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# (IM)MOBILITIES OF BRAZILIAN JIU-JITSU COACHES FROM RIO DE JANEIRO'S PERIPHERY

Text: *Raphael Schapira*

**Keywords:** *social inequality, mobilities, Rio de Janeiro, Brazilian jiu-jitsu, martial arts*

While getting ready for training at a martial arts club in Rio de Janeiro, my coach tells me: «You know, at the headquarter they are now going to send athletes and coaches to the US.» We had talked a lot about Brazilian jiu-jitsu (BJJ) athletes trying to find employment outside of Brazil, but I was surprised to hear of his team's professionalization. Usually, members from his team had to organize everything for themselves if they wanted to work abroad. «The *Mestre*<sup>1</sup> just got back from the US and tonight he will explain [to his black belts] his plans. If you want, I can ask him if you can join us», my coach continued. Of course I wanted. This was my chance to observe firsthand the expansion of a BJJ team from Rio de Janeiro's northern periphery to the United States. In the evening I joined my coach and his gym associate on their way to the headquarter in the North Zone of Rio de Janeiro.

Taking an Uber taxi, we had time on our way to talk about the intricacies of living in Rio de Janeiro which usually means talking about everyday violence. My coach's gym associate told the story of how his motorcycle had been recently stolen and how he had managed to get it back. Wanting to refuel he had stopped at a gas station when he was assaulted at gunpoint. Although an expert in several martial art styles he stayed calm handing his keys over without resistance. This had been a wise choice: The robber left together with a car with armed men; a hit team for the case of encountering resistance. Later, the associate was able to locate his motorcycle. It had passed into

the possession of a local drug lord who he could convince to re-sell it to him – the righteous owner. Upon arriving at the headquarter my coach and his partner summarized the lessons learned from this story in three points: First, even if you are the best martial artist in the world, never resist an armed assault if it is not a question of life and death. Second, if you know your way around, you will get your things back. And third, Rio de Janeiro «'ta foda» – Rio de Janeiro «'s messed-up.»

## Martial arts mobilities

After this story, I interpreted my interlocutors' interest in the *Mestre*'s plan to establish a second headquarter as fueled by their experience of Rio de Janeiro's everyday violence and a perceived inversion of social norms. I began seeing this situation as the backdrop against which to understand my interlocutor's imaginaries of BJJ related mobilities. Their mobility imaginaries – understood as the «socially shared schemas of cultural interpretations about migratory movements» (Salaazar 2010: 56) – depict other countries, especially the United States, the United Arab Emirates, and Europe as places where to have a good life through Brazilian jiu-jitsu.

While the transnational circulation of athletes, especially young men, from the Global South to the Global North has been the object of anthropological scrutiny

<sup>1</sup> Title given to a 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> dan black belt.

(Besnier 2012), little is known of the contemporary transnational circulation of martial arts teachers from the Global South to the Global North. The few books treating this topic (e.g., Delamont et al. 2017 on capoeira in the United Kingdom) do not touch explicitly upon the migration infrastructures (Xiang and Lindquist 2014) which enable and condition mobility. In this article I aim to understand the current mobilities of BJJ coaches pertaining to the Fadda lineage from Rio de Janeiro's North Zone on the basis of the mechanisms in place allowing for certain types of mobilities while inhibiting others – by mobility scholars understood as «regimes of mobility» (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013) – which have disfavored regulated migration of athletes lacking the institutional, educational, or financial resources to navigate the regulations of migrant-sending and migrant-receiving countries.

The mobility of BJJ coaches from Rio de Janeiro's peripheral North Zone emerged as a research topic during my fieldwork because of its recurrent mention by my interlocutors. Despite the topic's popularity, I heard many stories about unrealized plans and began, therefore, to pay attention to the mobility as well as the immobility of BJJ coaches and the discourse surrounding this topic. What called my attention was the way in which athletes from the Fadda lineage (a lineage in martial arts denotes all the students who come after a grandmaster) referred to Rio de Janeiro's social topography to explain their difficulties in becoming internationally known athletes or in finding employment abroad. An athlete summarized the problem after a BJJ seminar by saying: «For us from the North Zone it is always more difficult!», referring to the class differences between BJJ practitioners from Rio's rich South Zone identified with the Gracie lineage and from the working-class North Zone identified with the Fadda lineage.

