CHAPTER 10

FACING A PANDEMIC AWAY FROM HOME: COVID-19 AND THE BRAZILIAN IMMIGRANTS IN PORTUGAL

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Introduction

On January 7, 2020, the Portuguese newspaper, *Público,* published an article about an unprecedented challenge facing Chinese leaders: a "strange form of pneumonia" (Chaiça, 2020) diagnosed in several patients in the Chinese city of Wuhan, that was subsequently named COVID-19. On March 2, the Portuguese government had placed major hospitals under alert and reinforced the supply of medicines (Campos & Lins, 2020). This occurred even before the declaration of a global pandemic by the World Health Organisation, on March 12 (WHO, 2020), and diagnosis of the first cases in Portugal. On March 18, a national state of emergency was declared - which imposed social measures, such as social isolation and mobility restrictions in public spaces. The state of emergency continued until May 2, when it was replaced by the state of calamity, and then by the state of contingency on July 1.

> *Covid-19 has another ironic or perverse trait. It does not reach everyone in the same way. It may even be a seductive speech that we are in the same boat, but it's not real (Severo, 2020, Chapter 24, para. 7).*

While such challenges were affecting Portuguese society, immigrants began to face a different set of concerns, that placed their lives in even more vulnerable situations. Along with refugees and racialised persons – who, despite being national citizens, are perceived as foreigners - various groups of immigrants are seen as the "Other" and stigmatised because they are viewed as a threat in the destination country. As stated by Paéz and Pérez (2020), in an epidemic scenario, the hegemonic collective often 'foreignises' the disease – i.e. associates it with outgroup individuals. According to Vala and Pereira (2020), this stigmatisation is related to the worldwide reinforcement of national identities, anti-universalistic beliefs and the rise of political governments aligned with right-wing values. Although it can be

claimed that this is used by dominant social groups to reduce anxiety and increase their sense of control over the situation, fostering a false impression that they are less vulnerable to the disease (Smith, O'Connor & Joffe, 2015), one should not forget that, within social processes, scapegoating[1] is one of the most extreme forms of prejudice against groups that are socially blamed for causing another group's misfortunes (Glick, 2005).

Indeed, in times of public health disturbances, history shows that such processes of social segregation based on scapegoating are not rare. For example, the unprecedented 1889–1890 flu pandemic was called the 'Asiatic flu' or 'Russian flu'. The most evident case is the 1918 influenza pandemic. The sole fact that the disease was called the 'Spanish flu' even though it did not originate in Spain (Hoppe, 2018) corroborates the idea that "Others" are frequently identified as being the causes of such diseases. This is particularly true for individuals who belong to social groups that are perceived as having low social status. In Portugal, Galician immigrants were stigmatised throughout the three waves of the Spanish influenza, which reflected the waves occurring worldwide, although we now know that the first wave of the spread of the disease began in the Alentejo region, in the rural area of Portugal. In the second wave, it spread from the city of Porto to the Northwest and Douro region, followed by the Centre and finally, the South of Portugal (Sobral & Lima, 2018).

Bearing this in mind, while it can be assumed that a pandemic often brings a sense of unity to social groups that share a fear of the potential impact of a virus on all human beings, regardless of their social positioning, it also highlights the disparities of social positions and the dilemmas that different social groups face in a given society. The same finding applies to Brazilian immigrants in Portugal, the largest community of documented foreign residents living in Portugal. In 2019, according to official statistics, there were 151,304 documented Brazilian immigrants in Portugal, equivalent to 25.6% of all documented immigrants living in the country (SEF, 2020). This reflects the historical migratory flow from Brazil to Portugal, that became more firmly consolidated in the 1980s. The main driver of this trend was the fact that as the Brazilian economy entered a period of an unprecedented deceleration, Portugal has begun to emerge as an alternative for those seeking better opportunities and quality of life, mainly due to the fact that the country joined the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1986. This migratory flow began as a countercurrent movement, since many Brazilians immigrants were part of the family of former Portuguese emigrants returning to their homeland. But it was soon complemented by the emigration of highly qualified professionals and political exiles. In the mid-1990s, Portugal joined

