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Constellations of Inequality: Space, Race & Utopia in Brazil

by Sean T. Mitchell (review)

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Luso-Brazilian Review, Volume 56, Number 2, 2019, pp. E1-E3 (Review)

Published by University of Wisconsin Press



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Books Reviewed

Mitchell, Sean T. *Constellations of Inequality: Space, Race & Utopia in Brazil*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2017. 255 pp.

On the northeastern tip of Brazil's mainland, just a few kilometers across the water from the capital city of São Luís (Maranhão), lies a municipality called Alcântara, a place where Brazilian state sovereignty gets very blurry. Alcântara is home to a space base used to launch satellite rockets—used, that is, by the Brazilian air force, by private Brazilian aeronautic companies, and by the Ukrainian government—groups with diverging aspirations for Brazil's future. (Brazil ended its partnership with Ukraine, but, as of a March 18th, 2019 agreement between Presidents Trump and Bolsonaro, it has authorized the U.S. to launch vehicles from the base). More interesting still is the historical and present-day relationship between the base and the rural, maritime Afro-Brazilian villages—now called *quilombolos*—that live in close proximity to it, some of which were displaced onto government-designed *agrovilas* during the early days of the base's construction. This is the ethnographic milieu that Sean Mitchell keeps squarely within his frame throughout this insightful book.

Mitchell's objective is to show how the tensions and alliances among the base's various stakeholder groups are shaped by Brazil's broader history of racial and class inequality. In fact, his main object of study is the subjectivization of inequality per se, a topic that leads Mitchell to enter important debates in anthropology (on the so-called "ontological turn"), Brazilian studies (on the apparent lack of cross-class racial solidarities), and Western Marxism (on E.P. Thompson's thesis concerning the contingent emergence of class consciousness). Mitchell proves a good guide to these debates—his discussions are succinct, but meaty—and the positions he stakes out are clear and well-supported by his empirical material.

Linking Mitchell's engagements in these debates are several broad claims about the transformation of inequality's reckoning in Brazil, claims that revolve around two concepts: mimetic convergence and complementary hierarchy. Mimetic convergence refers to a framework for reckoning inequality in the present by plotting differences along a utopic trajectory in which those differences fade away. During much of the twentieth century, racial inequalities were imagined through a utopia of whitening. Inequalities between Brazil and the global north were similarly subject to ideas about Brazilian science and economy catching up, an aspiration that satellite rocket development helped to sustain. The neoliberal 1990s disrupted these utopias, ushering in a new era in which inequalities could

be read in terms of non-convergent futures. The rural Afro-Brazilian communities surrounding the base adopted a new (post-convergent) model of ethno-racial advancement as *quilombolas* (maroon communities) whose Afro-Brazilian identity and communal land ownership came to justify their struggles against displacement by an expanding base. The military nationalists in the Brazilian air force regard the *quilombola* identity as a fiction drummed up by foreign NGOs who would use these communities to impede Brazilian sovereignty. For the same reason, they and others circulate conspiracy theories of U.S. involvement in the disastrous explosion of Brazil's VLS rocket (August 22nd, 2003).

Mitchel offers the term "complementary hierarchy" to denote another way of reckoning differences through an ideology of interdependence that "sustains inequalities through relations and conceptions of unequal reciprocity between the poor and rich ..." including patron-client relations and Brazil's classical model of the three complementary races (16). This too, he argues, has been declining since the 1990s, perhaps owing to thirteen years of progressive policies under the Workers' Party (2003–2016), as well as the proliferation of rights-based social mobilization (e.g. *quilombola* activism) during this period.

These two categories are useful for understanding this epochal shift in the reckoning of inequality in Brazil and elsewhere. But Mitchell draws these categories as broad as he does not only to illuminate such shifts but to allow for synchronic comparison of variants within these categories, such that he can, for instance, attend to the coexistence among different types of mimetic convergence. Here, I thought Mitchell could have positioned the examples of mimetic convergence he observes in relation to the well-worn Enlightenment models of unilineal history. Assuming mimetic convergence is not just another name for modernization theory, where does the critical distinction lie? Is it with the *process* of convergence, i.e. through the weak copying (mimesis) the strong, or with the claim that the strong lose their lead over the weak, rather than always remaining ahead? Mitchell's sensitivity to what Anna Tsing calls different "ideologies of scale" puts him in good stead to respond to such questions. He notes that "[a]s one moves farther from the base, these lines between local and national anxieties cross and blur ... [like] ... a geography of interest emanating from the base, in shifting zones of concern" (170). The same parsing of levels could be done in the analogous domain of time, differentiating among utopias that portend the materialization of the good in futures that come sooner or later. Relatedly, is there something particularly Brazilian about mimetic convergence or something special about Brazil's posture toward such utopias? The Alcântara space base seems to fit a Brazilian pattern whereby leaders build big, technically complex projects (Volta Redonda, Brasília, Zero Hunger, etc.) in the hope of hastening the arrival of convergent utopias.

Regarding, complementary hierarchy, this is a useful category for designating forms of domination in which the parties legitimate one another's existence, instead of imagining the other's extinction as the condition for a better world. Like mimetic convergence, this category is broad enough to invite comparison of the

different relations it encompasses, though Mitchell mostly focuses on declining patron-client relations, mostly those that tie Afro-Brazilian Alcântara residents to their local leaders. Still, Mitchell's discussions of transforming patronage implicitly dialogue with his argument about race consciousness. In Chapter Six, he suggests that villagers differ intergenerationally along both lines: on race, he writes that "young adults refer to themselves as *negros* and as *quilombolas* while their parents usually refer to themselves with the . . . depoliticized term *morenos*"; on patronage, he writes that "older people . . . refer to themselves as small people (*gente pequena*) . . . [who] . . . "hope to win favors from *gente grande* [*big people*]," while noting that "I have never heard such phrasing used by anyone under thirty . . ." (145, 148). Here I would have liked Mitchell to conceptualize this parallel. As it is, he offers a good account of the rise of *negro* identity (vis-à-vis the post-Cold War decline of class politics, the penetration of market value into the realm of the self, and the emergence of new forms of racialized activism well-suited to contemporary conditions). It's less clear how he understands the broader historical forces responsible the decline of patron-client relations (apart from the workings of the anti-clientelist Workers' Party state). More empirically, how do Afro-Brazilian villagers reckon the connection between these two parallel shifts?

This last question is important given that the changes Mitchell observes hold true for many populations throughout Brazil. But it's unfair to ask this of *Constellations of Inequality*, because Mitchell does not pretend to offer a community study of Alcântara's villages or *agrovilas*. His ethnographic frame gives equal treatment to the military, the civilian space program, the NGOs, race-based activists, state officials, etc. The book really works as an ethnography of the Brazilian nation, with its many fault-lines and convergences, at a particular historical conjuncture, and as revealed by an exceptional situation. The book is not only successful as an analysis of Brazilian inequality, it models an exemplary usage of ethnographic methods for the study of such multi-scalar processes.

Constellations of Inequality is very well written. Its conceptual discussions are profound but also accessible and economical. Mitchell's prose is clear and enjoyable—even colloquial at times. He writes with an abiding commitment to justice, but with no handwringing, and he knows where he stands on the issues he raises. This book should be read by scholars of Brazilian studies, anthropology, and other fields concerned with the historically shifting reckoning of inequality. And it should be assigned to students, undergraduates and graduates alike, who will appreciate it for these reasons.

Finally, in relation to matters of patronage and favor, I should disclose that Mitchell is a personal friend who has enriched my thinking on Brazil through our many conversations (and arguments). I may be partial towards his work, but his work deserves it.

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