

THE METAMORPHOSIS OF MARGINALITY: THE FAVELAS OF RIO DE JANEIRO: 1969-2002

Janice E. Perlman
janice.perlman@trincoll.edu
Prof. of Comparative Urban Studies, Trinity College
Founder and President, The Mega-Cities Project
October 10, 2002

This presentation is based on preliminary findings from a re-study of the people and communities described in my 1976 book, *The Myth of Marginality: Urban Poverty and Politics in Rio de Janeiro*. The original research involved living in three communities and interviewing 200 randomly selected residents and 50 leaders from each. The first community, Catacumba, in the up-scale residential South Zone was forcibly removed in 1970 and the residents relocated in public housing projects (conjuntos) around the city. The second, Nova Brasilia, in the industrial North Zone, is part of the now notorious Complexo de Alemão, which is one of the last areas untouched by the widespread upgrading project, Favela-Bairro. In the third site, Duque de Caxias, in the peripheral Fluminense lowlands, half of the interviewees were favelados and half owners of small-unserved lots in the poorest areas of the municipality.

Now, three decades later we are conducting a re-study whose objectives are:

- To understand the intra-and inter-generational dynamics of urban poverty;
- To explore the changing mythology and reality of ‘marginality’;
- To trace life history patterns against macro political and economic transformations;
- To test the mediating effects of civil society and social networks; and
- To see the effects of local, national and international public policies.

The advantage of this study is the availability of the original 1968-69 data set and our ability to locate and re-interview a third of the original 750 respondents, as well as their children and grandchildren. This enables us to trace life trajectories across time and space, rather than comparing static snapshots of different people at separate points of time in the same communities.

Since 1969 Brazil has undergone major political transitions from dictatorship to “opening” to democracy; major economic transformations from “miracle” boom to triple-digit inflation, to bust to precarious stability; and major policy changes from favela removal to upgrading and integration. It appears that the cumulative effects of macro-level gains, poverty programs, and community efforts have not significantly reduced urban poverty. In fact, both the absolute number of poor persons and the percentage of Rio’s population living in favelas have consistently increased over these three decades, as has the degree of inequality. By looking carefully at the three communities studied and what has happened to them and their residents we hope to better understand this perverse persistence of poverty and what has made a difference for those who have broken out of it.

Five themes have emerged from the preliminary analysis: the meaning of marginality; the framing of fear; the increase in inequality; the deception with democracy; and the sense of agency and optimism.

1. The Meaning of Marginality. The original “myths of marginality” which blamed favela residents for mal-adaptive attitudes and behaviors making them unfit for integration into urban life, were largely discredited after the late 1970’s. Perlman, Portes, Quijano, Nunn, Eckstein and others showed that the favelados were not marginal but strongly integrated into the system, albeit in an asymmetric manner, providing their labor power, political support, and cultural richness but receiving little in return. In Brazil the discourse turned to *exclusion, inequality, social injustice and spatial segregation*, and then to *human rights and citizenship*. Then in the 1990’s Waquant and others, observing the USA and Europe posited an “advanced marginality” or “new poverty” based on irrelevant ghetto populations in global capitalism. Some of the propositions (such as increasing, high skill levels demanded for jobs and increasing inequality, despite economic gains) apply to the Rio case, while others (such as the retrenchment of the welfare state and the relegation of one racial group into a space without an exit) do not apply at all. Most recently the term “marginality” has re-surfaced to connote the drug dealers, and ‘bandidos’ who threaten the peace of the favela communities and the city as a whole.

2. The Sphere of Fear. The most dramatic change in the lives of the favelados has been created by the invasion and expropriation of the space of their communities by drug and arms dealers. The fear of removal by agents of the dictatorship that prevailed during the earlier study has been replaced by fear of dying in the crossfire between police and gang members or between rival gangs. Almost one in five people report that a member of their family has been the victim of homicide. The consequent fear has reduced the sense of solidarity and community; the level of sociability, as measured by visits among friends and relatives; the use of public space for leisure and recreation; and the membership in all types of associations except religious. In short, it has diminished the social capital of the communities, one of their primary survival strategies for hardship in the past.

3. The Increase in Inequality. While both collective consumption of urban services and individual consumption of household goods have increased over the last three decades, the gap between rich and poor has continued to widen. The gains in educational achievement (85% of children having more years of schooling than their parents) have not been translated into better insertion into the labor market (only 36% have more highly qualified jobs than their parents). Unemployment has risen as jobs in manufacturing, domestic service, and civil construction have declined. This is reflected in the ever-receding sense of becoming “gente,” the Brazilian word for “people.” There is a heightened sense of exclusion and discrimination based on race (up from 53% in 1969 to 89% in 2001), on residing in a favela, on the style of dressing, on place of origin, and on gender.

4. The Deception of Democracy. It was anticipated that the “abertura” and the end of the military dictatorship (which lasted from 1964-85) would bring new opportunities for the underclass. Re-gaining democratic rights and the direct vote for mayor, governor, and president was expected to give greater “voice” and bargaining power to the urban poor in negotiating community improvements and greater opportunities for upward mobility.

Indeed, in the years immediately following the end of the dictatorship there was a burgeoning of participatory activity, with many grassroots organizations springing up in the favelas and a plethora of non-profits taking an active role in the cause of justice and equity for the favela population. However, another picture has emerged over time. Too many candidates came courting the favela vote with too many promises that went unfulfilled after elections; political corruption became too visible; drug dealers became too powerful; and cynicism set in. More people today (51%) doubt that Brazilians have the capacity to choose their candidates than in 1969 (37%). And most agree that health, security, the economic situation, and the feeling of exclusion are worse now than during the dictatorship.

5. Agency and Optimism. The final set of findings adds a ray of hopefulness to this bleak picture. On the positive side, the people we interviewed expressed less passivity and paternalism today than they did three decades ago and a stronger belief that political participation can make a difference, especially at the local level. They see that organizing and mobilizing are necessary to bring the demands of the poor to the attention of the government. For example, over twice as many people today (66% compared with 33% in 1969) say that “all Brazilians should participate in political life” rather than “politics should remain in the hands of the politicians,” and almost twice as many (35% compared with 17% in '69) think that their participation can influence government decisions.

These changes indicate that the concept of “citizenship” which had been suppressed to the point of extinction during the decades of the dictatorship is emerging again. Residents of favelas, conjuntos and subdivisions are committed to playing a role in the political life of their city and country. They are rightly cynical about influencing government decisions but they have become increasingly sophisticated in knowing how to seek redress of grievances or assistance from public institutions.

Next Steps

The next step of the research will involve interviewing new random and leadership samples in the three communities studied as well as in “matched communities” with the opposite policy interventions. For example, Catacumba will be compared with a South Zone favela that has not been removed and Nova Brasilia with a North Zone favela that has received the benefits of several upgrading programs, including Favela-Bairro. We will also add a favela and a clandestine subdivision in the West Zone, which is the area of greatest growth and likely to have a profile comparable to that of the original three communities in the late 1960's.