was important, but so too was that of Henry Sylvester Williams, the Trinidadian lawyer who convened the Pan-African Congress in London in 1900. Du Bois played an important role in this meeting and in the Universal Races Congress (1911), and he also witnessed the Versailles Conference (1919), where the Japanese were humiliated and western notions of equality and national self-determination were revealed to be a sham. Increasingly, social theorists wrote of ‘race’ as a social myth, but it was the Second World War that diminished the prestige of the white man, while 1948 saw the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. With de-colonization, and African and Asian countries forming a majority in the UN General Assembly, the 1960s saw the International Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Racial Discrimination. It is interesting to note that the situations of Indigenous peoples figure only briefly in the background of this work, and that the international human rights system has only more recently taken up their issues.

The authors have a powerful and compelling thesis, backed by a wide range of sources. This is an important work of transnational history. It will be widely cited and form the basis of lively discussions, both for its approach and its findings. It is expected that more specialized historians may want to contest particular findings in relation to the readings of particular national histories. Nevertheless, this work is a major achievement. Its timing is curious, coming out just as economists are talking about the decline in the importance of the Anglo-American world and, as a character in Aravind Adiga’s The White Tiger declares: ‘White men will be finished in my lifetime. . . . In twenty years’ time it will just be us brown and yellow men at the top of the pyramid, and we’ll rule the world.’

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Brodwyn Fischer has written a richly researched and innovative account of the ‘impossibly paradoxical historical relationship between Rio de Janeiro’s urban poor and the rule of law’, with a focus on ‘the degree to which hope has coexisted with cynicism and the use of laws and rights has expanded in lockstep with vital informalities’ (305). It is an exquisitely detailed and carefully crafted monograph that advances our understanding of key aspects of Brazil’s urban life, law and politics while shedding light on the discourses and practices of the ‘frustratingly vague and heterogeneous social group’ designated as the urban poor, the informal sectors, or the ‘povão’ (the really ‘common people’) (2–3).1


During the forty years of her study, the city of Rio de Janeiro grew from 1.15 million in 1920 to 3.3 million by 1960, when it lost its position as the nation’s capital to the newly created interior city of Brasília. Yet it has never lost its power of attraction on multiple levels, and the city’s entire history since the eighteenth century has received incredibly detailed and thorough treatment. Given the depth and sophistication of the historical and social scientific literature, it would not be unreasonable to judge a book a success if it added a new grain of sand, or perhaps a handful, to the beach of our common understanding. Yet the cumulative impact of this ambitious monograph is to create entirely new understandings of the material, legal, discursive and political world of the urban subaltern, especially the undocumented poor.

The book is organized into four ‘relatively autonomous’ parts that explore the ‘interactions between the urban poor and a particular field of Brazilian law during the middle decades of the twentieth century’: urban planning and regulatory law (I), labour and social welfare law (II), criminal justice (III) and the land battles associated with rights of property and possession (IV) (8–9). The two strongest sections of this excellent book – Parts II and IV – are truly exceptional in their achievements, and Fischer’s analysis of land struggles in Rio’s favelas from the 1920s to 1960 reveals a hidden history that will surprise even those who have recently written systematic surveys of the entire body of favela research since the 1930s.

Chapter 3 on Vargas and the poor offers a sensitive and sophisticated analysis of the discursive tactics of the poor and their allies as they interacted with the new ideological themes and propaganda of the reformist Vargas government after 1930. While showing the birth of a new rights discourse, the author neither absolutizes the claim nor avoids its entanglement with older discursive formations inherited from slavery and Brazil’s authoritarian political culture. Sketching out the strikingly patterned narratives to be found across various genres of popular appeals, she neither takes them at face value nor discounts them entirely while demonstrating the complexities introduced by intermediaries, dissimulation and tactical artifice. As she notes in a sharp summary observation, ‘The political changes heralded in 1930 were thus complex and contradictory, at once increasing the popular classes’ centrality and restricting their autonomy, upsetting old political networks and appropriating their political scaffolding’ (57).

