

**Portuguese Gaúchos:  
Socio-political transnationalism, integration  
and identities in the River Plate Region**  
***Portugueses Gaúchos:  
Transnacionalismo socio-político, integração e  
identidades dos portugueses no Rio da Prata***

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**Abstract** Through the analysis of interviews to Portuguese emigrants and their descents in the so-called River Plate region, this article explores the relations between integration and participation in associations/organizations of emigrants, and how these relations intertwined with collective identities in the host society. We explore the role of immigrant associations in the construction and reinforcement of Portuguese national symbols, references and identities and as facilitators of integration into the host societies. We contend that the activation of identities from the country of origin does not have ethnicizing effect; on the contrary, it works as an effective resource for integration through the promotion of open social networks.

**Keywords** Portuguese emigration, emigrants' associations, ethnicization, integration, River Plate region

**Resumo** Através da análise de entrevistas com emigrantes portugueses e os seus descendentes na região platina, o artigo explora as relações entre integração e participação em associações de emigrantes, e como elas se inter-relacionam com a identidade colectiva na sociedade de recepção. Examinamos o papel das associações de emigrantes na construção e reforço dos símbolos, referências e identidades nacionais, e como simultaneamente facilitam a integração. Sugerimos que a activação de identidades do país de origem não tem efeitos etnicizantes; pelo contrário, funciona como recurso efectivo da integração, promovendo as redes sociais abertas.

**Palavras-chave** emigração portuguesa, associação de emigrantes, etnicização, integração, região platina.

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**Resumen** Analizando entrevistas con emigrantes portugueses y sus descendientes en la región platina, este artículo explora las relaciones entre la integración y la participación en asociaciones de emigrantes, y cómo estas relaciones se interrelacionan con la identidad colectiva en la sociedad de recepción. Examinamos el papel de las asociaciones de emigrantes en la construcción y refuerzo de los símbolos, referencias e identidades nacionales, y simultáneamente cómo facilitan la integración. Sugerimos que la activación de identidades del país de origen no tiene efectos etnicizantes, por el contrario, funciona como un recurso efectivo de integración, promoviendo redes sociales abiertas.

**Palabras claves** emigración portuguesa, asociación de emigrantes, etnicización, integración, región platina

# **Portuguese Gaúchos: Socio-political transnationalism, integration and identities in the River Plate Region**

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## **Introduction**

This article<sup>1</sup> studies the connection between integration processes, immigrant associations and collective identities in migratory contexts. Through the analysis of several Portuguese migrant associations in the River Plate region, we explore how the different trajectories and experiences of Portuguese associations relate to strategies of social integration of the Portuguese in host societies.

Despite the large amount of research done on ethnic associations, there is little scholarly work about the Portuguese experiences in this region (Carreiras, Malamud, Padilla, Xavier and Bussola, 2007). Drawing on institutional and personal interviews carried out during 2005-2006, we investigate the role of immigrant associations in both the construction and reinforcement of Portuguese identities (ethnicization) and the process of integration into the host societies.

## **Migrations, Immigrant associations and identity**

### *Collective identities and integration processes in migratory contexts*

Let us start by clarifying key terms that have been subject of contested uses. In the case of collective identity, the “concept is grounded in classic sociological constructs: Durkheim’s “collective conscience”, Marx’s “class consciousness”, Weber’s *verstehen*, and Tonnies’ *gemeinschaft* (Cerulo, 1997: 386). One important aspect to highlight is the relational and contextual character of collective identity, defined as a process of symbolic construction over time, socially produced and organized in reference to certain collective entities, implying both negotiation and contestation (Sanchez Gibau, 2005). This construction is the result of two intertwined dimensions: identification, to include social actors into wider groups, and differentiation, to establish distance with others (Pinto, 1991). Therefore, the construction of social, cultural and ethnic identities implies the existence of referential ‘others’, and an articulation of belonging and recognition.

When identity construction takes place abroad, the concept of diaspora becomes handy, as it “is constituted by shared memories and common attributes (which) are likely, with the passage of time, to fade and assimilate as it adapts to its diverse environments” (Lever-Tracy, 2000: 5).

