

THE METAMORPHOSIS OF MARGINALITY IN RIO DE JANEIRO

By Janice Perlman

Both the theoretical concept and the social reality of marginality have been significantly transformed since the 1960s, but Helen Safa's final comment above, that "[the poor] remain an integral part of the nation," remains as true today as it was when I lived in Rio de Janeiro's *favelas* in 1968–69. As I argued in *The Myth of Marginality*, *favela* residents were tightly integrated into society, albeit in an extremely perverse and asymmetrical manner. They worked in the least desirable jobs, under the worst conditions for the lowest pay; participated in the political life of their communities and city (to the extent permitted within the dictatorship) to little or no benefit; and contributed to the cultural and social life of the city without recognition. Peter Ward's introductory summary above lays out the context and parameters of my earlier work. Now, thirty-five years later, I am engaged in an intensive re-study, interviewing the original study participants, their children, and grandchildren. As we have data on the parents of the original interviewees, this enables us to look at propositions of marginality over four generations.⁵

Interestingly, after a long period of relative silence, references to *marginality* are once again appearing in daily discourse on the streets, in the press, and in music, as well as in contemporary academic debates. The term was not widely used in activist circles or social science writing after the 1970s. Since the mid-1980s and Brazil's return to democracy, it has been replaced by concepts such as exclusion, inequality, injustice and spatial segregation, concepts that were increasingly linked to the new discussion of citizenship, rights, participatory democracy, and transparency. In the 1990s, however, with the growth in drug traffic, the word 'marginal' began to resurface in Rio's press, popular music, and common parlance, invested with new connotations. It is now widely used to refer to the drug and arms dealers, gangs, and 'bandidos'. Daily headlines in the newspapers scream out about the violence of the 'marginais' and their ongoing battles with the police. Rap songs and funk music talk about being 'marginal' as a kind of badge of pride, revolted by the injustices of the system. After many decades of co-existence, Rio's populous has again begun to fear and shun *favelas* due to the sharp increase in violence. Although the *favelados* themselves are no longer considered marginal, the

5. For more details on the study, methodology, and preliminary findings see Janice Perlman, "The Metamorphosis of Marginality: *Favelas* in Rio de Janeiro 1969–2002," in *Urban Informality*, ed. Ananya Roy and Nezar AlSayyad (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2003), 105–146; and Janice Perlman, "Longitudinal Panel Studies in Squatter Communities: Lessons from a Re-study of Rio's *favelas*: 1969–2003," paper presented at Urban Longitudinal Research Methodology Conference, University College London, May 28–29, 2003.

physical territory of their communities has become tightly controlled by the drug dealers, who have now inherited the term "*marginais*," and are known locally as "the marginality" or "the movement."

Beginning in the late 1990s, the concept of marginality has been revisited in academic circles, insofar as it is purported to relate to persistent poverty in first world cities. Terms such as "the underclass," the "new poverty," "the new marginality," or "advanced marginality" are used in reference to the chronic poor in advanced capitalist countries, particularly in the black ghettos of the United States and in the stigmatized slums of Europe. Loïc Wacquant has developed this concept most fully starting with his 1996 article where he points to what he calls the "contiguous configuration of color, class, and place" in the Chicago ghetto, the French *banlieue*, and the British and Dutch inner cities. He posits a distinctive post-industrial marginality characterized by new constraints, stigmas, territorial separation, dependency (on the welfare state), and institutions within "territories of urban relegation" (Wacquant 1996; see also 1997, 1999). However, our ongoing restudy of the original *favelas* and families that I researched in 1968 suggests that there are a number of disconnects between this "new marginality" portrayed by Wacquant and actual social reality. Below I look at the four key structural dynamics that Wacquant (1997) finds to be reshaping urban poverty in advanced industrial societies.

1. *Social inequality* in the context of overall economic prosperity and in light of the deskilling and elimination of jobs for unskilled workers, along with multiplication of jobs for university-trained professionals. Brazil is one of the most unequal countries in the world despite some recent improvements, yet, in the case of Rio the question of social inequality is problematic. First of all, we are not talking of a context of overall prosperity since the city's economy suffered greatly during the 1980s and is only gradually recuperating. While there has indeed been massive de-industrialization and a reduction of jobs for unskilled workers, the perception of inequality shows mixed results. In open-ended discussions many *favelados* talk bitterly of the increased gap between rich and poor, but in response to questions about changes in social exclusion after thirty years, only one-third of them said that it had increased.

