The Hill and the Asphalt: A 50-year perspective on informality in Rio de Janeiro

O Morro e o Asfalto[1] *: Cinquenta anos estudando as favelas cariocas*

El Morro y el Asfalto: Cincuenta años estudiando las favelas cariocas

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Abstract

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This article argues that informality is essential to urban vitality and that the ability of the formal sector to function depends upon the labour, consumer strength, social resilience, and intellectual capital of the people considered marginal. Based on the author's 50 years of original fieldwork in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, she takes exception to the much-touted goal of 'Cities without Slums', contending that cities without slums are cities without soul. What should be eradicated is not informality, but poverty, inequality, and exclusion. Her research findings reveal what has changed in the case of Rio's favelas, by following hundreds of families over four generations. She chronicles the evolution of favela policy from hostile to hopeful and back again – with the return of favela removal and the sabotaging of promising upgrading, public safety, and social projects. The result of policies over the last 20 years has been to increase spatial and socio-economic segregation, which in turn, has increased lethal violence. This trend has made vulnerability a chronic condition in informal communities in the south and precarious neighbourhoods in the north, eroding a sense of security and of self. The article concludes with the provocation to go beyond territorial place-based thinking to poverty-based remediation and rights-based approaches including the right to the city and the universal right to dignity for all

Keywords: Favela. Informality. Urban policy. Vulnerability. Lethal violence. Right to the city. Precarious neighborhoods. Squatter settlements. Rio de Janeiro.

[1] The book Informality through Sustainability: Urban Informality Now, edited by Di Raimo, Lehmann, and Melis has 25 chapters by authors from around the world, including Perlman's "The Hill and the Asphalt: a 50-year Perspective on Informality in Rio de Janeiro. Read more: https://www.routledge.com/Informality-through-Sustainability-Urban-Informality-Now/Raimo-Lehmann-Melis/p/book/9780367354770. I would like to thank Guilherme Rocha Formicki for his outstanding work and valuable contribution to this article.

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Resumo

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Este artigo defende que a informalidade é essencial para a vitalidade urbana e que a habilidade de o setor informal funcionar depende da força de trabalho; de consumo; da resiliência social; e do capital intelectual das pessoas consideradas marginais. Com base nos seus 50 anos de trabalho de campo original nas favelas do Rio de Janeiro, a autora discorda da meta tão publicizada de se alcançarem 'Cidades sem Favelas'. Perlman argumenta que cidades sem favelas são cidades sem alma. Para ela, não é a informalidade que deveria ser erradicada, mas a pobreza, desigualdade e a exclusão. As suas conclusões mostram o que mudou no caso das favelas do Rio a partir do acompanhamento de centenas de famílias por quatro gerações. Ela conta a evolução das políticas públicas direcionadas às favelas, que partiram de um estágio hostil a um esperançoso e novamente a uma fase hostil. Essas políticas marcaram o retorno das remoções e a sabotagem de promissores projetos sociais, de urbanização e de promoção da segurança pública. O resultado dessas políticas ao longo dos últimos 20 anos foi o aumento da segregação espacial e socioeconômica, que, por sua vez, aumentou a violência. Essa tendência fez da vulnerabilidade uma condição crônica nas comunidades informais das Zonas Sul e Norte, erodindo a sensação de segurança e de individualidade. O artigo termina com a proposta de se ir além do pensamento de base territorial para aquele baseado na remediação da pobreza e nas abordagens baseadas em direitos, incluindo o direito à cidade e o direito universal à dignidade.

Palavras-chave: favela. Informalidade. Políticas públicas urbanas. Vulnerabilidade. Violência. Direito à cidade. Asentamentos precários. Rio de Janeiro.

Resumen

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Este artículo sostiene que la informalidad es esencial para la vitalidad urbana y que la habilidad del sector informal funcionar depende de la fuerza laboral; del consumo; de la resiliencia social; y del capital intelectual de las personas consideradas marginales. Basándose en sus 50 años de trabajo de campo original en las favelas de Rio de Janeiro, la autora no está de acuerdo con la meta tan publicitada de lograrse 'Ciudades sin Favelas'. Perlman sostiene que ciudades sin favelas son ciudades sin alma. Para ella, no es la informalidad que debería erradicarse, sino la pobreza, desigualdad y la exclusión. Sus conclusiones muestran lo que ha cambiado en el caso de las favelas de Rio desde el monitoreo de cientos de familias por cuatro generaciones. Ella cuenta la evolución de las políticas públicas dirigidas a las favelas, que partieron de una etapa hostil a un esperanzado y nuevamente a una fase hostil. Esas políticas marcaron el regreso de las remociones y el sabotaje de promisorios proyectos sociales,

de urbanización y de promoción de la seguridad pública. El resultado de esas políticas a lo largo de los últimos 20 años ha sido un aumento de la segregación espacial y socioeconómica, que, a su vez, ha aumentado la violencia. Esa tendencia hizo de la vulnerabilidad una condición crónica en las comunidades informales de las Zonas Sur y Norte, erosionando la sensación de seguridad e individualidad. El artículo termina con la propuesta de ir más allá del pensamiento de base territorial hacia al basado en la remediación de la pobreza y enfoques basados en derechos, incluyendo el derecho a la ciudad y el derecho universal a la dignidad.