The construction of collective identities refers to different dimensions (common characteristics by a group of individuals, self-representation as a collective entity and external representation by others as a group). Among these dimensions,

there exist a game of power relations that shapes the process and final output of identity building (Costa, 2000). The literature on these issues has focused on some loaded concepts: assimilation (initially used to identify a linear and unproblematic incorporation of immigrants into host societies) and concepts such as 'pluralism' or 'ethnic retention' (focusing on the resistance of immigrants to assimilation and the preservation of significant ties to ethnic heritage). Assimilationist perspectives have derived into a diversity of versions, from the so-called straight line or *bumpy line assimilation* (Guns, 1992) to the idea of *segmented assimilation* (Portes and Zhou, 1993; Zhou, 1997). Other trends have incorporated ethnicity from an immutable to a situational and instrumental conception of ethnic groups (Geertz, 1993; Isaacs, 1975) and a relational perspective on "invented ethnicity" (Conzen *et al.*, 1990; Sollors, 1989), explaining the resurgence of old ethnicities. These two positions used to be seen as dichotomously opposed, but nowadays conciliation has been possible as integration combines both *assimilation and ethnicization* (Pires, 2003). Hence, assimilation does not mean mere adaptation and implies hybridization (Alba and Nee, 1997).

Identity building associated to *ethnicization* depends more on the reactions of the host societies than on the memories that immigrants bring with them (Smith, 1986). Machado (2002) understands ethnicity as referring to processes more than to particular groups, defining the space of ethnicity as built around contrasts/disruptions and continuities of minorities with regards to the wider society. This approach highlights two analytical dimensions: social (class, demographic composition and place of residence) and cultural (sociability, religion and language). For each ethnic group, different combinations can be identified and both ethnicization and assimilation are feasible to take place. In this case, being/feeling Portuguese need not be opposed to being/feeling Argentinean, Uruguayan or Brazilian – in the figurative sense, gaucho. Pires (2003) identifies three sets of factors that explain different integration modalities: migration flows, state policies and social reactions towards immigrants.

### **Migratory waves and social integration in the Southern Cone**

The presence of Portuguese immigrants in the River Plate region at the beginning of the twenty-first century comprises both the characteristics of the social-historical processes that fuelled migration flows from Portugal and the processes of integration of these immigrants in the host societies. Notwithstanding many commonalities, differences across the studied countries/regions emerge concerning the dimension, organization and rhythms of the flows, the effects of migration policies, and the social-demographic characteristics of the immigrants and their families.

Data collected during fieldwork in 2005 and 2006 (Portuguese Consulates and Census data) pointed to the existence of some 12.000 Portuguese in Argentina, 1.100 in Uruguay and 700.000 in Brazil, of which 210.000 were born in Portugal. Still, in the southern states of Brazil the Portuguese are a minority: only about 9,000 (4% of the total) lived in Paraná, Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul. The intensification of the Portuguese emigration to the three countries took place in the first decades of the

twentieth century, following significant transformations in the social structure both at home and in the host societies (Table 1).

**Table 1 – Portuguese emigration to Brazil and Argentina**

Years	Argentina	Brazil
1900s	7.633	229.348
1910s	17.570	293.793
1920s	23.406	233.655
1930s	10.310	85.690
1940s	4.230	60.700
1950s	12.033	237.327

Sources: for Argentina, Borges (1997); for Brazil, Garcia (2000).

Explanatory elements of the flows were the type of migratory policies adopted on both sides of the Atlantic. In Portugal, while a formal restrictive legal framework was in place, in practice, it existed a high degree of tolerance that enabled the continuity of flows until the mid-twentieth century (Rocha-Trindade, 2001). The magnitude of the flows depended on the incentives offered by the countries of destination. In Latin America, Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay held permissive and liberal policies until the 1930s with some differences; while in the Brazil subsidized programs explain a part of the new arrivals, in Argentina the increase was due to high and competitive salaries (Devoto, 2003).

Nowadays, Portuguese immigrants and their descent have progressively incorporated into the host societies; however, there is still a noticeable feature of the Portuguese presence in the River Plate region: the persistence of a lively associative dynamic. In 2006, the archives of the *Direcção Geral dos Assuntos Consulares e Comunidades Portuguesas* (DGACCP) registered fifty-two associations of Portuguese or Luso-descendants: sixteen in Buenos Aires city and Buenos Aires province, two in Uruguay and thirty-six in the three southern states of Brazil. Since 1988, the Portuguese communities of Argentina, Uruguay and Rio Grande do Sul annually organize the *Encontros das Comunidades Portuguesas e Luso-Descendentes do Cone-Sul*, that foster the debate on “common problems, strengthening the relations and exchange among the associative movements in the three countries” (webpage of the DGACCP).

