

**MARGINALITY FROM MYTH TO REALITY
THE FAVELAS OF RIO DE JANEIRO 1968-2005**

Janice E. Perlman

January 20, 2007



1. BRIEF DESCRIPTION

As a young graduate student in 1968-69, during the height of the Brazilian military dictatorship I lived in three *favelas*¹ in Rio de Janeiro and interviewed 250 residents in each. The book that grew out of this, *The Myth of Marginality: Urban Poverty and Politics in Rio de Janeiro* (UC Press, 1976), won the C. Wright Mills Award. The book sold 1,679 copies in hardcover and 11,918 in paperback. It has been translated into over a dozen languages (in its 5th edition in Portuguese - Editora Paz e Terra, Sao Paulo). The foreword was written by Fernando Henrique Cardoso, who became President of Brazil (1995-2002).

I discovered that the prevailing stereotypes of favela residents (which I termed the myths of marginality) were “empirically false, analytically misleading and invidious in their policy implications” – as they were used to justify the eradication of favelas. My book created a paradigm shift from “blaming the victim” to recognizing migrants as highly motivated urban pioneers and from socio-cultural modernization theory to structural dependency theory.

Thirty years later, I returned to do a re-study of the same people and the same communities.² Due to the trust and friendships I had maintained over the years, the strength of community ties, and the help of local residents, I was successful in finding 41% of the interviewees – although only half of them still lived in the same communities. Using an up-dated version of the original questionnaire and a life history matrix, I interviewed them, their children and grandchildren (2001) and added a random sample of current residents within the boundaries of the original communities (2003). The results provided a longitudinal panel over three generations and snapshots of the same places at two points in time.³

How has life changed over the last three decades? To what degree is poverty passed down through the generations? Who were the most successful, and what strategies did they use? Has re-democratization empowered the urban poor? How have drug and arms trafficking changed coping mechanisms of everyday life? How have the communities themselves evolved over time?

The answers are paradoxical. While the *material condition* of life has improved, the *human condition* has deteriorated. The fear of favela eradication has been replaced by the fear of being killed in the cross-fire between drug gangs and the police. Despite the return to democracy after the 20-year dictatorship, people feel *more excluded* and say they have *less bargaining power* than before; and despite community upgrading, the poor feel more *marginalized* than ever.

I draw upon personal narratives of the most successful people to complement the survey data and life histories in tracing the inter- and intra-generational dynamics of urban poverty. I use photos, maps, poems and song lyrics as illustrative. The chapters address the changing meanings of *marginality*; the mixed mobility; the deception of democracy; the consequences of violence; and the optimism that prevails despite all. The concluding sections explore the limitations of public policy, the quest for identity as “gente” (a person); the favela / “asphalt” divide; and the relevance of the Rio findings for other cities. Successful experiences from 20 other mega-cities are highlighted, and I end with some new directions for thought and action.

¹ *Favelas* mean squatter settlements or shantytowns, called “subnormal agglomerations in the census.

² Support for the research came from two Fulbright Fellowships, the Tinker Foundation, the World Bank, the British Aid Agency (DFID) and the Dutch Trust Funds. The analysis was funded through a Visiting Scholar position at the World Bank, and the writing was supported by the Ford Foundation and a Guggenheim Award.

³ The total sample size is 2,182.

2. THE CONTEXT

A new tourist attraction has been added to the menu of sites for visitors to Rio de Janeiro. In addition to taking the cable car up to Sugar Loaf, the tram to the top of Corcovado, or the street car of Black Orpheus fame to Santa Teresa, foreigners may now stop in at the fanciest hotels in the city to sign up for a jeep tour of a favela. Rio's favelas have become cultural icons. Films such as "City of God" (2002) and its sequel "City of Men" (2005); "Bus 174" (2003); and "Favela Rising" (2006) – as well as Snoop Dogg's music video "Beautiful", filmed in Rio's favelas (2003) – have reached large audiences and brought the favelas into public consciousness. At the same time, "favela chic" has entered the lexicon of international fashion, food and music. Last year, the Luxembourg Metro Station in Paris was turned into a life-size mock-up of a Rio favela complete with quotes from residents and scholars printed on glazed tiles.