Palabras clave: favela. Informalidad. Políticas públicas urbanas. Vulnerabilidad. Violencia. Derecho a la ciudad. Asentamientos precarios. Rio de Janeiro.

1. Introduction

In Brazil 13 million people live in informal communities called favelas. They are distinguished from formal communities in colloquial parlance as '*the hill and the asphalt*' *(o morro e o asfalto)*. As with the urban poor worldwide, favela residents are particularly vulnerable to natural and man-made disasters. Due to the extreme density of the communities, their precarious access to water and sanitation and the lack of adequate health care, Covid-19 has hit favelas hard and spread rapidly. When asked about this, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro is reported to have said, *'So what? What do you want me to do?'*

Even before the new coronavirus, the President had broadcasted his disregard for the lives of favela residents he considered dangerous through what has been called his 'extermination policy, stating publicly they should '*die on the streets like cockroaches* [*os caras vão morrer na rua igual barata]'(ISTOÉ, 2019).*[3] Rio State's Governor, Wilson Witzel, exhorted the police *'to aim at their little heads and fire' [vai mirar na cabecinha… e fogo*] (PENNAFORT, 2018). This is only the most extreme expression of 'the war on the poor', which has been consistently hostile to informality in Rio's favelas since their first appearance in 1897.

To quote one favela resident before the new coronavirus,*'our people make the city but do not have the right to enjoy it'* [*'o povo faz a cidade, mas não tem direito de usufruir]*[4].

This article is based on 50 years of primary fieldwork in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro – and on involvement with informal settlements in megacities throughout the world. In Brazilian Portuguese, favelas are colloquially referred to as hills and the distinction between the informal and formal city is indicated as '*the Hill and the Asphalt*' [*O Morro e o Asfalto*]. Most cities have their own affectionate or disparaging

[3]

[4] Author's field notes from meeting of Pastoral da Favelas December 14, 2016.

terms – such as '*pueblos jovenes*' (young towns) in Lima or '*villas de miseria*' (towns of misery) in Buenos Aires. Reference to the *informal sector* applies to both informal settlements and to the informal economy. I have argued elsewhere that both types of informality are essential for the flourishing of urban centers. This article in keeping with the entire volume, addresses primarily the physical territorial side of informality.

2. What is urban informality, after all, and why does it matter?

Today informality is the term of choice to signify shanty towns, squatter settlements, degraded public housing projects, clandestine subdivisions, multiple family use of abandoned office buildings, slums, tenements, and precarious neighbourhoods of various sorts. The term itself has become increasingly useful insofar as each of the terms I listed here is used differently and most have derogatory connotations in one context or another. The use of the term *squatter settlements* is most meaningful in the global south while in the global north the terms that fit better are slums and precarious neighbourhoods.

Specific characteristics used earlier to define squatter settlements have become irrelevant over time as they have improved the quality of their homes, installed urban infrastructure; participated in urban upgrading programs and/or received various forms of certification through payments to electric companies to government certificates of occupancy.

The one constant factor seems to be the absence of formal land title. Frequently – especially in older settlements, the parents or grandparents of the current residents squatted on unwanted land and built up their houses and community over several generations. It represents an ongoing investment of household resources. They are owners of their homes and many have occupancy permits (given by various local and state administrations) but they do not own the land on which their homes were built. The fight for formal title was a major struggle from the mid-60s through the mid-90s in Rio, but in the current configuration residents do not seem to want it. They see it as a financial burden (paying property tax) and a risk factor for gentrification (having legal title making it more appealing to buyers from outside).

Informal settlements are the fastest growing segment of the human population. Writing about *'the urban explosion,' a 'world of cities' or 'the urban age'* is really about the growth of informal settlements. The population of the formal sector is not growing and in some places is actually shrinking. It is now widely known that informal settlements are home to a billion people representing 1/6 of our global population and is expected to double by 2030 and triple, by 2050, reaching 3 billion – one of every three people on the planet.

Neither the state nor the market has the capacity to provide housing to meet this demand, so self-built homes in informal settlements are the only way to house newcomers. The fact that the informal sector has grown faster than the formal sector corroborates this view. For new arrivals informal communities provide a toe-hold in

the city; a stepping-stone to a better life and a source of mutual aid – all of which make the difference between life and death.

Over the past few years I have been reminded of a basic tenant of the Mega-Cities Project, that is, the similarities faced by people in squatter settlements in the global south and 'precarious neighbourhoods', in the global north. Precarious neighbourhoods is the term of choice to signify slums, tenements, shanty towns, squatter settlements, degraded public housing projects, clandestine subdivisions and informal neighbourhoods in highly industrialised countries. It is useful insofar as more specific terms – slums; invasions, and social housing projects have a derogatory connotation. They faced the same type of exclusion, stigma, and vulnerability as marginalised communities the world over.

