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Getúlio Vargas and the Making of Restrictive Migratory Policies in Post-1930 Brazil

Mônica Raisa Schpun

École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), 93332 Aubervilliers, France; moschpun@ehess.fr

Abstract: Following Brazil's "great migration" period (1880–1930) came Getúlio Vargas's rise to power, marking a radical historical rupture. From 1930 onwards, we observed the construction of a framework of restrictive rules aimed at controlling the entry and stay of foreigners in the country, including an ethnically differentiated management of flows. This article sought to cross-reference the new migratory policy, aimed at both new entries and immigrants already present in the territory, with the issue of race. To this end, it dealt with two groups of immigrants whose flows were directly impacted by the new policies (and by racism), but not in the same way: Japanese and Jews. The reflection also turned to the different experiences in each of the two groups between the candidates for immigration—in the face of the new barriers imposed on entry and those already living in Brazil in the face of the assimilationist measures adopted. Brazilian migration policies and state actions have been studied more often than the agency of immigrants. In this sense, the existing studies have focused more on the management of new flows than on the experience of immigrants already settled in the territory. The text, therefore, assumed a change of perspective, opting for a look "from below" in order to focus on both sides of the scales and the border. Finally, it examined the historiography that dealt with migration policy during the Vargas era and, more specifically, that which focused on Jewish and Japanese immigration.

Keywords: immigration; restrictive policies; Japanese; Jewish; Getúlio Vargas; Brazil; 1930s



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1. Introduction

The 1930s was not a glorious time for Brazilian immigration. Yet things had not always been this way. Rather, during the First Republic (1889–1930), policies were clearly favorable to immigration, despite ongoing debates around the "ideal immigrant" that became, at many moments, very heated and controversial. Furthermore, the immigrants that the local elites desired were not always available. Vargas's rise to power in 1930 marked the end of an open-door policy through the construction of an arsenal of restrictive legislative that sought to control the entrance and permanence of foreigners in Brazil.

In this article I sought to cross-reference the new migratory policy, aimed at both new entries and immigrants already present in the territory, with the issue of race. To this end, I focused on two groups of immigrants whose flows were directly and particularly impacted by the new policies (and by racism), but not in the same way: Japanese and Jews. It is worth noting that the experience of immigration candidates in the face of the new barriers imposed on entry and that of immigrants already living in Brazil in the face of the assimilationist measures adopted was absolutely not the same. However, most of the existing studies have focused more on the management of new flows¹ than on the experience of immigrants already settled in the territory, and on their agency. I, therefore, assumed a change of perspective, opting for a look "from below" in order to focus on both sides of the scales and the border. After a historical introduction to immigration and the construction of "Brazilianness" (Sections 2 and 3), I will discuss with the restrictive turn taken by migration policy since the beginning of the Vargas era, starting with the Quota Law and its impact on Japanese immigration, and then the ways the new regime managed the

entry of Jews (Section 4). In Section 5, I will focus on the lives of immigrants from the two groups already present on Brazilian soil, before returning to migratory policy (Section 6) to examine, in more detail, the legislative apparatus used to control the migratory flows. From the same “micro” perspective adopted throughout the text, I review the historiography that has dealt with migration policy under the Vargas era and, more specifically, that which focused on Jewish and Japanese immigration (Sections 5–7).

These two groups were the only ones who were still entering Brazil in significant numbers in those years, when the more numerous flows of Italians, Portuguese, and Spaniards had already become insignificant. Japanese arrivals were at their peak in the early 1930s. As for Jews, while immigrants from the Russian Empire had arrived in the 1910–1920s, refugees from Nazi Europe began to appear in the mid-1930s. Both were directly targeted by the new restrictions that were created, and in some cases ethnically directed. To add complexity to this picture, it is worth saying that these two groups brought the racial issue to the fore in an acute way, unlike the majority flows mentioned above. In the case of the Japanese, this was linked to the imaginary about the group, but also to the phenotype which, in a period marked by restrictions and ethical vigilance, gave its members ethnic visibility in the public space. As for Jews, not only did their immigration in those years have racial persecution in Europe as its *raison d’être*, but the Brazilian political elites were permeable to the antisemitism that was spreading around the world.

Finally, in this article, I focused on the city of São Paulo, a veritable laboratory for migration studies. In 1934, 27.89% of its population was made up of foreigners, not counting naturalized citizens and descendants born in the country (Bassanezi et al. 2008, p. 61). It was in this complex space that Japanese and Jews immigrants tried to integrate, individually and collectively, avoiding, circumventing, and resisting the obstacles imposed by the new rules, as we will see. In the case of Jews, eminently urban immigrants, the choice was made. In the case of the Japanese, who mostly went to the countryside and urbanized significantly from the 1940s onwards, the choice was linked to the fact that the ethnic concentration in a central district of the city was the focus of surveillance and repression by the political police during the war, creating tensions that singularized the history and memory of the group’s insertion into Brazilian society.

2. The Early Days

Brazilian migratory policy was designed by the elites who, since the late 19th century, promoted it with a twofold goal. They sought both to promote the formation of a free wage labor market without onus for agriculture or for coffee growing, in particular (an issue bearing relation to the slave labor regime and its 1888 abolition), and the “whitening” of the population. Hence, the policy of “hands for coffee picking” sought first to guarantee a migratory surplus, attending to real needs for labor in the agricultural sector by creating a reserve army and keeping salaries low (Hall 1969, pp. 163–69). A veritable recruitment campaign ensued, with emissaries making their way across the European countryside, using propaganda to create an alluring image of life in Brazil.

Regarding the second aspect mentioned above, the racial issue was harshly felt in the debates that preceded the implementation of immigration policy. In this vein, and beyond the construction of a free wage labor market, such policy was intimately linked to the process of nation building itself (Skidmore [1974] 1976). The type of workers that were desired and sought were clearly those of white European origin. Decree n. 528 from 2 June 1890 set the tone, impeding the entrance of African and Asian immigrants and making the immigration policy that was already in place explicitly restrictive and ethnically discriminating. In 1895, a state law (n. 356) was promulgated by the São Paulo legislature, the social actor most interested in promoting immigration, restricting the entrance of immigrants to the state of São Paulo to people from Europe, the Americas and, in the case of Africa, the Canary Islands, i.e., “all of the white race”.

