Advancing Research on Japanese-Brazilian Immigrants

Sedi Hirano, University of São Paulo

Abstract

The immigrant, in transiting from a traditional space of residence to another space, is transformed into an *atopo*, without a place of his own in the social and cultural sense. In this new space he is seen as inopportune and is the object of stereotypes, prejudices, and acts of intolerance. This study analyzes Japanese immigration within this theoretical framework. Critical reflection begets the following question, to paraphrase Abdelmalek Sayad, scholar of Algerian immigration to France: how does one remain Japanese after living outside Japan for many years? When, with the passage of time, is a new space (*topus*) constructed in Brazil with a complex web of family relations and professional activity? When are the children socialized and educated through schools, according to the Brazilian standards of being, feeling, thinking, and acting? In this context the school appears as an unquestionable value for Brazilians of Japanese descent, is an essential instrument for social ascension, and is the place where the rules of civility and Brazilian active citizenship are acquired. The research clearly demonstrates that Brazilians of Japanese descent mobilized knowledge to plan and follow trajectories of sociocultural ascension, thereby contributing, alongside Brazilians of other ethnicities, to the construction of a dynamic, modern, multiethnic, and multicultural Brazilian society.

Brief biography

Sedi Hirano is an Emeritus Professor of the Department of Sociology of the University of São Paulo (USP). He is known for his work on classical sociological theory and on the impact of economic development and globalization on inequality, poverty, and migration, focusing especially on the regions of Latin America and East Asia. At the University of São Paulo he has held the positions of Vice Provost for Culture and University Extension, Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy, Letters and Human Sciences, and Chair of the Graduate Program in Latin American Integration. He has also been a member of the Superior Council of the São Paulo State Research Funding Agency (FAPESP). He is currently a member of the University Councils and the Editorial Councils at both USP and the State University of Campinas (UNICAMP). He has been a visiting professor at Tenri University in Japan.
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Pierre Bourdieu, the famous French sociologist, in his preface to the book *Immigration* by Abdelmalek Sayad (the fine CNRS researcher of immigration issues), affirms, inspired by the reflection of Sócrates, that the immigrant is an *atopos*, without a place, displaced, unclassifiable. Furthermore, he writes, “Neither citizen nor foreigner, neither entirely on the side of the Same, nor entirely on the side of the Other, the ‘immigrant’ is situated in a ‘bastardized’ place of which Plato also speaks, the border between being and not being a social being. Displaced, in the sense of being incongruent and inopportune, he provokes embarrassment; and the difficulty experienced in thinking of it – even in science, which often adopts, unknowingly, the assumptions or omissions of the official vision – only reproduces the embarrassment that his uncomfortable inexistence creates. Uncomfortable everywhere, and thus in his society of origin as well as in his receiving society, he requires the rethinking of the question of the legitimate bases for citizenship and the relation between the State and the Nation or the nationality” (Sayad, Abdelmalek, 1998, 11-12). Abdelmalek Sayad affirms in the abovementioned book that the immigrant is, in his essence, “a force of work, and a force of provisional, temporary work, in transit.” It is work that “gives birth to” the immigrant and makes his existence possible. He is substantially linked to labor (Sayad, Abdelmalek, 1998, 54-55).

Alfredo Bosi, in his brilliant essay entitled *Dialectic of the Colonization*, deciphers with acuity the words “culture,” “cult,” and “colonization,” all of which originate from the same Latin verb “colo,” “whose past participle is ‘cultus’ and whose future participle is ‘culturus.’” In his erudite exposition, the great literary critic teaches us that the word ‘colo’ “meant, in the language of Rome, ‘I live,’ ‘I occupy the land,’ and by extension, ‘I work, I culture the field.’” Continuing his analysis of the meanings of the words, Bosi says that an “old heir of ‘colo’ is ‘incola,’ the inhabitant; another is ‘inquilinus,’ he who inhabits the land of others.” The word “agricultural” is connected to “the idea of work.” He also affirms that “the action expressed in this ‘colo,’” in what is called the verbal system of the present, always denotes something incomplete and
transitive.” It is the movement that passes, or passed, from an agent to an object. “Colo is the origin of ‘colony’ in that it is a space that is being occupied, a land or people that can be worked and subjected.” A ‘colonus’ is, according to Augustus Magne, quoted by Bosi, “he who cultivates a rural property in place of its owner; its administrator in the technical and legal sense of the word.” In Greek, he is “the colony resident who comes to establish himself in place of ‘incola.’” And the ‘incola’ that migrated becomes ‘colonus.’ “The settlement is a totalizing project whose driving forces can always be found at the level of the ‘colo’: occupying a new soil, exploring its goods (...). But the agents of this process are not only physical supports of economic operations; they are also believers who brought in their memory and language of those dead who should not die.” The colonization is a process of production of culture, that is, culture understood as “the set of practices, techniques, symbols, and values that must be transmitted to the new generations to guarantee the reproduction of a state of social coexistence. Education is the marked institutional moment of the process.” In sum, the colonization is conceived as a project directed toward the satisfaction of the material needs of the present (‘colo’: I cultivate, I work); and the colonization as a transplant of a past full of images, symbols, and rites of a religious character (Bosi, Alfredo, 2010, pp. 11-17 and 172).