There is a tendency in both cases to *conflate precarious neighbourhoods with precarious people.* Once an area is perceived as precarious, the people living there are seen as undeserving (BRIDGES, 2016), dirty and dangerous. Public policy and planning decisions flow from that perception. This is what I find so devastating – the mindset that a significant number of people in the city don't count, don't matter and don't deserve respect.

Vulnerability is a chronic condition of existence and constant stress associated with informality, marginality and precarious neighbourhoods in four ways:

1. **Vulnerability due to *insecure occupancy of territory***. Uncertainty and fear are present in conditions running the gamut from homeless people living on the streets, in parks, or under bridges (as seen in New York City); to occupation of patches of grass in the middle of traffic circles (as seen in Paris); to living on construction sites (as seen in Bombay); to sharing abandoned office buildings (as seen in Johannesburg) to social housing projects and squatter settlements across Latin America Asia, and Africa
2. **Vulnerability due to the *instability or impermanence of the dwellings***. Construction materials are often taken from the garbage: scrap metal that becomes burning hot in the sun; plastic sheeting that becomes torn in wind and rain; packed mud, lean-tos and tents or even, as in the case of pavement dwellers in India, cloth saris strung on poles on the sidewalk (using the wall behind them as the back of the house). What these have in common is precariousness and danger for the inhabitants
3. **Vulnerability of *entire neighbourhoods***, which may be due to: 1) *deterioration* due to neglected maintenance, lack of urban services, natural disaster, or population succession; *2) partially or totally demolished; or 3) abandoned* due to economic and social transformations
4. **Vulnerability *exacerbated by public policy***. The intention driving the programs may be rationalised as 'improving living conditions', 'regularizing land use'; protecting the environmental' or 'opening space for the public good'. In any case, the end result is generally expelling the poor to the urban fringe

Regardless of the circumstances, the cruel reality is that *precariousness erodes not only one's* ***sense of security*** but also one's **sense of self.** Families and individuals are put under constant stress. Their lives and the meaning they imbue to their home and community can be ripped apart at any time without justification. Decisions are made about them without including them. Health data shows that displacement increases high blood pressure, risk of stroke and heart attack and reduces life expectancy.

3. What was learned? Marginality Disputed

My early research in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro was conducted in 1968 and 1969 at the height of the military dictatorship in Brazil. It was a time when everyone – from leftist students to taxi drivers – thought it was too dangerous to go near the entrance to a favela, much less enter one. I was interested in the impact of urban experience on newly arrived migrants from the countryside. I wanted to know how they managed in the city, given that most arrived with little or no money (having sold everything to afford the trip to the city); that few knew how to read or write; and that only a handful had gone beyond walking distance from their villages.

To do the study I selected one favela from each of the three areas of the city where migrants tended to go: 1) *Catacumba* from the upscale residential South Zone; 2) *Nova Brasília* from the industrial North Zone; and 3) *Vila Operária,* and two small favelas from the municipality *Duque de Caxias* in the *Baixada Fluminense*. I lived for six months in each favela and interviewed 200 people chosen at random (among residents from 16-65 years old) and 50 leaders from each community. I returned in 1973, after *Catacumba* was removed, to find out what had happened and learn about life in the housing projects.

The book resulting from that study in 1976, The Myth of Marginality: Urban Politics and Poverty in Rio de Janeiro,[5] was part of a paradigm shift from seeing squatter settlements as a problem to recognizing them as the solution to a problem; seeing the residents as parasites on the city to recognizing them as a valuable resource. This line of thinking had already been suggested in the work of John Turner, Lisa Peattie, and Anthony Leeds, with whom I studied – and Charles Abrams before them (TURNER, 1972; PEATTIE, 1986; LEEDS, 1971; 1976; 1978; ABRAMS, 1964).

A decade before Charles Abrams, Oscar Lewis had argued against the anti-urban bias in his article 'Urbanization without Breakdown' which took on Robert Redfield's premise of a 'folk-urban continuum' from an idyllic rural life to a depraved urban life (LEWIS, 1952; REDFIELD, 1953). Lewis later postulated a 'Culture of Poverty', a set of beliefs and behaviours passed from generation to generation thereby perpetuating poverty (LEWIS, 1969). William Ryan called this, Blaming the Victim, claiming the poverty trap was structural and not a self-defeating subculture (Ryan, 1971).

[5] The book I am working on now shows how this 'non-personhood' plays out in Rio in the time of the mega-events. It is titled The Importance of Being Gente.

In Brazil at roughly the same time, a body of work on marginality and dependency theory was emerging in the discourse on poverty, inequality, and development. At the height of the military dictatorship (1969) a group of university professors in São Paulo founded CEBRAP – The Brazilian Centre for Analysis and Planning. The group included Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Enzo Faletto, Paulo Singer, Francisco Weffort, Octavio Ianni and Jose Arthur Giannotti.[6] Shortly afterwards, this line of thinking was elaborated in the book, *Authoritarian Brazil,* edited by Al Stepan, which included chapters by Cardoso, Juan Linz, Samuel Morley, Philippe Schmitter, Thomas Skidmore and others (Stephan, 1976).