Favelas are in the news. In the last weeks of 2006, the New York Times, BBC, Reuters and other news services carried stories about the "wave of gang violence" that swept over Rio to protest the inauguration of the new state governor, elected on a platform of "cracking down on crime and violence." These actions were coordinated by a drug lord from his prison cell and carried out by favela-based gangs citywide. As of today, (January 16, 2007), Federal Police were called into Rio after two passenger busses were set aflame by residents of "Manguieira" (a favela renowned for its samba school and its corporate-sponsored school and sports programs).

A new literature has sprung up about squatter settlements and slums⁴ as the prevailing urban phenomenon of the 21st century. Book titles such as "A Planet of Slums" (Mike Davis), "Shadow Cities" (Robert Neuwirth), "2007 State of the World: Our Urban Future" (Worldwatch Institute); "Empowering Squatter Citizens" (Diane Mitlin and David Satterwaith) and "A Home in the City" (Millennium Development Task Force) attest to the recent interest in this area. Works on Rio's favelas by Alba Zaluar, Jailson Souza, Dulce Pandolfi, Marcelo Burgos, Marcos Alvito, Zuenir Ventura and Ladislau Doubar have come out in Portuguese and by Robert Gay and Demond Arias in English.

The "buzz" created by all of this newfound interest has a solid foundation in reality. In 2007, the world will become predominantly urban. For the first time in history more people will be living in cities than in rural areas. UN projections indicate that virtually all of the population growth in the world over the next 25 years will be in the cities of the developing countries; and that the vast majority of this new urban growth will be poor people living in squatter settlements and slums. These "subnormal agglomerations" (as the census terms them) currently account for 30%-60% of the urban population in Asia, Africa and Latin America.⁵

⁴ Since 2000 when the Millennium Development , Target 11, Goal 7: to "improve the conditions of 100 million slum dwellers by 2020" was ratified, the word "slum" has been used to designate many types of "informal communities" including squatter settlements, shantytowns, invaded buildings, clandestine sub-divisions, deteriorated public housing and pavement dwellers.

⁵ See *World Urbanization Prospects*, 2005 Revision; UN Habitat, *The Challenge of Slums* (2003), *Slums of the World* (2003) and *State of the World's Cities* (2006) and WorldWatch Institute's *State of the World Report: Our Urban Future* (2007).

The discredited “old” thinking that ‘squatter settlements are a blight that must be eradicated’ has been replaced - in some circles - by the idealized view of favelas as models of community solidarity and mutual support⁶. In other circles, the idea that marginality is a social construct masking the integrated dependence of the elite on the goods, services and psychic benefits provided by the underclass has been superseded by Waquant’s concept of the new or “advanced marginality”. He argues that in this late stage of global capitalism there really are disconnected ghettos of concentrated outcasts for whom society has no use and who have little hope of exit.⁷

In any case, the fact that the urbanization of poverty has now grabbed the attention of scholars, journalists and policy-makers and that multiple opinions and prescriptions are being hotly debated, makes this a propitious time to come out with this book based on original data I collected over more than a quarter of a century.

3. THE BACK-STORY

While the new book is a follow-up to *The Myth of Marginality*, it is *entirely self-contained and does not assume familiarity with the earlier work*. The life stories of individuals, families, communities and ideologies are unfolded from scratch; and my own story is summarized in the Preface.



For the original 1968-'69 study, I had tracked migrant families from Brazil’s Northeast, and selected one favela from each of the three areas where they went: 1) the upscale South Zone, 2) the industrial North Zone and 3) the Baixada Fluminense on the periphery of the city. I lived in each area for several months and interviewed 200 randomly sampled men and women (16-65 years of age) and 50 local leaders each chosen by his position as head of a community organization or by his reputation. In order to protect anonymity during this period of authoritarian rule, I used only first names – which made the task of re-locating interviewees 30 years later that much more difficult.

⁶ Stuart Brand, author of *The Whole Earth Catalogue*, took this position at an urban symposium in Chicago, November, 2006.

⁷ Waquant, Loïc J. D. “The rise of advanced marginality: notes on its nature and implications”. *Acta Sociológica*, v. 39, 1996; “Urban marginality in the coming millennium”, *Urban Studies*, v 36. Sep. 1999; *The Militarization of Urban Marginality - lessons from the Brazilian Metropolis*, 2005; and *Urban Outcasts*, 2006.

