The Right to Occupy: Moral Economies of Occupation and Social Housing in Urban Brazil

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Abstract

Current research on Brazilian vacant buildings where squatters live tends to paint a familiar picture: the occupants are united in struggle, resolute in their understanding that squatting is within their constitutional, legal, and natural rights. However, drawing on new data from Rio de Janeiro, we argue that researchers have an incomplete understanding of this process. Our findings reveal considerable ideological variation among occupants regarding their rights to occupy abandoned property, including their understandings of private ownership versus the social function of property. In our analysis, we explain this ideological variation through what we call "moral economies of occupation." Specifically, we focus on lived experiences of losing or being excluded from secure housing and the remembered role that the state played in that lived experience. This, we argue, is crucial for understanding why some occupants believe in their rights to squat while others doubt it.

Keywords: housing; rights; activism; social movements; squatting

Resumo

As pesquisas atuais sobre prédios abandonados ocupados no Brasil tendem a retratar uma imagem familiar: os ocupantes estão unidos em sua luta, firmes em sua compreensão de que a ocupação está dentro de seus direitos constitucionais, legais e naturais. No entanto, com base em novos dados levantados na cidade do Rio de Janeiro, argumentamos que pesquisadores têm uma compreensão incompleta desse processo. Nossas descobertas revelam considerável variação ideológica entre os ocupantes em relação aos seus direitos de ocupar propriedades abandonadas, incluindo suas concepções de propriedade privada versus a função social da propriedade. Em nossa análise, explicamos essa variação ideológica por meio do que chamamos de "economias morais da ocupação." Especificamente, focamos nas experiências vividas ao perderem ou serem excluídos de moradias seguras, e no papel que o Estado desempenhou nessa experiência. Portanto, concluímos que esses motivos sejam cruciais para entender o porquê de alguns ocupantes acreditarem no direito de ocupação, enquanto outros não.

Palavras-chave: moradia; direitos; militância; movimentos sociais; prédios ocupados

> I don't think I have a right to be here because I did not buy my apartment. I believe I have the right to live in a place when I go to the registry, buy, and then pay [for it]. I don't think it's correct for me to be here. I'm here by pure necessity. I'm not in favor of invasions.

—Madalena, resident of occupation Hotel Franco in central Rio de Janeiro[1]

Since the start of the twenty-first century, in cities all over Brazil the number of squatted vacant buildings has been on the rise (Araújo and Coura 2018). To be sure, the occupation and squatting of unused land and property in Brazil has a long history (Garmany and Pereira 2019), but the past two decades represent a new chapter. Reasons for this are complex, but the phenomenon can be explained, very generally, by a combination of political-economic factors and legislative changes that have coalesced since Brazil's redemocratization in the 1980s (Earle 2017). On the one hand are issues of ongoing poverty, increasing rents in cities, and the presence of large vacant buildings, producing a context ripe for urban squatting. Added to this, and on the other hand, are the combined effects of new legislation harnessed by housing rights activists, pressuring the state to invest more heavily in social housing. With this has come a surge in occupations over the past two decades, with activists and the poor squatting vacant buildings in growing numbers throughout the country (e.g., Moura 2020; Zhang 2021).

São Paulo is the epicenter of this movement; today there are dozens of occupied buildings in the city's central area alone (Ferrara, Gonsales, and Comarú 2019). Not far behind is Rio de Janeiro, where ongoing economic crisis has fueled shortages in affordable housing, particularly in the city's historic center and port area, where revitalization efforts have spiked rental costs (Mello 2012; 2015). These squats can house anywhere from a few dozen to more than one hundred residents, and their organizational structures take a variety of forms. For example, while some are entirely self-organized, others are coordinated by one or more of the several dozen housing rights organizations currently active in Brazil. Similarly, some have existed for several years and have become integrated into their local communities, whereas others remain barricaded and highly vigilant of who enters and leaves the building.

Current research on these squats tends to paint a familiar picture: the occupants are united in struggle, resolute in their understanding and conviction that occupying vacant buildings or land is within their constitutional, legal, and natural rights (Earle 2017; Irazábal 2018; Kolling 2017; Mello 2012, 2015; Moura 2020; Wittger 2017; Zhang 2021). Given that most of this research is based on interviews and participant observation with movement leaders, including documents and materials produced by housing rights organizations, such consensus is not surprising. The same is mostly true in other countries, where, again, data have typically been collected from—or under the guidance of—leaders in these occupations (e.g., Kadir 2016; Pixová and Novák 2016; Starecheski 2019). Not until one conducts ethnographic research, living for extended periods within a squatted building, does a more complex picture emerge. Indeed, as we show in this article, after coresiding with rank-and-file squatters (i.e., not the movement leaders), it is possible to discover considerable variation in activists' views about the nature and extent of their rights to occupy vacant buildings.

Our goals in this article are twofold: first, to argue that researchers have an incomplete understanding of how those who occupy vacant buildings feel about their rights to squat; and second, to help explain ideological variation among squatters—for example, their

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[1] The names of specific locations and people have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

understandings of private ownership versus the social function of property, including the legitimacy of their rights to occupy—through what we call moral economies of occupation. In particular, we draw attention to the lived experience of losing or being excluded from secure housing and the remembered role that the state played in that lived experience. These, we argue, are crucial factors previously overlooked by researchers, and ones that help to explain why some squatters believe viscerally in their right to squat while others doubt it.