My research in Rio's favelas examined the stereotypes about favelas against the reality on the ground. I started with a set of questions about the 'Impact of Urban Experience' based on the disputes in the literature of the time. The research results contradicted assumptions that had never been empirically tested or contested. I found that the migrants were not the poorest or most desperate within their village, but the best and the brightest. They were the ones who had the courage and conditions to leave everything behind in search of a better life in the city. In other words, they were *not* the 'bottom of the barrel' but the 'cream of the crop'. And, in political terms, they were not resentful and radical and did not compare their conditions to that of those in the luxury apartment houses around them. Their reference group remained the people back in their villages who were much worse off and without future opportunities open to them. My main conclusions were:

- Favela residents are not marginal to the city but inextricably integrated into it, albeit in an asymmetrical manner detrimental to their own interests
- They contribute their hard work, their high hopes, and their loyalties, but do not benefit from the goods and services of the system
- They are neither economically nor politically marginal, BUT exploited, manipulated, and repressed to maintain the status quo
- They are neither socially or culturally marginal, BUT stigmatised and excluded from a closed class system

In short, favelas are not marginal but actively 'marginalised' by a system that benefits from maintaining inequality, exclusion, and repression.

4. What changed over 40 years and 4 generations?

In 1999, I returned to Rio to see whether it would be possible to find the 750 people who had been interviewed thirty years earlier. The prospects were especially dismal given that we had used only first names (to protect people's identity); that there were few street names and no housing numbers at the time; and the communities had grown and changed so much between 1969 and 1999. *Catacumba* had been removed in 1970 and its 10,000 residents had been relocated to distant housing projects. *Nova*

[6] For a history of this period and the individual and collective publications of CEBRAP, see Goertzel, 1999 and Cardoso, 2001.

Brasília had grown up and over the hillsides, merging with other favelas into what the government called the *Complexo do Alemão*, one of the most violent areas of Rio. Yet, due to the strong social networks it was easier than expected to track down original interviewees, even those who had left the area.

The idea of the study was to follow the evolution of these precarious neighbourhoods and the life trajectories of those who had been part of the original study.[7] However, there was no way to determine whether the people were better or worse off, because they were in a different stage of their life cycle. To deal with this we interviewed a sample of their children, whose age range was comparable to their mothers or fathers 30 years earlier (the study included males and females from 16-65). When the analysis of those data showed disappointing results as compared with the hopes of the migrants, we thought that perhaps it took another generation for integration. With that in mind we sampled the grandchildren. The research results are presented in the more recent book, *Favela: Four Decades of Living on the Edge in Rio de Janeiro.*[8]

5. Where were the original study participants?

After two years of detective work and travel to six states, we managed to find 41% of the 750 people interviewed despite not having their last names or addresses, and the fact that many had died since the oldest ones would have been 95. We found 50% of them in the same homes. But one in three had moved out of the favelas into the bottom rungs of the formal sector and by their grandchildren's generation half had done so.

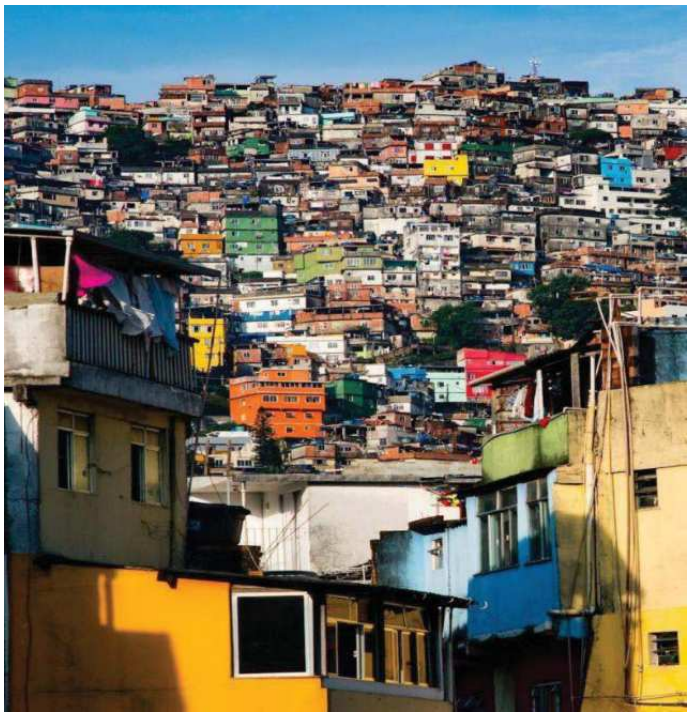
6. Did things get better or worse?

The answer is 'both' – some things got much better and other things much worse. Among those that improved:

- *Living Conditions Improved.* During the years between the two studies, the residents had turned their ramshackled homes into solid housing stock made of permanent materials, generally four stories high with a rooftop space. This allowed extended families to live together and often provided rental income as well. This settlement pattern prevented sprawl and allowed people to live close to multiple sources of work.

