Favelas

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In common usage, the terms *slum*, *shantytown*, *bidonville*, and *favela* all seem to designate a housing settlement lacking basic urban services and infrastructure. However, the term *favela* has some peculiarities that demand a somewhat different approach.

In Brazilian cities, favelas shape local economic, political, and social dynamics. Even if it were possible to distinguish the "formal" from the "informal" areas of the city, the traditional distinctions that are generally used to characterize the favela do not necessarily apply. First, the idea that favelas are exclusively a space of illegality is not completely correct, as a vast number of settlements have been formalized in some way or another. Second, urban services are not entirely absent from all households: most have access to electricity, water, and other utilities. Third, materials used in construction are not always precarious: even though wood and tin are used in some cases, most houses are built (or are constantly being modified or improved) with resistant materials such as cement and bricks. Fourth, favelas are not unruled areas beyond the reach of the state or market forces: as a matter of fact, these settlements are influenced by the real estate market, and, state actors and institutions are in fact able to enforce the law and to regulate services and utilities. Fifth, favelas are not homogeneous neighborhoods of chronic poverty or misery. On the contrary, there is a wide range of incomes among households in these settlements that defines significant socioeconomic differences within – and among – communities. As Janice Perlman (2010) argues, the only continuum that separates the favela from the rest of the city is the historically rooted stigma associated with its residents. Indeed, Perlman's work demonstrates how the urban poor are, in reality, deeply integrated into the local economies – albeit through strong asymmetric power relations.

BIRTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF BRAZILIAN FAVELAS

The birth and development of the Brazilian favelas – or *morros* (hills) as they are also referred to – is the product of and fostered by the economic interests of the local elites, regional conflicts, economic market trends, and, finally, since the late nineteenth century, by the inconsistent approach taken by the state to issues of urbanization.

The first of these communities was established around 1897 in Rio de Janeiro: after defeating a popular uprising (War of the Canudos) in Bahia (a northeastern state), a group of federal soldiers returned to Rio de Janeiro and occupied an area up in the hills, by the city. The government had failed to pay them, and the homeless soldiers ended up settling down and creating a new community: Morro Favela. *Favela* is the name of a plant that grows in the region of Bahia, where the soldiers had fought. Today, this specific community is known as favela Providência and is but one of nearly a thousand favelas in Rio de Janeiro.

The former soldiers were not the first in Brazil's history to form a community of squatters: during the early nineteenth century slaves fleeing the city would occasionally

organize in free towns called *quilombos*. Thereafter, the abolition of slavery in 1888 had repercussions on the inception and expansion of the favelas in all Brazilian cities. In fact, initially they were mostly populated by former slaves arriving from rural areas searching for work in the fast-growing metropolis.

It is therefore difficult to regard favelas as ghettos, intended as places "to which the subjects or victims of the involuntary segregation process are sent" (Gans 2008, 353), not only because this analytical category has never been popular in Brazil (Monteiro 2008), but also because, even if constrained by economic factors, favela residents have always demonstrated strong and active forms of agency.

Moreover, the areas where the first favelas arose were initially of little interest to the real estate market, due to the difficult accessibility of the hillsides of Rio de Janeiro. However, they were strategically close to middle-class neighborhoods and factories, which, for the favelas' residents, meant easy access to work opportunities in the industrial or service sectors. This workforce was not assimilated as traditional labor, with employment rights and union representation: on the contrary, the population of the favelas quickly became a low-cost, reserve labor force, often lacking formal contracts and exposed to risky work conditions. It was precisely from the interdependence of labor and accessible housing that these settlements gained force, as favelas guaranteed easily accessible income opportunities, albeit informal and unstable, to former slaves and to the underprivileged fleeing from rural areas.

FAVELA: OFFICIAL DEFINITIONS THROUGH TIME

It was during the 1920s that the term "favela" was borrowed from the settlement of Morro Favela to indicate, generically, an informally occupied space within the urban landscape, characterized by poverty, scarcity of resources, and social exclusion. A couple of decades later, the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, its acronym in Portuguese) began to recognize and analyze the favela as a socially and geographically relevant phenomenon in Brazil.