The immigrant, from an inhabitant of a defined national space (incola), in moving from this traditional space to a different one, is transformed into an atopus, without his own place in the social, cultural, and economic sense, a dislocated being in the new space that does not belong to him in terms of practices, values, and customs, ways of acting and thinking. He becomes an inopportune immigrant, embarrassing, inconvenient, an object of stereotypes, discrimination, racism, and acts of intolerance. Perhaps, without realizing it, the immigrant, before becoming an immigrant, was also – due to his dreams, his desires for the future, and his utopias – already transforming, in his own country and community, into an atopus, or at least, part of him did not have a space and a clear position in the social structure, in terms of social ascension. Another, quite considerable, part was an element of a State project, as in the case of Japanese immigration from 1924 on, which transformed immigrants into colonists in both senses of the word, not only as a labor force. The settlement projects were preceded by studies and research to define the strategic areas that would be occupied by the Japanese emigrants. The areas were planned
to have an enviable infrastructure for the time, endowed with schools, medical clinics, factories for refining agricultural products, canteens for provisions, lodgings for housing immigrants, professionals with knowledge of agricultural technology, and instruments for communication among the colonists.

From an “exiled/expatriated” salaried manual laborer on the coffee plantation, the “settler, in the condition of one who works and cultivates products on the land of others,” the Japanese immigrant, after a few years as a salaried worker, is transformed from an “atopos,” an uprooted tenant, into a resident of his own land, an “agricultural” owner, frequently within a “settlement” either planned or unplanned. The utopian dream of being a landowner began to have a place in the “settlements.” The land, to the Japanese immigrant, is the true force of life and of the symbolic imaginary. It is life, suffering, and the dream, the lifeblood that sustains his strength and effort. The land is, for the rural worker, a space of freedom and autonomy, the place of daily work where quotidian life takes place; the land then becomes, in the form of the house constructed on it, an abode of rest, of calm, and of the dreams of the future for the family of the Japanese immigrant. It is also the space, and the place (topus), of tradition, solidarity, and shared customs, of the living family members and of the ancestors. It is on this land that the immigrant, by way of the untiring daily work of the family, constructs his new homeland, and in it the future of the children, choosing education as an unrenounceable value and as a permanent motivation for solidary work. In this context, it is opportune to remember the defining adage of the Italian immigrants: “where there is work, there is the homeland” (Franzina, Emilio: 2006, p. 40).

Claude Lévi-Strauss alerts us that anthropology can remind the economist, if by chance he forgot, that the human is not simply impelled to produce continuously, or ever more. “He also looks in his work to satisfy aspirations that are rooted in his profound nature: to fulfill himself as an individual, to imprint his mark, to give, through the results of his work, an objective expression to his subjectivity (Lévi-Strauss, 2012, pp. 61-62).

It is in this space of the small property, from the work that he does, that the Japanese immigrant stops being an atopos and becomes a culture-producing citizen. In the territorial space acquired by way of the cultivation of land, he seeks to realize aspirations to form and produce hope for the future for his children, by prioritizing
education. This will allow the children to become the new Brazilian citizens – ethnically of Japanese descent – imprinting in them a singular mark with its own characteristics. In this process of obtaining first-class citizenship for the children, the old dream, previously facing the country of the Rising Sun, migrates to the country of the Setting Sun, where, initially considered a guest, the immigrant over time culturally and socially becomes a new Brazilian.

When the first immigrants arrived to Brazil, according to the description of CORREIO PAULISTANO on June 5, 1908, they brought with them in their luggage many uncommon and unusual objects, as compared to the other immigrant groups; for example, they brought: “Dentifrice powder, toothbrushes, combs, razors for shaving, sauces for seasoning, one or another medicinal root, quilted blankets, coats for the cold, small tools, ONE OR TWO BOOKS, paper for letters, ink, chopsticks, small spoons and other small wares” (Nogueira, Arlinda Rocha, 1984, p. 100).