In the following section, I trace these differences to the history of the Gracie and the Fadda lineage and their respective class identity as they relate to the South and the North Zone. I am using Rio de Janeiro's social topography, as emblemized by the upper-class South Zone Gracies and the working-class North Zone Faddas, as the background against which I discuss my three case studies presented thereafter. Using a successful, planned, and an unrealized migration to exemplify three different forms of BJJ related migration – self-organized, team-organized, and state-organized – I aim to show that although excluding mechanisms related to different forms of capital in the Bordieuan sense are alive and are keeping BJJ athletes from the North Zone from migrating, new strategies are breaking with this scheme.

## The Gracie-Fadda divide

The first event of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) took place in 1993 in the United States of America and pitted fighters of different martial art styles against each other to determine which one was the best. By winning three of the first four tournaments the Brazilian jiu-jitsu representative Royce Gracie propelled a formerly little-known and geographically confined martial art into a globally popular sport, creating a new demand for Brazilian jiu-jitsu teachers outside of Brazil. Since then, the demand for BJJ teachers has been mostly met by representatives from the Gracie lineage. Especially outside of Brazil this resulted in the general equation of Brazilian jiu-jitsu with the Gracie family. Their ability to dominate the sport was so strong that they were able to give the sport their family name which is why Brazilian jiu-jitsu is also known as Gracie jiu-jitsu. But there have always been Brazilian jiu-jitsu groups in Brazil tracing their lineage to other founders of the sport, like Oswaldo Fadda, only that they never gained the same popularity.

One of the reasons for why the Gracies managed to promote their sport abroad while the Faddas did not can be traced to differences in class habitus. The Gracies originally descended from Scottish gentry but eventually experienced downward social mobility. Intending to re-climb the social ladder they offered their martial art style to an affluent clientele and sought social proximity to the political elite (Cairus 2012). Opening their first academy in Copacabana in Rio de Janeiro's South Zone in the year 1930, the development of Gracie jiu-jitsu paralleled the transformation of Copacabana, Ipanema, and Leblon into a tourist destination for the rich. The city's marketing efforts changed during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century from the Center and its historical monuments to the South Zone, propagating sun and beach as the modern way to spend one's leisure time (O'Donnell 2013). The identification of Gracie jiu-jitsu with the South Zone and its beaches emblemizes the sport's social prestige and has been durable. The TV series «Fight Quest» (Anderson and Smith 2008) introduces Brazilian jiu-jitsu showing the typical Rio de Janeiro beach, bikini and surfing images before switching to all-male Gracie jiu-jitsu fighters practicing on mats with the Ipanema beach in the background. Although never occurring like this in everyday life, this staged scene conveys the stereotypical idea that men can have access to women and a virile, active, and luxurious lifestyle through Brazilian jiu-jitsu fighting.

The Fadda lineage never became as famous as the Gracie lineage but made Brazilian jiu-jitsu accessible for Rio de Janeiro's working-class. It is named after jiu-jitsu grand-

master Oswaldo Fadda, who opened his gym in the district Bento Ribeiro in 1953 and who was equally crucial for Brazilian jiu-jitsu's development as his well-known counterpart Hélio Gracie. Oswaldo Fadda understood his gym as a socially inclusive project, welcoming poor and disabled athletes. Unlike the Gracies' identification with the wealthy South Zone, the members of the Fadda lineage are identified and self-identify with the poorer North and West Zone as the workers' part of town. These areas, symbolically and socially constructed in opposition to the cosmopolitan South Zone (Sampaio Guimarães and Davies 2018), are connected with the city center by a train line which formed part of the urban transformation initiated at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Rio's municipality aiming at settling the lower classes in the workers' suburbs along the railway line (Rio Prefeitura 2004). Since many Fadda academies continue being located next to this train line, one can hear the train rattling outside during training sessions, being reminded by its sound of the initial social distance between the Gracies and the Faddas. The Fadda class identity continues being expressed in anecdotes told by Fadda disciples: The Gracies used to call the Faddas pejoratively «*sapateiros*» (shoemakers) and «*suburbanos*» (suburbians) referring simultaneously to foot locks as the Faddas' preferred technique, the part of town where those techniques were developed, and the Faddas' working-class background.