We now turn to the associational life of the Portuguese immigrants and their descendents, highlighting its main features and dynamics. The empirical analysis does not follow a uniform pattern: in some cases, we lay emphasis on the connection between current and historical dynamics; in others, we privilege the institutional structure and relationships.

## Argentina: associations and integration in Greater Buenos Aires

According to Devoto (2003), the history of migration to Argentina is divided into three phases: early, mass and contemporary. The Portuguese, in variable proportions, were present in all three, but their magnitude was much higher during the first decades of the twentieth century and after the Second World War (Table 1). Devoto suggested that the migratory wave from Europe towards Argentina in the second post-war period limited itself to “an intense but short episode between 1947 and 1951” (2003: 408), but it did not stop afterwards.

Most of the Portuguese living in Argentina came from the regions of Algarve and Guarda, representing 60% of the arrivals. Castelo Branco, Viseu, Braga and Leiria contributed 5% each (Borges, 2000). The Portuguese settled mainly in Buenos Aires city and province and in Comodoro Rivadavia, in Patagonia, where the discovery of oil generated job opportunities.

The Portuguese presence in Argentina is relatively small and enjoys low visibility. In the early twentieth century, a close link between Southern Portugal (Algarve) and Argentina was established, starting a “migration system” based on social networks. What calls one’s attention is that the creation of some Portuguese associations took place in the late 1970 onwards, when Argentina had long ceased to receive Portuguese migration.

Two of the largest Portuguese associations in Greater Buenos Aires are the *Club Portugués de Esteban Echeverría* and the *Casa de Portugal Nuestra Señora de Fátima* (Villa Elisa, La Plata). The former is located in a neighbourhood at 30 kilometers south of Buenos Aires city. It was founded in 1978 by northern Portuguese (*minhotos*). Many of those who serve as board members are small firms’ owners, connected to the construction sector. The trajectories of the interviewees and their families allowed us to understand why the post-war migratory wave extended for some time: they were part of migration chains that brought the bread-winners in the first stage, who later requested family reunification. This process could take up to 15 years: the first comers arrived in the immediate post-war period (1946-51) while their families kept arriving until the mid-1960s.

*Casa de Portugal Nuestra Señora de Fátima* was established in 1981 by Portuguese residents of Villa Elisa (35 km southeast of Buenos Aires city), most of them natives of Algarve who worked on flower farming and horticulture activities. The founders are still in charge of the association, one of the most active in Argentina. Family trajectories of the interviewees show similarities with the previous case. Drawing on these data, it is possible to advance a three-fold periodization of post-war Portuguese emigration to Argentina: arrival of males (after the end of the war), family reunification and draft evasion (1953-1963), and the very limited last drops (from 1964 onwards).

The Portuguese that arrived to Buenos Aires joined networks previously established. As a consequence, most of them did not use their qualifications in the job market, but worked in the existing niches created by the elder Portuguese: brick ovens and flower

fields. In the more successful cases, progress was achieved within the same activity, expanding vertically to all stages, from production to commercialization.

*When I arrived, (...) I worked with those who called us. (...) In Portugal I worked as a carpenter, so when I arrived here I began to work as a flower producer along with my brothers. (...) afterwards I went into gross selling in the Central Market. As a producer, I sell my own flowers but I'm also an intermediary for other flower producers (Analido M. A., Villa Elisa).*

Even though in the 1970s Argentina was no longer promising for potential migrants, it was still attractive for those who settled there. Some of the interviewees had gone back to visit Portugal during the 1970s and 1980s but decided to stay in Argentina, where they had a good economic position and where currency overvaluation favoured them.

The Portuguese associations of Greater Buenos Aires were established at a time when Argentina and Portugal shared a similar level of development measured in GDP per capita, the 1980s. This was more than a decade and a half after the migration flows had ended. This can be explained by looking at the integration processes in the host societies. As inferred from the interviews, integration went through three phases. The first of *hard work*, from 1950 to 1978 when upward mobility was attained (immigrants concentrated production and commercialization). The second phase of *consolidation* (the decision to stay for good is made), from the late 1970s to 2001, and associations are created by those who are better off. The third phase of *reverted relation*, is set off by the 2001 economic collapse (becoming obvious that Portugal's quality of life surpasses Argentina) and second thoughts about returning home grow among the least successful members of the community (however, actual return was rare).