These two objectives were strictly pursued. In relation to the second objective mentioned above, the results were noteworthy. By the mid-19th century, between 3.5 and

3.6 million black people had been brought to Brazil from Africa and sold as slaves. The process had led to a gradual transformation of the Brazilian population which, at the end of the 18th century, had a black majority. Hence, in the first census ever carried out in the country in 1872, the results indicated that 38.1% of the population was white. The following census, taken in 1890, indicated an increase in the white population to 44% of the total, albeit still a minority. In the state of São Paulo (or the province of São Paulo, until the Proclamation of the Republic), the situation was hardly different. In 1872, 51.8% of the population was white, and the numbers did not cease to grow over the following decades, demonstrating the impact of immigration policy on racial issues. Thus, in 1890, even before the big immigration boom which was just taking off (and would continue until the beginning of the First World War), the white population of the state of São Paulo had already reached 63.1%. In 1940, the proportion had climbed to 88%. It must be kept in mind that such results were obtained, in relation to the 3.5 or 3.6 million slaves brought from Africa over the course of three centuries, through a subsidized migratory policy responsible for the entry of more than 4.7 million immigrants in less than a century. Of these, more than half settled in the state of São Paulo, by then the economic heart of the country.

In the obtention of such results, another significant factor was most certainly the situation in Europe, and particularly in the European countryside. The agricultural crisis in a number of countries, demographic pressure, and hunger expelled millions of Italians, Spaniards, Portuguese, Irish, German, Poles, Scandinavians, Jews, and others toward the Americas. Brazil was not a privileged destination, neither for immigrants nor for the countries from which there was *en masse* departure. The country's bad reputation in Europe was longstanding. In 1859, the Prussian government prohibited local businesses from promoting settlement projects in Brazil, and in 1871, after German unification, this prohibition was extended to all Germans, persisting until 1896. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Italian and Spanish governments prohibited the subsidized emigration of their citizens, despite Brazilian propaganda, through decrees, the first of which was the Italian Prinetti decree, dated from 1902, and the second was Spanish, dated from 1911.

In the light of the falling supply of white European labor, Brazilian elites were obliged to seek alternatives, reducing their level of expectations with regard to the ideal immigrant. Thus, as of 1892, an exception was created (Law n. 97, from 5 October), allowing the entrance of Chinese and Japanese immigrants, whose possible importation was brought to the table for discussion. The debates that ensued were intense and, despite the difficulties in sustaining high entry rates for white workers, Brazilian elites ended up discarding the Chinese option. The Japanese option was accepted sometime later, after considerable hesitation, bringing new laborers to São Paulo plantations as of 1908. A binational agreement also served to resolve a problem plaguing Japan, since the United States imposed limits on Japanese entry to the country in 1907; a policy adopted the following year by Canada. The important flux of immigration to Hawaii, annexed by the United States in 1900, was also restricted in 1908. The opening of the Brazilian route awarded Japan with a new solution for the problem of demographic pressures and the crisis in the countryside. In this context, after the arrival of the first waves, criticism regarding the treatment given to Japanese immigrants in Brazil surfaced. The emperor preferred a compromise and so did the Brazilian government, which also had few alternatives, given the falling supply of European immigrants for work in farming and agriculture².

Thus, when the country modified its directives in relation to immigration, the population of São Paulo, host to a large part of the migratory flow, was rich in visible multiethnic traits. For those who came to the São Paulo plateau region in the 1930s, this diversity certainly stood out. It was an extremely heterogeneous population, including Blacks, mestizos of all hues, southern, northern, and eastern Europeans, as well as Syrians, Lebanese, and Japanese. The latter, together with Blacks and mestizos, also bore the marks of their origin on their bodies, noting a difference that was visible in public space.

Yet at the time, the elite perspective on the country was also changing, shifting from the wager that had been placed on "whitening" to singing the praises of "synthesis".

In fact, the “whitening” project had not stopped the construction, sedimentation, and dissemination at the national level of an ideology of “racial democracy”, which turned mixing and miscegenation into distinctive traits of Brazilianness. Yet a racial hierarchy persisted, evidently, to the benefit of whites.

3. Parenthesis: Brazilianness

In the late 1930s, when Brazil was living under the New State dictatorship (1937–1945), the elements that came to comprise a notion of Brazilian national identity, which remains in place today, had already come together despite their novelty. This construction, soon taken for granted, was in fact the fruit of elaborations and choices that were still very recent. At any rate, at the time, to be “Brazilian” had already become synonymous with a way of being that was happy, cheerful, jovial, uninhibited, and free of fetters, especially those of the past, born of Portuguese colonization and slavery.

The formula of *mestiçagem*, or miscegenation, was accepted, valued, and glorified as a positive and potentiating synthesis of the cultural components of the nation, and as further proof of the alleged affability and peaceful character of Brazilians (Stepan 1991, chap. 5; Schwarcz 1998, pp. 193–96; Wade 2017, chap. 2). According to such a perspective, the Brazilian people had a demonstrated ability for overcoming conflict and were capable of and particularly willing to incorporate everything and everyone. This sort of plasticity was posed and exalted as an inherent part of the national culture.

Such characteristics had already been recognized as representing something which all Brazilians—whether born in the country, or “adopted” by it—had in common. At the end of 1938, in the midst of a naturalization campaign imposed by the Vargas regime on immigrants living on Brazilian soil, entertainer Carmen Miranda’s (1909–1955) interpretation came to the forefront. Dressing herself in a stylized version of a Bahian folk dress and using the gestures she had been taught by young composer Dorival Caymmi, she sang his “O que é que a baiana tem?” [What’s the Bahian woman got?] in the musical film “Banana da terra”. She soon took the piece and the character that it had shaped to the stage³. With these enactments, Miranda completed the portrait of Brazilianness that had been taking shape through the notion of musicality and samba as national rhythm par excellence. It coincided with Carmen’s soaring professional career. By the late 1930s, she had already become a major national success, for whom the greatest Rio de Janeiro *sambistas*, most of whom were black, composed their songs. In May of 1939, at the height of her career, she left for the United States, accompanied by the “Bando da Lua”. Their maritime voyage was paid for by President Vargas himself.

