

Favela, Four Decades of Living on the Edge in Rio de Janeiro by Janice Perlman

Review by Armando Huerta

In 1968 the author, an anthropology student, made an unprecedented study of the Brazilian favelas (slums) that were growing all over Rio de Janeiro and other major cities in Brazil. As repositories for the Brazilian migrant population seeking better opportunities, they were informal communities crowded with makeshift shacks, no indoor plumbing and electricity siphoned off from streetlights. Having previously studied rural farmers in Northern Brazil, the author was curious as to the impetus behind their pulling up and moving to an alien environment, oftentimes with no local contacts or safety net.

Living in 3 favelas over the course of a year, the author was able to integrate herself into the communities, gaining the trust of the residents and therefore access to candid answers not shared with those that lived outside. That study, published in 1970 under the title "The Myth of Marginality", went beyond learning the reasons behind the residents' migration, capturing their daily struggle for survival and second-class status in a city that grew with their labor. With the government not providing any services to the favelas, we learn how the residents banded together to create resident associations, deal with sanitation issues and in some cases build schools with their own funds.

Curious as to how upward mobility has worked for residents of the favelas, the author returns 40 years later to follow-up on the progress made by participants of the original study. Along with poignant reunions and disbelief as to how much has changed in the favelas she once called home, the author has a chance to see if people born and raised in them are destined to remain there or have the ability to move to the "asfalto" (paved road that denotes streets in formal communities with recognized addresses). With the UN forecasting that 3 out of 5 people will live in cities by 2030, this is an important question as favelas can be viewed as either way stations for the migrant population or dead ends. Having located a substantial amount of the original participants, the author was able to not only track their progress but that of their progeny, in some cases up to 3 generations down. By evaluating their levels of education, access to formal sector jobs and housing conditions, the author was able to make assumptions as to whether their situation had improved or worsened since her first visit 40 years ago.

As is the case with most studies, this analysis did not provide a clear answer. What was clear, however, is that most families in the favelas operate on a precipice, with one job loss or medical condition sufficient to reverse in a moment any gains they've achieved over the course of several years. Another glaring difference that was not a part of the original study was the influence the drug trade has had on the favelas. Where previously the drug trade involved the sale of marijuana and violence involved fistfights and broken bottles, the current drug trade centers around cocaine, the use of automatic weapons and a strict lockdown on the favela by the ruling drug gang. In the past resident associations controlled actions within the favela, now the drug gangs determined who has access to the favelas, what projects can be undertaken and how disputes are resolved. The violence has been sufficient to force some of the participants to leave their favela for others, in some cases homes that they have added on to over the years and was their main asset. For others it requires using fake home addresses when applying for jobs as guilt by association has prevented many honest favela residents from obtaining jobs. What the author states is that overall the data shows that poverty in the favelas is not a chronic and sticky situation, with upward and downward mobility in constant flux.

Where the book loses steam and provides less compelling research is when the author attempts to quantify how globalization has affected the favelas. It would have been better to frame the question of globalization and its effect on Brazil as a whole, not to bring it to the micro level of favelas in Rio de Janeiro since they are a consequence of Brazil's growth patterns and income

disparity, not a direct result of international markets. The author then spends a considerable amount of time introducing the reader to several programs or NGOs operating in the favelas. She would have been more effective focusing on a handful that have been shown to work and are replicable across all favelas.

Overall this book is an interesting look into the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, both historically and in their current incarnation. We can see that the majority of the residents are hardworking and seek education, health and dignity for their children in order for them to lead a better life and are willing to sacrifice to see that goal achieved. If you are looking for answers on how to tackle poverty in the context of favelas, this book is not the resource for you.