The book builds upon this foundation over the subsequent chapters, detailing events after 1945 in which rights take on greater prominence, while chapter 4 establishes convincingly the wide-ranging impact of new configurations of paper (a by-product of legal modernization) as it reshaped older forms of hierarchy within the urban popular classes. Coming out of Part II, one begins to understand what Fischer means by her provocative title A Poverty of Rights, when one might more conventionally think of poverty in terms of wealth and of rights in terms of having them or not. As she correctly notes, it is not new to cite scarce access to rights and a weak legal status as tied up with the phenomenon of urban poverty, yet it is only with her book that this insight has been developed into ‘a full-blown historical argument about the connections between law, poverty, and citizenship in modern urban Brazil’ (5).

Fulsomely documented, A Poverty of Rights leads the reader crisply from one chapter to the next as the author adds nuance, dispels doubts and adds layers that lead one finally to understand why modernizing legal innovations – which were the key dimension of the Vargas era – fit so poorly into the world of the poor, thus reproducing older hierarchies in new forms. At the same time, she also convincingly demonstrates why those very laws and their discursive penumbra proved so central to their struggles as ‘another tool – unreliable and unwieldy, but a tool nonetheless – to be deployed whenever luck, struggle, and circumstances made it possible and desirable’ (145).
In helping us to understand ‘how tightly woven legality and illegality would become’, the book explains how even a state of ‘rights poverty’ could ‘emerge as a compromise rather than a defeat’ (312, 7). This is shown most dramatically in the exciting chapters in Part IV, which begins with a superb and demystifying analysis of the early origin of the forms of illegal urban settlement symbolized by the ubiquitous term *favela*. Telling a story that goes back to the late nineteenth century, Fischer shows the complex networks of interests – by no means limited to poor residents – that were all ‘locked in a sort of perverse dependence, each relying on intricate and fragile relationships with the others in order to achieve separate and mostly contradictory goals’ (252). From there, she proves her claim that – even before the 1940s – the poor possessed the political savvy necessary to navigate this web of interests with success by recruiting allies wide and far (including Vargas’s wife, right-wing presidents and anti-*favela* mayors).

When we reach chapter 8, we enter a world transformed by the social and political explosion of 1945–7, when the Communist Party emerged as the dynamic centre of mass mobilizations and won city council majorities in almost all of the nation’s largest cities (although outlawed). Fischer’s story of the intensification of successful anti-eradication struggles from 1948 to 1954 – at the high point of this repression – is largely unknown, and her account of the pluralization of support, under conditions of electoral competition, helps to explain why eradication is abandoned in the Populist Republic that ended in 1964. At the same time, her narrative is not triumphalist since residents never achieved the security of legal recognition; rather, they held on de facto to what they could not hold de jure by transforming the issue into a question of politics (217, 299). It was the removal of those constraints, after the 1964 military coup, which allowed the forcible relocation of a substantial minority of *favelados* (200,000 in all), that is alluded to but not fully explored (79–81, 301).

Finally, the achievements of Parts II and IV are accompanied by an extremely clear and compelling rendering of Rio’s urban development in Part I, and an interesting examination of the poor’s intersection with the criminal justice system in Part III. Throughout, the author achieves a degree of narrative power – despite what she calls its unorthodox structure (9) – in which the reader’s understanding grows from chapter to chapter and culminates in a powerful new grasp of what are too often thought to be the conundrums of understanding popular contentiousness in one of the world’s most unequal societies. It is an admirable achievement that will stand as a landmark in both the Brazilian and Brazilianist literature.

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Over the last thirty years, discussions of democratization and the development of democratic institutions have driven debates on politics in Latin America. Growing crime, continued economic exclusions and an imperfect distribution of citizenship rights have, however, led to a