Carmen Miranda’s importance derives from the all-out recognition she received as the national, and later international *Baiana*, perfect embodiment of the representative and recently constructed trope of Brazilianness. In fact, as a cultural icon, she concentrated and translated national identity through her voice, repertoire, and in the way she danced, sang, and interpreted the samba, with its particular gestures and corporeality.

The constitutive elements of national identity were being sedimented, acquiring resonance across the social fabric in a very efficient way. They touched all social classes, in particular thanks to popular music fueled by the development of the radio, the record industry, and the institutionalization of Carnival. Given their power in building cohesion, such elements pushed regional identities into the background. This was taking place in a moment in which a nationalist motto demanded unreserved assimilation from immigrants. An all-encompassing Brazilianness seemed to engulf everyone, and all were encouraged to allow themselves to be drawn into it.

In this context, and in a coherent way, Carmen’s figure, that is, the persona that she took on publicly, was not “white” but “Brazilian”. She brought to it her considerable talent, as well as the set of ingredients mentioned above, including the samba itself—the rhythms, double meanings, and a certain cunning that she performed through her gazes and gestures. She became a mirror of the Brazil of the times, much esteemed by those in power, but also by the people.

National identity, racial politics, and the question of migration thus appeared together in this configuration and were intricately connected. All of this made its mark not only on the immigrants already living on Brazilian soil at the time but also on new candidates who were ready to take off for Brazilian ports.

4. Change of Direction

Since the 1920s, some legal initiatives were already taken in the sense of restricting migratory flows, although they had not yet taken the form of a veritable juridical framework, an innovation of the Vargas Era. Thus, as of 1930, immigrant entry suffered a significant setback. The exceptions were those coming from Japan, whose greatest contingents arrived in Brazil between 1926 and 1934 under Japanese rather than Brazilian subsidies.

The sudden drop in flux after the 1934 promulgation of the new Brazilian constitution is easily explained⁴. During the labors of the 1933–1934 Constituent Assembly, a veritable campaign against “the yellow peril” unfolded, attempting to stop Japanese immigrants from entry. Abusive arguments such as that of “social cysts” were employed again and again. Oliveira Vianna, an intellectual who was held in particular esteem by the political elites of the period, said that “the Japanese are like sulfur: insoluble” (Vianna [1934] 1938, p. 209).

It is worth keeping in mind that racism, Brazilian style, did not seek racial purity. Rather, in the context of a recognizably mixed-race society, “lightening” was the goal (Nucci 2010, p. 98). In fact, in Brazil, when compared to other societies in which separation was promoted or even decreed, miscegenation was seen as a vector for improvement. Yet at the same time, similar concerns were not usually extended to people of Japanese origin, since in Brazil the racial issue concentrated its focus on Black people or those of Afro-Brazilian descent. However, there were times in which ideas on racial mixing were solicited in relation to Japanese immigrants as well.

In the 1930s, as Japan emerged on the world scene as a new and expansionist military power, the Brazil of the Vargas regime became concerned with the assertion of national sovereignty, even as it adopted a restrictive and radically assimilationist migratory policy. In this regard, in the eyes of prestigious members of the elite, the Japanese refused assimilation—not only cultural, but also biological through mixed marriages—thus building “social cysts”. This was not the only aspect of the peril of their coming to Brazil in expressive numbers. Considering the threat of Japanese expansionism, their simple presence was to be avoided. Thus, the best option, in the case of the Japanese, would be to simply block their entry. On the one hand, Japanese immigrants’ alleged refusal to adhere to local culture and society was criticized, while on the other, this separatism might have been positive. However, in the radical sense that meant not only excluding them from Brazilianness but from the country itself. These restrictions were enacted through the quota law, which after heated debate, reduced the entry of Japanese immigrants to insignificant numbers (Schpun 2019, pp. 212–13).

Another motive, now more exacerbated, joined earlier forms of anti-Japanese sentiment to explain the rejection of Japanese immigration as sealed by the law. São Paulo state landowners became aware of the fact that a large number of Japanese farmers had left the coffee plantations. As tenants or small landowners, they engaged in intensive horticultural polyculture, but also grew cotton. As skilled social actors, they knew not only how to insert themselves into the gaps left by the expansion of the coffee economy, but also how to create their own niches, bolstered by the support and incentives offered both by the Japanese government interested in the permanent rooting of these immigrants in Brazil and by private companies. The latter, also Japanese, were interested in the development of certain crops, such as cotton, to be imported to Japan itself. Expanding the options for agricultural exploitation, as well as the role of small and medium-sized farms in the coffee region, Japanese settlements modified the agrarian structure of the region. This upset the elite coffee growers, especially during a time of crisis in the aftermath of 1929. Through the

voice of the latter group's representatives in the Constituent Assembly, xenophobic and racist reactions rapidly gained ground.

The text that established drastic restrictions on immigration, ones which the campaigning constituents wished to include in the Constitution, was supposed to include explicit mention of the Japanese, those whose presence had triggered the initiative. Japanese diplomatic representation acted not only to bar that explicit mention as the expression of an "international humiliation" (FitzGerald and Cook-Martín 2014, p. 27) but, above and beyond all else, to ensure that migration itself would not be blocked. While they were able to fulfill the first goal, they failed in the larger struggle, that is, on the second point. A quota law was written into the new Constitution, albeit without explicit reference to any particular ethnic group. Nonetheless—and not without reason—the Japanese ambassador in Brazil and the Minister of the Exterior in Japan resigned from their respective positions. Of the groups who were present in Brazil at the time, the one whom these authorities represented and defended was the one most directly harmed by how the quota policy had been written up. This was because Japanese immigration was recent and at its peak, yet the total number of inhabitants of Japanese origin in the country, used as the basis for calculating quotas, was less than that of the other majority groups, such as the Italians, Portuguese, and Spanish. However, members of the latter were no longer immigrating to Brazil in significant numbers and were, therefore, not directly affected by the measures.

In addition to the Japanese, Jews were also hurt by the new measures, although they had not been the initial target of the new law. As a small and scantily visible minority in the early days of the 1930s, the Jewish population was not the object of constituent debates on the quota law, nor were they an object of concern for the lawmakers and heads of government interested in creating selective obstacles to immigration.