Therefore, in their luggage was a good portion of the material and symbolic culture of Japan that translates the way of acting and thinking with regard to the habits and customs of the family group for the maintenance of bodily health and personal hygiene. They also carried with them items to be used for meals, and clothing for protection from the elements, as well as instruments for artisanal and domestic work, and, most importantly, spiritual nourishment (in the form of one or two books). Symbolically, books are a powerful means for developing the intellectual faculties and morals of people who have a given educational background. It is common to say that good reading is the nourishment of the spirit. Therefore, in the luggage of the immigrant who came to Brazil, there was a substantive part of the material and symbolic culture of Japanese daily life. There was, in the products brought from Japan to Brazil, a certain social order and a conception of organization of life.

Lévi-Strauss affirms that the mark of Japanese culture is “sobriety, concision, discretion, economy of means, feelings of impermanence and of the poignancy of things (‘mono no aware’), relativity of any knowledge.” This cultural essence was infused in the feelings of the Japanese immigrants who came to Brazil (Lévi-Strauss, 2012, p. 30).
It should be remembered that Lévi-Strauss was a professor of sociology of culture at the University of São Paulo in 1934. He stated that culture “manufactures order: we cultivate land, we construct houses, we produce manufactured objects” (Lévi-Strauss, 2012, p. 59). Therefore, the Japanese immigrants’ dream for the future – within a given adverse and completely different social and cultural order – was, initially, to construct, in the short term, a savings to realize the motto of “fast enrichment and return to the homeland,” an expectation that was not fulfilled and that was immediately substituted by the project of access to land, which occurred quickly (Saito, Hiroshi, 1961, p. 132).

Starting in 1914-1915, there began to appear the first small Japanese landowners, in increasing numbers. As early as 1918, there existed in the state of São Paulo, among the Japanese immigrants, 450 landowners. The majority of them worked with the family, thus transforming the family into a unit of production and solidary work. This process marks the rise of polyculture in agriculture in the state of São Paulo, whereby the Japanese immigrants began to cultivate corn, silkworms, beans, rice, and other products, without neglecting the raising of animals such as chickens, goats, pigs, and horses.

These activities were born on the coffee farms, on parcels of land where the landowners allowed the workers to cultivate for their own consumption. The leftovers were commercialized, which generated a small savings fund that complemented wages (Nogueira, Arlinda Rocha, 1984, pp. 107, 109; see also Saito, Hiroshi, 1961, pp.125, 132).

Besides the Iguape Colony, which was installed in 1913 with an enviable infrastructure through the participation of the Japanese emigration company BRAZIL TAKUSHOKU KAISHA, in the 1920s various other settlements (“colonias”) were planned, financed, and implanted as a state project of the Japanese government. Many of these settlements were also undertaken by the provincial governments, such as, for example, the Aliança settlements, whose construction was started in 1924.

The conditions for the immigrants’ path to autonomy were constructed on the coffee plantations, which were transformed into a sort of laboratory of cultivation of some products that were not produced on a large scale like coffee. And, with the program of access to land as a project of the family unit and later as an enterprise of the Japanese state, with participation of the financial capital of Japan, the bases for the construction of
Ruth Cardoso, in her intriguing book entitled FAMILY STRUCTURE AND SOCIAL MOBILITY, emphasizes the rapid social ascension of the Japanese immigrants from the condition of settlers to that of small landowners. In a period of ten years, 81.3 percent of the immigrants stopped being settlers, becoming families of independent agriculturists; 50.3 percent obtained autonomy as workers in a period of two to four years. The family, structured as a solidary system, was transformed into a unit of economic production, whereby all the members worked daily, methodically, and ascetically to produce profit. This social order laden with communitarian values served to maintain the continuity of the family as a unit of solidary sociability. The production of this profit would sustain, through collective family choice, the progressive education of the younger children on through, in many cases, the universities (Cardoso, Ruth Correia Leite, 1998, pp. 57-79; see also Motoyama, Shozo: “The Nikkeis at USP: A Historical Introduction,” in Miyadahira, Ana Maria Kazue et al., 2009, pp. 19-44).