There is no established consensus over what exactly defines a favela. Definitions proposed by both scholarly and policy-making institutions have usually focused on what these neighborhoods are "lacking," rather than their actual characteristics. Indeed, there is a generalized trend that characterizes a favela as an anomic territory – that is, the product of the absence of money, of education, of police, and, in general, of the state (Motta 2014, 151). In this regard, the Brazilian phenomenon is approached in the same way as analysis, on an international level, of "slums" in general – mainly being described as lacking the following:

(1) durable housing (a permanent structure providing protection from extreme climatic conditions); (2) sufficient living area (no more than three people sharing a room); (3) access to improved water (water that is sufficient, affordable and can be obtained without extreme effort); (4) access to improved sanitation facilities (a private toilet, or a public one shared with a reasonable number of people); and (5) secure tenure (de facto or de jure secure tenure status and protection against forced eviction). (UN-Habitat 2010, 33)

In 1950 the IBGE, which is also the authority responsible for conducting the national census in Brazil, gave the first official and institutional definition of the term "favela," mainly by articulating its lack of resources. According to the IBGE, favelas are human agglomerates possessing totally or partially the following characteristics: (a) minimum proportions: 50 or more residences or structures; (b) housing: sheds and shacks of rustic

appearance, mainly built with tin, zinc, and similar materials; (c) legal status of the structures: constructions without license, deeds, or registry, built on land owned by an unknown or unidentified third party; (d) public utilities: a partial or total lack of sanitation, electricity, potable water, or sewers; (e) urbanization: nonurbanized area, lacking formal streets, postal codes, licensing (Guimarães 1953).

However, realities within the favelas seem to challenge the construct and definition proposed by the IBGE. For instance, the discretionary choice of including settlements of 50 or more houses seems to exclude several other informal settlements; land use and property ownership fall under a wide range of juridical situations; many communities are partially or totally urbanized. Finally, when the IBGE first published its definition of the phenomenon, in 1950, not all houses in favelas were shacks. This is even more true today, as most structures in favelas are actually built from cement and bricks.

Revisions by the IBGE in 2010 maintain many elements of the 1950 original definition and, furthermore, describe favelas as "subnormal" agglomerates (*aglomerados subnormais)*. Semantically, this framework imposes the socially constructed idea of a normative city, in which any form of self-built or informal construction is designated as abnormal.

DEMOGRAPHY AND URBANIZATION IN BRAZILIAN FAVELAS

The geographical location of favelas tends to vary depending on the city: while favelas in Rio de Janeiro are mostly located in the hillsides, in Fortaleza they are predominantly near the coastline. In São Paulo and Brasília, they are located at the periphery and, in the latter cases, are commonly referred to as "satellite cities" (*cidades satelites)*.

According to the last Brazilian national census (2010), 6 percent of the population lives in a favela; this converts to about 11 million inhabitants nationwide. In Rio de Janeiro, a city of approximately 6 million inhabitants, the figure rises to 23 percent of the total population. The percentage of favela residents diverges enormously in different Brazilian metropolises. Moreover, the size of the favelas varies significantly as well, the largest being Rocinha in Rio de Janeiro, with 69,161 residents, and the second largest Sol Nacente in the satellite city of Ceilândia near Brasília, with 56,483 inhabitants. These communities also rank among the largest shantytowns/favelas in Latin America.

In other regions of the world, when a slum is urbanized (integrated into the urban fabric through the development of infrastructure, such as roads, improvements in housing, and services as water, electricity, and sewer systems), it is redefined as an urban neighborhood, and ceases to be classified as a slum.

The growth of the urban population, due to internal migrations flows from rural areas, has deeply affected the socioeconomic dynamics within Latin American cities. In fact, Latin America has the highest rate of urbanization compared to other regions of the world; this reality has entailed the ubiquitous proliferation of low income neighborhoods or informal settlements (UN-Habitat 2012). From Mexico DF to La Paz, Bogotá, and Lima, policy-makers have made efforts to formalize these communities. As in low income neighborhoods in other countries of the region, Brazilian favelas pose complex challenges to local authorities regarding sanitation, health, security, and urbanization.