Before we move on, however, we need to make one thing clear: our argument is not that existing research should be written off or that data and findings from those studies are fundamentally inaccurate. Instead, our point is that previous work has emphasized the views and sentiments of housing rights leaders rather than the opinions and lived experiences of rank-and-file squatters. As such, what exists is an incomplete account of those occupying vacant buildings in Brazilian cities. When we shift the focus from activist leaders, what we find are conflicted, nonbinary, ambiguous, and often fluid ideas about property. Some squatters firmly believe they possess a clear and distinct right to occupy; others remain convinced that claims of private property trump those of social function. Difficult as this may be to reconcile, it paints a fuller picture of housing struggles in Brazil and Latin America and provides researchers better traction for understanding inequality, mobilization, and diversities in activist groups (e.g., Alvarez et al. 2017; Varley 2017).

The next section presents an overview of housing struggles in Brazil to contextualize processes of urban squatting and the work of social activists. This includes a brief discussion of moral economies (e.g., Thompson 1971; Scott 1976), including how we define moral economies of occupation and what the concept adds to debates over housing and social movements in Latin America. We then provide details of our case study from Rio de Janeiro, where we carried out several years of ethnographic research on social housing near the city center. Finally, we consider findings from our case study, revealing two well-articulated positions among those we interviewed. On one side were those convinced of their right to occupy vacant buildings, sometimes referring, as the literature would suggest, to the social function of property and rights enshrined in the Brazilian constitution (e.g., Earle 2017; Mello 2012, 2015; Moura 2020; Zhang 2021). On the other side, however, was an equally large group of squatters with serious doubts about their right to occupy. We suggest that these differences can be explained, at least in part, by squatters' personal histories with housing vis-à-vis the state. Building on Alexander, Bruun, and Koch's (2018) work on moral economies of housing, we analyze this through what we call moral economies of occupation: a concept that examines the role of the state in lived experiences of housing insecurity. We argue that this concept helps to better elucidate ideological variation among those fighting for social housing in Brazilian cities.

The struggle for housing in central Rio de Janeiro

With the ratification of its Citizen Constitution in 1988, Brazil embarked on a new and remarkably progressive era of democratic governance (at least on paper). At the heart of the constitution was a series of collective rights, including urban policy directives that recognized "the right to social housing; the right to the regularization of informal settlements; the social function of urban property; and the need to combat land and property speculation in urban areas" (Friendly 2013, 162; see also Avritzer 2007; Fernandes 2007). While it took more than a decade to formally implement the policies (Avritzer 2007; Friendly 2013), their inclusion in the constitution represented years of groundwork by urban social movements (Bassul 2010; Holston 2008).

Finally passed into law in 2001, this legislation provided, writes Friendly (2013, 163), "a broad range of instruments and tools for municipalities to use in combating social

inequality, promoting the right to housing, and overall, in advancing the right to the city." Known as the City Statute, it established that "urban property is assured and recognized as a fundamental individual right provided that a socio-environmental function is accomplished" (Fernandes 2007, 212). In other words, claims of private ownership can be contested in cases where property does not serve a social function, meaning, for example, that vacant or abandoned buildings may be appropriated by others, provided that the property is then put to legitimate use.

The City Statute has proved crucial for housing rights movements, which, over the past two decades, have mobilized it to push for social housing throughout Brazil (Nogueira 2019). The law ostensibly justifies squatters' rights in cases where property has been left vacant, and it provides a legal mechanism for pressuring the state to fulfill obligations of adequate and decent housing. Combined with initiatives introduced by the Workers' Party over the past twenty years, there exists today a host of social programs and municipal laws available to housing activists (Tatagiba and Teixeira 2016). While limited in capacity—and endlessly bureaucratic—such federal programs, along with legal pathways opened by the City Statute, have created a dynamic setting for social housing and grassroots mobilization in Brazil (Lago, Petrus, and Mello 2020).

That said, let there be no mistake: occupying vacant buildings is no picnic. The buildings themselves reveal varying states of disrepair and decrepitude, requiring significant labor to become habitable, such as removal of debris, infrastructure repair (including electricity and plumbing systems), access and distribution of water, and the establishment of basic security. Residents must also deal with threats from police, neighbors, and very often local drug gangs and militia groups. Moreover, while squatted buildings are vacant, many do have legal owners. When owners are not tax delinquent and have an interest in keeping the building empty for speculative purposes, the squatters are usually evicted in short order (Albert 2022). Rare is it for squatters to find a building where the owner is tax delinquent and where the state has no interest in the property, whether for sale or redevelopment. In such cases, occupiers may find relative stability, potentially staying for several years without formal resolution on the property.[2]

More common, however, are cases in which the building, despite having fallen into tax delinquency, is of interest to the state—namely, the Instituto Nacional de Seguro Social, or INSS, the National Social Security Institute. This is particularly true in central urban areas where ground rents are high and developers and municipal officials see opportunity. In such cases, housing rights groups often organize and lead the occupation and thereafter try to negotiate a settlement with INSS while defending the squatters in court. Generally, they rely for legal support on the constitution and the City Statute law—working with advocacy and pro bono groups, including public defense attorneys and sometimes the Public Ministry—arguing that the vacant building served no social function and the squatters have the right to take up residence and improve the property. Such cases can go either way: sometimes the squatters win; sometimes they lose. Either way, the process is often drawn out, and squatters must learn to live with uncertainty and the constant threat of eviction. This is the type of case we examine in this article, and in central Rio de Janeiro, where we conducted research, it characterized several occupations led by housing rights groups (e.g., Mello 2012, 2015).

What our findings draw attention to is that in hotly contested occupations where eviction by the state is a real threat, considerable ideological variation exists among squatters. For example, some believe they have a fundamental right to occupy and make claims to abandoned property, whereas others believe that principles of private ownership

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[2] This was the case at one of our field sites in this study: an abandoned hotel, occupied since 2003, where residents had lived without interference or formal resolution from the state. For more, see Burdick (2020); Garmany and Burdick (2021); Santos and Domingues (2020).

outweigh those of social function. We are by no means the first researchers to highlight diverse ideologies among housing activists in Latin America (see, e.g., Kopper and Richmond 2021; Varley 2017), but what our analysis helps to clarify is why the variation exists. In particular, we argue that lived experiences of losing or being excluded from secure housing, and the role attributed to the state in those processes, are crucial for understanding how residents feel about their rights to occupy and make claims to abandoned property.