[1] Scapegoating processes can be understood as a social practice, in alignment with socially-shared beliefs, ideologies and stereotypes embedded in a given cultural context (Allport, 1954; Glick, 2005).

the Schengen Area[2] and a services-based economy began to emerge, which attracted Brazilians with a more diversified profile. In this second migratory wave, Brazilian immigrants with lower educational levels began to occupy the least qualified positions in the Portuguese job market, in particular in the food and tourism sectors (Padilla, Marques, Góis & Peixoto, 2015). The feminisation observed in migratory movements in other parts of the world can also be observed here. Although the statistics showed only a 2% difference between the number of Brazilian women and men living in Portugal in 2003, this difference increased annually[3] and stood at 8% in 2008 (Barbosa & Lima, 2020).

This configuration of the migratory flow continued until the end of the first decade of the new millennium, when it began to show signs of weakening, especially because of the 2008 global economic recession. From 2011 onwards, the number of documented Brazilian immigrants living in Portugal began to fall, which Machado (2014) attributes to return migration or new migration to other European countries. This trend changed significantly in 2017, when the decline in the number of documented Brazilian immigrants resident in Portugal was replaced by an accelerated upward trend, with a 23.4% increase in 2018 and an even more impressive increase, of 43.5%, in 2019 (SEF, 2020). Not only these numbers, but also the different media discourses that are emerging in relation to the new Brazilian immigrants in Portugal, attest to the existence of a third migratory wave over recent years.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Brazilian immigrants soon emerged in media discourses, both in Brazil and Portugal, that aimed to explore how they are dealing with a pandemic in a foreign country. Such narratives proliferated and soon began to be generalised - from unemployment to days spent at the airport with no resources and waiting for a flight to return to Brazil. However, although all kinds of media now constitutes important sources of information and knowledge (Talbot, 2007), it is important to not take for granted the media content and to develop a critical awareness about the circulation and large scale dissemination of fake news through social media. Given the size of the Brazilian community resident in Portugal – and hence the important role played by these individuals in Portuguese social and economic structures - we considered that it would be extremely valuable to understand how such individuals have been

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[2] The Schengen Area represents the geographical area of 26 countries that joined the Schengen Agreement, established in 1985, where there are no border controls of residents from any of the signatory countries, in order to allow free movement of people between countries (Carvalhais, 2008).

[3] With the exception of 2006, when the number of women decreased by 3%. Nonetheless, they still represented a majority, since women were 51% and men 49% of all documented Brazilian immigrants living in Portugal that year (SEF, 2010).

coping with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology

The main goal of this qualitative empirical research was to explore and bring to light the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of Brazilian immigrants in Portugal. With this goal in mind, we developed a script with four major thematic blocks of topics to be used in semi-structured interviews: biographical information, migration trajectory, life in Portugal and perceived impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Acknowledging that this research was not intended to be representative, the participants were selected using the approach of convenience and opportunity (Tracy, 2020). The sole criterion for the selection of respondents was the year of migration, that should be no prior to 2015, since the intention was to portray the point of view of Brazilian immigrants from the current third wave (França & Padilla, 2018). A public call was posted in online groups of Brazilians living in Portugal, on *Facebook*, *WhatsApp* and *Telegram*. The interviews were conducted via audio calls made over the Internet, between May 18 and June 22.

