Book Review

Gilberto Velho. *Um Antropólogo na Cidade: Ensaios de Antropologia Urbana*. Seleção e apresentação: Hermano Vianna, Karina Kuschnir e Celso Castro. Zahar: Rio de Janeiro, 2013.

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The premature death of Gilberto Velho is a loss for the world of social science, in Brazil and throughout the world. As always, the death of a person so important to the thinking and lives of so many of us becomes the occasion for an assessment of his work, a rethinking (now that we know there won't be any more) of what he gave us, what we have now to carry on without his help or example.

Fortunately, Gilberto left us a lot. The editors, students and then colleagues of his, have made a judicious and helpful selection of some of his most important papers and, in a splendid introduction, have given readers a short but detailed and insightful introduction to the person as well as the writing. They tell us about his unusual childhood as the descendant of a military family (a few years of it spent at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, where his father taught the language and history of Brazil), about his education at a very modern high school, and take full account of his well-known eccentricities. My favorite is his well-known insistence on unconventional measures of time. When he and I taught together he always announced a pause in the three hour meeting by saying, "Sete minutos!" and then kept track as the minutes passed so that everyone knew it was necessary to return strictly on time.

The editorial introduction to the person is important here because, while he wrote many important, insightful and trailblazing papers, Gilberto did much more than that for the enterprises we all were, and will continue to be, engaged in with him. He wrote and edited book after book based on his own research but also on the studies done by the people he worked with at the Museu Nacional and, especially, the students he saw through their graduate work and dissertations. He was instrumental in the development and flowering of Brazilian anthropology and, I believe, the other social sciences (certainly in sociology, my own field), in the later years of the ditadura and afterward, when the government's restrictions on intellectual life decreased.

And not just in an intellectual sense, though that too. He also presided over a collection at Zahar of some of the major works of British and American sociology and anthropology and, more importantly even, of the increasing number of first-rate research studies of life in urban Brazil and, especially, in Rio de Janeiro, most of these based on dissertations for which he had served as orientador. He was, I think, instrumental in the founding of the journal Mana. He understood very well the necessity of an organizational foundation for intellectual life, and took an active role in the creation of these outlets for the dissemination of all this scholarly production, and in the establishment of the national scholarly organizations involved with social science. And took an active role, as well, in bringing an anthropological breadth and wisdom to public discussions of what was happening in Brazilian society, so that his death was marked by important recognition in the national newspapers of the contribution he had made in that dimension.

This book contains some of his most important, agenda-setting papers, which laid out whole fields of research for his friends and students and colleagues to follow. One of the most important and salient points lies in his perpetual insistence on the study of "complex societies." He wanted no one ever to forget that contemporary urban society was complicated, made of many interlocking parts, which are in turn made of interlocking parts, all of these entities, large and small, involved in what the others do, in ways it is our job to discover and explicate. No simple formulas satisfied Gilberto, no matter how sanctioned they were by conventional veneration, academic history or anything other than their utility in understanding the world around us.

This helped him avoid (and helped people who paid attention to his counsel to avoid) the endless theoretical traps and fruitless arguments that accompany attempts to summarize the results of research in some handy abstract formula, no matter what famous name was attached to it.

One of the most striking results of this policy came when he reversed the standard practice of applying the ideas developed in the tribal societies and small communities anthropologists conventionally studied (following in the footsteps of such founders of the field as Levi-Strauss and Malinowski and the succeeding generations of mostly British and North American researchers) to large urban conglomerates. Instead, he insisted, people who studied those smaller entities should understand "little communities" (Robert Redfield's apt phrase for the conventional subjects of anthropological

research) in the terms necessary for understanding urban life. In other words, there really aren't any "simpler societies" for us to work in. All societies have the complexity, the multiple interconnections between spheres, the arenas of competing interest, even areas of impersonality, that we ordinarily associate with the world's great metropolises. His anthropology was truly comparative at every level.

I saw all this very clearly in a field in which I had earlier suggested some ideas that provoked a lot of research but which I hadn't thought out as clearly as I should have, the field of so-called "deviance." Two papers in this book went a long way toward clearing up the confusion. "O estudo do comportamento desviante" makes clear the essentially political nature of this subject matter, how "o 'desviante' é um individuo que não está fora da sua cultura mas que fez uma 'leitura' divergente." In the deceptively simple paper that follows it here—"Acusações: projeto familiar e comportamento desviante"—he transformed the sociological ideas of so-called "labeling theory" for the better by inserting the element whose absence was creating confusion: the necessity for someone to accuse someone of something, making the act of accusation the keystone of the whole sequence of deviance creation. The same paper shows the utility of the improved idea by inserting it into the sequential activities that constitute the planning and execution of a projeto familiar. This is what progress looks like when we do science properly.

I can't help remarking on what I hadn't remembered so clearly from earlier readings: the extraordinary clarity of Gilberto's thinking and of the language, deceptively simple, in which he expressed his understanding of social life. He summed up what he had learned from his early fieldwork among Açorianos in Boston in the complimentary ideas of trajetória individual e campo de possibilidades. Which is to say, on the one hand the enormous number of things that formed the background of our every action and of every situation in which we acted, and on the other hand the more-or-less explicitly formulated projects we pursue, as we assess the possibilities our situation makes available to us. This formulation avoids all the sterile oppositions so much social theory imposes on us, giving us instead a lapidary formula that opens doors to new understanding.

I could go on much longer, pointing out ideas and remarks we can all use to improve our own work. But that is work for readers of this book to do.

Ciao, Gilberto!