This relationship between housing insecurity and the perceived role of the state—and how it connects to the ways people understand their rights—are what we refer to as moral economies of occupation. Similar to Alexander, Bruun, and Koch (2018, 10), we "use the concept of moral economies as a heuristic device to access our informants' demands for housing and how they make sense of their rights to home in the face of political-economic processes and larger political-economic institutions." The broader concept, of course, comes from Thompson (1971), who showed how in eighteenth-century Britain, insurrections by the poorest in society revealed feelings of injustice over limited state intervention in economic processes. When peasants felt that generally agreed-on political-economic principles had been violated, they sometimes took action, as evidenced by the food riots of 1795. In short, their expectations of the state were grounded in paternalistic histories of governance, meaning, very broadly, their moral economic sense reflected state-led traditions rather than market-led ones.

James Scott (1976) famously built on Thompson's work, arguing that peasant rebellions in Southeast Asia reflected similar notions of justice and what states were expected to provide in times of crisis. Like Thompson, Scott (1976, 35) argued that "subsistence security" was, for peasants, a moral right the state was expected to fulfill. Numerous researchers have taken up these ideas in Latin America (e.g., Meek 2014), showing how, for example, a moral economic lens helps to explain tactics of peasant mobilization (Edelman 2005), including the ways social movements position themselves ideologically and justify their claims to resources (Wolford 2005).

Alexander, Bruun, and Koch (2018, 2) have extended this concept to housing, exploring "the complex and often overlooked ways in which people claim allegiances to particular moral communities and how they (re)constitute themselves as deserving of secure tenure and of what they consider to be proper homes." For them, moral economies of housing is a broad concept, including "multiple moral communities" where "several actors appear, or are invoked, as authorities" (Alexander, Bruun, and Koch 2018, 4). It also includes a wide range of struggles, such as informal settlements and land, systems of credit and moneylending, and specific demands for government housing.

In our view, moral economies of occupation develop within larger moral economies of housing and are useful for understanding the different ways people feel about their rights to occupy abandoned property. Crucial here is one's lived experience with housing. Those who have experienced firsthand the state's violation of their access to secure housing are more likely to feel empowered to demand restitution—and may feel that they have a legitimate right to squat abandoned property—whereas those without this experience may feel differently. In this way, a moral economic perspective sheds light on why, in a context like Brazil, some rank-and-file squatters feel that they have the right to occupy while others do not. Again, a moral economic perspective draws attention to the specific role of the state and how rights claims tend to reflect lived experience and traditions of paternalistic state governance.

Research design and fieldwork

Rio's port area was the focus of this research because of recent changes in the region and how those changes dovetail with similar processes in cities elsewhere. The area began a

steady downturn in the second half of the twentieth century, as Brazil's national capital moved to Brasília, and Rio's middle and upper classes moved south to the Zona Sul area of the city. A mixture of low-income, working-class, and middle-class families made up the residential population of the port area by the first decade of the 2000s, but dilapidated buildings, worn infrastructure, and large numbers of homeless residents were clear signs of economic decline. However, with the hosting of several megaevents beginning in 2007, city officials sought to revitalize the area, sending rental prices upward and putting strain on working-class residents (Richmond and Garmany 2016). Just like in cities elsewhere around the world, low-income families who live and work near the city center face mounting expenditures and urban peripheralization.

Our field research was carried out from 2016 to 2021. We sought to understand how diverse, affordable housing experiments enable low-income families to stay put in Rio's rapidly developing historic city center and port area. Through activist-oriented, ethnographic research, we considered Rio's broad ecosystem of social housing near the city center. This included four field sites: a public housing estate, constructed in 2014 under the Minha Casa, Minha Vida program; an abandoned hotel, occupied since 2003 by self-organized residents (i.e., not coordinated by a housing rights organization); an abandoned warehouse, occupied since 2008 and coordinated by the Central de Movimentos Populares (CMP, Center for Popular Movements) and the União Nacional por Moradia Popular (UNMP, National Union for Popular Housing); and an abandoned hotel, occupied since 2016 and coordinated by the CMP, the UNMP, and the Movimento de Luta nos Bairros, Vilas e Favelas (MLB, Movement for the Fight for Neighborhoods, Villages, and Favelas). In this article we focus on the fourth site—what we call Hotel Franco—as it represents a similar case to others often studied by researchers (Earle 2017; Irazábal 2018; Mello 2012, 2015; Moura 2020; Wittger 2017). Hotel Franco was an abandoned building in which the occupation was coordinated by housing rights leaders who thereafter engaged INSS in negotiations to settle the occupying families and allocate the building for social housing. At the time our field research concluded in 2021, Hotel Franco continued in a state of limbo, with residents unsure whether their case against INSS would be successful in court.

Our research team totaled eleven people during five years of fieldwork.[3] Many on the team lived in Rio, which included academics and housing rights activists. This collaboration helped us, as researchers, to connect with and build rapport at our field sites. It was also important with respect to ethical considerations, as activists on the research team and research participants we lived with and interviewed were encouraged to make reciprocal requests of academics. For example, by participating with communal work projects at our field sites, offering youth tutorial groups, teaching English classes for several months, sharing insights at our different field sites, and archiving professionally made videos on YouTube to document occupation processes, our aim was to facilitate quid pro quo exchanges and to conduct collaborative fieldwork that was useful to our participants.[4] The data in this article are representative of those collaborations and highlight the insights of long-term, ethnographic research. In particular, they foreground the willingness of housing rights activists to engage in critical discussion and to encourage open conversations with rank-and-file squatters at our different field sites.