In total, 19 people were interviewed, a number that is compatible with that which Gaskell (2003) considers to be ideal for exploring a research topic without undermining the researchers' analytic capacity. 13 of the participants were women and six were men. The age range was between 23 and 58 years old. Only three of the respondents were single. The others stated that they are married or live in a "stable union" (de facto marriage) with a Brazilian partner. In terms of their educational level, 16 respondents had completed at least a Higher Education degree, and three are currently enrolled in postgraduation courses. In terms of professional status, one respondent was retired, nine worked for companies in Portugal and two were entrepreneurs. The other seven respondents said that they were unemployed, dating back to before the COVID-19 pandemic. In terms of the region where the respondents lived in Brazil prior to migrating to Portugal, 12 lived in the Southeast – Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Espírito Santo and Minas Gerais, three in the Northeast – Bahia, Ceará and Pernambuco, three in the South – Paraná and Santa Catarina - and one in the Midwest – Distrito Federal. In Portugal, nine live in the South – Évora, Faro, Lisbon and Setúbal, eight in the North – Aveiro, Porto and Viana do Castelo - and two in the Centre region – Castelo Branco and Coimbra. In relation to the year of migration, nine respondents migrated in 2019 and three in 2020. The other seven respondents migrated between 2015 and 2018.

Although this paper does not aim to provide in-depth analysis of the characteristics of the sample, it is interesting to observe how it can be related to previous migratory waves from Brazil to Portugal and what it tells about

the current wave. The fact that more than a half of the participants were women, for example, can be associated with the tendency of the feminisation of this flow, observed since the second wave. The higher educational level also matches the tendency of higher qualified migrants, that can be attested when comparing this data with that of all migrants from that same flow (Padilla et al., 2015). When it comes to where they lived prior to migration, except for one participant who lived in Distrito Federal, 12 participants came from states that were the source of over 50% of the immigrants from the second flow (Padilla et al., 2015), while the other six participants came from states in the Northeast and South regions, whose representativeness has increased over recent years (Barbosa & Lima, 2020).

Results

First of all, we sought to understand the impact of the pandemic on the lives of the respondents. The backdrop of economic recession - it is impossible to ignore the economic "tumble" that could lead Portugal's GDP to shrink by 6.8% in 2020, which is nonetheless more optimistic than the 7.7% drop in GDP that is forecast for other European Union countries (Francisco, 2020) - ended up having a direct influence on the lives of Brazilian immigrants. For the entrepreneurs in the sample, the pandemic has multiple impacts. Carlos[4] (30), who abandoned his career in Human Resources in Brazil to set up his own business in the food sector in Portugal, admitted that the pandemic had had an impact on his planned business. "Initially, it will open as a take-away and then we will determine how to manage the issue of the virus itself", he stated. Karine (51), who worked in the Marketing sector in Brazil and is now an entrepreneur in the tourism sector in Portugal, considers that the impact of the pandemic makes it necessary to reassess where she should direct the business. "We had a lot, a lot of work, and now we are walking on eggshells", she explained, assuming that, with the pandemic, "a little bit more care" will be needed in all aspects of her company's business. For those who are presently employed, the fear of possible dismissal was reported as being always imminent, despite the fact that the unemployment rate in the first quarter of 2020 in Portugal remained the same as that in the last quarter of 2019 (INE, 2020). This was also portrayed by the media, such as news items which stated that the new coronavirus is "the virus that has brought unemployment to [the Brazilian immigrants]" (Filho, 2020). This concern was referred to by Pedro, who told us that he thinks he has nothing that differentiates him from the other employees of the company where he works, beyond his productivity. "If, for example, the company downsizes and has to fire someone, I'll probably be on the front line," he said, "I'm going to have to be better than anyone else,

[4] We used fictitious names to protect the anonymity of the respondents.

or they'll dismiss me first". This concern, however, seemed to be less pronounced for those immigrants who, either because of their professional position or because they are in a different social position, do not feel that their work is threatened by the pandemic. Working in the legal field at a company that provides legal services to Brazil, Liana (27), who migrated to Portugal in 2017 and now works for a law firm, recognises that she is in a different position from those immigrants who are most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. "I am aware that I am in a privileged position with respect to many immigrants," she said, "since we audit the Brazilian market, even in the situation of collective dismissal, I even have a little greater job security". There were even immigrants for whom the pandemic offered new opportunities. Juliana (30), who works at an air filter company in Portugal after migrating in 2019, said that sales have increased significantly as a result of the pandemic. "My husband has therefore joined the company, otherwise he would be unemployed now".