Toward the end of 1969, I learned that I had been accused of being an “international agent of subversion” since the military could not imagine any other reason for my living in the favelas. Fortunately, I was able to leave the country with data in hand before the DOPS (the secret police) came looking for me. When I returned in 1973 to see what had happened to the residents of the South Zone favela that had been removed, I was advised to get a newly issued passport with a different number.

The topic of my study changed from the “Impact of Urban Experience” to the power of the ideology against the urban poor (who had “invaded the citadel of the elite”) after the first several months of immersion. The discrepancy between the image of favelas as “syphilitic sores on the beautiful body of Rio de Janeiro” (in the immortal words of one of my professors) and the reality of what I witnessed on a daily basis, became too great to treat as a side issue. What I perceived were vibrant communities of migrants who had risked everything to come to the city and were willing to sacrifice themselves to provide more opportunities for their children, much like the waves of migrants who flooded into NYC at the turn of the last century. I saw that the favelados were not marginal to the society but tightly integrated into it, albeit in a perversely asymmetrical manner. I bore witness to the reality and gave voice to the unheard. My book demolished the prevailing stereotypes about city-ward migrants, re-framed the role of the urban poor and pointed toward their ability to build legitimate working class communities if granted ownership of their land.

4. THE RE-STUDY

In the three decades since *The Myth of Marginality* was published, major transformations have occurred in Brazil that re-shaped the landscape of urban poverty. The gradual opening of the dictatorship led to a return to democracy in 1985, giving citizens the direct vote for Mayor, Governor and President for the first time in 20 years. The economic miracle of the 1960's gave way to triple-digit inflation, stagnation and relative stability with the Real Plan, and the policy of massive favela eradication was replaced by on-site upgrading. Yet favelas continued to proliferate faster than they could be upgraded; their population growth rates continued to outpace city growth rates, and the stigma of living in favelas grew stronger once drug traffic began to take over their communities.

Catacumba, the favela in the south zone, had been eradicated and its residents carried by garbage trucks to distant housing projects; Nova Brasília, the North Zone favela, had become part of the larger Complexo de Alemão, renowned for violence and untouched by government improvement programs; and, in Caxias, the favelas had become more dangerous while the un-serviced lots had become integrated as low income neighborhoods, and the residents had succeeded in moving up in life.



The restudy was carried out in three phases:

- I) **Phase I:** feasibility study to assess the possibility of locating the original interviewees after so many years without having recorded last names or street addresses. Also used for open-ended interviews to learn now terms and reference points and update community situation.
- II) **Phase II:** multi-generational panel study including the survivors of the original sample, samples of their children and of their grandchildren.
- III) **Phase III:** longitudinal study of the communities themselves, based on new samples within the original geographic boundaries of the '69 study. This part is a cross-sectional study of the same places at two points in time.

Since I had already collected information about the location, occupation and education of the parents of the original interviewees, this new study provides a unique opportunity to trace four generations of families, spanning the entire 20th century.

The data analysis was complex as it involved working with five distinct samples: the original study participants in 1969, the same people in 2001, a random sample of their children, a random sample of their children's children (their grandchildren); and the new 2003 samples in the same three communities.

5. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

If my earlier work created a paradigm shift in how favelas were perceived and treated, this new book reinforces the shift and goes beyond, contradicting today's prevailing wisdom about the urbanization of poverty and of our planet. It disrupts our collective imagination and the media *hype* about what the problem is and where to seek solutions. The marginalization of the urban poor has become *less of a myth* and *more of a reality* over the past 35 years, despite improvements in living conditions. Globalization has transformed the local job market; world-class images have defined local "needs"; and international drug and arms traffic (with their concomitant corruption) have transformed local settlements into traps of violence.

Discussion of Main Points

Although the **concept of marginality** has undergone several transformations and the words used have been sanitized into more politically correct phrases, the exploitation and exclusion of the urban poor has not diminished over the past decades. The high degree of inequality in Brazilian society -- the legacy of “masters and slaves” (Gilberto Freire) -- played out in the “divided city” (Zuenir Ventura) has led to the persistence of poverty and the perpetuation of elite privilege. Favela residents are not treated as “gente” (people) and feel increasingly distant from becoming so.

Gains in access to urban services and material well-being have not resulted in social integration. The **stigma** of living in a *favela* is more pernicious than that of color, class or gender. Impressive gains in education, with illiteracy dropping from 85% of parents of original sample to 45% of original sample to 16% of their children and to 0 for grandchildren, have not fully translated into jobs or income. Unemployment rates have doubled and the gap between income returns to education between favelas and non-favelas increases with each additional year of schooling (Valeria Pero).