Research visits to Hotel Franco began in 2016, not long after the building was occupied, and continued regularly until 2020. The building is located between Rio's old city center and the port area, and it operated as a hotel until it was abandoned in the early 2000s.

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[3] Research team members, listed alphabetically: John Burdick, Michelle Lima Domingues, Jeff Garmany, Émilie B. Guérette, Melinda Gurr, Luciana Lago, Sarah Miller, Roberto Santos, Rolf Malungo de Souza, Priscila Tavares, Hugo Virgilio.

[4] See the YouTube channel at https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC3C2BSPtiD8uWl_DO6AXlNw/videos.

Ethnographic data collection included participant observation and semistructured interviews, and research team members frequently attended resident meetings and gatherings at Hotel Franco, contributing to the collective kitchen and various work projects. In 2018, one team member (John Burdick) was invited for an extended stay and subsequently lived for two months in Hotel Franco, participating in collective activities and conducting extensive interviews and participant observation. At that time, there were thirty-eight full-time adult residents living in the building—a majority of whom were women—along with eight children. Nearly all residents participated in informal interviews and participant observation, helping to provide a comprehensive overview of the occupation and residents' perspectives. Those who agreed to formal interviews were usually interviewed multiple times, and sessions frequently lasted between one and a half and two and a half hours. Questions addressed several themes, including what motivated residents to join the occupation, their personal histories, how they felt about the occupation, their experiences inside the building, relationships with their coresidents, and so on. All told, more than sixty formal interviews were conducted with a dozen residents in Hotel Franco, eight of whom were female. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed for content analysis, and they were scrutinized alongside hundreds of pages of field notes. Research visits to Hotel Franco ceased in 2020 on account of COVID-19, but research team members continued to liaise remotely with residents until data collection ended in 2021.

In this article, we draw extensively from the personal histories of four residents in Hotel Franco, all of whom were female. Their accounts paint a holistic picture of the occupation, emphasizing common experiences of struggle, family, housing and employment insecurity, feelings of desperation and anger, and conflicted sentiments over the occupation and their rights. Moreover, in highlighting their histories, we draw attention to an important characteristic of housing movements in Brazil: most squatters are Black and mixed-race women, often from working-class backgrounds (Melo 2015; Wittger 2017). Reasons for this are manifold and stem from high levels of gender inequality and income disparity in Brazil, as well as the fact that women are more likely to be primary carers for children, the elderly, sick and disabled family members, and so on. They are especially vulnerable to housing and employment insecurity. Among those we interviewed, most had joined occupation movements not for activist reasons but because of extreme housing insecurity. As accounts in this article show, low-income Black and mixed-race women are at the sharpest end of Brazil's housing crisis, helping to explain their increased participation in housing rights movements.

We consider our key findings in the following two sections, showing how many residents in Hotel Franco held serious doubts about their rights to occupy the building, including whether the social function of property held prevalence over claims of private ownership. Again, our detailed interviews revealed that, contrary to what other studies have shown (Earle 2017; Mello 2012, 2015; Moura 2020; Wittger 2017; Zhang 2021), many residents in occupations like Hotel Franco do not necessarily share the views of housing rights leaders. We explore reasons for this in the penultimate section, arguing that different lived experiences with housing insecurity—and the state's perceived role in those lived experiences—are crucial for understanding ideological variation among squatters. Explaining this through what we call moral economies of occupation, our goal with this analysis is to shed new light on Brazil's ongoing battle for affordable social housing in downtown urban areas.

Ideological variation among squatters, part 1: "I feel this right [to occupy] every day"

At first glance, Caroline might seem to exemplify much of what has been written about squatting and social housing in Brazilian cities. "I have the right," she said, "all us

Brazilians have the right to have dignified housing, and we're not harming anyone . . . so we're occupying. We're seizing our rights in the struggle, because if we don't, if we wait for our government, we won't get anywhere." At fifty-three years old, she and her husband had lived in Hotel Franco since the building was occupied in 2016. They were self-employed, were working together nearby, and had decided to participate in the occupation because they could no longer afford increasing rental costs. They had two sons and had been renting a house in a nearby favela, but medical costs for their youngest son consumed their savings, and they had no money to buy a home. By 2015, when they began preparing to occupy Hotel Franco, 80 percent of their household income went to rent. "I already made my contribution for this land," Caroline said bitterly. "I always paid my taxes, and [the government] stole so much, and I had nothing . . . we're not outside the law. We're not against the laws. I feel this right [to occupy] every day."

In nearly every respect, Caroline's words reflect the ethos of housing rights groups in Brazil (e.g., Earle 2017; Zhang 2021). As highlighted by Kopper and Richmond (2021, 5), such language articulates what Bornstein and Sharma (2016) have called "technomoral" politics: "dynamics of collaboration and confrontation between state and nonstate actors [that] occur primarily through technocratic language and moral statements." In accentuating the legality of her actions and how "all us Brazilians have the right to have dignified housing"—interspersed with moral justification foregrounding personal struggle, scrupulousness, and the state's corruption—Caroline's words illustrate how "social movements combine technical, legal, and bureaucratic reasoning . . . with carefully calibrated moral claims" (Kopper and Richmond 2021, 18).

But let's let Caroline keep talking—over two years, she gave eight interviews, recording nearly twelve hours of conversation—and her narrative grows more complicated. She clearly believes in her right to occupy, but the source of her conviction is not so clearly rooted in moral claims or legal justification. For example, when asked why she felt that way, the first thing that came to her lips was not that property should fulfill a social function, or that it was immoral for buildings to remain vacant while people go homeless. She believed in those things, but they were not what came to her right away. They were not what drove her, not what made her claim to legitimacy in occupying the building personal for her. Instead, Caroline's feeling that she had a right to occupy was rooted in what turned out to be a visceral, experience-based sense that she was owed reparation by a state that had betrayed her.

