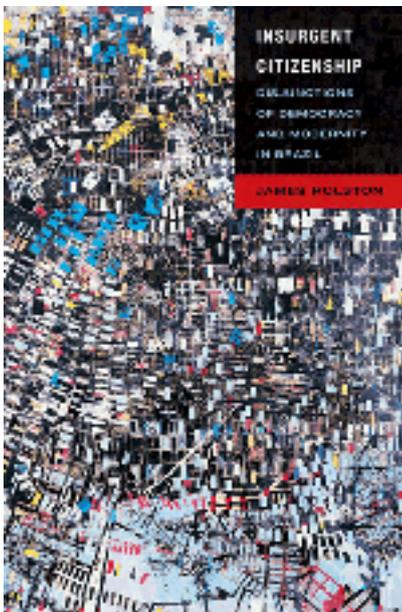


## James Holston's *Insurgent Citizenship: Disjunctions of Democracy and Modernity in Brazil*

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*Insurgent Citizenship: Disjunctions of Democracy and Modernity in Brazil*. By Holston, James. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007; pp. 416.



For a period in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, policy-makers around the world were enthralled by economist Hernando de Soto's arguments that reliable individual property ownership could transform homes in the world's teeming slums into capital, and the residents of those homes into prosperous capitalists (2003). When put into practice, de Soto's populist neoliberal utopianism has fallen short of its promise (see Davis 2006:79-82). Anthropologist James Holston's latest work, *Insurgent Citizenship*, provides a bolder (though more politically ambivalent) interpretation of the emancipatory potential of the urban poor's attempt to control their homes and destinies. Through extensive historical research and ethnographic work on São Paulo's peripheries, Holston sketches the development of Brazilian citizenship over the last two centuries. He shows how, in recent decades, through the process of home construction and land struggle in a rapidly urbanizing country, many on the urban periphery have demanded new forms of egalitarian citizenship. Ultimately, Holston argues, this process is transforming Brazilian politics and is occurring throughout the global south (4, 271).

*Insurgent Citizenship* is fundamental reading for those interested in governance, citizenship, law, land, inequality, and social movements in Brazil and Latin America. However, it is not

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principally a work of political theory, but, rather, a very good work of history and anthropology. The book is dense but well written, with extensive and content-rich footnotes that are generally worth reading. It will be of clear interest to scholars and also is appropriate for advanced undergraduates.

The book is divided into four sections. The first section (and chapter) gives an overview of Holston's key arguments and evidence.

The four chapters in the second section elucidate the development of unequal citizenship in Brazil. Notably, Holston contrasts the models for governing difference that emerged in modern France, the United States, and Brazil. His comparison of the two massive slave states of the Western Hemisphere is most illuminating: the United States adopted an egalitarian model of citizenship but limited membership, while Brazil adopted an inegalitarian citizenship with inclusive membership. Holston analyses this inegalitarian citizenship principally through the politics of law and land. He shows how the majority of Brazilians have been historically excluded from legal use of land, forcing most Brazilians to live illegally and making illegality "the predominant condition of settlement" (113).

Holston claims that Brazil's "inclusively inegalitarian" citizenship (41) is being challenged by "Insurgencies," which is the title of section three. The two chapters in this section contain much of the book's ethnography, which is based on Holston's long-term research on land struggle in the São Paulo peripheries, in the communities of Jardim das Camélias and Lar Nacional. He shows how over three decades of "autoconstruction" of homes, urban expansion, and land conflict, "residents of the urban peripheries [. . .] converted their violence into law talk" (234), demanding legal rights as citizens rather than privileges under "clientelistic relations of dependency" (235, 267). Holston's ethnographic evidence supports his argument well, allowing him to make a very persuasive case. He could have, however, provided more ethnographic analysis of the lawyers, NGO activists, and others from outside of these neighborhoods, who exist mostly as a shadow presence in the book but are clearly important actors in the conflicts and transformations that he describes.

Holston's preferred adjective for the citizenship emerging from Brazil's urban peripheries is "insurgent." This is a suggestive choice, since the conflicts between armed gangs and the armed state in many of these peripheries increasingly resembles a literal war of insurgency and counterinsurgency, particularly as international anxieties mount about violence during the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympics. While Holston is generally enthusiastic about the expansion of egalitarian citizenship in Brazil, moreover, he is aware that it has expanded along with "new kinds of violence, injustice, corruption, and impunity," a development that he calls "the perverse paradox of Brazil's democratization" (271) in the book's final section (and chapter). The legalization of the poor's homes and possessions is of obvious political importance, though it is less of an economic panacea than many readers of de Soto's *The Mystery of Capital* might have hoped. *Insurgent Citizenship* offers a rigorous window

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into the conflicts and transformations of citizenship that have accompanied struggles for such legalization in Brazil. I recommend the book highly to those interested in the present, past, and future of political participation in Brazil and the Global South.

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