According to UN-Habitat (2010), in the period from 2000 to 2010, roughly 227 million people in the Global South moved from slums into formal housing, even though, as a matter of fact, most of them actually remained in the same settlement, which

was simply urbanized and integrated into the formal city. These data also show that 30 million of the 227 million are Latin American. In Brazil alone, slum residents diminished by 16 percent during this period.

Indeed, efforts to reduce severe social inequalities have led to public policies and, regarding urbanization issues in particular, to initiatives aimed at tackling formalization and security. For instance, formalization efforts have ensured access to basic household utilities, such as electricity, water supply, and improved sanitation (UN-Habitat 2012). The "pacification" program in Rio de Janeiro, which involves placing permanent police units in some favelas that were previously ruled by drug gangs, is an example of a public security strategy targeting low income neighborhoods. There has been a shift from the sporadic, violent, and repressive incursions that overwhelmingly characterized the "war on drugs" to, allegedly, a new rhetoric of community and proximity policing strategies.

In order to comprehend what a Brazilian favela is, we should understand that even when one of these communities becomes partially or totally urbanized, it can still be classified as a favela, a fact that sets it apart from other forms of informal settlements that exist in other parts of the world. According to the Municipal Housing Secretariat (*Secretaria Municipal de Habitação*) of Rio de Janeiro, an urbanized favela is one that:

> has undergone integral urbanizing programs, such as Favela-Barrio (PROAP), Barrinho, Programa de Aceleração do Crescimento – PAC, and similar projects, which guarantee basic infrastructure, public equipment and services, and satisfactory levels of accessibility, or that through the efforts of the population and other diverse public actions, has achieved a satisfactory urbanization level. (Cavallieri and Vial 2012, 3)

By way of example, the IBGE has established that nearly 20 percent of the population in Rio de Janeiro lives in "urbanized favelas."

A historical analysis shows how various governments have improved both infrastructure and services, especially during periods of political campaigns and elections, in order to acquire public support and votes. In some cases, they attempted to regulate the housing situation, by issuing deeds and delivering basic services such as water, electricity, and sewerage as well as the necessary infrastructure so that these neighborhoods could be redefined as partially or totally urbanized (Figure 1).

On the other hand, in order to understand how the IBGE's definition does not fully describe this social reality, it is important to acknowledge that not all favelas are the product of "irregular occupations." On the contrary, some were once formal residential communities that were later catalogued as favelas, after undergoing unregulated growth due to a proliferation of informal constructions. This progressive informalization was adopted as the key metric to justify this recategorization. Some of the current favelas actually began as government housing projects that later expanded, unregulated, such as Cidade de Deus in Rio de Janeiro. This community gained national and international recognition through the 2002 movie *City of God*.

INEQUALITY AND SOCIOECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS OF FAVELA RESIDENTS

If a favela is not defined by its level of urbanization, neither should it be by the income of its residents. In the United States, a recent debate on "concentrated poverty," defined as neighborhoods "where at least 40 percent of the population lives below the poverty line" (Gans 2010, 82), explored whether such concentration is the cause of social exclusion and of so-called antisocial behavior. In Brazil, there has been no attempt to identify a precise

Figure 1   Complexo do Alemão, Rio de Janeiro (source: photography by Sebastian Saborio)

percentage of poverty that that might be construed as socially harmful or that identifies, in and of itself, an inhabited urban territory as favela.

Even if it is true that most favela residents live in poverty and lack resources, when compared to the urban middle class they are not a homogeneous social group. This has been particularly evident at the national level in recent years, as income and consumption capacity have increased, in particular thanks to better access to credit for significant segments of this population. This is partially the result of social policies aimed at reducing the large economic divides that have characterized the country to date.

The assumption that favelas are synonymous with poverty is false. As a matter of fact, the economic conditions of their residents are more complicated and nuanced. The association between favela and urban marginality is also not always true, not only because of a question of scale (for example, residents of

Rio de Janeiro's favelas represent about one in five of the total population – by definition not a "marginal" figure), but also because they are far from marginal with respect to the social and economic dynamics of the city. Residents of the favelas have always been a staple in the cities' labor market and in their local economies, albeit mainly on an informal basis.