The change in the institutional context, with the Nazi's rise to power in Germany, was almost simultaneous with the new Brazilian situation. This led to precipitated interpretations, yet the Jews were not on the horizon of concerns of those who militated in favor of an ethnically discriminatory law in 1933–1934. Nonetheless, the new law, although not conceived with such an objective in mind, soon became one of the many barriers that were placed in the way of Jewish refugees who requested entry to Brazil. As we will soon see, other texts and regulations to the same effect were soon created.

In relation to the quota law, the situation of the Jews was singular. As they could not be considered a nationality, they did not comprise a separate legal category. Rather, they fell under the quotas destined for their countries of origin. Although one wave of Jewish immigrants had arrived before the shift in migratory policy, coming largely from Eastern Europe, another was about to arrive just when the new law was promulgated. Thus, during the second half of the 1930s, exactly when the flow of Japanese migration was slowing down, the number of Jews coming into the country grew, inaugurating a new wave of Jewish immigration, this time from Germany.

The changing European context provoked a progressive increase in Jewish candidates for Brazilian visas. As it grew, the flow attracted the attention of those who were responsible for the construction and the application of new restrictive policies. Their response to the issue was different from the one they had awarded to the Japanese case.

The quota law was not an original invention, nor was Brazil alone in forging this type of policy. The model chosen by the Brazilian constituents took inspiration from the extremely restrictive U. S. Immigration Act of 1924, or the Johnson–Reed Act, followed by the Asian Exclusion Act of 1924, and which were in fact what led the Japanese government to subsidize immigration to Brazil. Brazil was also not alone in instituting a migratory policy restricting Jews. For German Jews, emigration was becoming increasingly difficult. On the German side, the Nazi regime had, until October of 1941, sustained a policy that incited their emigration, and which included recourse to violence. Outside of capital, which was not easy to transport, Jews were allowed to take their assets with them as long as they paid the taxes that had been levied on the latter, which were also on the rise. Emigration was expensive, but it was not prohibited. The lines at consulate doors grew incessantly,

following the pace of increased persecution. Finding a safe port became an uphill battle for Jews living in Nazi Europe.

In Brazil, the management of Jewish immigration followed a specific pattern through a series of secret documents. This fact led the first authors writing on the matter to defend the thesis of undeniable politics of state antisemitism manifested by the adoption of a differential policy regarding Jews. This explained—if not completely, at least in part—the discrete (“secret”) treatment of the question in light of its international resonance⁵.

This issue has generated debate among specialists on Jewish immigration in Brazil. These authors, despite their disagreements, all placed the state centerstage and saw migratory policy as a key element in the debate. The “Jewish question” was thus conjugated around the issue of state antisemitism whose existence was clearly recognized by some, while others either negated or strongly qualified it⁶. Focusing on the migratory policy of the Vargas Era, and not specifically on Jewish immigration, [Geraldo \(2007, pp. 111–213\)](#) cast another light on the issue. In effect, examining the transformations of the whole of immigration policy over the 15 years of the Vargas Era (1930–1945), the author placed the management of Jewish immigration within a larger movement, comparing it to that of other groups, and most notably with the discussion on the Japanese, which preceded the measures specifically aimed at the Jewish population.

The growing centralization and authoritarianism within the government, in force even before the coup d’état that led to the creation of the New State in 1937, shrouded in secrecy many of the decisions made on immigration, not only those which targeted Jews. The publicity and debate that emerged regarding Japanese immigration, materializing in 1934 with the quota law, as well as the polemics that the matter provoked within the press and public opinion with international repercussion, were removed from the public eye. The circulation of information, decisions, and internal government discussion were now treated with much greater discretion. The publicity that had been given to such matters during the 1933–1934 Constituent Congress served as lesson to the government, as it resulted in a quota law that did not satisfy even the most radical opponents of Japanese immigration. It became a “constitutional fetter to a regime that governed in an increasingly centralized way” ([Geraldo 2007, p. 210](#)). The authoritarianism that, as of the beginning of the New State, reigned as the absolute principle for decision-making eliminated all possibilities for expanding political debate, whether to the legislature, which had been closed, or to the press, which was under censorship. The discretion that was applied to the management of Jewish entry thus responded to general problems of immigration policy and was characteristic of the way the Vargas regime state functioned, without necessarily representing an exclusive response to the Jewish question.

This did not mean that the international context had no influence on the thinking of Brazilian leaders. It was actually quite the contrary. The transformation of antisemitism into the official policy of the German regime, shifting it from mere opinion to “scientific truth”, as well as the growing restrictions on Jewish immigration, including on the part of major democracies such as the United States, Canada, and United Kingdom, certainly resonated in the decisions made in Brazil regarding the entrance of Jewish refugees. The European political situation, given increased persecution in Germany and the number of German Jews who had become immigration candidates, brought a new issue to the Brazilian agenda in the years that followed the promulgation of the 1934 Constitution. At this time, the first legal provisions for managing the entry and permanence of foreigners in the country had already been approved and published.

Nonetheless, the Jews that wanted to move to Brazil, whether successful or not, were also affected by general measures to control flows, and not just by the “secret” texts that were thought up for and applied to them. In a general sense, the new legislative arsenal, which was growing and complexifying, affected both individually and collectively the immigration candidates confronted by the barriers of increasingly restrictive border policies, and the immigrants who were already living in the country and became the target of the assimilationist policies that the Vargas regime was putting into practice.

The Japanese, whose entrance had been radically damaged by the quota laws, also paid the price for the way these policies unfolded. They were deeply affected by the way naturalization measures were designed, as of 1938, with regard to foreigners residing in the country. Jews, on their part, were more severely affected by the ethnic restrictions that were placed on the entrance of new immigrants than by the surveillance over and discrimination against those who were already living on Brazilian soil. Both groups, at any rate, supplied paradigmatic examples of the consequences of Vargas regime politics on immigration flows and the integration of foreigners. Hence, they quite understandably became the object of numerous studies devoted to these issues. The reflections that follow refer to the experience of these two immigrant groups and the historiographic debates that they kindled.