The starting point for the construction of the project of social ascension – as an articulated solidary system of the domestic group – is small property. The family, by way of small property, constructs trajectories of success, with education as an institution of social opportunity. As Ruth Cardoso states:

“Widely known is the high rate of schooling of this settlement, as well as the efforts that they make for their descendants to reach even higher educational levels. If we consider only those older than ten years of age, only one percent of them are illiterate; this being an almost rural population (1972), we can assess the extent to which this level of schooling is exceptional as compared to the national population” (Cardoso, Ruth, 1998: 135).

Well before the Meiji Period, according to Lévi-Strauss, “Japan already was, in the 16th century, an industrial nation that manufactured and exported to China, in the tens of thousands, armor and sabers, and a bit later rifles and cannons.” And he gives the surprising information that Japan “had more inhabitants than any country of Europe, had more universities, a higher literacy rate…” (op. cit., p. 81). The idea that Japan entered
the era of industrialism and capitalism two or three centuries behind is, according to Lévi-Strauss, entirely false.

Japan’s concern with education comes from the Nara period (710-794), with Prince Shotoku, who was influenced by Confucianism. Karl Jasper, the renowned German existentialist philosopher, chose Confucius (551-479 A.C.), together with Buddha, Socrates, and Jesus, as one of the great educators of humanity. According to him, Confucius saw that the path to truth is the knowledge that allows one to differentiate the true from the false: “The path is to learn, not a mere knowing of something, but as appropriation. The connecting tissue of this authentic ‘learning’ is the existence of the BOOK and SCHOOLS. The school was the foundation of education” (Jasper, Karl, 2003, p. 79).

Consequently, to create SCHOOLS and to cultivate the reading of BOOKS, as the Japanese immigrants did, by way of the collective participation of the community, was fundamental for the education of the people. The way of learning and teaching was transformed in Confucianism into a fundamental question for humanity. In the ANALECTS, Confucius preached “THE LOVE FOR LEARNING.” According to him, education was not the mere acquisition of technical information, but rather the core for the development of humanity itself. It is for this reason that Confucius advocated universal and affordable education for all: “My teaching is addressed to everyone, without distinction” (Confucius, 2005, pp. 26, 55, 91, 162, 163, 178, 190 and 222).

Amartya Sen, Nobel Prize winner in economics, affirmed in 1999 that the pioneering example of intensification of social, cultural, and economic development by means of the construction of the institution of social opportunity in the area of basic education is, without a doubt, Japan. He writes: “Sometimes it is forgotten that Japan had higher literacy rates than Europe even at the time of the Meiji Restoration, in the mid-19th century” (Sen, Amartya, 2000, p. 58). In Sen’s understanding, the East Asian countries initially drew up a State Project, aiming to expand education as a right of every citizen, and, later, took care to extend health services, often accomplishing this even “before breaking the shackles of poverty.” And they reaped what they sowed. In these countries, and particularly in Korea and in Japan, economic development occurred with “relatively egalitarian income distribution,” which “has been widely – and rightly –
recognized” (op. cit, p. 58). In the understanding of John N. Gray of the London School of Economics, this made Japan, among all the developed countries, the country that had the lowest rate of inequality and poverty and the lowest rates of crime. And, as Gray explains, Japan “is an egalitarian society in which almost all are middle class” (Gray, John, 1999, pp. 150-152 and 226).

It can be affirmed that building schools is certainly a responsibility of the State, but when this State is absent – mainly on the pioneering fronts of expansion – organized communities, through the efforts of their citizens, build schools. That is what happened with the Japanese immigrants and the Brazilians of Japanese descent in Brazil.

In his excellent book entitled A MODERN EPOPEE, Wakisaka reveals that in 1958, 75 percent of the immigrants born in Japan belonged to the old middle class of old autonomous rural and urban landowners, and 13 percent to the new middle class, totaling 88 percent in the middle classes, leaving only 12 percent as salaried workers; and, among the descendants, the stratum of salaried workers practically doubled (23 percent), the old middle class decreased to 52 percent, and the new middle class in formation doubled, reaching 25 percent (Wakisaka, Katsunori et al, 1992, p. 576).