Considering that 20 percent of favelas in the city of Rio de Janeiro are "urbanized," or "assimilated into the urban fabric," this means that the remaining 80 percent cannot count on an acceptable level of basic services, and are far from being integrated into the "formal city" or "asphalt," as it is commonly called in Brazil. Not all favelas experience the same level of urbanization, access to sanitation, water, electricity, and other basic infrastructure and state services; the implication is that, since the residents of these areas do not share a homogeneous experience, they should not be considered homogeneous

groups – there are instead fragmented and varied communities, both within the same as well as among the different favelas.

Notwithstanding their varied nature, the sheer scale of the phenomenon and the large number of favela residents clearly shows that Brazil is among those countries in the world with the highest levels of social inequalities. This is even more conspicuous in cities such as Rio de Janeiro, where the central location of the favelas, and their proximity to middle- and upper-class neighborhoods, makes the divide visible in the urban landscape.

Local and national nongovernmental organizations, as well as residents' associations, have been quite active within favelas, mainly tackling issues of culture, citizenship, human rights, and violence, among others. Favelas are also incubators for popular culture and artistic expressions such as samba, funk, and capoeira that express a sense of identity and pride in Afro-Brazilian heritage. Residents' associations have always played an important role inside favelas, from organizing resistance to government evictions to mobilizing grassroots initiatives to autonomously providing services and infrastructure, as well as mediating disputes between neighbors (De Sousa Santos 1988).

FAVELAS: PUBLIC POLICIES AND SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS

Over the last few decades, the public perception of favelas as spaces controlled by criminal networks has progressively consolidated. They are seen as lacking state control, or as lawless enclaves. Indeed, this imaginary of the favelas as outlawed territories can be traced to the very beginning of their history.

Just three years after Morro da Favela settlement was established, police authorities had already branded it as a "place of deserters, thieves and soldiers" and indicated two major

problems with the settlement: sanitation and security; they specifically spoke about its existence as a public morality issue (Zaluar and Alvito 2006, 9). Evidently, the idea of a pathological space needing urban cleansing has long shaped the social representation of Brazilian favelas. At the time, the authorities thought about fencing off the hillsides that they perceived as the most socially dangerous. The government surrounded and planned, unsuccessfully, to remove the Morro da Favela a few years after its establishment. These attempts to eradicate this and other newly forming favelas in the city would continue during the ensuing decades, officially motivated by hygiene, security, and moral concerns. Later governments would continue in their attempts to remove and eradicate this and other favelas in the city, in what was later called a "war on the favelas."

The industrial consolidation of the southeast region of Brazil after World War II also had a direct impact on the expansion of favelas. And even though their residents started to be acknowledged, the state and local governments subsequently tried to either remove and eradicate them or assimilate them into the urban fabric by extending services.

In later years, as the dictatorship established its control over the country, the regime formally considered favelas as illegal squatter settlements, and maintained a policy of removal. Accordingly, during the 1960s the government effectively eradicated dozens of favelas, which in turn displaced a population of thousands to other parts of the city; meanwhile, the ongoing rural migration did not actually decrease the percentage of favela residents. In other words, as established favelas were being eradicated and their inhabitants forcefully removed, newly arrived disenfranchised persons settled into favelas themselves.

Why did all the efforts of removing, cleaning, and integrating the favelas into the city

fail? According to Zaluar and Alvito (2006), it was because, for local authorities, they were simply not worth the trouble. In Rio de Janeiro, it was not until 1927 that favelas actually garnered the state's attention and intervention, due to the "remodelling, extension and embellishment of the city" envisioned and detailed by the French urban planner Alfrend Agache. As persons who enjoyed "unlimited individual freedoms" in his opinion, residents of the favelas created serious issues of social order, security, and hygiene, not to mention a serious aesthetic blight to the city. Therefore, he argued, they needed to be removed from the urban setting (Zaluar and Alvito 2006, 11–12).

Despite the economic utility of favela residents to the middle and upper classes, from their inception these communities were considered the antithesis of the "formal" city, the latter connoting "hygiene, labour, ethics, progress and civilization" (Burgos 2005, 190). In other words, favelas have always been perceived as a problem to be solved (Valladares 2005), a menace to the social order, and a refuge for criminals (Zaluar and Alvito 2006).