5. Insiders

Responding to the discussion on the existence and efficacy of antisemitism during the Vargas Era, Roney Cytrynowicz described the functioning of some of the major São Paulo Jewish organizations of the period. They were able to circumvent the naturalizing measures adopted by Vargas, as well as the surveillance he had imposed, and went on with their activities, including those devoted to the use of and education in foreign languages (Yiddish and Hebrew) and the action of Zionist organizations. Cytrynowicz's work, while rightly defending the idea that restrictions on Jews applied exclusively to those who were not yet in the country, adopted a historiographical approach that we might call optimistic (Cytrynowicz 2002). He insisted, in my view also correctly, on the fact that no form of open violence against the Jews living on Brazilian soil was perpetrated during those years. Jews were able to continue engaging in all kinds of community activities—religious, educational, and cultural—despite Vargas's nationalist policy, which forbade or drastically limited the functioning of ethnic press, schools, and associations from April 1938 onwards.

The same cannot be said of the Japanese, who were a much more numerous group⁷. In general, those who were already living in Brazil bore the burden of the isolation that they experienced in their early years on coffee plantations and regions of the agricultural frontier. They had only a poor command of the Portuguese language, and the existing repression of the foreign language press (which went underground from 1938 until 1941, before disappearing completely) harshly deprived them of access to information. Furthermore, Japanese schools were officially closed in 1938, as was also the case for a large portion of ethnic associations.

The situation worsened after Brazil broke off relations with the countries of the Axis in January of 1942 and the ensuing Brazilian entrance into the war in August of that year. In the city of São Paulo, the heart of the Japanese ethnic neighborhood, Liberdade, right in the city's downtown, was considered a national security zone. It became the object of culminating events of surveillance and ethnic persecution organized by the political police: the evacuation of Japanese residents of the neighborhood between 1942 and 1943. Such actions were carried out according to methods and calendars that are difficult to reconstruct due to the lack of precise sources. The press completely silenced the events, despite the ample coverage given to the evacuation of Japanese and German residents from the São Paulo State coast, another zone of national security in July 1943.

Political police records provide some clues on the matter. In their pursuit of a German suspected of spying and the Japanese who were supposed to meet with her undercover in the Liberdade neighborhood, agents appeared on the scene, provoking the suspect's flight. In the report that was drawn up afterwards, the police claimed that two families, living at the address in question and in the building next door, "had managed to escape the eviction order [...]" that was part of the attempts to disperse the Japanese population throughout the city [outside the district of Liberdade]. The dossier referred to evacuations that took place in the region before March 1943, the date of the aforementioned police raid.

The evacuations were not systematic. Some families were able to "escape", like the two mentioned above, during those years of police investigations of people suspected of "anti-national" activities carried out within the neighborhood. Within the ambit of the

police investigation seeking to locate spies or fifth columns, to which the above-cited report pertained, in May of 1943 the police paid visit to a boarding house that was functioning normally on the street called Conde de Sarzedas, a key point of the neighborhood's ethnic concentration. Thus, on the one hand, evacuation orders were not totally efficient, and on the other, surveillance was indefatigable. Boarding houses, workshops, and businesses were hastily closed, giving rise to the urban dispersion of the group. The violence of the evacuations gave these foreigners a clear message that their presence in the country was henceforth tolerated, at best, and that they should submit to police controls, including home searches and the seizure of books and documents in Japanese, wherever suspect.

The process took its toll on the economic situation of the families, who were usually poor, living off of handcrafts or small businesses that often catered to ethnic customers, and were thus dependent on the nearby clientele of the central neighborhood in which they were living. Such activities were unable to carry on at the same pace in other neighborhoods further from the downtown area and from networks of support and mutual acquaintance. To make the situation even worse, from the end of 1941 to the beginning of 1942, the assets of citizens of Axis nations were confiscated, and their economic transactions were limited. Although the majority of immigrants were not directly affected by this last measure, given their disadvantaged financial situation and lack of "assets", it did affect the community elite, made up of owners of larger businesses, factories, banks, and rural properties, in addition to the agricultural cooperatives which were undergoing rapid development at the time (Wakisaka et al. 1992, p. 258).

In the state of São Paulo, anti-Japanese sentiments were expressed with more violence than the control that was directed against Italians and Germans, who were also citizens of the Axis. The racism that shrouded the way the Japanese were imagined, affecting state actions toward that group, was not circumscribed to the war context. It had been exacerbated, as we have seen, since the days of the campaign against the "yellow peril" that led to the quota law. Seen as "yellow people", according to a hierarchical scale that disqualified them from the start, the Japanese, in the eyes of the ruling elites, did not belong to the "white race". They were considered unassimilable, hence a perfect fulfillment of the stereotype of the "social cyst", which in turn was seen as the antithesis of the policy of naturalization and assimilation that had been adopted.

Discretion and a low profile were the rule for these immigrants, identified in public spaces by their phenotype, a fragile situation that impeded their mixing in with the masses. Accused of not wanting to assimilate within Brazilian society, marrying only amongst themselves and forming problematic and undesired "cysts", as of 1942 the Japanese were regarded with suspicion, as if they might be colluding with the enemy.

The isolation and lack of information that could be considered reliable after the banning of foreign language presses, in addition to the humiliation linked to state-promoted racism, left indelible marks on the group. Ethnic surveillance and repression, the fruit of suspicion and of efforts to break the group's identification with their country of origin, ended up having the opposite effect, reinforcing Japanese nationalism, the fruit of the education that the first generation, schooled in Japan, brought with them. In those years, they did consider themselves Japanese citizens and sought to raise their children as such, whether they were born in Japan or Brazil (Nishida 2017). All of this had dramatic consequences, beginning with the violence that the so-called "*vitoristas*" inflicted upon their countrymen—whom they called defeatists—in the aftermath of Japan's WW II defeat. The former, and members of the organization Shindo Renmei in particular, who continued to believe in Japanese victory, committed crimes targeting members of their own ethnic group, i.e., people who accepted the news of Japanese defeat (Schpun 2016, pp. 97–98). More recent than the repression inflicted by the Brazilian state on the Japanese community, the crimes of Shindo Renmei were impactful because they were directed toward other members of the community, creating a rupture from within that has been remembered to this day.