Only a third of the original study participants are still living in favelas and only a third of those in the children’s and grandchildren’s generation. Those who managed to get out live in deteriorated public housing complexes (built during the era of eradications), in clandestine subdivisions without urban services, or in peripheral low income neighborhoods where the drug gangs have followed them.

Those who did **exit the favelas** to live in legitimate neighborhoods tend to have better jobs and higher income than those who remained, but not everyone who has the economic conditions to leave does so. Those with stable jobs nearby, with strong family and community ties and those who own (or think they own) their homes are less likely to leave even when their financial circumstances would make exiting easy.

The biggest change since the first study is the explosion of drug and arms trade and the high degree of **fatal violence** that has resulted. In the space of the favelas, the state has lost control to the better-equipped and financed drug gangs with the complicity of the police and judicial system. People report feeling trapped between the police and the drug dealers -- and neither protects or benefits them.

Democracy has not fulfilled its promise of bringing power and voice to the poor. **Corruption, clientelism and cronyism** have perpetuated rule by and for the elites. The poor feel more disenfranchised and excluded today than during the dictatorship when at least they had some bargaining power with the local councilmen (vereadores).

Contrary to Robert Putnam’s conclusion (Making Democracy Work) that **social capital and strong civil society** correlate with increased political stability and economic growth, the favelas with greater organizational and social cohesion did not fare better than those with less, nor did the individuals. Our findings showed that the favela residents with more *social ties within their community* had *less upward mobility*, while those with linkages to groups and individuals *outside* the community had more. In short, “bonding social capital” acted as a deterrent to upward mobility whereas “bridging social capital” was an asset. (Granovetter, “The Strength of Weak Ties”)

The findings also indicate that the anti-poverty or “**pro-poor**” policies currently in vogue –primarily land regularization and access to micro-credit (Hernando de Soto, Cities Alliance) do not address the priority needs expressed by poor themselves. In the current configuration, with a third of Rio’s voting population living in the “informal sector”, it would be political suicide (and financial folly) for any politician to undertake large-scale favela eradication. Consequently, squatters have *de facto* land tenure. While favelados say they would like to have legal title, they do not want to pay land taxes, preferring to use their money for food and medicine. They are decidedly uninterested in micro–credit loans fearing that they will be unable to pay and thus unwilling to put up their only asset – their homes - as collateral.

The main priority of those interviewed is **income generation**, whether through formal employment or informal work. In earlier times, they thought “education” was the key to a successful life; now they say” decent work for decent pay”. None of the major policy initiatives currently address this problem. *If unemployment, underemployment and under-paid employment are not addressed, all other issues from housing to community development will fail to resolve the fundamental issues and will have only limited impact.*

The final chapters of the book draw out the broader implications of the research findings for cities everywhere and look towards the future. (See chapter summaries below)

6. TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Estimates
Foreword:	4 pages
<i>Preface: The Back-Story</i>	6 pages
Part I	
Chapter 1 World of Cities, World of Squatters	15 pages
Chapter 2 Three Decades, Three Communities	20 pages
Part II	
Chapter 3 The Metamorphosis of Marginality	20 pages
Chapter 4 The Mystery of Mobility	25 pages
Chapter 5 Pathways out of Poverty	25 pages
Chapter 6 Violence, Drugs and the Fear Factor	20 pages
Chapter 7 The Deception with Democracy	30 pages
Chapter 8 Agency and Optimism	15 pages
Part III	
Chapter 9 Time, Space and Place	20 pages
Chapter 10 From Knowledge to Policy: Limitations/Inspirations	30 pages
Chapter 11 The Hill and the Asphalt : The Importance of Being ‘Gente’	15 pages
Chapter 12 Our Urban Future	25 pages

Appendix: Research Methodology	10 pages
Endnotes	18 pages
Bibliography	20 pages
Index	8 pages

7. CHAPTER SUMMARIES

FOREWORD

PREFACE: THE BACK-STORY

This is a first person narrative about my experience with favela communities in Rio de Janeiro and the unsung heroes who have persisted in seeking a better life for their children and grandchildren over all these years. I trace the origins of the study to anthropological fieldwork I did in Brazil's Northeast while still an undergraduate, later following the fisherman and rural peasants into Rio's favelas. I touch on living in the favelas in the late 60's, my expulsion from Brazil as an "international agent of subversion", maintaining my friendships there over three decades and the excitement and mutual curiosity surrounding my return in 1999 to initiate the re-study. .