Caroline was born and raised by a poor family in a small town in the state of Minas Gerais. She was one of eight children crowded into a small house built by her grandfather. "When I was little," she recalled, "I already started thinking about the house I would someday have, that I would raise my own family, and have the space I didn't have when I was a child." In the early 2000s, she became an avid supporter of the Workers' Party government, in part because she trusted it to fulfill its promise to help her realize her dream of owning a home. "I thought, 'They really care!'" she said. "They will not abandon the poor. I thought, 'Their heart is in the right place; with this government I will finally be able to buy my home.'"

But then two things happened, both at the hands of the state, that turned Caroline's world upside down. First, in early 2015, the main federal credit arm for funding residential mortgages altered the size of the required down payment from 20 percent to 50 percent. For Caroline, this was an earthquake. "That came as a huge shock," she said. "From 20 percent to 50 percent! I looked at that and my heart froze. I said, 'There's no way I can do that. Why is the government doing this? Why is the government abandoning me? It said it would support the poor!'"

Caroline's other option was the Minha Casa, Minha Vida federal housing program, which, in addition to building housing units, also promised large subsidies to low-income families to purchase a home. By 2015, however, Caroline had been on the program's

waiting list for four years. That was when a trusted friend told her about queue jumpers who were getting their houses even though they had only just registered for the program. According to her friend, they had pulled strings and curried favor. "So, I thought to myself, 'How will I ever get my own house if I don't accept this kind of thing?'" she said. "I thought, 'My number will never come up because I can't pull strings!'"

The government she had supported betrayed her. "The government was not honest with me," she said. "I trusted it, but they lied to me." Caroline was becoming desperate when she learned about the plan to occupy a vacant, government-owned building (i.e., Hotel Franco). At first, the idea frightened her, but after thinking it over, she felt that if the state could not be trusted to fulfill its promises, then she would have to help herself. She felt, in effect, that by occupying the vacant building, she was collecting restitution for the government's betrayal. "The government robbed me," she said, "so I have a right to occupy because that's my reparation [*ressarcimento*]."

Caroline was not the only resident whose belief in her right to occupy Hotel Franco stemmed from a sense of betrayal by the state. In fact, among residents who held firm beliefs in their rights to occupy, nearly everyone expressed a sense of loss or injustice at the hands of the state. While many of them made passing reference to, for example, constitutional rights and the social function of property, no one said that the reason they believed they had a right to occupy was rooted in those things. Instead, it came from their lived experience and tended to involve sentiments that something had been stolen from them by, or on account of, the state. It was the same for Roberta, whose anger had been simmering for much longer than Caroline's.

Originally from the state of Pernambuco, Roberta, fifty-four years old, had been living in Hotel Franco since 2016. She had not participated in the initial occupation but had moved in six months afterward when invited by a friend. Without steady employment, she struggled to find housing near the city center, where she worked odd jobs and performed as a singer. Like Caroline, she believed firmly in her right to live in the occupied building, but when asked why she felt that way, she never mentioned constitutional rights or fulfillment of the City Statute. Rather, for Roberta, the belief came from a sense of loss and injustice that went back as far as she could remember. "I feel I do have a right to be here. Not sure it's something I know," she said. "It's something I feel. It comes from something that goes back a long way, very far. Because this land, this Brazilian land, this land is ours." Roberta was referring to her Indigenous ancestry and how the land that is today Brazil, along with other forms of ancestral inheritance, had been stolen from Indigenous people. "I don't accept that people end up sleeping in the street," she continued. "Becoming garbage. Because people are becoming human garbage." Roberta had lived hand to mouth for years and had seen firsthand how people's lives were destroyed on the streets. For her, Hotel Franco represented a place of refuge to which she had a right.

But her clearest sense of truth about her rights to occupy came from personal injustices she attributed to the state. She had been deprived, she felt, of the resources she needed to purchase a home and live independently. "It starts with the slavery of salaries," she explained:

> Then the worker has to work until he's seventy years old, and keep at it all that time, practically without any salary. I struggled to build a house for ten years, even with the help of my friends, but I just couldn't save up enough to build. Paying my obligations but being robbed, because this salary is theft, and then they want to take even more. We have to keep paying, because they want to steal from us; they raise the price of bus fares, they raise the cost of food, they raise everything except for the minimum wage, so they can pay for their own robberies. It's we, the workers, who pay for that. So, that's why I feel that this house, I have already earned that right. I feel that I've already paid for this house, over the years, with my sweat and tears.

Some memories were particularly painful. She was still outraged to think of how her savings had been wiped out overnight, in 1991, when President Collor de Mello froze all bank accounts and revalued the currency: "With the theft that the government has done, I feel injured [*lesada*]. With the robbery of savings. With the robbery of Collor. I feel that, if not for these robberies, I would've been able to save more than enough to buy this whole building! The money that I saved, they stole."

From the theft she felt at the hands of the state, Roberta experienced her own occupation of Hotel Franco as a righteous act. It was, if nothing else, an act of reparation for past injustices and payback for a lifetime of subjection to inequality and corruption. She never once took issue with private property rights during interviews. Instead, for her, it was the state's corruption and negligence that justified her right to occupy. "Who pays for this?" she asked, raising her hands. "The people! The people, with our work. It's our work that pays for all the luxuries of these politicians. So, why shouldn't I have the right to live in a building that this government has abandoned?"