The historiography on Japanese immigration to Brazil has mostly focused on the group's rural experience. In addition, the period of the Second World War was a hiatus,

as associations, schools, and newspapers were closed, creating a void of sources (with the notable exception of those produced by the political police).

Alongside this historiography, there are a significant number of memories written by members of the group, literature that is practically non-existent in the case of the Brazilian Jewish community. In this regard, the work of Tomoo [Handa \(1987\)](#), a prominent painter and memorialist from the Japanese–Brazilian community, has been much explored by historians, especially those who have studied the war period, which was poor in sources about the group. Living in São Paulo during the war, Handa described the evacuations from Liberdade and gave them a narrative and dramatic prominence that was reproduced by other authors. Thus, the action of the political police to disperse the urban concentration of the group in São Paulo became a strong event, socially and symbolically, of the difficulties imposed on the Japanese at the time by the Brazilian state.

This short (1942–1945) and little-studied period of the Japanese presence in Brazil, and this event that affected a small part of the group that lived in São Paulo at the time, struck me as particularly interesting ([Schpun 2019](#)). The visibility of the members of the group in the urban space, given by their phenotype, favored police surveillance and repression, which were concentrated precisely in the ethnic neighborhood of Liberdade. Despite the surveillance and evacuations, the ethnic neighborhood withstood the war years, renewed itself, and still exists today. It is a silent but effective and visible resistance, the voluntary and claimed occupation by the ethnic group of a central district of the city, marking its collective and lasting rootedness in the urban and social fabric. Studying this ethnic neighborhood allows us to understand the agency of the group's members in the face of an unfavorable migratory and urban context.

6. Outsiders

Let us now return to the mid-1930s. Immigration policies followed their own increasingly restrictive route. At the same time that the quota law was being written into the Constitution, Decree n. 24,258 (from 16 May 1934) instituted the system referred to as “invitation letters”, which made it much harder for immigrants to enter the country, in addition to placing drastic limits on the entrance of urban workers.

In May of 1938, Decree-law n. 406 (later subjected to the regulations of Decree n. 3010), altered some of the earlier decree's tenets, further intensifying the procedures of control and complexifying the bureaucratic and administrative arsenal that had been created and deployed for such purposes⁸. The two new texts reinforced the principle, already in place within the previous legislation, that awarded preference to farmers. A total of 80% of the quotas available to each nationality were to be filled by agricultural workers. Only the remaining 20% were for other (urban) professions. Jewish urban tradition, as well as Nazi persecution and the precipitous and tragic surge in the number of immigration candidates, encouraged those in charge to ensure that the rules were followed to detect the presence of Jews on the list of farmers seeking entrance to the country. They were viewed with suspicion, or even reported.

The new texts introduced an important innovation regarding the existing rules. Beyond the division of immigrants by spheres of activity, i.e., “farmers” and “non-farmers”, two administrative categories were created, i.e., “permanent” and “temporary” statuses, which also shaped the new apparatus of control over the circulation of foreigners within the country. “Permanent” referred to immigrants themselves, those who intended to stay in the country for more than six months. The “temporary” category included “tourists and visitors in general and foreigners in transit; representatives of foreign businesses and those who come on a business trip; artists, lecturers, sportsmen, and the like”.

Finally, the quotas established by the 1934 Constitution went into effect, as calculated and published in an amendment to Decree n. 3010. They made no reference to “temporary” but only to “permanent” residents, a detail that was not irrelevant in the case of Jews who, with the end-of-decade intensification of persecution in Europe, often entered Brazil as “tourists”. This not only excluded them from the reduced quotas available, but also

indicated (to us) that the Brazilian authorities did not always follow the established rules strictly, including the antisemitic discriminations inscribed in the secret memorandums used to manage this flow. “Tourist” was also a category mentioned in the 27 September 1938 Secret Memorandum n. 1249, which regulated Jewish entry into the country during the period of the most intense flows, that is, between the end of that year and the middle of the following one, after the Crystal Night that had stirred an emigration panic.

In addition to “tourists”, this memorandum provided other exceptions regarding Jewish immigration, which had been prohibited outright by the earlier memorandum (n. 1127, from June 1937) and was now revoked. Henceforth, technicians, scientists, and “capitalists” would be able to receive “permanent” entry visas, providing they fulfilled some very precise and exacting criteria.

The truth was that despite the stringent restrictions established by the secret memorandums and the antisemitism manifested by some of those who were responsible for their elaboration, for control over migratory flows and the functioning of migratory policy, the rules that had been created were often largely disregarded—even on the part of the very authorities who were expected to apply them. Close to 25,000 Jews, a non-negligible number, were able to enter Brazil legally between the Nazi rise to power in Germany and Brazil’s entering the war in 1942.

How can this be explained? Jeffrey Lesser returned to this question on several occasions in the book he devoted to the Jewish question in Brazil (Lesser [1994] 1995). For this author, those who were responsible for the decisions that were made, as well as those who were charged with their compliance, oscillated between positive and negative views of Jews—as undesirable but also as useful to the national economy—alternating, as well, in the use of antisemitic and philosemitic imagery. Lesser examined the fluctuating numbers of entries and attempts to explain them according to this logic—a daunting task, since there was no apparent coherency in the way the numbers evolved.

To provide a better answer to this question, it is useful to extend our gaze beyond the number of Jews allowed to enter the country. This enables us to see that, despite the gaps that the obstacles imposed by restrictive immigration policy (including the ethnically restrictive) allowed, barriers were enough to impede the entry of an incalculable but certainly very large number of would-be immigrants.

Bernardo Sorj was correct when he wrote that Lesser’s normative explanations led him to “distort the findings of his own research” (Sorj 1997, p. 26). The latter, in fact, provided a clear indication of the constant disregard for established rules, but did not see this as a persistent element in migration management. The issue was not a back and forth between anti- and philosemitism. The gaps that existed were not due to moments in which a fear of the Jews was temporarily interrupted by another rationale (the ability of Jewish capital and technical knowledge to contribute to the country’s development).

The antisemitism that was in vogue in Europe certainly seduced sectors of the Brazilian political elites. The heightened nationalism of the Vargas Era further enhanced the principles of sovereignty. In this context, the non-acceptance, within national territory, of immigrants not wanted in other countries became a sensitive issue. Brazil did not want to do more than others were doing, that is, welcoming the period’s undesirables *par excellence*.