The Gracies' and the Faddas' different social and cultural capital might explain why it was the Gracies who began globalizing Brazilian jiu-jitsu at the end of the 1980s by emigrating to the United States, although both BJJ schools formed part of a peculiar martial arts culture alive in Rio de Janeiro between the 1960s and 1990s. The Gracies' decisive role in the invention of the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) was the result of this martial arts scene, in which athletes from different disciplines regularly fought each other in so-called *vale tudo* fights – literally meaning «anything goes» (Alonso and Nagao 2014). This martial art and competition system that Rorion Gracie took with him to the United States of America in the 1980s enabled him to work as a fight choreographer in Hollywood in the 1980s for movie stars such as Chuck Norris and Mel Gibson, meeting the demand for martial masculinity in the Reagan area (Cairus 2012). While *vale tudo* continues to be confined to a small community, the UFC has transformed into a multi-billion dollar business being considered one of the most valuable sports brands (Ozanian 2016), expressing and producing current ideas of heroic martial manhood.

## BJJ related (im)mobility

BJJ athletes build their corporeal capital through rigorous training which involves learning specific techniques, sparring against gym colleagues, and participating in competitions. The belt color and the number of medals won, especially those of international competitions, express the value of an athlete since they indicate his technical skills. While all BJJ athletes will acquire this specific corporeal capital as time passes, few can use it to find employment abroad. In Rio de Janeiro many dedicated BJJ students come from socially disadvantaged families for whom sport is one of the few possibilities to acquire symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1978). While those athletes will gain a high degree of corporeal capital through the adoption of a martial arts habitus that enables them to distance themselves from a violent social environment (Wacquant 1998), they will most likely lack basic foreign language skills due to the poor performance of the public school system in this subject. To illustrate these mechanisms, I will present three brief case-studies of BJJ coaches employing different migration strategies. I describe one realized self-organized, one planned team-organized, and one not realized state-organized migration.

## Self-organized migration

José Colombo<sup>2</sup> immigrated to California in February 2018 to teach BJJ. Although he started his BJJ career late in life with 29 years of age, he rose up the belt-ranks quickly by frequently participating in national and international competitions, currently holding a brown-belt. Using the possibility to meet potential employers during international competitions, mainly in the United States and Portugal, he visited local gyms when abroad. His efforts paid off when he was invited to teach at a gym in northern California that did not offer BJJ training before his arrival. He accepted, quit his secure job in his father's company and left Brazil together with his wife, who did not have formal employment at that time, mainly managing her husband's BJJ career.

Even though other BJJ athletes have the same or better technical skills as José, he managed to immigrate to the United States already as a brown-belt because of his excellent English. José already spoke English before his immigration because part of his family lives in the United States where he had spent two years as a teenager. Although José always attended public schools in Rio de Janeiro, he did not

<sup>2</sup> My interlocutors' names have been changed to ensure anonymity.

depend on paying expensive private classes to acquire a sufficient level of English. José is confident of being able to turn his current temporary tourist visa into a permanent working permit for two reasons. He can ask his father's family for advice, who had emigrated from Portugal to Brazil and the United States during the 1970s, and he is still in contact with his BJJ team from Rio de Janeiro, which is currently expanding to the United States employing specialized lawyers to obtain visas for their athletes.

### Team-organized migration

A BJJ team is usually formed by one or several charismatic leaders who stand out by their record as competitors or as coaches having produced top-class athletes. Although anyone can found a team, only the most charismatic leaders will succeed in attracting and maintaining followers around the world. The Grappling Fight Team (GFT), where part of my research took place, is the only top-ranked BJJ team which traces its lineage solely to Oswaldo Fadda. Its identity is rooted in the North Zone of Rio de Janeiro where it has its headquarter and where most of its affiliated gyms are located. GFT continues the Fadda tradition of using BJJ as a form of social inclusion. Its headquarter functions also as a kind of boarding school, hosting promising young athletes and providing them with free housing and BJJ training in exchange for their work as teachers and competitors. These students get prepared for their future career as BJJ coaches abroad through a technical and pedagogical training which is organized internally at GFT's headquarter in Rio de Janeiro.