I had hoped to repeat the study every ten years, but it took from the 1960s to the late 90s for the development funding community to re-interest themselves in poverty at the grassroots level rather than in macro issues of structural adjustment and "getting the prices right". The final part of this section reveals how my original ideas and hypotheses were modified by my discoveries along the way and how being a woman once again turned out to be an advantage in that learning process.

PART I

Chapter 1 ***World of Cities, World of Squatters***

This chapter situates the study in the global context of the urban century. According to UN projections, nearly 100% of world population growth over the next several decades will be urban growth in the cities of the developing world, and that virtually all of that growth will be among the urban poor living in informal settlements (that are already home to 30-60% of the city's population). How will the cities of the future function if they do not incorporate their existing underclass and the new migrants into the urban fabric, and how can they begin to do so?

Both the similarities and the differences in the way uneven urban development plays out in the cities of US and European cities versus those in Asia, Africa and Latin America, are uncovered. This chapter is structured like a funnel, starting with North-South comparisons; moving to Latin American urbanization in comparison to other developing regions; specifically Brazilian patterns within Latin America; and finally situating Rio de Janeiro in the context of other Brazilian metropolitan areas. I argue that while each city is unique, there are many lessons to be learned from the case of Rio's favelas that may be adapted to the realities of informal settlements the world over.

Chapter 2 Three Decades, Three communities

This chapter traces the distinct histories of the three study communities. Their trajectories were affected by a combination of chance, politics, location, land values and self-help efforts. *Catacumba*, in the upscale residential South Zone was forcibly removed in 1970 and its residents relocated to public housing projects (*conjuntos*) distant from their jobs and from each other. *Nova Brasília*, in the industrial North Zone, kept growing up and over the hillside until it merged with several other favelas to create one huge contiguous settlement, the *Complexo de Alemão*. This “complex”, one of the most violent centers of drug and arms traffic, became notorious a few years ago when the investigative journalist Tim Lopez was tortured and murdered there. Like the other large favelas, it has received no help from the government and was not part of the Favela-Bairro upgrading project. In Caxias, the most peripheral of the sites, I drew half the sample from favelas and the other half from *loteamentos* (small inexpensive lots in un-serviced subdivisions). In the near term, those in the favelas had the advantage of more disposable income and community help, but, in later years, those with the legitimacy of being renters or owners in the subdivisions were better able to move up and out.

PART II

Chapter 3 The Metamorphosis of Marginality

This chapter traces the evolution of the term “*marginality*” from its fall into disuse after the publication of my 1976 book to its replacement by a discourse of exclusion, inequality, social injustice and spatial segregation and then to the antithesis of basic human rights and citizenship. The return of the term in street language and song lyrics began in 1985 with the explosion of drug traffic in the favelas and the renewed association in the press and common parlance, between favelados and “*bandidos*” (criminals) The “new marginality” or “advanced marginality”, postulated by Loic Waquant (based on his work in Chicago slums and Paris *banlieu*), argues that, in the current stage of advanced capitalism, that the urban poor are in a more permanently excluded position than earlier. Testing Waquant’s premises in the Rio case yields mixed results. Some premises hold true, while others are in direct opposition to his findings.

Chapter 4 The Mystery of Mobility

While both collective consumption of urban services and individual consumption of household goods have increased over the last three decades, the perceived gap between rich and poor has grown. The gains in educational achievement have not been fully translated into better jobs or higher incomes. For every additional year of schooling the income gap between favela and non-favela residents becomes greater. Unemployment has doubled as jobs in manufacturing, domestic service, and civil construction have declined. Yet for those lucky enough to have jobs, each generation has a lower percent doing unskilled manual work (such as construction or domestic service), and a higher percent in “routine non-manual” jobs (such as cashiers, clerks or level government functionaries). A handful of the original interviewees have made money in real estate, picture framing, photography or book sales, but it is their children and their grandchildren who have slowly entered the ranks of professionals, becoming lawyers, dental assistants, accountants and computer technicians. This means that for those with jobs, average salaries have risen over time and across generations, but