Associations were established during the consolidation phase driven mainly by economic reasons, as the bonanza due to currency appreciation gave them a good position, but other reasons were also instrumental. The clubs developed 'internal' functions by providing members with a space for socialization, outdoor activities and sports, also offering an effective tool for social integration during the difficult times of the dictatorial regime when organizing was under surveillance. If up to the 1970s members were dedicated to work, after 1978, the clubs allowed for society recognition. They could pass as a model minority: hard working (white) people, socially and economically successful. This ideal situation allowed them to continue to be Portuguese abroad, which is different from being so in Portugal, and thus legitimizing different ways of assuming a Portuguese identity. The latter was reinforced by the sacrifice of migration and hard work, and the pride of honorably representing Portugal abroad. This type of discourse is reflected in their narratives.

*A: I always say that we carry the best part of the Portuguese community all over the world. We carry the Portuguese culture to our host countries... We work a lot trying our Portugal to be well [regarded]...*

*Q: What is the image of the Portuguese people here in Argentina?*

*A: It is very good. The Portuguese image is excellent, because we are a community that hasn't caused trouble. The Portuguese, we are working people. I mean the people who came*

*in that time; today's migration is different, the Portuguese are also different.* (Analido M. A, Villa Elisa).

Although the clubs were founded by immigrants who used local networks (of origin) upon arrival, the associations has privileged the national Portuguese identity

### **Southern Brazil: Power asymmetries and the Azorean identity**

Between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Brazilian government developed two policies to attract European immigration: the first one was state-driven and aimed at populating distant and vacant territories; the subsequent one was market-driven, though public funds were made available to support travelling, accommodation and working credits, and sought to develop a white/European workforce in the wake of abolition (Padilla, 2004; Fiori, 2006). In the southern region, the former prevailed.

Even if Brazil has historically been a key destination for the Portuguese emigration, the same is not true for its southern states. When massive immigration arrived, other European groups settled. This fact is crucial for understanding the history of the Portuguese associations in Southern Brazil and their current condition.

From an early stage, Portuguese emigrants organized themselves through creating immigrant associations, charities and mutual organizations, in general, congregating around very affluent and successful members. This was common in several Brazilian regions. Yet, the reality of the southern states was different as other European communities settled with the assistance of local policies (Germans, Italians, Poles, and Ukrainians among others). So, as in the rest of the River Plate region, the Portuguese formed a small and less visible community. According to the *Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística* (IBGE), 1912 registered the highest numbers of Portuguese arriving in Rio Grande do Sul: 373. According to the 2000 census only 8% of the Portuguese residing in Brazil lived in its southern region. Padilla (2005) pinpointed three factors that explain the invisibility of Portuguese migration in the Southern States: a) Brazil's need to build its own national identity after independence (1822) when tensions existed between Brazilians and native Portuguese (Bieber, 1998; Valença, 1999), b) Portuguese emigration was not numerically significant if compared with other European communities and somehow they were not defined as desirable "good European racial stock" (Bak, 2000) and c) the Portuguese benefited little of state-promoted migration (if compared with other groups), as their migration was more entrepreneurial, independent and adventurous, more disperse geographically and less organized (Klein, 1991).

It is in this context that the cases of *Casa de Portugal* and *Instituto Cultural Português* are presented, to show how ethnicity was built in relation to other groups. As Vertovec stated, "much success in building positive relations can arise with the recognition that individuals each belong to multiple group identities at different levels of inclusiveness" (2007: 31).

In Rio Grande do Sul, the Portuguese claim their identity in relation to and amongst other national communities. Threatened by the negative image associated to the colonizer and by the stronger and well appreciated presence of other ethnic communities, the Portuguese reacted with the purpose of achieving recognition among them. To this end, identity resources were triggered to achieve visibility and protagonism through the (positive) distinction of the Azorean element in the history of the state and in the gaucho identity (in the eighteenth century, sixty Azorean couples were brought to settle in the territory). This process was much later strengthened by policies developed by the Azorean government towards its diaspora. The Azoreans were depicted as settlers that came to stay, as opposed to the Portuguese who were seen as conquerors and colonizers.