For residents like Caroline and Roberta, there was a strong sense of conviction regarding their rights to occupy Hotel Franco. They would sometimes draw on techno-moral language when explaining this, but when pushed as to why they felt they had the right to occupy, their explanations inevitably reflected their own lived experience. There was, however, a clear thread connecting the interviews: a sense of loss or injustice at the hands of the state. For these residents, their right to occupy was vested in a sense of restitution. Each made it clear that if a judge allowed the state to evict them from the building, it would be an unjust and tyrannical act.

There was an equally sized group within Hotel Franco, however, that felt differently. While understanding it was wrong for a building to remain vacant when people need housing, they were unconvinced that the situation created a right to occupy, and they remained basically committed to the idea that claims of private property should take precedence over those of social function. In the view of this second group, the rights of the legal owner are determinative, such that if a judge rules against them, they are prepared to recognize their own eviction as—though painful—ultimately legitimate. It is to this group we now turn our attention to in the next section.

Ideological variation among squatters, part 2: "The building belongs to them, not us"

When Priscila was asked if she had a "right" to live in Hotel Franco, she gave a surprising answer. "I haven't thought of this . . . . Like, my right to be here? I never thought about it. I've been here for a while. It could be for one more month, two years, who knows; if the INSS makes us leave, I'll leave . . . . It isn't worth fighting over such things, you know?" This is not what one expects to hear inside an occupation coordinated by three national-level housing rights movements. The building is covered with reminders of the radical politics at stake, from banners and flags that hang down to quotes and graffiti art painted on the walls. Hearing Priscila say, "It isn't worth fighting over such things," was, to say the least, unexpected. Then again, compared to some of her coresidents, Priscila has a different backstory.

She described her life as *uma loucura* (craziness), always in motion, and she did not remember the exact year she arrived in Rio. She was born in the city of Manaus, in the Amazon, and later studied history at the Federal University of Belém. It was there she began to engage with radical politics through different unions and progressive Catholic groups present during the military dictatorship. Her militancy continued as she grew older, and when she moved to Rio in the 1990s to work for the municipal government, she connected with several social movements. This eventually brought her to UMP meetings, where she became involved in the fight for affordable housing. During interviews, she

made it clear that her decision to participate in the occupation was not because she was desperate, but because she believed in the movement and wanted to take part.

Today, at sixty-two years old, single, and with no children, Priscila's position was different from that of many of her coresidents. When pushed, she argued that she had "a right to be here," but she was quick to distinguish between the right to occupy and a right to ownership (the former, for her, was temporary, while the latter was weightier and enduring). She wanted to emphasize that any right to possession created through occupation depended on the true owner not showing up. In the meantime, as long as the occupiers kept the place clean and orderly, she felt that the combination of occupation and caretaking established a certain (provisional) usufruct right. As soon as the "true owner" returned, however, that claim would trump all others: "Look, we occupied this space. No one showed up to take us out, right? I'm not sure we have a right, but if you're occupying, and you're taking care of the place, well, there's a certain right there. But if the owner arrives here and says, 'Hey, this place is mine,' OK. Great. It's yours. Just give us enough time to gather our stuff, and you can have it. No problem. If he bought it, and it's his, OK. It's his. He has a right to it. I only had a right to it while he'd abandoned it. This here's not mine."

Priscila's stance becomes less surprising when one learns that she, too, owns a house in her home state of Amazonas, and is herself concerned about potential squatters there. "If I need that space," she said, "but someone has occupied it, I'm going to have to go there and have a conversation with them, and say: 'Hey, I need it back, OK? You've used it, and that's fine, but I'm the owner.'" To be sure, a small private home in the Amazon is not the same as a government-owned (and abandoned) building in central Rio, but for her, the point was that both had a legal owner, and the principle of property had to be respected. Her understanding of the right to occupy was that it was temporary usufruct—quite distinct from ownership, which came through monetary payment. "I have a right to live here, for now," she said, "but that doesn't make this mine. I'm living here, OK. But for this to be mine, I have to buy it; that's another story."

At the heart of this view is a certain skepticism toward the doctrine, enshrined in Brazil's City Statute and espoused by social movements, that any property that does not fulfill a social function may be appropriated by the state for social housing. For Priscila, such action seems unfair when it overrides a legal, monetary purchase. In fact, rather than decry real estate speculation—so central to the worldview of housing rights movements—Priscila imagined absentee owners might have perfectly defensible reasons for letting a building fall to waste: "I mean, the person paid for that, even in an abandoned building with garbage strewn all around. There are reasons he abandoned it, allowing the grass to grow up inside. He can have reasons even for that! But the key thing is that he made a sacrifice in order to buy and to pay. See? I think it's very unjust when I take something that I know he paid for, you know? And then afterward, to declare that it's mine? I just don't see it."

Our intent in this article is not to argue who is right or wrong in this instance but to understand the contrast itself. In this case, there are several factors that distinguish Priscila's lived experience with housing from residents like Caroline and Roberta, who believed they had a clear right to occupy the building. To begin, Priscila first engaged with radical politics when she was a university student—a far cry from residents like Caroline and Roberta who became involved after confronting housing insecurity firsthand. This is not to say Priscila was not committed to the cause. Were she not, she would not still be living in Hotel Franco, nor would she have been invited to participate in the occupation. Still, in contrast to residents like Caroline and Roberta, she came from a family of small property owners who, while falling on hard times, held firmly to respect for property rights. She herself was also a property owner, having worked hard to buy land and a house in Amazonas. Concerned about potential squatters, she could sympathize with the hypothetical owner of Hotel Franco. These are all factors that help to explain Priscila's position (see also Varley 2017).

