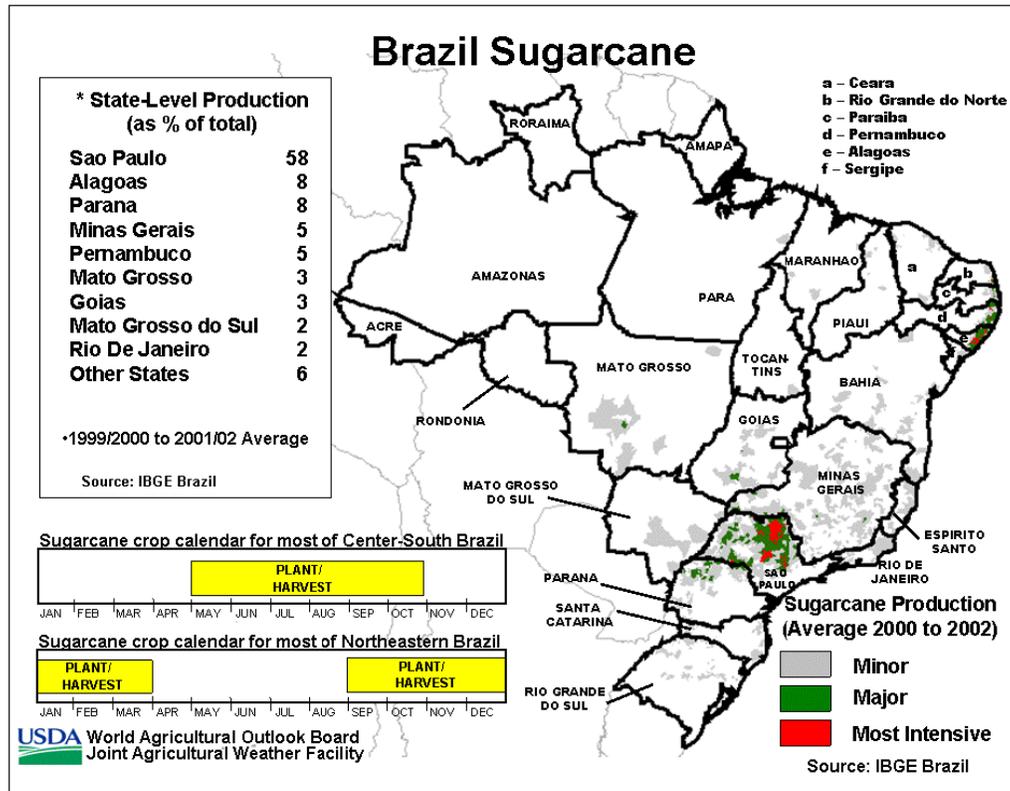


Figure 2

(Source: USDA World Agricultural Outlook Board)

teen hours... the large majority of workers are illiterate... health problems are constant and frequently severe... most workers' families live in a three- or four-room shack that they do not own... nutritional shortcomings are widespread... salaries are consistently below the legislated minimum wage... and women are routinely paid less than men."

There is an absence of a model of migration that addresses the nuances of domestic labor migration. Domestic migration can be placed within the paradigms of some of the dominant approaches to the study of migration, as there are many similarities between the patterns and processes of domestic and international labor migrations. While these models are appli-

cable to domestic labor migrants, a theoretical approach to migration that considers the disparities that exist *within* countries and the consequent flows of labor in this context is lacking. This article proposes a broader interpretation in migration theories that accounts for the movement and experiences of domestic labor migrants.

The comparative approach to sociological and geographic studies, among other disciplines, emphasizes the relevance of context. In migration studies, the importance of context has been well documented, and studies on migrant communities and their experiences illustrate the myriad ways in which migration is experienced by different groups. However, the bulk of the migration studies deals with international

migrants. While international migrants have the unique experiences of being uprooted (or uprooting themselves) and being transplanted (or transplanting themselves) into a foreign society, their understanding of the process does not differ much from that of domestic migrants, particularly those in large countries where regional social, economic, and cultural differences are evident.

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