Some participants also revealed that they recognised the impacts of the pandemic on their mental health. "When the world says that an avalanche of mental problems will come, it is no joke", said Karine, for whom the imposition of having to stay at home has been challenging in psychological terms. "I love working from my home-office, but as a result of being forced to stay [inside the house]… I started to freak out", she explained. For Carla (32), who migrated to Portugal in 2017 and now lives in Castelo Branco, surviving the new coronavirus also involves taking care with her mental health, especially because, in her words, "we get a little crazy, feel a little bit alone". This is not an unreasonable concern. Ornell et al. (2020) remind us that, in pandemic scenarios, concern about the pathogen and the biological aspect of the virus ends up overshadowing - or even neglecting - the associated psychological and psychiatric consequences for human beings. According to these authors, fear "increases the levels of anxiety and stress in healthy individuals and intensifies the symptoms of those pre-existing psychiatric disorders" (Ornell, Schuch, Sordi & Kessler, 2020, p. 2). In the case of immigrants, there is still a need to look at, and take care of, mental health as an issue crossing the past and the present, i.e. recognising the influence of individuals' history and migratory trajectory on their psychological welfare, well-being (Lechner, 2007).

In the case studied, the emergence of situations of social discrimination - one of the most pressing issues facing immigrants - was also reported. In an official statement, issued on March 30, the UN representative, Fernand de Varennes, warned that COVID-19 is not only a health issue, but also a potential agent of exacerbating situations of xenophobia, hatred and social exclusion (Varennes, 2020). This theme also emerged in our research in the account of Carla, who told us that she suffered xenophobia in her workplace

because she is Brazilian. "Sometimes, in meetings, I have to listen to 'oh, the Brazilian is here, she will give us COVID-19'," she said. "It is a shame to see the sad plight of Brazilian people becoming a joke at a meeting of a company, that I previously considered to be serious", she added. This "sad plight" is associated to the high incidence of cases of COVID-19 in her native country, which, throughout the month of May, became an epicentre of the pandemic in Latin America and the world (Waldron, 2020). According to Worldometer - a website that compiles world statistics on the new coronavirus - in a consultation carried out at 07:40 GMT on September 1st, the country already ranked second, with 3,910,901 cases, in the global list of countries with the highest number of total registered cases – 25,644,319. While it has already been found that residents in areas of high incidence are more vulnerable to episodes of social discrimination (Ornell et al., 2020), our study reveals that, even when they are no longer residing in the country in question, nationality turns out to be an unavoidable part of immigrants' identity, which leads them to be a target of such disturbances.

On the other hand, the enforcement of social distancing and quarantine affected these immigrants, by restricting their mobility in public spaces, including their routines – "I spent virtually 30 days without even going to the supermarket," said Ana (40), a mother who has been living in Loulé, alone with her young child, since 2019 - and also affected their leisure options - for Juliana, going out to eat; for Pedro, going to the beach. This presence in public spaces, which was also a moment of social integration, was replaced by new forms of leisure - or, in the case of women, by the overload of duties. While Pedro spent more time on activities such as watching TV and playing video games, and even taking occasional short walks outside, Ana and Sueli, both married, hardly found any free time while taking care of their children. "Since I have a 4-year-old daughter, she has been very demanding during this period because she isn't going to school", Ana confessed, "so I can't give her proper attention, nor to my work, nor to my master's degree, so everything becomes 'compartmentalised'".