Also significant, we argue, is Priscila's personal experience with housing insecurity and the state. For example, at no point in her life did Priscila describe feeling outraged or directly betrayed by the state as it concerned her housing. She had seen the state infringe on the rights of others—and had stood against the state in those struggles (like she was doing in Hotel Franco)—but she had not experienced firsthand housing injustice at the hands of the state. In other words, she had been involved in a variety of collective fights, but she had not confronted the state over her own direct interests. These factors, we suggest, are also important for helping to understand Priscila's ambivalent perspective.

Still, reasons some residents believe they have a right to occupy and others do not go beyond socioeconomic differences and histories of militancy. Consider, for example, Madalena. Like Caroline and Roberta, she, too, had struggled her whole life and was living in Hotel Franco, she said, because were it not for the occupation, she would be on the street. However, unlike Caroline and Roberta—and even more so than Priscila—she felt conflicted about the occupation and her "right" to be there: "I don't feel proud to live here," she said. "No . . . I'm ashamed to be fifty-three years old, and I don't have my own place to live with my two daughters. I feel no pride about living here. It's embarrassing, really, not to be able to buy a house, I feel very ashamed about that."

Madalena lived with her two daughters in Hotel Franco and made a humble living selling snacks in the streets downtown. One of her daughters had participated in the occupation to secure a place, and after a few months, once the building was made habitable and had running water, Madalena joined her. She was grateful to be living there, but she had reservations about the group's right to occupy the building. "I don't have a *right* to be here," she said, "because I haven't paid." If the government decided to evict them, she said, it would be within its rights. "I'll want some time to pack my things, but the building belongs to them, not us."

Like Priscila, Madalena felt that residents like herself had no grounds to claim rights to the building because they had not paid for it. She did not feel that living in Hotel Franco was somehow due to her or that the state owed her a place to live. Her sentiment was more akin to gratitude than entitlement. She spoke of the occupation not as a conquest on her part, but as a kind of gift that came from the organizing movements. "Thank God I learned about the [UNMP] that placed me here," she said. "For this place, where I am today, I'm very thankful." In this way, she felt confident that she deserved to live in the occupation but stopped short of saying it was her right. "I think the occupation is just," she reasoned, "but I don't think I'm right to be here without paying. But occupations are just . . . if it wasn't for an occupation, where would I be? These occupations are important for the life of people . . . to assist these very poor people, who are living, sleeping in the street."

Madalena knows whereof she speaks. Her life history, like those of Caroline and Roberta, is shaped by hardship and loss. Born into a large family in the state of Ceará, she was one of seventeen children growing up in a house that often lacked enough to eat. She made her way to Rio at age twenty and found work washing floors in a supermarket. There, she met a man who owned a store and appeared to be on his way up in the world. She moved into his house, and they married and had two daughters together. "I was so happy," she said. "He was doing well, he opened two more stores. I thought all was perfect." An essential part of this perfection was the house that he owned. "It was a good house, it had been in his family, his father had built it," she recalled. "I wanted to make a good life there."

But her dream came crashing down, all due, unmistakably, and brutally, to him. Soon after her second daughter was born, he began having affairs. "He wanted to have a wife and lovers, and I didn't accept that," she said. She suffered through humiliation for a year, then finally confronted him. When she did, he threw her to the floor so violently that it injured her back, leaving her with lifelong pain that would forever reduce her earning ability. That was not the worst of it. "After he threw me down," she said, "he threw me out of the house. He evicted me. Me and my two daughters. Onto the street."

Readers should pause to absorb the enormity of this. Like Caroline and Roberta, Madalena's lifelong dream had shattered right before her. She, too, had been deeply wronged—violently so—and in her case, at the hands of someone she had loved. For several years, Madalena and her daughters were forced to live in the homes of family members, squeezed into extra rooms, sleeping on floors, depending on the goodwill of others. When she finally moved into rented accommodation, she found herself paying more than half her income on rent. She could save nothing for a home, and her anger at her ex-husband swelled. "When he threw me out," she said, "he robbed me of my ability to save for a home." Again, like Caroline and Roberta, Madalena felt reminded every day of the injustice done to her and that something had been stolen from her.

What stands out in Madalena's case, however, is that in contrast to Caroline and Roberta, her lived experience of housing loss was caused by a man, not the state. More specifically, the one who betrayed and abandoned her was her ex-husband. In many ways, her life history aligns with those like Caroline and Roberta, but unlike them, she does not hold the state accountable for her loss. This is significant, we argue, in helping to explain her conflicted feelings about the occupation and why her beliefs align more closely with residents like Priscila. We explore this contrast in the penultimate section, arguing that the state's role in these lived experiences of housing insecurity is crucial for understanding why some residents in occupations like Hotel Franco believe strongly in their rights to occupy while others doubt it.

Housing, rights, and moral economies of occupation

Thus far, our emphasis in this article has been to highlight the ideological variation that exists in an organized occupation in central Rio de Janeiro. Contrary to existing accounts (e.g., Irazábal 2018; Mello 2015; Wittger 2017), our research found a roughly even split between residents who believed strongly in their rights to occupy vacant property and those who doubted it. Similarly, our findings did not reveal, as other studies suggest (e.g., Earle 2017; Mello 2012; Moura 2020; Zhang 2021), that rank-and-file squatters had a particularly strong connection with Brazilian constitutional rights or the social function of property. These topics came up in conversation, but they were not what animated residents or made them feel they had a right to occupy Hotel Franco.

Instead, what emerged from these interviews were deeply personal stories that gravitated around lived experiences with hardship and housing loss. We found that residents who believed in their right to occupy and expected settlement from INSS had, at some point in their lives, experienced housing insecurity that they attributed to the state. More specifically, they felt betrayed by the state and that they were owed restitution for the injustice. It was not the Brazilian constitution or the City Statute that informed their sense of virtue; it was their lived experience of losing or being excluded from secure housing and how they held the state responsible for this.