Yet this does not explain everything. Certain components of the Brazilian political culture also made their weight felt, such as the penchant for “pragmatic attitudes”, “commitment”, and the “treatment of each case as one of a kind”, rather than the recourse to “universalist bureaucratic attitudes” whose absence intrigued Lesser (Sorj 1997, p. 27).

In this context, clientelism was amply enabled, emerging from the breaches that the secret memorandums created. Those who were responsible for drafting a Jewish immigration policy, together with the diplomatic representatives who carried it out on a daily basis, were enveloped in a culture that, traditionally, valued the other and did not fear the future. Brazil was “the country of the future” or the place where the future was “here”. Both the other, and the future, were the bearers of novelty, carrying positive connotations, in contrast to the past, from which separation was worthy⁹.

The numerous exceptions that were created, whether by Secret Memorandum n. 1249 or by the detailed examination of each case by the operators of immigration policy, cannot be explained by a particular humanitarian sensitivity, alleged philosemitism, or even, as Lesser has argued, by the desire to convince American authorities of Brazil's international position, which had been ambiguous and oscillating. Rather, the answer lies within the realm of the above-mentioned political culture. It impeded those charged with political responsibility from adhering formally or completely to the established norms, even though they themselves had created the latter and were always ready to defend them¹⁰.

Nonetheless, there is still a need for further explanation. It is true, as Jeffrey Lesser has argued, that more Jews came to Brazil between 1933 and 1942 than in the previous decade, and that the number of admissions rose in 1939, rather than falling (Lesser [1994] 1995, pp. 217–25). Yet this was due not only to the *modus operandi* of the immigration policy that had been created, but above all, to the dramatic increase in the number of people who wanted to emigrate. In every international displacement of populations, diverse and sometimes even conflicting contexts come into play. In the case of Jewish refugees from Europe, increased external pressure was a determining factor for the rise in admissions, notwithstanding the purposefully permeable character of Brazilian immigration policy. Hence, if we shift our point of view, as I suggested above, taking our eyes off those who came to Brazil to focus on the much larger number of those who remained abroad, without in the end ever reaching any port, the situation calls for further reflection.

The exacerbated authoritarianism and centralization of decision-making that characterized the period kept immigration policy out of the spotlight and from becoming an object of public debate. This gave free rein to leaders and to those who were responsible for the organs that Vargas had created for the purpose of managing flows. These factors were associated, from a political point of view, with efforts to assert Brazilian sovereignty at the international level. At the same time, the increasing antisemitic violence in Europe was accompanied by extreme indifference in relation to the destiny and persecution that Jews suffered, which, furthermore, was far from an exclusively Brazilian attitude.

A situation then ensued in which, while an unknown but certainly very large number of Jews were deprived of entry visas, those who were in Brazil were not particularly affected. Despite this, the extremely important efforts made by German Jews already living in the country to take advantage of the loopholes within the legislation, and thus get as many Jews out of Germany as possible were the focus of the group's activities during those years. This, in turn, demonstrates that the two facets of the situation—what was going on inside the country and what unfolded abroad—were not completely separable.

7. Conclusions

The racial issue, which had turned Jews into victims in Nazi Europe, took on different characteristics in Brazil; ones that worked in their favor. The question unfolded through a twofold vector. On the one hand, and notwithstanding the praise of miscegenation, racism was alive and worked in detriment of dark-skinned populations. Existing racial hierarchies brought Jews, particularly German Jews, closer to the privileged white fractions and was, in this sense, different from the group's previous experiences of belonging, allegedly, to an "inferior race". "Blood" was not, in Brazil, the differentiating and hierarchizing factor. Instead, appearance and phenotype were. Such aspects negatively affected the Japanese, who were perceived as "yellow".

That said, as we have seen in Brazil, the belief in racial hierarchy and the inferiority of Black people coexisted alongside the ideology of "racial democracy" (Stepan 1991, chap. 5; Wade 2017, chap. 2). This brought a second advantage to Jews who had fled Nazism, both in relation to their own previous experience and their newfound position within Brazilian society. In Brazil, in contrast to Germany and European countries under Nazi occupation, the separation of body and spirit was emphatically avoided. Those who did not seem to adhere to notions of Brazilianness and were reluctant to social and cultural mingling, or who resisted miscegenation, were seen as a threat to the integrating principles of a nation

that was always ready to absorb the new, the foreign, the different. Those who came to Brazil no longer had to confront the constraints of social isolation (death) but were expected to step outside it in the interests of the constitutive principle of the nation. According to the motto of their new country regarding immigrants, no “blood” should remain “pure”.

Hence, in Brazil, Jewish refugees were able to engage again with the diverse elements that became a part of their identities, situationally taking advantage of the singularity of a model that, more than others, left ample margin for the unforeseen or less clearly defined. For the Japanese, the matter held greater complications, due precisely to the weight of their appearances and phenotypes within the racial hierarchies of Brazilian society. A hefty baggage made up of a nationalism that was no less exacerbated than the one which marked the Vargas Era was added to this. As we have seen, the racism, mistrust, and ethnic persecution that they were the object of reinforced Japanese immigrants’ ties to their roots. Measures encouraging naturalization, rather than attenuating such ties in favor of a supposed acculturation, made the ties stronger and more desirable, although the obstacles that immigrants were forced to deal with on a daily basis were far from negligible.