[7] Perlman, 2007.
[8] Perlman, 2010.

Image 1: Rocinha in 2016



Source: with permission of Bennett Cain

The favelas did not have legal title to their land but they had 'de facto' tenure since it was unthinkable that they would ever be faced with removal. In fact, during the first decade of the 2000s, most residents were no longer interested in formal title as they saw it as unnecessary and adding the cost of property taxes

- *Household consumption rose.* Ownership of electro-domestic appliances rose dramatically, especially in the grandchildren's generation whose score on the index of household consumer goods reached the median of the city as a whole. The younger generation owned plasma televisions, washing machines, and air conditioners unthinkable in earlier times. The only two indicators that were higher in the formal city were personal computers and cars. Even so, 34% of the grandchildren's generation owned cars or other vehicles and 27% of them had personal computers. This high degree of consumerism has been equated with the rise of a 'new middle class'. Yet *no degree of material acquisition can confer citizenship status, equal treatment under the law or the respect accorded to a middle-class person*

- *Educational gains were impressive.* Illiteracy was 46% among participants in the 1968 study; was 82% among their parents; dropped to 6% for their children and no longer existed among the grandchildren. Over 11% of the grandchildren were studying or had completed university. In 2020 when this is being written, that percentage is estimated to be closer to 20% .

Among the things that got worse are work, violence, schools, access to health care, bargaining power with political candidates and the degree of exclusion. For example:

- *Finding work was more difficult.* For the most part, gains in education did not translate into parallel gains in income. *85%* of kids had more years of schooling than their parents but only *56%* had better jobs and unemployment was much higher in the children's generation

  Even more striking, the income gap between favela residents and the rest of the city increased with every additional year of schooling after the 3rd grade, The expected rise in incomes with additional years of schooling showed up for the city as a whole, but not so much for favela residents

  Among the explanations for this gap are the rising bar for entry into jobs which demands educational levels at higher rates than the gains made in the favela population; the changing labour market; the poor quality of schools in favelas, and *the stigma of living in a favela* – which is sufficient in itself to cut off job interviews when address is required

- *Lethal Violence devastated community life.* In the intervening years between the first and follow-up studies, the single change, however, which most affected already precarious lives between my first study in the 1960s and my restudy in the 2000s, was *the rise of the drug and arms traffic and the consequent high levels of lethal violence.* Starting in the mid 1980s the drug trade, especially in cocaine grew rapidly and favelas provided a convenient local for dealing. By the time I began the re-study in 1999 many favelas were controlled by drug traffic and by the end of the study almost all had expelled the elected Presidents of the Residents' Associations. People were living in constant fear of being caught in the crossfire between competing drug gangs or between the police and the traffickers. One in every five interviewees reported having lost a family member in a homicide

The sharp increase in violence decreased the most precious survival mechanisms of the favelas: social capital, mutual trust, and sense of community unity. And the association of favela residents with danger and violence reinforced the old and ongoing stigma

In response to the questions about sources of prejudice they had experienced personally, residents reported more discrimination based on favela living than on skin colour, 'appearance' (presentation of self), gender, being born outside the city or living in a 'bad' neighbourhood. While all other experiences of discrimination declined in each generation, the degree of discrimination of living in a favela remained high – reported by 80% or more in all three generations

Fear of losing one's home was replaced by fear of losing one's life in the crossfire between police and gangs or among rival gangs at war over territorial control. Police tended to stay out of the favelas while the narco-traffic expanded their area of control expelling or killing the elected Presidents of the Residents' Associations. By 2010 there were few independent favelas left; those not controlled by drug lords were controlled by self-appointed armed militias

7. Contextual Transformations

These changes in the lives of favela residents across time and generations were reflections of macro-level transformations in the political economy of Brazil and of Rio. Brazil went from dictatorship to democracy; from hyperinflation to stabilization to growth and then stagnation. Rio lost jobs as the pace of city growth declined, reducing construction work; as industrial costs became noncompetitive and manufacturing jobs moved out; and as port activities became obsolete with containerisation. The difficulties these contextual factors created for livelihoods among the favela population were compounded by public policies over the same period of time.

8. Evolution of Favela Policy: from hostile to hopeful and back again

The clear policy message from my earliest favela research was to stop favela removal and allow them to grow naturally into working class neighbourhoods, serving the needs of surrounding neighbourhoods. The government did the exact opposite, bulldozing down favelas, displacing over 100,000 residents from their homes, and moving them to remote public housing complexes. This proved disastrous for both the families, who never recovered from the trauma and loss of income and for the government, which was nearly bankrupted by the non-recoverable costs of the public housing.

