

## **Turbulence before Take-Off: Life Trajectories Spotted en Route to a Brazilian Runway**

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Woke up at 5:30 am, dragged myself out of bed into the shower. While Andrea made me breakfast I finished packing, and then I went. There were three options for getting to the international airport:

- 1) Taxi ; R\$ 88 / US\$ 44, comfy, fast, reliable
- 2) Subway to airport bus ; R\$ 24 / US\$ 12, comfy, slower, semi-reliable
- 3) Subway to public bus ; R\$ 5/ US\$ 2.50, even slower, unknown reliability, three train transfers, have to take bags on bus and watch over them in the aisle.

As my financial situation has been somewhat<sup>a</sup> turbulent as of late, I decided to go with option three.

On the subway, I practically sleepwalked from train to train, but in navigating the transfer to the bus, dragging my bags up and down a few sets of stairs and through crowded corridors, I was forced to wake up. During my one-hour-and-forty-minute journey to the airport, and the various stages of airport pre-take-off activities, I chatted with three Brazilians who were oddly representative of what I imagine might be the wide variety of persons making their way across this 20 million-strong megalopolis to converge upon Guarulhos International Airport, on this cold and rainy winter day in São Paulo.

First, there was Selma. I met Selma on the public bus to the airport. Seems that the bus is mostly used by airport employees, as very few people actually had baggage. The bus left from a station in the eastern zone (Zona Leste) of São Paulo, a station that I had only been to once before, making this same trip in reverse.

For whatever reason, I've never been invited to, or needed to go to, or even really known about anything on that end of that metro line. Seeing the morning commute was fascinating; my train was close to empty as I left the centre of the city and headed eastward, towards the sprawling *periferia* that is home to the millions of workers who make the city tick. The train going in the opposite direction, towards the city centre (read: jobs) and away from the periphery (read: poverty), was absolutely packed with people, standing, sitting, piling in.

While I sat on the airport bus, gripping my rather large and unwieldy bag to keep it from flying all over the aisle, Selma and I had a pleasant morning chat. She had recently been transferred from one city airport to another, because the airport where she used to work is closed for remodelling and construction. Instead of being fired outright, like many of her co-workers, she was lucky enough to get a transfer (maybe because she'd worked at the cafe in the other airport for seven years). Unfortunately, the transfer added more than two hours per day to her already onerous commute.

Now, she spends more than six hours per day in transit, going to and from the airport, getting a bus, a train, a subway, and another bus. At her new job in her second airport cafe, the company is required to employ her for six months; after that, they can legally fire her with no explanation. She's worried that this will happen soon because the company is required to pay her transportation costs, which amount to about US\$ 6 per day. She told me that this is nearly as much as she is paid (minimum wage here amounts to only slightly more), so the company is losing a lot of money on her.

I ask her about her other job prospects, and she said that it's tough to find work. But, as is, she's looking forward in a certain sense to being laid off, just to end this terrible commute. The bus lurches up and over a hill, engine labouring. A news stand flashes by, its owner setting up the day's papers and magazines under a grey tarp overhang to keep them out of the rain. I think to ask Selma what she thinks of the recent scandal happening in Brazil: the troubled Worker's Party government has been caught red-handed arranging a bribery scheme in which they actually paid off senators from other parties to vote with them. She tells me that she really doesn't pay attention, as she's just got absolutely no time for such things.

Selma leaves home at 5 am, gets to work at 8, works until 4:20 pm, gets home at around 7:30 pm, and has to wake up again eight hours later to get ready for work. "I spend my life travelling, *f* she says. Nine hours a day belong to her, for sleeping, eating, caring for her child, spending time with her husband, all of it. Just time enough for what Marx would call the "reproduction of labour-power"<sup>1</sup>. If that.