Thus, Brazilianness intervened, in different ways, for each immigrant group. The paths this took were also contingent upon the pre-migration history that each group brought with it. Further reflection is still needed on how this complex and varied configuration was interpreted by a historiography that most frequently studied each ethnic group separately and had rarely compared them to each other in relation to Brazilian society.¹¹

With regard to Jews in the face of the antisemitism that marked the Vargas Era and its ethnically restrictive migration policies, standing in clear contrast to the constitutive imaginary on Brazilianness, the general tone of the literature that unmasked this reality in the 1980s could only be pessimistic. Jewish immigrants appeared as victims of state policies that penalized both those who were already on Brazilian soil and those who never reached it. This reading was then nuanced, especially in works that reclaimed the agency of the immigrants themselves. In fact, the experience of those who were already settled in the country was not affected by the real antisemitic barriers imposed on would-be immigrants trying to escape Nazified Europe. Roney Cytrynowicz (2002, p. 418) rightly stated that Jewish institutions functioned normally during those years, even reaching an “institutional effervescence” in all its strands and tendencies. This does not mean that the local Jewish community was not under tension in relation to the international context and not aware of the difficulties imposed by the Vargas regime. I have shown how German Jews in São Paulo strove to bring in as many of their countrymen as possible, often trying in vain to find loopholes in the extremely restrictive rules in force (Schpun 2011, pp. 302–4). Thus, historiography shifted from a pessimistic approach when Vargas’ antisemitism came to light, to a more nuanced reading. At the same time, social history progressively opened space for the agency of Jewish immigrants, changing the view of both state antisemitism and immigrants. However, the debate still mostly revolved around the state as the central and unavoidable actor, giving little prominence to the lives of immigrants, their journeys, the challenges that were imposed on them daily, and to which they reacted. This opening up to social history from below, to the daily life of migratory experiences, remains practically unexplored. The reflections made in these pages can serve as a lever for studies more centered on the actors themselves, absorbing, as other historiographical fields have done, the contributions brought by anthropology, gender studies, and microhistory.

In the case of the Japanese, the situation was different. Those who were unable to enter Brazil due to immigration restrictions did not suffer the same consequences as Jews living in occupied Europe. On the other hand, those who already lived in Brazil faced greater racism, which also manifested itself through their phenotype. The group was silent about this as it rose socially. It took a long time for the issue to come to light. “Racial prejudice of mark” (Nogueira 1985, 1998), which was recognized in the case of people of African descent, also existed in the case of the Japanese, without the issue of having been studied until very recently (Higa 2015; Yanagiwara 2018). In fact, the taboo of racism, which was only very recently broken by young researchers from the new generations of the group,

had also been resisted for decades in the humanities and social sciences. Recent production remains, even so, marginal. Its potential to engage in a broader dialogue with studies on racism and racialization has not been exploited, given the prevalence of studies on race in Brazil regarding the legacy of slavery and the experience of people of African descent. When it comes to crossing racial and migratory issues, the existing works mostly focused on the history of ideas, as in the case of Skidmore's pioneering study (1976), or migratory policies at a "macro" level, as in the vast comparative panorama constructed by [FitzGerald and Cook-Martín \(2014\)](#).

This point, which is key for the reflection made here, opens an important avenue of research in social history, linking the field of migration studies to that of the racial question on a "micro" scale. In the face of Afro-descendants, any immigrants in Brazil appeared to have a privileged life, given the historical weight of slavery, which remains alive in countless ways today. This incommensurability, however, leaves in the shadows the racism experienced, more or less acutely, by different immigrant groups, not to mention their adherence to varied forms of racism in keeping with Brazilian society or those of their origin. This intersection reveals a significant specificity of Brazilian history and society, allowing for comparisons with other countries of immigration. The assimilationism assumed by the Brazilian state, with particular force from the 1930s onwards and widely incorporated into the various expressions of national identity, has been manifested by the supposedly welcoming character of Brazilians, by the image of an easy and quick acceptance, and the aggregation of those who come from outside. It, therefore, contrasts with other national models, in which immigrants were not called upon to integrate but, on the contrary, to remain apart from the nationals, even by legal initiatives. In Brazil, segregation was frowned upon as a tendency for some groups not to embrace the Brazilianness that was open to them. This also implies, historically, less visible forms of expression and experience of racism by immigrants and their descendants.

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Notes

- ¹ In this sense, [FitzGerald and Cook-Martín \(2014\)](#) provide an interesting synthesis, established to answer a double question, on a "macro" analytical scale: on the one hand, the relationship between liberalism, democracy and racism; on the other—for this relationship to gain in density—the comparison of migration policies, read in this key of political history, between various countries in the Americas.
- ² On difficulties of adaptation, the discontents on both sides in the early days of Japanese immigration to São Paulo and official reactions, see [Nogueira \(1973\)](#), pp. 107–49).
- ³ The film was destroyed in a fire at the end of 1940. All that remained of it was the last scene, precisely that one in which Carmen sings "O que é que a baiana tem?". This is because that specific scene had been used in the 1940 film "Laranja da China". On the construction of Carmen Miranda as *baiana*, see [Sá \(1997\)](#), pp. 63–128).
- ⁴ According to data from the Departamento de Imigração, do Ministério do Trabalho, Comércio e Indústria, there were 21,230 entries in 1934, dropping to 9611 the following year. ([Wakisaka et al. 1992](#), p. 138).
- ⁵ I refer particularly to [Carneiro \(1988\)](#) and [Lesser \(\[1994\] 1995\)](#), both of whom are pioneering scholars on Jewish immigration during the Vargas Era.
- ⁶ On this debate and its relationship to the immigration policy established and applied at the time, see [Schpun \(2011\)](#), pp. 99–104).

- 7 In 1940, close to 210,000 immigrants of Japanese origin were living in Brazil (Wakisaka et al. 1992, p. 205), while during the same period, Jews numbered 56,000 (Decol 2001, p. 153). The Japanese population has increased considerably since then, to 1.6 million, which makes it the largest Japanese Community outside Japan. The Jewish population has been estimated as 90,000–100,000.
- 8 Decree-law n. 406 of 4 May 1938 and Decree n. 3010, of 20 August 1938 (which entered into force on 22 December 1938). “Decree-laws” had the force of law and were used in Brazil by its presidents during two specific periods: from 1937–1946 and from 1965–1988.
- 9 “Within Brazilian culture, the Other is needed in order to construct oneself. Rather than degeneration, the strange is a bearer of progress.” (Sorj 1997, pp. 28–29).
- 10 We can see in this political culture the lasting presence of Sérgio Buarque de Holanda’s “cordiality” of the Brazilian man. According to the historian, the formation of the nation was marked by the porosity between the public and private spheres and the persistence of patrimonialism in the functioning of the state bureaucracy. In the 1930s—which saw the birth of this reflection, with the publication of *Raízes do Brasil* (Holanda [1936] 1992)—the country’s entry into modernity was a major difficulty.
- 11 For one of the rare exceptions, see Lesser ([1999] 2000).

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