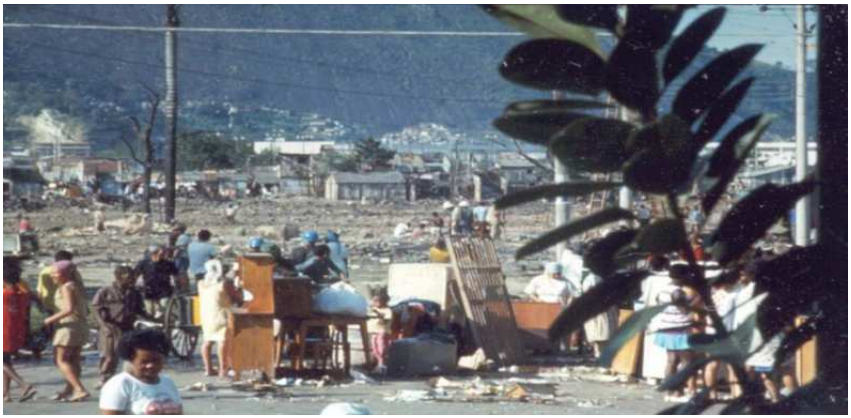
By the first decade of the 2000s, it appeared that favela removal was a thing of the past. It seemed too politically risky for any candidate or office holder to antagonise the 20% of the electorate living in favelas. They had de facto if not de jure land tenure. No one expected the drastic policy pivot back to removal, once Rio won its bids to host the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics.

By 2016, 77,206 residents had been removed from favelas (VINICIUS, 2016). Most were sent to apartment units in the federal government programme, My House My Life (Minha Casa Minha Vida). They were generally separated from family and neighbours and moved far from their homes, reprising what had been done half a century before.

The rationale for removal was to make way for the Olympic venues (or parking lots), for the new Transcarioca or Transolímpica Bus Rapid Transit lines; or to protect them from 'environmental risks'. The real reason was the opportunity for low-cost acquisition of valuable lands for up-scale development. The numbers of people removed was almost twice that of the 1960s and 70s and the value of destroyed homes many times greater than 35 years before.

The images below show what removal looked like in 1969 in Praia do Pinto on the Lagoa Rodrigo Freitas and in 2015 in Vila Autódromo, in Jacarepaguá, the West Zone.

Image 2: Favela Removal Then and Now



Source: Praia do Pinto, 1969 (photo by author)

Image 3: Vila Autódromo, 2015



Source: Image thanks to RioOnWatch.

9. Return to Democracy

The end of the dictatorship in 1985 heralded the shift from hostile policies to helpful policies, specifically upgrading urban services and improving living conditions on site.

The first large scale upgrading project in Rio was *Favela-Bairro* (translated as Favela-Neighbourhood). It started in 1995 with funding from the Inter-American Development Bank, the Brazilian National government, and the city of Rio. Its mission was 'to improve the quality of life in favelas through urban infrastructure projects and soften the boundary between favelas and their surrounding neighbourhoods'. The initial two 5-year phases targeted small and medium-size favelas. It was the most ambitious squatter upgrading program of its time.[9]

The largest favelas in Rio were next to be upgraded in the third phase of Favela-Bairro. Due to changes in the local administration and the *not-invented-here* syndrome, the project was subsumed under the Federal Program for Accelerated Growth (PAC) and named *PAC-Favelas* (PAC-Slums). It was launched in 2008 with the advantages of a considerable budget, ten years of upgrading experience through Favela-Bairro and a semi-autonomous public management enterprise. But just when the actual upgrading was to begin – after years of painstaking work with the selected favela communities to build trust and goodwill – fund were abruptly frozen and the project dropped indefinitely.

There was one other extremely promising upgrading program in Rio, *Morar Carioca*. In 2008 when Rio won its bid to host the Olympics and the new Mayor, Eduardo Paes, took office, he saw an opportunity to take on-site upgrading to the next level. He announced his plan to *upgrade all of Rio's favelas by 2020,* as part of the Olympic Legacy and went so far as to promise land title for residents.[10] Like PAC, Morar Carioca met a painful death. By 2016, although it was never declared dead, it had been dismembered piece-by-piece and the name had become the new label for any public housing projects.

The Pacifying Police Program (UPP) was yet another example of a public policy that had the potential to improve safety and bring social services into the favelas but ended up doing more harm than good, ultimately increasing lethal violence. Most of the victims were young black males shot by the police without provocation and never held accountable. Lives lost in the crossfire were considered collateral damage whether children playing in their school yard during recess or mothers with their children sitting on the front steps of their homes. In the first eight months of 2019 police actions were responsible for the deaths of 1,249 favela residents.