I ask a bit more about job possibilities. She tells me she really doesn't even have time to think about it, though she seems confident that she will be able to find something. If nothing else, her mother has a small lingerie store in her neighbourhood where she could work. But that would be less than ideal, she says, it would mean cutting into the family income to pay her. I ask (thinking of my present research on the topic) if she has any friends who are maids or domestic servants. She does, and she tells me that she's really not

interested in that route, from what her friends tell her. Depending on the employer, it can be very difficult at times. I suggest that with seven years working in a restaurant, maybe she could open her own. She doesn't seem enthusiastic. I ask about her schooling, and it turns out she's only finished elementary school.

The conversation drifts to quiet, she seems very tired and goes to sleep up against the window of the bus. She doesn't ask me anything about myself during the entire conversation, not even where I'm from, how I speak Portuguese, nothing. This is fairly uncharacteristic of my encounters with Brazilians, who are usually quite curious after they hear my accent..

This of course didn't stop me from asking her all about her life. Selma was born in Maranhão, one of the poorest states in Brazil. With its primarily slave-descended, Afro-Brazilian population, and indigenous and white minorities, Maranhão has both the lowest literacy and formal employment rates in the country.<sup>2</sup> Located in the far north, three or more days by bus from São Paulo, the state has little industry to speak of beyond tourism, palm plantations and aluminium processing.

Selma moved here from Maranhão with her parents when she was very young, and has never gone back. I ask if, after seven years working at an airport, she's ever been on an airplane. Nope. She says she could some day if she wanted to, as her brother and father work for an airline that gets her access to discount tickets. But she doesn't seem very interested. We talk for another few minutes, about the city, life, etc., and then she gets off at the first stop, with all the other airport employees. I stay on a bit longer, one of the few passengers headed for another departure.



The next encounter was much quicker ; with the woman who checked me into my flight. I joked with her about my recent visa difficulties, and she was curious to know how I spoke Portuguese and asked what I was doing in Brazil, why I had come here, etc. It turned out that she had actually gotten a bachelor's degree in geography from the same university where I'm studying, the prestigious University of São Paulo (USP). She'd even taken a few classes in sociology, my very own department. From opposite sides of the shiny ticket counter, we talked about USP for five or six minutes ; professors, classes, cafeterias ; quite funny, given that there was a big line of anxious passengers behind me, a team of harried employees stumbling to heave bags onto conveyor belts behind her, and she didn't seem to be affected in the least.

After our discussion of the university, and her thorough, yet cordial questioning of my motives for being here, I ventured to ask how it was that she had ended up working at the airport. She told me that when she graduated, she had really wanted to work in physical geography, doing research, mapping, or something related, but there were just no jobs around at all. Since she'd studied English in private classes since she was a child (a virtual prerequisite for getting into USP), she took advantage of the leg up on the labour market

that this gave her, and ended up working for American Airlines because that was what she could find.

This basic social trajectory for middle-class Brazilians is something that I've seen more times than I can count here in São Paulo. A university-educated individual looking for a specific career either in the academic world or a creative field ends up giving up their search and relying on their more basic skills, or simply, their very class itself, to find work. Speaking a foreign language or possessing basic computer literacy come into play here; but often, a person's simple and even unconscious ability to manifest the cultural capital<sup>3</sup> that their middle-class upbringing affords them seems to be a key to acquisition of these sorts of relatively well-paying, yet somewhat menial jobs. Comportment, dress, vocabulary, deployment of greetings, accents, off-hand comments about current events or cultural happenings; in this fast-paced and hyper-cosmopolitan metropolis, such affectations, even if not completely conscious, do not go unnoticed. And of course one's skin colour, in this very obviously racially divided nation, is most certainly an asset in such situations.