The precarious living conditions and scarce hygiene due to the lack of basic services have become gradually associated with the residents of the favelas, crystalized into a characterization of the *favelados* as lacking not only economic virtues but also moral ones. Much like how black and Hispanic poor communities in the United States have been depicted as undeserving underclasses, characterized by deviant behavioral patterns (Gans 1990), moral deprivation has also been associated with favela residents, who are often referred to as "favelados" in a pejorative sense.

Janice Perlman has argued (2010) that the urbanization of favelas does not necessarily translate into the social integration of its residents. According to her, the stigma of being a resident of a favela is stronger than other factors such as race, gender, and age.

However, these latter elements are closely intertwined and increase their stigmatization, since most favela residents are black or mulatto, and their ethnicity therefore attracts an additional form of stigmatization. Being a favela resident is equivalent to being socially excluded, regardless of race and level of urbanization of the favela. In other words, urbanized favelas continue to be favelas, as their residents continue to be discriminated.

In Brazilian public opinion, favelas are par excellence places of disorder. Over the past centuries, the favela has haunted urban and social representations of Brazilian cities, being conceived as disease-ridden, a generator of moral epidemics, a refuge for the idle and criminal (*malandros*) black enemies of hard honest work and a promiscuous population without morality.

Defined mostly by listing what it is not, as opposed to what it actually is, the imaginary of the favela reveals how urban scarcity is still strongly associated with lack of material and moral order. It has provoked both humanitarian sentiment but also fear and othering, where the residents of the favela become the scapegoat of the city's problems.

To this day, the middle and upper classes are ambivalent in their feelings toward favela residents, and classify them according to stereotypes: the figure of the honest worker, the average favela resident (*morador*), but also the bandit (*bandido*), the criminal, and the drug-dealer (*traficante*). Indeed, the stereotypes and cultural imagery associated with the favela and its residents are highly polarized and controversial. The plethora of representations include the historically rooted ideas of health, security, and moral concerns, condensed in the image of the favela as a space dominated by criminal networks.

In Brazil, in many ways the imaginary of the favela has shaped most of the public debate around criminality, and, specifically, around urban violence. Not only have

they evolved throughout time, but, more importantly, the collective representations of favelas have changed dramatically. Indeed, they are no longer perceived as a social problem confined to their own territory but are now felt to be a threat to the rest of society as a whole.

Although favelas are often fought over by different gangs (*fações*), and are often the setting where they settle their disputes, the communities should not be defined solely as a function of these turf wars. Many favelas have experienced periods of "neutrality," and many others have not always been controlled by gangs; others still have recently been taken over by militias (usually former or active police, military, and firemen) who extort payment from local business owners and residents on the pretense of providing a "security service" to keep drug gangs in check and sell illegally a range of basic services. The emergence of heavily armed drug traffic as well as militias in many favelas during the past decades has been the focus of policy-makers and scholars.

Favela residents – specifically black young men – are more subject to police actions and have a higher risk of being killed by the police. However, establishing reliable indicators of violence within favela territories is still a challenge. On one hand, statistics are gathered using territorial subdivisions that do not necessarily correspond to a favela's layout. On the other, data sets are managed at a regional level – rather than nationally – and local public security institutions may not necessarily use the same standards in their analysis.

Persistent efforts to "integrate" the favelas into the formal city have been infrastructure and security related. Nevertheless, the favelas remain a place of otherness and distance, mainly known for their lack of infrastructure, services, and revenue. A great amount of literature has focused on urban violence associated with favelas, especially in Rio de

Janeiro, not only because it is the birthplace of the original favela, but also because of their intricate relationship to the urban fabric of the city.

ACADEMIC APPROACHES, PERSPECTIVES, AND DEBATES OVER BRAZILIAN FAVELAS

As explained above, favelas cannot be understood solely by the resources they lack. But, what then defines a favela? According to Perlman (2010) it is its *visibility*. It is a favela's morphological characteristics that distinguish it from the "asphalt." Favelas' infrastructure shows the valorized and non-valorized areas within the urban landscape (Figure 2).