The *Instituto Cultural Português* (ICP) was founded in 1979, after the extinction of the *Gabinete Português de Leitura de Porto Alegre* led António Soares, a Camões Institute's reader, to look for alternative means to promote the Portuguese culture and underscore the Azorean influence in the gaucho identity. Remarkably, at the entrance of the ICP there is an Azorean flag and the picture of the Azorean governor. The Institute offers courses and seminars, has issued several publications and organized the commemoration for the 50 years of Fernando Pessoa's death. It also broadcasts a radio program, "Portuguese presence," being more recognized for its cultural and exchange activities than for its membership.

In 2002, the ICP achieved higher visibility when Santa Inèze Rocha, Soares's Brazilian wife, co-organized with the state government the official celebrations of the 250 years of the Azorean settling (1752-2002). Later, she edited the book "Açorianos no Rio Grande do Sul," highlighting the fact that the Azoreans arrived 72 years before the Germans and 123 years before the Italians, and underlining the vast Azorean influence on the *gaucho* costumes and traditions. António Soares, founder of ICP, contends that:

*The Portuguese Cultural Institute keeps the cultural spark alive; the Casa de Portugal does very little (in that realm). There are no other associations that keep our culture alive. The Casa de Portugal, once in a while, organizes some events but not with that objective.*

The contemporary presence of the Azorean narrative in the cultural life of Rio Grande do Sul can be explained by many factors: first, the need by the associations to legitimate their status in competition with other national references; second, the interest of some scholars, especially historians, to gain recognition within a promising niche, last but not least, the role that the Regional Government of Azores has played investing in outreach projects such as *Discovering the roots*.

Unlike the culturally oriented ICP, the Casa de Portugal in Porto Alegre is a typical immigrant association, founded by initiative of the consul Antonio Rodrigues in 1934. It currently has about 1.000 members, but about 400 pay their dues. The association is located downtown in an underutilized building with office space, a library, a large ballroom (rented for celebrations) and a restaurant. In addition, it has another facility in the country side, dedicated to sports and recreational activities as a way to hold on the youngsters. According to testimonies, the Casa was central to the life of the Por-

tuguese in the 1960s and 1970s, when it assisted newcomers facilitating information, jobs, housing, financial resources, and contacts. Its visibility and centrality diminished afterwards, enjoying today less social recognition. However, it participates in the *Encontros das Comunidades Portuguesas e Luso-Descendentes do Cone-Sul*.

Contrasting with the ICP, whose leaders never referred lack of support from the Azorean government, the Casa de Portugal complaint about the neglect of the Portuguese government in comparison with what other groups (Spaniards, German and Italians) received from their states of origin. While both institutions claim the Portuguese identity in their names, the ICP makes recourse to the Azorean identity and to cultural issues to distinguish itself from Casa, which is a rather traditional organization usually associated with class issues.

### **Uruguay: From historical heritage to the contemporary reconstruction of the Portuguese identity**

In Uruguay, most of the Portuguese and their descendants settled in the area of Montevideo. However, there is a group in Salto, a city 600 kilometers north by the Uruguay River. There are about 1.100 Portuguese registered with the Consulate, but information provided by representatives of the associations points to a community (nationals and Luso-descendants) of 5,000 to 10,000.

While in Montevideo it is still possible to find immigrants that came around the post-war period, in Salto those who claim a Portuguese heritage are descendants of immigrants that arrived at the beginning of the twentieth century or before. They can no longer obtain the Portuguese nationality or speak Portuguese. Migration to Uruguay mobilized poor rural workers from northern Portugal, especially the regions of Minho, Douro Litoral and Trás-os-Montes, recruited through local networks. Apart from a few cases of successful businesspeople, the Montevideo community is mostly composed of small farmers. Likewise, in Salto the majority are farmers or small entrepreneurs (citrus and vegetables).

Both cities have a Portuguese association (the only two in Uruguay), the *Casa de Portugal de Montevideo* and the *Casa de Portugal de Salto*. The former is more active, institutionalized and has a defined associative dynamics. In both cases, the difficulty to attract younger generations is the outmost concern of their leadership.