The recent hiring of the daughter of the governor of São Paulo state as a saleswoman at a luxury retail outlet in the city is perhaps a particularly illustrative example of the fallout of this phenomenon. Daslu, a four-storey, neo-classical behemoth of a department store,<sup>4</sup> sells everything from US\$ 5,000 Chanel designer jackets to US\$ 200,000 Lamborghini sports cars, and even helicopters. In fact, during the first day of the grand opening of the store in 2005, the only clients accepted were those who arrived by helicopter on the store's two rooftop helipads. The stylishly dressed models-cum-salesgirls, called *dasluzetes*, often hail from the same class as the shoppers, making impressive salaries and calling upon their lower-class assistants in black-and-white French maid outfits to bring out clothes from the stockrooms, and champagne or espresso for clients.

Back in the airport, I ponder this American Airlines employee's impressive English language skills, her light skin, her confident and curious demeanour, her well-placed scarf and shiny company-logo lapel pin. It was almost as if she had been harvested from the ranks of the young, educated Brazilian middle class to be packaged and repackaged daily in that crisply starched outfit behind this ticket counter.

If her current station in life was a sore spot, she definitely didn't show it. Smiling and cheery on that rainy São Paulo morning, she explained to me that maybe someday she'd like to return to USP for more schooling, maybe a master's degree like the one I'm pursuing. As the harried staff continued to run about behind her, and as the line behind me grew longer, our conversation came to a cordial close; she folded up my passport, stapled my tickets together, dispatched my bags and sent me to the departure gate.



The third Brazilian I met was Marcelo, transferring from a flight coming in from Miami and on his way to Porto Alegre, one of the wealthier, more European-blooded cities in the far south of Brazil. I met him at the gate while waiting for my flight. We exchanged brief

words related to whether a particular one of the well-worn, black-leather-and-steel chairs was occupied. Again, just from hearing me talk, he struck up a conversation that went on for about 45 minutes, asking about me, my life, why I came to Brazil, sociology, California, everything. It was almost the reverse of the conversation I had with Selma, lasting ten minutes or so before he ran out of obvious questions and I was able to get in my first question about him.

Marcelo is an attaché to a Supreme Court justice in Brasilia, and it sounded as if he'd just been promoted to federal district attorney or something equivalent. He graduated from the University of Brasilia (a good one) in law, worked a few years as a public defender, did a master's degree in Comparative Law at the University of Miami, and then somehow ended up with his present job. Based on what I know about government salaries at his level, I'd guess that he makes about two to five times more than I do with my scholarship stipend of US\$ 1000 per month. Either way, considering that he can afford to take a week-long vacation to Miami to visit friends, he can't be doing badly.

We discussed politics, law, the new Supreme Court justice in the US, the possibility of *Roe v. Wade* being overturned, the World Social Forum, Brasilia, São Paulo, San Francisco, Berkeley, Bush, Lula, government corruption, and a bunch of other stuff. Neat guy. We exchanged email addresses; I got my plane; he got his, and now here I am on the flight, where passengers are politely asked to only use the restrooms that correspond to their "class". I wonder for a moment what the first-class-only restrooms might be like. I ponder a poker-faced stroll through the first-class cabin and into the forbidden toilet, but quickly desist. Such acts of civil disobedience are not taken lightly in these troubled times. "For the convenience of Brazilian passengers, there is one flight attendant who speaks Portuguese aboard the aircraft", they announce. And now, homeward bound, my little blue passport doesn't make me so special anymore...

## NOTES

1. The "reproduction of labour-power" is the effort that a person must undertake to ensure that they can continue to prepare their body (and the bodies of future generations of workers), day after day, to furnish the commodity of labour-power, which they in turn sell on the market to their employer under capitalism. *Capital*, Vol. 1. In (ed.) Robert C. Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader* (Norton, 1972, New York).
2. (Eds.) André Campos et al. *Atlas da Exclusão Social no Brasil*, Vol. 2 (Cortez Editora, 2004).
3. Pierre Bourdieu. "The Forms of Capital". In (ed.) J.G. Richardson, *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (Greenwood, 1985, New York), pp. 241-58.
4. Todd Benson. "An Oasis of Indulgence amid Brazil's Poverty". In *The New York Times*, 16 July 2005.

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