The participants were then asked whether they considered the fact that they are immigrants enhanced or reduced some of the reported impacts of the pandemic. For Carlos, immigrant status is not a problem in its own right, but rather the renewed social exclusion that these individuals may feel. "I don't believe that the pandemic hit immigrants more because they are immigrants", he explained, "but because they sometimes faced greater difficulties in being fully integrated into the system." This resulted in a lack of access to immigrant's rights, especially in cases where the immigrant's legalisation process is taking place after entering the country, which places the individual in what Carlos called a "legal limbo".

Despite this discourse, these immigrants felt an overall atmosphere of

insecurity. As Cohen points out (2020), the sense of the lack of security felt by migrants during a pandemic can be revealed in many ways and in different dimensions, including a response to the fear of loss. In fact, insecurity was a recurring theme mentioned by the participants. It soon became clear that the insecurity felt during the COVID-19 pandemic did not derive from the immigrant status itself, but from what this condition represents in the individual's life. It was a perceived feeling of isolation referring to "not having anyone here, in case something happens", as Beatriz (30), a psychologist who has been living in Lisbon since 2019, explained, when "[...] you don't have, let's say, someone to count on. Nobody knows you; nobody is going to do anything for you. So, you're on your own." This feeling of insecurity was also portrayed as being far from family, friends, and from a common past that supports a linkage between the immigrant and the community of origin. "The feeling of being at home and of importance and insecurity for being an immigrant, is precisely not having my family around", said Carla, "so you end up not having the affection of your family members, the security of being within the family". Júlia described this as her "warmth", that meant "being close to 'my people'". For her, the realisation that everything could change at any moment intensified this feeling of wanting to be close to her family. "And sometimes you think 'no, I will withstand this moment, it will soon be over and everything will go back to normal.'", she said, "we can't think like that, because you blink and everything has changed, the world has changed." When we asked her to explain what she meant when she referred to her "cosiness", she told us: "the place that brings me security, the place where my children are, where my friends are, where are the people that I have lived my whole life."

In the words of Karine, insecurity is a way to describe the feeling of the Portuguese community in an economic scenario of instability, in which the search for job opportunities gets more intense, when it is necessary to "compete" with immigrants. "Their insecurity is turning into hatred [...] and I would say mainly against Brazilians", she confessed. "I don't see the same prejudice against Angolans, for example, or Cape Verdeans, for example". This scenario is a consequence of processes of social comparison and perceived competition between groups in a situation of scarcity of resources, whereby the "Other" is seen as a threat, resulting in competitive behaviour (Campbell, 1965) that can be converted into situations of social discrimination and xenophobia. Such competition is exacerbated when there are social status asymmetries (Cf. Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which helps to understand the rivalry mentioned by Karine: when the perceived social status of different nationalities of immigrants are assessed by Portuguese, those of African origin figure at the bottom of the perceived hierarchy, while Brazilians figure higher (Cabecinhas, 2007). The importance of the asymmetries of perceived social status was corroborated by Karine, when she

explained the meaning she gives to this perceived competition: "They see Brazilians as being a little superior to them, although they don't admit it." That's why, according to her, "they feel a bit more vulnerable. And then, to conceal this, they try to diminish us [Brazilians]".

After ascertaining the current impacts of the pandemic, we decided to analyse its possible implications on plans for the future. Participants were asked whether they have made any alterations to their life plans for the short or long term. It is interesting to note that the participants who mentioned some change are those who have been in Portugal for the longest time, while for those who have migrated more recently, have kept their plans with few changes. In our research, 10 out of 12 participants who migrated in 2019 and 2020 said that the pandemic did not impact their future plans, while 6 out of 7 of those who migrated between 2016 and 2018 answered affirmatively to the question. This difference corroborates the statement by Castles and Miller (1998) that the very experience of migration and daily life in another place means that the original plans may be modified. This could explain why those who have lived longer in Portugal have had more time and experience in the new country to re-evaluate their plans, while newcomers have not yet had sufficient time to make such an evaluation. We also found that, for those who have lived in Portugal for longer, there was a higher feeling of uncertainty about the future, a characteristic of pandemic times and also the migratory journey itself.