Favelas have been said to be "informal" settlements that do not follow the traditional forms of urban planning. This is to say that the majority are "self-built neighborhoods," meaning that they are a direct result of the physical labor of those who inhabit them. While the formal city is composed of ordinary construction that follows modern urban aesthetics, the favela is visibly disorganized and evidently not planned. As Perlman stated (2010, 3), "the formal city is rectilinear, the favela curvilinear." Within some favelas the paved roads are intertwined with narrow streets and steep stairs, such that their size is not always wide enough for vehicles. It is not always possible to identify where one house ends and another begins.

Rooftops are flat, which allows for further construction when financial conditions permit. Housing is often a priority for many residents who seek expansion in order to guarantee an additional house for a family member. Construction in favelas is often carried out by owners and residents, neighbors and friends. The aesthetic of the favela does not, therefore, follow the standards and parameters of the formal city. A bird's eye

Figure 2 Santa Marta favela and Botafogo neighborhood, Rio de Janeiro (source: photography by Sebastian Saborio)

view shows multiform agglomerates built with ochre bricks and cement in plain sight, given the fact that most residents do not paint the exterior of their homes. These visible traits are the images around which the stigmatization of the favela and its residents are mobilized. To identify and categorize them based on their visible characteristics may not lead to a profound comprehension of their peculiarities, but it does prove to be more efficient than the traditional approach that was based on simply cataloguing their deficiencies.

So far, is clear that the common perception of favelas tends to trivialize problems that arise from socioeconomic, racial, and geographic inequalities. And while these territories may appear marginal within the broader urban fabric, they are utterly engrained in the economic, social, and political life of the city. The dichotomy between "favela" and "city" or "morro" and "asfalto" seems more to reflect a historically rooted

"othering" process than an actual physical reality. Colonialism's legacy is to have articulated symbolic divisions that are spatially or geographically reflected in the case of favelas. To this day, the state seems to operate along a very specific postcolonialist mentality, where its effort to integrate and urbanize favelas is essentially construed as a mission to "civilize" them.

For Perlman (2010), favelados are integrated in the urban fabric through asymmetrical power relations. According to her, favela residents are marginalized and exploited. Marcia Pereira Leite (2005) agrees with this perspective, pointing out that, to this day, a significant portion of their employers in the city do not give them access to their full civil rights.

The association between favela and informality is also widespread. In fact, institutional and academic debates have framed their analysis along the lines of dichotomies such as city

and favela, legal and illegal, formal and informal. However, recently there have been efforts to develop other interpretative frameworks that grasp the complexity of the relationships, regulations, legalities, state laws, and technologies pertaining to favela residents.

According to Machado da Silva (2012), the sociohistorical meaning of favelas has changed throughout time, not only because of the evolution of the object itself, but also as a symbolic construction. Regardless, the term in Brazil is, and always has been, much more than a simple synonym for slum, or a shorthand term used to indicate an informal or self-built neighborhood. Its history and representation encapsulate the complexities of a postcolonial nation, which, to this day, create geographical, social, and racial borders, and reproduce specific logics of exclusion and otherness.

SEE ALSO: Urban Poverty; Urban Morphology/Urban Form; Urban Landscape/Urban Form; Urban Inequalities; Squatter Settlements; Spatial Segregation; Social Exclusion; Slums and Shanties; Rio de Janeiro; Latin American Cities; Informal Settlements; Global South/North; Drugs and Violence; Divided Cities; Cities in Developing Countries

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ABSTRACT

Favelas is the word used in Brazil to designate areas commonly known as slums. However, the term suggests more than territories defined by scarcity, lack of basic services, and poor housing. Favelas expanded as a colonial legacy of slavery and of the growing divide between the urban have and have-nots. Today they are present in most metropolises in the country; although varying in size and location, they shape the urban and social landscape of Brazilian cities. Largely interpreted by simplistic dichotomic categories, such as formal/informal, legal/illegal, security/insecurity, hillside/asphalt, favelas should be analyzed through more comprehensive and historically situated approaches that integrate stigmatization, marginalization, and otherness.

KEYWORDS