
MOISES LINO E SILVA
Brandeis University

It is hard for us to comprehend that until anthropologist Gilberto Freyre succeeded in establishing a new face for Brazil in the first half of the 20th century, Brazil was often imagined by Brazilian elites as a white outpost in the tropics (being the last nation to have abolished race-based slavery). Freyre (1963) convinced most Brazilians that they made up a much darker and mixed nation than they had so far been willing to recognize. If not in terms of skin color alone, at least culturally speaking, Brazilians were all mestiços—argued Freyre. “Every Brazilian, even the light-skinned fair-haired one, carries about with him on his soul, when not on soul and body alike . . . the shadow, or at least the birthmark, of the aborigine or the Negro” (1963:286).

The transformation of Brazil from a white nation into “a racial democracy” was very significant at times when Jim Crow Laws of official racial segregation were still operative in the United States, for example.

André Cicalo examines ethnographically the claims of a transformation underway in Brazil arguably as meaningful and profound for the country as those experienced during Freyre’s time. In fact, this recent transformation could be in some ways understood as a reaction against the idea of Brazil as a mixed nation—as a racial democracy based on the notion that everyone shares an identity based on racial mixing. The Black Movement in Rio de Janeiro, as described by Cicalo, proposes that it is time for the brown Brazilian population (pardos) to affirm themselves for what they are: black people (negros). This political movement seems to intend to establish a new face for Brazil, one that is darker and at the same time able to recognize more racial inequality than has been the case so far. One of the main objectives of Cicalo’s book is to offer an ethnographic appreciation of the recent implementation of measures to address this inequality in Brazil: “I realized that most of the debate about racial affirmative action in Brazil limited its focus to the philosophical reasons about the possible risks and speculations about the usefulness of these measures” (p. 7).

When the Brazilian state started to respond to concerns of racial inequality through the introduction of (U.S.-inspired) affirmative action policies, the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ) became one of the first battlefields in the country where quotas were implemented, in 2003, as a measure to boost the admission numbers of both poor and black students. The university soon became a complex site of “urban encounters” of different classes and races, which Cicalo cleverly appropriates as a field for research for an entire academic year.

Truthful to its promises to use fieldwork-based methods to add new knowledge to an already well-explored and heated debate, the most successful achievements of this book lie in the intimate revelations that it makes about the complex and multifaceted daily life aspects of “quota students” in a law classroom, a very competitive and demanding university subject at UERJ. Cicalo exposes, for example, how most beneficiaries of the racial quota system, actually, very much dislike the mechanism themselves and try to avoid using it as much as they possibly can. The author suggests that because of a belief in “racial democracy,” most students would rather opt for the use of income-based quotas if they had a choice. Cicalo reflects: “There are crucial questions about the legitimacy of policies that potential beneficiaries dislike” (p. 178). Elsewhere, there is an intriguing (or somehow dubious) discussion of the articulation of race and religion at UERJ. Cicalo makes an analysis of the role of Neo-Pentecostal churches and of the very hard work ethos of the quota students. Even the most radical black activists at UERJ are argued to be Protestants: “Interestingly, I could not find any quota informants involved in Candomblé or the other main Afro-Brazilian cult, Umbanda” (p. 130).

A potential frustration that some readers may encounter with the book is the fact that at many points the ethnographer seems to be imposing a certain research agenda on his informants. Cicalo states: “on some occasions racial references emerged only through very tortuous paths and were always solidly tied to concepts of space and class” (p. 73). In fact, as one reads chapter 2, “Dreams and Hard Places,” there is a sense that the main thread of the book could have been an exploration of social class and inequality at UERJ (with reference to racial issues when relevant). Perhaps the researcher did not want to frustrate his predetermined research agenda. Therefore, Cicalo seems to be bound to reach the final pages making remarks such as: “it is still not clear if racial measures are so indispensable” (p. 179). This issue becomes particularly problematic when the author interprets silence and the lack of interest from the part of his informants about his research topic as evidence of some sort of racial tension. It could be argued that the most telling example of racial tension in the ethnography actually comes from the fact that the students members of the main Black Movement at UERJ (Denegrir) ultimately refused to release formal interviews to the anthropologist because of his “white, foreign, and research position in that space” (p. 128). Meanwhile, the author appears too comfortable not taking seriously enough what some of his close informants actually say and experience as a consequence of their understanding of Brazil as a “racial democracy.” Instead, Cicalo treats these simply as “the mystifying effects of racial democracy” (p. 171). Although this may constitute a significant problem for some readers, overall, the rich ethnographic findings presented in this book shine
through much more than its tendency toward top-down analysis.