Until recently, GFT did not play a direct role in sending BJJ teachers abroad and relied on the self-organized emigration of its athletes for its expansion, only providing legitimacy and a network for teachers willing to work abroad. With the opening of a headquarter in the United States in August 2018 GFT is now ready to send Brazilian BJJ coaches from its headquarter in Rio de Janeiro to their new one. GFT is setting in place a structure that involves housing for visiting Brazilian BJJ teachers and specialized lawyers charged with obtaining visas. The idea behind it is to enable Brazilian BJJ coaches like Antunes Machado to gain teaching experience abroad which will allow them to establish their own GFT affiliated academies outside of Brazil. Although Antunes Machado grew up in a shanty town in difficult social circumstances and saw many of his childhood friends get involved with the drug business and eventually die in violent confrontations with the police or rival drug cartels, he managed to open a thriving BJJ gym. Despite his success, he plans to leave Rio de Janeiro, which he perceives as extremely vio-

lent, in three to four years and to open a gym in Portugal. His reason for choosing Portugal are his difficulties in learning English, as he freely admits, and the relative proximity to Brazil, which will allow him to visit his gym in Rio regularly, handing over the operational business to one of his students.

### State-organized migration

States around the world are employing BJJ experts as teachers for their security forces. One strategy of state representatives to hire Brazilian BJJ teachers is contacting internationally known BJJ team leaders who will then spread the offer among their BJJ black belts willing to work abroad. Another way is setting up professionally managed hiring companies. The first country having done so is the United Arab Emirates (UAE) which established Palms Sports in 2010 to manage the hiring of foreign BJJ teachers. The plan of Sheikh Tahnoon bin Zayed, a member of the ruling Al Nahyan family, to make BJJ in the UAE a national sport taught in schools and to security forces, made the UAE one of the leading destinations for Brazilian BJJ black belts seeking employment abroad.

The prospect of finding a well-paid job in the UAE motivated Lalinia Silva to apply to Palms Sports which conducts job interviews in Brazil. Her long experience in teaching BJJ and her excellent reputation among her world-class coaches got her the desired job interview, but in the end, she was rejected due to her lack of English and the missing official belt certificate by one of the Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu Federations, which to obtain exceeded her financial means. BJJ teachers seeking employment in the UAE are required to hold a black belt, to have their certificates adequately registered with a BJJ federation, and to prove sufficient knowledge of English. Since the registration belt certificates and private English classes are expensive, the successful application for a job with Palm Sports depends much on one's financial means which made it impossible for Lalinia Silva to pass the Palm Sports job interview despite her technical and pedagogical BJJ skills.

### Conclusion

The global demand for BJJ coaches in the security and recreational market has been met so far mostly by coaches pertaining to the Gracie lineage. During my fieldwork, I observed that this demand and Rio de Janeiro's everyday violence are fueling the imaginary of the good life abroad also of coaches belonging to the Fadda lineage. But despite being martial arts experts, they often lack the necessary resources to find employment abroad. The social inequalities within Rio de

Janeiro, in this article emblemized by the Gracie-Fadda divide, continue to condition the contemporary mobility of many BJJ coaches from Rio de Janeiro's periphery. However, – as I show using my three case studies of one successful self-organized migration, the ongoing team-organized migration, and the unsuccessful state-organized migration – the extent to which social inequality inhibits spatial mobil-

ity of BJJ coaches from Rio de Janeiro's North Zone depends largely on the individual's access to different forms of capital in the Bordieuan sense. While having family abroad is a factor which the individual can hardly influence, being part of a transnational team can compensate otherwise insurmountable difficulties like expensive language classes to translate corporeal expertise into mobility.

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