

The Conundrum of Violence and Insecurity in the Favelas of Rio de Janeiro

Review Essay by Kees Koonings

- *Favela. Four Decades of Living on the Edge in Rio de Janeiro*, by Janice Perlman. Oxford University Press, 2010.
- *Hard Times in the Marvelous City. From Dictatorship to Democracy in the Favelas of Rio de Janeiro*, by Bryan McCann. Duke University Press, 2014.
- *Todo Dia É Segunda Feira*, by José Mariano Beltrame (with Sérgio Garcia and Eliane Azevedo). Sextante, 2014.
- *Unidades de Polícia Pacificadora: Debate e Reflexões*, edited by André Rodrigues, Raíza Siqueira, and Mauricio Lissovski. ISER – *Comunicações do ISER* 31(67) (December), 2012.

Over the past decade Brazil seems to have reinvented itself as a newly emerging power in the Global South and indeed the world. Not only has fairly sustained economic growth after the ‘samba crisis’ of the late 1990s boosted the country’s position as a new ‘middle power’ (Armijo and Burges 2010), it has also been a major factor behind a much acclaimed process of poverty reduction and, indeed, the slow but certain decrease of income inequality. Governing politicians from the coalition led by the leftist Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT, Workers’ Party) have claimed that since 2003 an additional 40 million Brazilians have been lifted out of poverty to enter the (lower) middle class. Brazil’s high profile participation in BRICS, its newfound role as leader of South America, and the hosting of the 2014 Football World Cup and the 2016 Summer Olympics (in the city of Rio de Janeiro) should be the icing on the cake of this apparent story of success.

The fact that during the football tournament itself protests largely subsided and criminal violence did not affect the daily routines does not mean that ‘emergent Brazil’ is not facing challenges. One of these challenges is without doubt the problem of violence and insecurity in urban areas. This phenomenon

has become so deeply engrained in Brazilian society that many consider it intractable and have accepted it as part of everyday life (Caldeira, 2000). The peculiarity of this pattern of violence and insecurity is that it is segmented in its phenomenology and impact, in the sense that it is predominantly faced by residents of poorer urban areas, including the iconic yet infamous *favelas*. As such, violence and insecurity reflect a broader syndrome of what can be labelled ‘disjunctive’ or ‘unequal’ citizenship: citizenship is open to all Brazilians, but citizenship rights and entitlements are unequally enjoyed, depending on specific positions of class, place, ethnicity, and social connections (Holston, 2008).

The four books discussed in this review look at the causes and implications of this problem for the case of Rio de Janeiro and its favelas. Rio de Janeiro has been at the forefront of these developments and, until the early 2000s, it was leading the statistics of lethal violence in cities in Brazil and, indeed, the world (Machado da Silva, 2008). Ever since the publication of Zuenil Ventura’s seminal *Cidade Partida* (1994), the idea that socio-spatial segmentation and violence are intertwined has been a dominant trope in this body of work.

Favelas as violent and stigmatized places: The ‘reality of marginality’

Janice Perlman’s extensive study fits into this line of argument of social segmentation and favela violence being intertwined. The book is the result of an ambitious re-study, thirty years after she went into the field to gather the data for her seminal *Myth of Marginality* (1976). In this ‘original study’ as she calls it, she combined survey data, systematic reconstruction of life and migration histories, and ethnographic material to demonstrate that, contrary to the dominant views at the time, favelas and their inhabitants were not ‘marginal’ at all but integrated into the economy and society of the city in many ways. However, this integration took place on highly unequal and disadvantageous terms and was enveloped in powerful notions of stigma and ‘otherness’.

The restudy design produced a unique data set that allowed Perlman to make a diachronic and in-depth analysis of thirty years of socio-spatial transformation of Rio’s low income and peripheral neighbourhoods. The central statement Perlman puts forward is not devoid of gloom: instead of the ‘myth of marginality’ she had disclosed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, she comes to the conclusion, at the end of chapter 6 (p. 161), that Rio in the early 2000s displays the ‘reality of marginality’. This assessment is based on stigmatization, on the lack of opportunities, especially decent work, quality education and health care, and on the permanent confrontation with danger: violence by drug gangs and police. Underlying all this is the tenacity of the second-rate status of *favelados* in terms of citizenship and basic humanity. The status of *favelado* (favela dweller) creates the obstacles to being considered *gente* (meaning an honest person who has an accepted status in urban and national society).