For these reasons, we argue that a moral economic perspective of occupation helps to explain ideological differences among housing activists. Those who feel strongly in their rights to occupy are more likely to have firsthand experience with housing insecurity that they attribute to the state. More concisely, their moral economic sense of occupation is informed by lived experiences of state betrayal. Those who doubt their rights to occupy abandoned property, in contrast, are unlikely to have experienced housing insecurity firsthand, or they do not hold the state accountable for their losses. Their moral economies of occupation do not include lived experience of housing loss at the hands of the state. Both groups share common expectations with respect to paternalistic governance and state-led housing policy, but they are distinguished by their lived experience with housing insecurity and the specific role they attribute to the state.

In Brazil, these moral economies of occupation have been shaped by perennial promises to ensure, in some form, decent housing for the poor. First articulated, though sorely underfunded, during the Vargas era nearly a century ago (Koury 2020), the commitment by Brazil's federal government to subsidize affordable housing began in earnest in the 1960s (Perlman 2010). The result, over the following two decades, was the construction of state-subsidized, low-income housing units of varying quality, in insufficient numbers, and usually in peripheral locations (Azevedo 1988). While the military regime oversaw forced removals from favelas in the 1960s and 1970s, it was also responsible for integrating into popular Brazilian political culture the idea that it was the state's duty to ensure decent housing somewhere.

This (paternalistic) political compact has survived, in some form, ever since. When, with the end of military rule in 1985, the federal state withdrew from direct financing of new housing, it turned to housing vouchers and delegated much of public funding for housing to states and municipalities (Azevedo 2007). The 1988 constitution retained the promise of the housing compact, which was rendered into law with the City Statute in 2001 (Fernandes 2007). Then, when the Workers' Party came to power in 2003, it increased public funding for housing, creating the Ministry of Cities in 2003, the National System of Social Housing (SNHIS) in 2005, and PlanHab in 2007 (Bonduki 2014). The main mechanism of the compact was a mix of direct subsidy and low-interest credit via the federal bank, particularly after 2009, when the state implemented the Minha Casa, Minha Vida housing program. Between 2009 and 2018, this program delivered 4.3 million new units of housing, of variable quality, to families ranging from very poor to upper-middle income (Mazza, Rossi, and Buono 2019).

This history helps to contextualize moral economies of occupation in Brazil, revealing paternalistic traditions of housing governance that extend back several generations. Just as Thompson (1971) emphasized the political-economic landscape of eighteenth-century Britain, this background helps to explain contemporary expectations for housing in Brazil. Still, it bears remembering, at least in Hotel Franco, that residents who felt betrayed by the state were not necessarily angry for having missed out on government-subsidized housing. While they felt it was disgraceful that so many people should live on the streets—and that the state was failing in its responsibilities—they by no means insinuated that it was the government's responsibility to build homes for everyone. Rather, they believed that the state had effectively stolen from them or made it impossible for them to finance their own housing. As such, their moral economies of occupation—in this case, their belief that squatting an abandoned, government-owned building was their right—reflected senti-ments they had been cheated by a corrupt and thieving state, and occupying Hotel Franco was their restitution.

What larger insight does this offer for understanding politics, housing, and collective mobilization in Brazil and Latin America? We explore these questions in the conclusions that follow, suggesting not only that our findings help to flesh out accounts of squatting and housing rights movements in Brazil, but also that a moral economic perspective of occupation is useful for making sense of political action and social change in broader contexts.

Conclusions

To briefly sum up, our goals in this article have been to highlight ideological variation that exists among those who occupy vacant buildings in Brazil and to argue that these variances can be explained, at least partially, through what we call moral economies of occupation. This is important, we have explained, as it helps to paint a fuller picture of those fighting for social housing in Brazilian cities and shows how claims to rights—while

often justified by movement leaders through technomoral discourses (Bornstein and Sharma 2016; Kopper and Richmond 2021)—are more often made manifest through lived experiences of losing or being excluded from secure housing. Building on the work of Alexander, Bruun, and Koch (2018), we make sense of this through the concept of moral economies of occupation, arguing that activists who believe strongly in their rights to occupy tend to harbor feelings of state betrayal and that they deserve restitution for past injustices. This helps us to better understand not only squatting and the occupation of vacant buildings in Brazil; it also sheds light on broader processes of collective mobilization and how understandings of rights reflect moral economic expectations (e.g., Alvarez et al. 2017).

We should note, however, that how people understand their rights can change over time, often reflecting—as we have argued here—their lived experiences and engagements with the state. This means, for example, that in an occupation context where residents have lived for several years, squatters may feel differently about their rights than in one where occupation commenced more recently. As Kopper and Richmond (2021, 5) write— again, drawing on Bornstein and Sharma (2016)—the techno-moral politics of social movements are learned over time, reflecting "how activists and movements are socialized through long-term exposure to the state and policymaking processes." In the case of Hotel Franco, this could mean that in years to come, as residents gain longer-term exposure to the policy-making processes of social housing, they begin to articulate their rights through technomoral discourses. Only through ongoing research will we find an answer to that question.

Finally, we should also emphasize there are multiple factors involved when trying to understand ideological heterogeneity within squats, including the ways people make sense of property and their rights to occupy. Here, we have argued that lived experience of exclusion from secure housing is a significant part of this process and that the state's role has consequences for how people view their rights as squatters. Still, this is not the end of the story or a full accounting of all factors involved. Our hope is that this article encourages researchers to engage more deeply with ideological heterogeneity that exists within different collective mobilizations and to examine carefully the insights of ethnographic research. While not denying that squatters are engaged in a heroic struggle, the meaning of that struggle may have important variations among different individuals, and we would do well to understand those meanings more deeply.

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