**Reference cited**

Freyre, Gilberto


**ISMAEL VACCARO**

McGill University

This edited volume emerged out of a workshop conducted in Auckland in 2008. It is a significant contribution to those interested in property theory, in large part because it tries to redefine what property is by shifting the focus toward two closely connected concepts, “ownership” and “appropriation.”

As Chris Hann emphasizes in his foreword for the book, property is a historical and permanent focus of interest of the discipline. Property has been discussed in connection to social evolution, human ecology, political economy, and, amongst many other arenas of inquiry, development possibilities. The omnipresence of property across anthropological schools and fields has contributed to connecting the concept to a myriad of theoretical developments.

The controversy emerging from the publication in 1968 of the “Tragedy of the Commons” by Garrett Hardin resulted in a new golden age of property theory to which anthropology was a major contributor. A new wave of studies emerged to challenge Hardin’s paradigm. This research was mainly focused on documenting the properties of functional non-private property. This focus on what types of property there, were needed at the time, and tended to overemphasize the static nature of property regimes. In the late 1990s, coinciding with massive property regime conflicts in postcolonial locales, redefinition of land tenure in entire countries of the postsocialist world, and heated debates on intellectual property, numerous works were produced that concentrated on understanding the idea of change and the process of establishment of rights in the field of property. This plethora of studies enfolded in different themes, depending on the researcher’s interest, sometimes in mutual dialogue, sometimes in isolation.

One of the big contributions of this book is that it brings together some of these areas of interest into a fruitful dialogue around at least four topics. The book starts by pointing to the limitations of a static approach to property. To avoid the pitfalls of a synchronic understanding of property, they propose the idea of appropriation to emphasize the inherent processual nature of property regimes. Embedded in owning we encounter the act of claiming, negotiating rights, consolidating of claims, or even the possibility of losing ownership over something. The introduction and several of the chapters stress the historicity of ownership with its potential for change and adaptability to the capricious conditions of social life.

There is, also, an attempt to highlight the connections that ownership, consequently, rights, has with identity (cultural construction of the self). Although property has often been studied in isolation, as a legal condition that regulated inclusion and exclusion, rights and duties are ineluctably connected to the definition of the individual or unit socially relevant capable of upholding such rights. Inclusion and exclusion are then linked to, as this book puts it, personhood.

The third topic that the collection highlights is the idea of communication. Ownership is a claim; a claim is a relationship; and a relationship is only possible through some level of communication. The acceptance of this claim can only happen if the claim is accepted as legitimate by the interlocutors of the communication. These chapters weave process and identity with communication and legitimacy as a fundamental conceptual pair for the consolidation or demise of property regimes. It is understood that this legitimacy, these communication paths, are context dependent and that one culture legitimate claim is next culture’s outrageous scam.

Lastly, as a final and common theme for anthropological studies of ownership, in this text there are a few more interesting examples of legal conceptual context dependence. In other words, process, identity, and communication are analyzed, taking into account that key terms of the language devoted to appropriation and ownership are bursting with a multiplicity of meanings and legal consequences as a result of the diverse perspectives that different historical moments or cultures might have developed about them. This is especially stark on the numerous conversations that this volume offers about the conceptualization of ownership of immaterial things. The very discussion of what is material or immaterial unleashes a fertile set of questions about the nature of property.

In the literature on property theory we encounter pieces that deal with one or two of these aspects of ownership at a time, but we rarely encounter a volume that attempts to bring them all together to enrich and complicate the debate. This book is a significant contribution, not because of its conclusion or even because of the conceptual definitions that it generates. Although there is nothing inherently new in this book, it brings together several concepts and reflective lines in property theory that do not often appear together (time, identity, legitimacy, materiality, and communication). Strang’s and Busse’s work, interestingly enough, evokes similar dialogues that have occurred with the contemporary theoretical unfolding