In Montevideo, Portuguese associations and benefit societies date as far back as the XIX century. The *Real Sociedade Portuguesa de Beneficência* (1888) and the *Sociedade Portuguesa de Beneficência e Socorros Mutuos Dona Maria Pia* were two traditional institutions that merged in 1912. Later on, the *Centro Social Português* was created to embody the interest of those who opposed the *Estado Novo regime*. However, during the 1970s economic difficulties forced both institutions to merge after complicated negotiations that ended in 1983 with the creation of the *Casa de Portugal de Montevideo*.

The *Casa*'s organizes cultural, recreational and social activities character. In 2006 it lined up 500 members, mostly women and elders who are either Portuguese or their descendants, but it also congregates some members of other origins. In addition to the national celebrations, it broadcasts a weekly radio program in Spanish "Voz Lusitana", with community news and information and music from Portugal.

The *Casa* also has an active folkloric group of about 50 people of Portuguese and non-Portuguese origin, illustrating the syncretism of the association. The *rancho* is proudly perceived as one of the main activities because it fosters Portuguese identity as while at the same time creates a healthy, nice and friendly environment for the youth, keeping them away from drugs and alcohol. The folklore group is seen as the incarnation of the true national history of Uruguay, so besides performing typical dances of the Portuguese, they also perform dances that evoke the earlier Portuguese presence in the region.

Financially, the *Casa* depends on occasional support from institutions such as the Gulbenkian Foundation and the *Secretaria de Estado das Comunidades Portuguesas*. However, private donors constitute its main source. The *Casa* has leaned in many aspects (building acquisition & enlargement) on the contributions of affluent citizens whose presence is highlighted to combat the stereotypes about the early Portuguese immigrants, portrayed as illiterate, rude and unsophisticated. Since 1988, the participation of the association in the annual *Encontros das Comunidades Portuguesas e Luso-Descendentes do Cone-Sul* has been presented as a salient activity. The identity portrayed is of a 'mixed' identity, produced and sustained in the absence of particular tensions either between national symbolic references or with regard to other ethnic groups.

In Salto, the *Casa de Portugal* is the successor of an ancient mutual aid society, the *Sociedade Portuguesa de Beneficencia* created in 1882. This organization was initially founded to provide social support, mainly medical care and funeral service, but entered a lethargic period after 1956. More than underlining continuity, the reference to this first association aims at setting the historical foundation of a Portuguese identity as much as the Luso-brazilian origins of Salto (Pintos, 1968). The present association was born in the early twenty-first century, out of the convergence of external support from the *Casa de Portugal de Montevideo* and the voluntarism of a few Portuguese descendants in Salto. The group is composed of around 250 people, mainly over 60 years of age, who meet informally as they do not have a headquarter. The majority of their ancestors came from villages in the area of Porto.

The goals are the reunion of the Portuguese and their descendants through recreational and cultural activities. One of its central purposes is to build up and manage the Portuguese mausoleum in the local cemetery, which is not only motive of collective pride but also the main reason to actively enlarge their membership. The instrumental nature of this motivation is criticized, albeit in a complacent manner, by the current leadership, who oppose such attitude. For many of the interviewees, Portugal became progressively a distant reality, although symbolically strong, due to the weakening of ties and communication with the family. In the words of Carlos Teixeira:

*Here, immigrant associations were never strong because Uruguay is a very open country. So... between the Uruguayan and the foreigner there is no difference.*

However, when Portuguese associative dynamics are compared with those of other national origins, differences are sometimes underlined as relating to the varying social and economic status of migrants:

*R: These human groups gathered around two very important things in life: health and death. That explains the mausoleum and the mutual aid societies. So, there is an Italian association which still has a big mausoleum, its activities and premises. The French society had it but does not any longer; they became too integrated...*

*P: ¿More than the Portuguese?*

*R: The Portuguese integrated fine, but maybe not so much as the French because the French did not go to the chacra (...) What I mean is... maybe the resources the French had allowed them other type of things (...) People who came with their possessions and wealth... Not as the Portuguese. These people came very humble... (Juan Manuel A., Salto).*

This disagreement does not prevent the descendants from feeling Portuguese even without speaking the language or having ever been to Portugal. It is remarkable the level of material and emotional involvement of the community in the association's initiatives. For example the naming of a rural school in a formerly 'Portuguese' area in the surroundings of Salto as *Escola de Portugal*, in 2005, may be considered paradigmatic. The authorization for the renaming of the school was a long and bureaucratic process that involved local and national authorities and liaisons. It was a process of identity building led by the school teacher who carried out surveys to parents and students, collected data and documents on the Portuguese presence in the area as well as photos and family stories, to culminate in an emotional inauguration ceremony, in which Portuguese elements had to be created. The case of Salto shows how associative dynamics may foster the mobilization of an ethnic collective identity, but it also highlights the paradoxes involved in such reconstruction with little tangible connections to the origin.