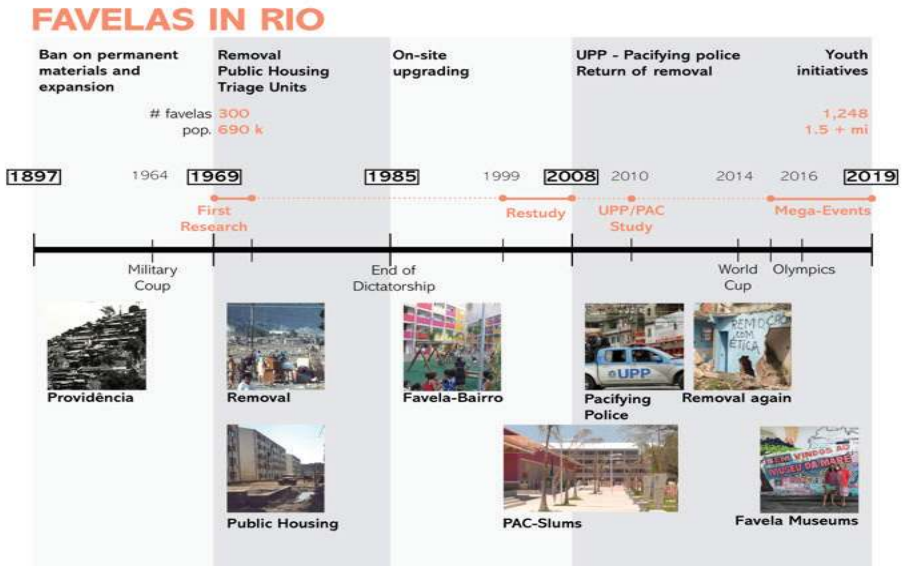
With the election of a governor whose campaign slogan was ending violence and the 'taking back control of the territories' and Rio's selection as host of the World Cup and Olympics, the UPP – Pacifying Police Programme – was launched in 2008. Its aim was to end the use of ostensive arms and exert control of favelas through a

[9] See Osorio, Libertun de Duren & Perlman (forthcoming).
[10] See Paes, 2012.

permanent police occupation. The original concept was to pair the military side with strong social programmes and community services provided by the sister programme, the Social UPP. A political party deal destroyed the prospects for the much-needed Social Programme just before it was to go into effect. Without the human and social side, and in push for rapid expansion, the UPP police antagonised the communities with arbitrary brutality and disregard for the rights of residents. Rather than bringing peace, they increased the atmosphere of violence and opened the door for the return of the drug gangs even before the 2016 Olympics.

Favela Policy Overview. The table below traces the major shifts in favela policy from the first favela in Rio, the Morro da Providência, in 1897, to the current period. Along the bottom of the midline are milestones in Brazil's history – the military coup and the dictatorship, the return to democracy and then the mega-events in Rio de Janeiro. Above the line are the periods when the favela research was conducted. Below the line are photographs of the main policies: removal; public housing, Favela-Bairro upgrading program: PAC-Favelas upgrading in largest favelas; the UPP-Pacifying Police; return of Removal, and the favelas re-claiming their history and identity through museums they create.

Image 4: Trajectory of Favela Policy in Rio de Janeiro from 1897 to 2020



Source: Made by the author

By a year after the Olympics, the public policies put into place before and during the games had left Rio's favela population no better than, and in many cases, **worse off than before**. This makes any future work in the communities much more difficult. Any new initiative will be met with deep-felt distrust, cynicism, and anger.

10. In Praise of Informality

Although I have used the case of favelas in Rio de Janeiro, many of the points raised can be generalised to informal settlements elsewhere in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. One of the main observations is the importance of *mindset* concerning informal communities. Our perceptions, concepts, and even our words shape our mental map of informality, which in turn defines how we define problems/solutions or deficits/assets. Once we recognize the essential role of Informality for our cities to survive and to thrive we can rethink what matters, whose lives count and what might be done to move towards the city we want.

To illustrate this, I have specified five valuable contributions of informal settlements and what the city would lose without them (PERLMAN, 2014):

1. *Loss of labour and productivity***:** informal communities have a thriving internal economy with commerce, services, real estate markets, restaurants, bars, and small-scale manufacturing. They also power most formal sector work by providing the cheap labour for local, national, and international production
2. *Loss of consumer power*: the urban poor spend a disproportionate portion of their income on consumer goods and services, paying double or triple the shelf price because they buy on instalments. Favela residents in Rio account for 1.3-2 million consumers, with an annual income of 5-10 billion *reais* per year[11] (approximately 1.4 to 2.9 billion US dollars) keeping entire segments of the urban economy afloat
3. *Loss of cultural production and creativity*: new forms of music, art, dance, theatre, film, and fashion are born and nurtured in these 'alternative spaces' influencing trends in the rest of the city and indeed the world. Insofar as the future of cities depends upon innovation and adaptation to change, there needs to be space for deviance and non-conformism
4. *Loss of social capital:* the strong kinship and friendship networks are coping mechanisms in day-to-day life and survival support in times of crisis. In the absence of any state safety net, the community becomes the safety net and the city depends on that, in fact, takes it for granted. That's how neighbourhoods in Mexico re-built after the earthquake, and how favelas are now dealing with the new coronavirus.

[11] O Globo, August 24, 2008, 'Sem direitos econômicos, favelas movimentam bilhões'.