According to the data of the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), as cited in the book THE NIKKEI IN BRAZIL by Kiyoshi Harada, 28.9 percent of those classified as Asians, which includes Nikkei, completed higher education, as compared to 10 percent of whites, 2.4 percent of “pardos,” 2.2 percent of native Brazilians, and 2.1 percent of blacks. As for the HDI (which is the result of the combination of four factors: variation of GDP per capita, adult literacy, school matriculation, and life expectancy), that of the Nikkeis is the highest among the ethnic groups studied; it is 0.937, which is almost equal to that of Japan, which is 0.938. It goes on to say: “If one considers only the Southeast region, where most of the Nikkei population is located, the HDI would be 0.958, which is even higher than that of Norway, the country that, at 0.956, has the highest index in the world.” Brazil’s HDI, determined in 2006, is 0.792, which is 69th in the world ranking (Harada, Kiyoshi, org., 2007: pp. 103 and 104; Hirano, Sedi: “Contributions of the Japanese immigrants and their descendants in the diverse areas of knowledge,” In: Watanabe, Kazuo et al: 2010: pp. 212-279).
The success of Brazilians of Japanese descent in the best research university in Latin America, which is the University of São Paulo, is reflected in the following numbers: they make up approximately 15 percent of the students and about 6 percent of the faculty. In the fields of medicine and engineering at USP, Brazilians of Japanese descent have reached an impressive 25 percent of the student population.

Currently, Japanese descendants are present in all fields in Brazil in which specialized knowledge is an essential condition for the exercise of the profession, as is the case in universities, the judiciary, the armed forces, the various state institutions, and private enterprise (Hirano, S., op. cit.; Harada, K., op.cit.).

If, on the one hand, the organized form of land occupation in the form of small property during the 1920s and 1930s produced successful trajectories, on the other hand, the immigrants were accused – by virtue of their educational system, their community organizing which was considered to be efficient and well planned, the low rate of mixing, their negatively-described phenotype, etc., and their singular ways of thinking, acting, and behaving – of being unassimilable, generating a wave of base and irrational prejudice and racism. In the opinion of various intellectuals, doctors, lawyers, eugenists, engineers, psychiatrists, parliamentarians, social scientists, diplomats, sanitarians, etc., the Japanese were considered harmful to the construction of the Brazilian identity and nationality, and they were punished and tagged with various epithets and negative stereotypes in racial terms. The supposed great danger resided precisely in the social, cultural, economic, and political expansion and development of a group considered to be impermeable, disciplined, diligent, and extremely organized which, in the near future, would territorially occupy Brazil and implant a new State within the Brazilian territory. This presence of the Japanese State, supported by financial capital, strengthened the anti-Japanese movement already in existence since the 19th century, which acquired a radically intolerant, racist, and discriminatory nationalist character, putting in evidence the question of the so-called “Yellow Threat.”

The “Yellow Threat” was not seen as a mere possibility, but rather was taken as a present reality that challenged the formation of a cohesive homeland built around national values. In this view, the Japanese immigrants represented an alien, foreign culture, extremely dangerous to Brazil. Of the books that dealt with this problem of xenophobia,

And there are those who are marginalized, without a place (atopos), suffering the degradation and the loss of quality of life, living in the slums. There are also those who suffered prejudice and loss of status due to their mixed ethnicity (“caboclinização”). And still others were “segregated” and socially marginalized for their sexual preferences. One cannot be silent with regard to the segregation and discrimination suffered by some of the Japanese immigrants of low social status – such as the “eta,” “hinin,” and “burakumin” – by their compatriots. One should also not be silent about Japanese racism, whose proponents declared themselves the white people of Asia, etc. (V. Willems & Saito, 1947; Schurig Vieira, Francisca, 1973, Motoyama, S. 2011). These questions deserve systematic and in-depth studies. However, the question at hand, to paraphrase an affirmation by Sayad found in his book IMMIGRATION, is how one remains Japanese even when one lives far from Japan for many years; when one is settled long-term with a
spouse and children; when, with the passage of time, there is constructed in Brazil a web of family relations and multiple complex pragmatically-oriented relations; when the children are socialized and instructed, by way of the school, according to the Brazilian standards of being, acting, feeling, and thinking (Sayad, 1998, p. 225). It is through the school, institution par excellence of secondary socialization and formation of citizenship, that the Japanese descendants acquire the values that guide the dominant national culture, and it is through primary socialization that they preserve the values of the maternal and paternal culture of Japan, in symbiosis with Brazil.

The Japanese immigrants, in moving from Japan to Brazil as a family unit, paradoxically brought with them the sociological components essential to becoming rooted economically, socially, and culturally. The sojourn, expected to be temporary, of the “excess” Japanese population exported as immigrants to Brazil became permanent. The Japanese immigrant and descendant, through family, school, and property, has now acquired the “status” of Brazilian citizen, and is no longer an atopos.

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