Despite these differences, for those who claimed their plans have changed, the pandemic seems to have been interpreted as an invitation to reflect on personal goals over the short and long term. Some immigrants referred to it as a "great pause" in life, in which they took the opportunity to assess the pros and cons of the choices they have made in the past and which they must make in the future. "The pandemic, in some way, made me reflect on some issues that I had already thought about and that became stronger", commented Marina (34), an unemployed single Brazilian who has just returned from an Erasmus study period in Madrid to the North of Portugal, and intends to give up the master's degree that she started in Portugal to look for a job and thereby "guarantee a minimum income [economically speaking], if things get tight". For those who were already looking for a job, however, "the pandemic dashed [our] expectations", as Júlia said. She was the only respondent who stated she intended to return to Brazil because of the COVID-19 pandemic, since she admitted she had lost hope that she will be able to put herself in the job market during the pandemic or in the near future, which has led her to assess whether it is really worth staying in Portugal in her current conditions. She, therefore, decided that she will return to Brazil as soon as she can - a decision that was influenced by the "burden" of being away from her family. "The pandemic made me think, you know?",

she said, "that I wanted to be close to those I always lived with, that I have always lived with, [those] who are 'mine': my family, my children, my brothers, my friends".

Except for Júlia, the other participants have no intention of migrating once again or returning to Brazil. This finding counters the notion that there is an increased intention to return to Brazil observed throughout the different migratory flows from Brazil to Portugal (Barbosa & Lima, 2020). This absence of changes indicates immigrants who, unlike those from other migratory waves, are planning to stay for longer in Portugal. "The plans remain the same", said Pedro, "I didn't come to take a rain check or anything, I came to change, to immigrate", he added. We noted that the matter, therefore, involves "waiting for the world to return to normal and continuing our life here", as Rodrigo (57), a retired doctor who moved to Aveiro in 2020, said. Something that "maybe changed the deadlines", according to Beatriz, of the plans mentioned by our respondents: buying a house, trying to find some part-time work, rescheduling the professional career or even bringing the family to live with them. Everything will depend, it appears, on the financial impact that the pandemic will have on these immigrants' lives. "I just need to know whether the financial impact is not going to be so severe that it obliges me to return", Pedro said.

Conclusions

Aiming to understand the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of recent Brazilian immigrants in Portugal, 19 of these individuals were interviewed in the months of May and June of 2020. Their responses were then submitted to a thematic analysis.

In relation to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their lives, the participants recognised that the situation affected several different areas. Besides the impact on their economic status and the fear of unemployment, our research findings point to the fact that their daily routine and mental health were also affected. Gender inequalities and the matter of immigrant insecurity were also identified in our research, making it possible to understand that dealing with the pandemic is related to new leisure options and routine adjustments, and also an excessive burden of domestic tasks for women and the uncertainties and insecurities about insertion in the job market. Some of the immigrants interviewed mentioned cases of social discrimination in their professional environment related to their nationality, that can be related to scapegoating processes that are common in epidemics. Several respondents who said that the fact that they are immigrants does not influence the impact of the pandemic on their lives, explained that this is because they are in a privileged position in relation to other Brazilian immigrants who have directly faced adversities during the pandemic in

Portugal. Another research finding is the reactivation of contact networks with Brazilians as a way to cope with the pandemic, which leads to the conclusion that contacts with those who remained in the origin country intensified, to the point of redeeming old affective relationships previously suppressed as a result of time and distance, frequently adopting a characteristic of care and monitoring of the situation of family and friends. Even so, this adverse scenario did not change the future plans of those who have migrated more recently, but imposed new schedules and deadlines for implementation of the life plans that they had drawn up before the pandemic.

Although these findings cannot be generalised to all Brazilian immigrants in Portugal, we believe that this study reveals several nuances that reflect broader societal issues, synthesising several important points that deserve to be addressed in further studies on this topic.

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