5. *Loss of intellectual capital:* ss intelligence is not distributed along economic, racial or territorial lines, depriving the residents of informal communities of the opportunity to realize their full potential, limits the intellectual capital of the entire city. Some of the community leaders in Rio are as brilliant as any of my professors in graduate school at MIT. The intractability and complexity of the urban problem, requires the best minds, closest to the ground for solutions

This is an abridged version of a much longer argument about the interdependence of the informal and formal sectors. Each needs the other to exist.[12]

There is a related truth here that is often overlooked. Many, if not most people I interviewed until the current moment of Covid-19, expressed a preference for living in informal communities even though they have sufficient income to move elsewhere.

Attachments to place run much deeper in the *morro than in the asfalto*. For them moving away means leaving behind the home that they watched their parents and grandparents build over a lifetime; leaving behind their extended families and friendship group – and the families of their friends; and giving up the freedom to be themselves.

For them, being forced out of their settlements and into apartments in public housing projects is *not a dream but a nightmare.*

11. Cities without slums are cities without soul[13]

Ridding cities of informal settlements altogether has been the dream of planners and policymakers for over a century, but was made explicit in 1999 through the '*Cities without Slums*' programme.[14] As these three little words embody the prevalent notion of slums as deleterious for urban order, they were readily picked up by the United Nations, folded into the 2000 Millennium Development Goals and then rolled over into the 2015 Sustainable Development Goals.

Ignoring for the moment the ongoing controversy over the derogatory nature of the word 'slum', the aim of formalising the informal sector is the polar opposite of what is needed. Why not use the same resources necessary to eliminate, clean up and control communities, to support the realization of their own priorities?

The very essence of urbanity is density and diversity. Conviviality, like innovation thrives on serendipitous encounters; on chaos and complexity and on the element of surprise when different knowledges come together.

[12] Perlman (forthcoming). Informality: Choice or Consequence: Model for sustainable cities or child of scarcity.

[13] Perlman, 2017.

[14] The 'Cities Without Slums' action plan was developed by the Cities Alliance in July 1999 and launched at the inaugural meeting of the Cities Alliance in Berlin in December 1999. [www.citiesalliance.org/cws-action-plan]. For more on this theme, see Yusuf 2014 and Perlman 2014.

12. What needs to be eradicated is *not informality, but poverty, inequality, and exclusion*

12.1. Going Beyond the Territorial Perspective

Until this point in the article, the discussion has focused on one approach to addressing urban poverty, the place-based approach. The focus is on the physical territory within the boundaries of informal settlements.The policies mentioned were targeted to informal settlements, whether for their benefit or detriment.

But the conditions that make informality so attractive to so many for so long – are not inside the communities. And as long as structural constraints produce and reproduce these conditions, informality will continue to grow faster than formality.

Other entry points and toolkits are needed to deal with the causes and consequences of poverty, inequality, exclusion, and lack of equal standing in the eyes of the law. Two other approaches might be based on conditions of scarcity and need or on the deprivation of rights.

The poverty-based approach focuses on those living below a set poverty line regardless of where they live. To be fair, this needs to be adjusted for purchasing power parity as living costs in a city are not comparable to those in a subsistence economy in the rural Northeast. This approach, generically known as Conditional Cash Transfers (CCTs) creates a monetary incentive for low income families to invest in the health and education of their children and the care of their elders. In Brazil the programme is called '*Bolsa Família*'.

The Rights Approach is based on individual and collective rights, applicable universally, to all people regardless of where or how they live. The argument for 'The Right to the City' was articulated by the French sociologist Henri Lefebvre in his 1968 book of that name (Lefebvre, 1968). He wrote: *'The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is (…) one of the most precious and yet most neglected of our human rights'.*

This concept led to a global discussion on the 'right to housing' and the 'right to decent housing' at the Habitat II Summit in Istanbul in 1996, and on the 'right to the city' or the concept of '*The City for All*' at the UN Habitat congress in 2016 in Quito and every urban summit meeting since. Obviously these approaches are complementary, not mutually exclusive.

Chart 1: Three Approaches to Urban Informality

Place-based	Poverty-based	Rights-based
Favela-Bairro	Conditional Cash Transfers	Right to Housing
PAC	Bolsa Família	Right to the City
Morar Carioca		Right to Dignity
MCMV		

13. Final Remarks

My 50 years of research and practice in international urban development compel me to argue for the addition of '*The Right to Dignity*'. The concluding chapter of my 2010 book is called '*The Importance of Being Gente*'[15]. *Gente* is the Brazilian expression for *personhood*. Despite the many intelligent people and good intentions in the public sphere and in bilateral and international aid agencies – and despite efforts to incorporate new knowledge and to partner with community groups and NGOs – government interventions in precarious neighbourhoods often do more harm than good. I refer to this as *'the helping hand strikes again*'. The further removed from the on-the-ground reality, the more difficult it is to value the voice of the disenfranchised and to recognize the way society renders them invisible.

Ultimately, the lack of respect for the dignity and personhood of the urban poor means that right now, in 2016, the knowledge and talent of the billion people living in precarious circumstances are being wasted. By 2050, one of every three people on the planet will reside in these informal communities. *Can we afford to ignore them?*

15 See Perlman, 2010.

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