The advent of violence and insecurity deeply impressed Perlman. Not only was this largely absent in the favelas when she carried out her original re-

search, she also had personal encounters with the coercion and restrictions imposed by the drug traffickers upon the favela communities during the fieldwork for restudy. Chapter 7 starts as follows: ‘The most dramatic and devastating change for Rio’s poor over the last three decades has been the growth of lethal violence’ (p. 165). In this chapter, Perlman examines the role of police, gangs, and militias in the rise of this new violence. She rejects one-dimensional explanations for this violence and presents the ten ingredients of what she calls the ‘violence stew’ (p. 173 ff.): stigmatized territories, inequality and lack of opportunities, drugs (cocaine), warring gangs, ubiquitous small arms, bad policing, ‘government indifference’, extorting militias, powerless *favelados*, and ‘sensationalist mass media’. These ingredients are perversely fine-tuned to reproduce the violence, leading to what she calls ‘loss’ at various levels: the personal, the family, the community, and civic urban life as a whole.

Perlman’s findings make dramatically clear that this process and its outcomes are not the direct translation of poverty (although it may explain much of the disenchantment with political democracy, discussed in chapter 8). Subsequently in chapter 9, she uncovers the mechanisms that promote or hamper social mobility. At the level of the communities the material conditions of dwellings, public spaces, and infrastructure improved over time, but this did not imply a break with the core logic spatial segmentation. In chapter 11, Perlman dwells on the question of how public policy has affected the favelas and their residents over time. Contrary to her 1976 recommendations, the formal regulation of land tenure and house ownership was not a key precondition for social improvement, mainly due to the effectiveness of informal tenure and recognized usufruct rights (also allowing for an informal real estate market). Likewise, the original thesis here that education would help to close the gap between favelas and the city as a whole was not confirmed.

The concluding chapter comes back to the bottom line: how to become *gente*. Does social change imply the disappearance of second class status and negative (self)identification of *favelados*? Perlman concludes that this is difficult; subtle, culturally and symbolically grounded fault lines divide first and second class citizens, separate ‘persons’ and ‘others’, despite the improvement of material and social conditions for many residents. The breach with the formal city is not closing. Yet, she argues, optimism prevails among *favelados* of all generations.

Favela politics

Where Perlman looks at politics mainly in terms of residents’ opinions of democracy in general, Bryan McCann offers a focused historical analysis of political mobilization of *favelados* and their interaction with the political class and the state in Rio de Janeiro. Contrary to the anthropological and sociological approach taken by Perlman, McCann, as a historian, mainly relied on documentation of neighbourhood movements and urban politics. Still, he backed

this up by numerous field visits and informal conversations. His book, therefore, covers similar diachronic ground as Perlman does, but the focus and the feel of the study are quite different.

McCann tells a sobering story of the rise and fall of mobilization and political voice of the favelados, or more precisely, the neighbourhood associations and their leadership. McCann tells this story in four chapters that are aptly titled ‘mobilization’, ‘reform’, ‘breakdown’, and ‘unravelling’. The second chapter, on mobilization, analyses the rise of favela movements in the late 1970s and early 1980s as not only part of the gradual opening up of the military regime but also of the increasing capacity for mobilization in the favelas, assisted by the Catholic Church through the Pastoral das Favelas. This, in turn, paved the way for the political return of former *getulista* populist and political exile Leonel Brizola. On the crest of favela mobilization, he won the governorship of Rio de Janeiro in the 1982 elections, the first direct elections for state governments allowed by the military regime since 1966. In chapter 3, McCann dissects the ambitious attempts at urban reform pursued by the Brizola administration within the framework his so-called ‘brown socialism’ (*socialismo moreno*), a homespun variety of social democracy. Tightening the bonds with the favela organizations was an important element of the reform strategy. Although the ambitious reforms in fields such as home ownership, education, and policing eventually failed, the first Brizola government (he would return as elected governor for the 1991-1994 term) integrated the favela organizations into urban and state politics and confirmed the favelas as a permanent (though not per se integrated) component of urban society and polity.

Paradoxically, this ‘success’ paved the way for the subsequent breakdown and unravelling of favela politics as a promise for grass roots participation, during the 1990s and 2000s, analysed in chapters 4 and 5. McCann convincingly dismisses the myth that the escalation of favela violence after 1990 was caused by Brizola’s decision to ‘go soft’ on security and to impede the police from operating in the favelas. He shows rather that the post-1990 security crisis was the outcome of a complex interplay (not unlike Perlman’s ‘violence stew’ but with a more specific focus on the politics of territorial control) of the rise of cocaine and arms trade in the hands of the drug gangs, their capturing of favela associations, and their subsequent control over clientelistic relationships between the favelas, public investment, and electoral politics (see also Arias, 2006). The post-Brizola return to repressive policing added to the toxic cocktail because violent policing greatly increased insecurity in the favelas and became an intrinsic part of police involvement in crime itself. The simultaneous proliferation of NGOs in Rio de Janeiro’s favelas was unable to offer an effective countervailing power. Despite the laudable activities of many of them, McCann argues that they too had to abide by the ‘law of silence’ and accept the *de facto* sovereignty of the extra-legal armed groups.