## **Debate and conclusions**

The analysis of immigrant associations in the River Plate region illustrates the tensions between *ethnicization* and *assimilation* as modalities of integration used by ethnic associations in the host societies. The facts presented are consistent with the idea that the mobilization of cultural frames and identity markers from the country of origin through associational practices does not necessarily promote *ethnicization*, as its purpose is not to establish contrasts or distance. It rather serves as a resource for integration through the promotion of open social networks instead of isolation or closure within the original communities. A reason for this is found in the interaction between the three dimensions described above: the characteristics of the flows, the immigration policies, and the context of reception in the host society.

From an historical perspective, *ethnicization* would have been expected due to the importance of informal anchorage of migratory networks. However, these networks, that

were fundamental during the arrival period, slowly lost relevance due to three factors: 1) the discontinuation of the flows, 2) the re-conceptualization of the individual migration/life projects from temporary to definitive, and 3) the generalized upward mobility into the middle-class of many Portuguese immigrants, even if less resourceful than other communities.

As noted, immigration policies have been liberal and non-restrictive in the cases of Argentina and Uruguay. Even in Brazil, where restrictions and a more selective immigration policy were adopted, the Portuguese usually escaped such limitations and received a more favorable treatment, both formally and informally. These conditions probably inhibited 'communitarian' integration strategies, which is visible in the nature of the associations. None of the organizations studied was constructed as an interest intermediation organization, nor pretended to represent the immigrants within the new societies. On the contrary, they avoided the politicization of their activities. This is also true in southern Brazil, even if an intense identity politics can be found at work there. In general, the associations mostly perform 'internal' functions of an expressive rather than political nature. Understandably, during the peaks of immigrants' organizing authoritarian regimes were prevalent both in Portugal and Brazil, so politicization was inconvenient if the associations were to gain adeptes.

As to social reactions in the host societies, the dominant pattern has been the absence of negative or stigmatizing processes vis-à-vis the Portuguese. Having said this, it should be noted that in Rio Grande do Sul the Portuguese have simultaneously nurtured their identity in relation to the national identity (Brazilians), the local identity (*Gaúcho*) and to other ethnic communities of European origin. They needed to construct positive identities within the constraints imposed by the negative image associated to the colonizer and the strong presence of other immigrant communities. Thus, they picked the positive features of the Azorean element already present in the history of the state of Rio Grande do Sul and mixed it with the gaucho's identity. This selective identity building was fostered and 'legitimized' through policies developed by the Azorean government, especially for the ICP.

In spite of the existence of hierarchies and asymmetries among the ethnic groups in the River Plate region, our interviews with Portuguese immigrants and their descents showed that the Portuguese do not feel discriminated. In all three national contexts, they stressed the openness of the host societies and friendly environment found upon arrival. In addition, their self-image as honest and working people – a powerful symbolic construction in the three countries – fits the image that the host societies attributed to them. This coincidence between self-identity and attributed identity gives stability to the collective referential of the Portuguese in the region, and has fostered a positive identification. In consequence, the mechanism of 'social reaction' and the expected hostility of host societies have not materialized. In the River Plate region, the social contexts of reception allowed for a smooth Portuguese integration, facilitating the constitution of open associations. Even when power hierarchies existed vis-à-vis other ethnic groups, as in the case of southern Brazil, they did not produce discrimination that fostered defensive, *ethnicizing* reactions among the Portuguese.

In brief, “belonging to Portugal” and fostering Portuguese identities through migrant associations have facilitated integration into the host societies rather than differentiation.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article stems from a research project funded by the Programa Lusitânia (FCT, GRICES and Instituto Camões). Empirical data was collected through surveys and interviews conducted with Portuguese associations in the region during fieldwork (January 2005/2007). We are grateful to Marcelo Borges, to Fátima Carreiras for research assistance. Diego Bussola acknowledges the FCT for funding his doctoral grant. A different version of this article was published in the *Portuguese Studies Review*, Vol. 14, N.º 2 (Winter 2006/7) published in 2009.

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