

Book Review

JANICE PERLMAN, 2010. FAVELA: FOUR DECADES OF LIVING ON THE EDGE IN RIO DE JANEIRO. NEW YORK: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS.

Maria Scarlet do Carmo

In this book the author discusses her experience over forty years (1968-2008) of systematically observing residents of low income communities (“favelas”) in Rio de Janeiro, by way of some 2.500 interviews with residents and ex-residents. These interviews covered: the way they lived, their wishes, aspirations dreams, and expectations regarding life in the “favela”, and changes which took place, such as social advance. In addition to field observations, Janice (the author) reports on her contacts with several Brazilian intellectuals involved in social affairs, such as Ruth Cardoso (late wife of ex-President Cardoso), Carlos Lessa, Alba Zaluar, Lu Peterson, Sergio Besserman, Herbert de Souza, among other influential authors involved with poverty studies in Brazil.

The city chosen for this study-with the largest percentage of urban dwellers living in “favelas”- is unique because these favelas were severely impacted by significant unemployment resulting from: de-industrialization, the move of the nation’s capital to Brasília, loss to São Paulo of its standing as the foremost city in commerce, economic, financial, cultural and intellectual affairs. The book shows how favela families succeeded or failed to advance socially, how the political context (which the author touches on longitudinally) related to the rise of ever present violence in its different manifestations. While in the 60’s police and politicians (and their tactics to promote “social cleansing”) were the elements most feared, in the 80’s and 90’s drug traffic takes this place. In fact “fear” is a constant factor highlighted in the renditions of life in the favela. In the 60’s and 70’s, the interviewed residents feared that their homes and communities would be demolished. Starting in the 80’s, the fear was of losing their lives or of their children, either through execution by narco-traffickers or accidentally in the armed confrontation between criminals and the police, or in the fights among gangs.

The author asserts that violence trails poverty and that local government became concerned with favelas, not because of poverty, but because of the spill-over of violence: first through police interventions, and later by way of government programs concerned with urbanization (as confirmed in the favelas visited in the last decade). The book has twenty chapters and 412 pages, organized in four sections. In the first one the historical

Copyright: © 2013 Maria Scarlet do Carmo. Copyright for this article is retained by the authors, with first publication rights granted to the International Public Management Review (IPMR). All journal content, except where otherwise noted, is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License. By virtue of their appearance in this open-access journal, articles are free to use, with proper attribution, in educational and other non-commercial settings.

Corresponding Author: scarlet.carmo@fgv.br

origins of the favelas is laid out as a consequence of the urbanization trend in different regions, and the impact of the favelas. In the following section the author goes over her experience in each of the three favelas covered in greater depth by the study both longitudinal and inter-generationally. It covers their history, uniqueness and the impact on each of them of: expropriation, de-industrialization, haphazard and disorderly growth. In the third section Janice focuses on a few key topics. In the third section the author selects some key issues such as marginality, exclusion, illicit drugs, erosion of social capital, security, injustice, which always come up when the subject is favelas and the people who live in them. The fourth section deals with globalization and its consequences, as well as urbanization strategies by governments versus investments in social development and citizenship.

Each of the three favelas studied reflects unique experiences, inherent in the geography or landscape where they are located. All however, share factors such as discrimination, marginality and migration to other regions –generally to other states offering higher salaries– in search of better living conditions. Those living in favelas, according to the book, are not portrayed as individuals marginalized from society, but integrated to it in an asymmetric way, as they give more than they receive, such as their work, loyalty to the system but without full benefits from its goods and services.

They are seen as people that live in stigmatized areas, excluded from government protection, with great inequalities, amidst well organized drug trafficking networks and subject to the excesses of a poorly paid police force and government indifference to their plight.

The ideology of marginality, with its moralist narrative based on victim/guilty dichotomy, according to Janice, would cover up the inability of the system to provide minimally acceptable living conditions to a vast group of the population at large. When labeled as marginal favela residents would end up blaming themselves for their problems, internalizing the belief that their shortcomings are fruit of their ignorance, incompetence and lack of ability. It is due to this state of mind that their way of improving their lot is through the education of their children. It is not by accident that the author, at the start of her book, refers to a family member of a key interviewee emphasizing his educational and career achievements.

Dr. Maria Scarlet do Carmo is a consultant at FGV/Projetos, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Email: scarlet.carmo@fgv.br

About IPMR

IPMR The International Public Management Review (IPMR) is the electronic journal of the International Public Management Network (IPMN). All work published in IPMR is double blind reviewed according to standard academic journal procedures.

The purpose of the International Public Management Review is to publish manuscripts reporting original, creative research in the field of public management. Theoretical, empirical and applied work including case studies of individual nations and governments, and comparative studies are given equal weight for publication consideration.

IPMN The mission of the International Public Management Network is to provide a forum for sharing ideas, concepts and results of research and practice in the field of public management, and to stimulate critical thinking about alternative approaches to problem solving and decision making in the public sector.

IPMN includes over 1300 members representing about one hundred different countries, both practitioners and scholars, working in all aspects of public management. IPMN is a voluntary non-profit network and membership is free.

ISSN 1662-1387