A theme that runs through McCann’s entire argument is the political reproduction of the distinction between the favela and the formal city, even by social

movement leaders and politicians that adhere to a discourse of equity, justice and inclusion. This is a valid line of argument that reflects not only the conditioning of favela politics by the historical and structural pathways of urban segmentation, but also the powerful cultural and symbolic groundwork for a mutual process of ‘othering’ between favelados and residents of the *asfalto*.

This is, according to McCann, also the case for the recent efforts to re-establish state control and public security in the favelas controlled by drug gangs (the militias are less prominent in his analysis). This so-called ‘pacification policy’ is positively assessed as: ‘Notwithstanding these risks, in its first five years the programme has achieved positive results – a relative success that contrasts with previous community policing initiatives in Rio’ (p. 190). The risks McCann refers to are the possible degradation of UPP units into violent and corrupt policing, bringing back the old spectre of the entanglement of criminal violence and governance, and so creating ‘... a new obstacle to the integration of favelas with the rest of the city’ (p. 190). Still, he ends on a note of hope by presenting the image of new, young community leaders that combine pragmatism and online connectivity to work for incremental changes that may offer new chances for closing the social, political and moral divide between the formal city and its favela communities.

Favela pacification

The political testimony of the main political protagonist of pacification, Rio’s state secretary of public security (from 2007 to the present) José Mariano Beltrame, promises to tell the story from the inside. Beltrame served as state secretary during the two consecutive terms of governor Sérgio Cabral (2007-2014), breaking the tradition of frequent substitution of security secretaries in the state. He has been responsible for the implementation of the so-called Pacification Programme in a number of important favelas and favela complexes in the city of Rio de Janeiro. Pacification entails three steps: first, the forceful occupation of the community and ousting the residing drug gang; second, stabilizing control of the area by permanent presence or security forces (mostly the Rio de Janeiro military police but sometimes the federal armed forces); and third, the implantation of new, permanent units of the military police: the Unidades de Polícia Pacificadora (UPP, Pacification Police Units).

After a brief biographic prelude, the book provides a chronological narrative of pacification from the favela Santa Marta in 2008 to the huge Rocinha complex in 2011. Beltrame dwells mainly on the first stage of pacification, that of occupation. He presents this as a story of success: occupations usually went smoothly, even in the case of the invasion of the infamous favela of Vila Cruzeiro and the adjacent Complexo do Alemão, scene of a violent police incursion in 2007 that lasted several days and left 19 people dead. For the occupation of this extensive area of favelas in Rio’s North Zone in November 2010, Beltrame enlisted the support of the military with its heavy equipment (the ar-

moured vehicles of the *Fusileiros Navais*, the marines) because the *Complexo do Alemão* was seen as the headquarters of the strongest and most heavily armed of the three drug factions of Rio, the *Comando Vermelho* (Red Command). In contrast, the occupation of the equally large set of favelas in *Rocinha*, in the South Zone, home base of the *Amigos dos Amigos* (Friends of Friends) faction, went more smoothly. According to Beltrame, ‘The result was fantastic. In less than two hours, *Rocinha* was fully occupied without a single shot, and the inhabitants of *Vidigal* moved about the community in tranquillity’ (p. 160). This quote is illustrative for Beltrame’s message: pacification is a success because the occupations are well-planned and organized, with minimal (or no) violence, enthusiastically embraced by the residents that welcome the return of legal state control in the communities; apparently, there are no social or political obstacles worth mentioning. As such, Beltrame’s testimony stands in sharp contrast to that of Luis Eduardo Soares’ (2000) detailed and critical political examination of his own failure as subsecretary of public security during Anthony Garotinho’s governorship (1999-2002) of Rio de Janeiro.

Beltrame pays much less attention to the difficulties of sustaining pacification. Although the book contains some interesting inside and personal views on police corruption and the rise of militias, a balanced, let alone critical assessment of pacification will not be found in its pages. This is no surprise since the book was published while Beltrame was still in office; one could not expect the secretary to abandon his own trope of the restoration of the legal state by determined political leadership and innovative policing to the benefit of the long neglected communities, certainly not in a crucial election year. Beltrame downplays the risk of renewed police corruption and violence and new, more hidden forms of coercion by the traffickers. In fact, this appears to be occurring in *Complexo do Alemão* and *Rocinha* recently. For this reason, Vianna, in a critical column (2014) states that Beltrame’s testimony is not only coming too soon but also ‘collides with the facts’.

The volume organized by André Rodrigues, Raíza Siqueira and Mauricio Lissovski (2012), based on extensive field research and published by the prestigious research institute ISER (*Instituto de Estudos da Religião*), does make an attempt to provide a comprehensive, albeit early, assessment of pacification. The volume is somewhat heterogeneous but this helps to convey a sense of the complexities and challenges of pacification. Project coordinators Rodrigues and Siqueira’s extensive opening article presents an overview of the findings that comes close to a balance of achievements, difficulties and challenges of (the first three years of) pacification. They argue that the principal achievement of pacification is, true to the programme’s name, the end of open violence: no more gang confrontations, repressive police incursions, or public display of heavy firearms in the communities. In tune with the dominant symbolic arsenal of the pacification programme (that of ‘ending a state of war’ and restoring legitimate state control, using terms like ‘invasion’ and ‘occupation’ and practises like hoisting the Brazilian flag in occupied favelas), Rodrigues and Si-

queira call this the ‘cease fire’ (p. 15). This has not only brought down the number of casualties but has also allowed the restoration of the freedom of movement of residents and outsiders. The pacification opened the door to a large number of state agencies and NGOs that seek to provide collective goods and services. In the long run, this could contribute to a process of ‘reconciliation’ between favela residents and the police.

Here, however, some of the main short-term obstacles and problems can be found. UPP officers (especially the lower ranks that do the actual community patrolling) and residents live in uneasy co-existence from which distrust is far from absent. Police officers have to get used to the daily interaction with favelados and have to come to terms with a citizens’ rights approach to public order and law enforcement, against the grain of the dominant frame of armed combat prevailing within the PMERJ (Military Police of the State of Rio de Janeiro) at large. Residents, in turn, resent the frequent interrogations and checks by police officers while going about their business in the community. Another key critical issue addressed by the research presented in the volume is the tendency that the UPP turns into a *pars pro toto* of governance in the communities, without the timely introduction of mechanisms for civic governance and community participation.

The other chapters of the volume elaborate, in considerable detail, various aspects of pacification and the functioning of the UPPs: the role of resident associations and relations of UPP with favela inhabitants, the controversial issue of whether or not *bailes funk* should be banned, the influence of evangelical churches and pastors (in the favela of Batan), the regulation (or not) of informal local transportation (the *mototaxis*), the impact on the security of women, the rationale behind the UPP social programme, and diagnosis of specific communities such as Morro da Providência, located in downtown Rio de Janeiro. The overall drift of the findings and interpretations presented by the research teams that contributed to this volume is positive. Pacification is considered to be an important experiment that requires not only further programmatic fine-tuning but also perseverance.

Conclusion

It can be questioned, however, whether fine-tuning and perseverance sufficient to overcome the vulnerability of pacification. Is it, indeed, a ‘considerable gamble’, as McCann (2014, p. 190) calls it? The pacification programme suffers from outside pressure (from politicians, impatient publics, extra-legal armed actors) and internal tensions (within the police force as a whole and inside the communities that the UPP are policing). Will pacification avoid the risk of being ‘... perpetuated as a mode of favela control, reinforcing the separation between favela and formal city’ as McCann (2014, p. 192) rightly observes? Or will it contribute to a long term paradigm shift in which the physical and socio-economic insertion of favelas in the urban fabric of Rio (and other

Brazilian cities) will be followed by political integration and sociocultural recognition of favelados as gente?

What these four books tell us about the recent development of Rio's favelas is that they have been changing considerably yet continue to reproduce and represent the fractured nature of city and society. Material poverty and spatial marginality are not the determining factors of these fault lines. In many favelas, overall living standards and the quality of the urban environment have been improved. The return to democracy has consolidated the favelas as important political spaces. Yet, the escalation of violence has turned these spaces into wastelands, giving new meaning to the 'marginality' of the favelas and the encapsulation of favelados in exclusion and stigma. Perlman and McCann uncover the social and political mechanisms at work but express hope that improved governance and the demonstrated resilience of favela dwellers may turn the tide. Rodrigues, Siqueira, and Lissovski, and in his way Beltrame as well, show that, despite the apparent success of pacification, turning back the spectre of violence and insecurity is fraught with uncertainty. The central element of this uncertainty is the difficulty in connecting top-down efforts at state-making to grassroots perceptions of citizen-state relations and social inclusion. Here, I think, lies the key to understanding the future of the favelas: how can a sustained struggle for inclusive citizenship be based on the social, political and cultural resources of the communities and their residents, so as to keep the violence away and bring down the social, cultural and moral divides between *morro* and *asfalto*? In the short run, impending regime change (gubernatorial elections in October 2014) and the uncertainties as to the post-2016 Olympics sustainability of pacification will be worth watching. In the long run, Rio's favelas will continue to be an important signifier of the degree to which Brazil's transformation brings security, social advancement, justice, dignity, and citizenship to – using Waqquants (2008) term – its 'urban outcasts'.

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