2. *Absolute surplus population* which Wacquant relates to the mutation of wage labor, implying a degradation and dispersion of the conditions of employment with a high percentage of "redundant" workers—many of whom will never work again—alongside widespread poverty for those who do have jobs, due to low pay and the exploitation of temporary workers. Brazilian unemployment levels are among the highest in history, with Rio among the metropolitan areas suffering most. There has also been a weakening of the labor movement with an erosion of the conditions of formal employment, and the informal economy also masks

what might be considered a surplus population. We found one-quarter of the households of our original *favela* sample reported at least one person of working age defined as unemployed, suggesting even higher levels of unemployment.

3. *Retrenchment of the welfare state*, characterized by social disinvestment, with programs targeted at the poor being cut and turned into instruments of surveillance and control. Here it must be understood that the welfare state in Brazil was never as highly developed as that of Europe or the United States. As in other countries in Latin America, Brazil has been undergoing a process of reform, rationalizing its state social expenditures. However, some social programs focused on the poor have been expanded, both under the past and current presidents, as well as by state and local governments. Food vouchers, educational vouchers, low-income (*popular*) restaurants, and citizens' wages are among the programs being implemented. The recently-elected Labor Party president, Luis Inacio Lula da Silva, has pledged a campaign of zero hunger and of full land regularization for squatters. Moreover, in our own sample it is clear that state retirement payments are a major source of income for a majority of households; some 58 percent of the original (1968) interviewees stated that their retirement payments are now their principal source of livelihood, and, for household heads it was even higher (66 percent).

4. *Spatial concentration and stigmatization*, which Wacquant posits is expressed in hard-core areas of outcasts, territorial stigma, and prejudice, and in a diminishing sense of community life. Although *favelas* are not "hard-core areas of outcasts," they are certainly stigmatized. In fact, of the eight sources of discrimination most mentioned by people in our sample, "living in a *favela*" was the most prevalent, (mentioned by some 66 percent) with a close second being "skin color" (mentioned by 65 percent). A diminishing sense of community life was also striking: in the 1968 study 56 percent regarded the people in their community as being "very tightly united" whereas today only 12 percent feel this way.

Where our findings differ from those of Wacquant is in the realm of spatial concentration. First, not all of Rio's poor are in *favelas*, and not all *favelados* are poor: they are racially, socially, culturally, and economically heterogeneous. In contrast to the total racial segregation characterizing the new marginality, Rio's *favelas* have always been racially mixed. At the time of my original 1968 study the random sample showed 21 percent of *favelados* were black, 30 percent mulatto, and 49 percent white; and these percentages are almost identical in the current study. Secondly, *favelas* in Rio are not concentrated in any one area of the city, but are intermixed geographically with more prosperous neighborhoods. Indeed, some are so well located that rental and sales prices are higher in *favelas* than in certain parts of Copacabana or Botafogo (both upper- and

middle-income areas, see Abramo 2001). However, the boundaries between the *favela* and the “asphalt” are unmistakably clear to all despite a massive ten-year program of infrastructure upgrading designed to integrate *favelas* with their surrounding neighborhoods.

Perhaps the most striking finding contesting the premise of advanced marginality is that *favelados* are not “forcibly relegated” to staying in their communities. Of the random-sample “survivors” we re-interviewed, 30 percent live in *favelas*, 37 percent in *conjuntos* (housing projects), and 34 percent in neighborhoods, mostly in the periphery of the city. Among the former community leaders in the sample, only 16 percent are still in *favelas* and 48 percent are in neighborhoods. Our socio-economic analysis shows clearly that moving into neighborhoods is an indicator of upward mobility, so we have robust evidence that the poor (even the black poor) are not consigned to “bounded territories of urban relegation” (Wacquant 1997).

DE LOS “RECURSOS DE LA POBREZA” A LA “POBREZA DE RECURSOS” Y A LAS “DESVENTAJAS ACUMULADAS”

By Mercedes González de la Rocha

Mi contribución a esta discusión necesariamente lleva el sello de las investigaciones que he realizado a lo largo de dos décadas, los ochenta y los noventa, en el México urbano. Se trata de un período de cambios vertiginosos, dos décadas trepidatorias marcadas por las fuertes sacudidas de profundas crisis económicas. Mi búsqueda se aparta de las miradas estáticas para dar cuenta de algunos de los cambios más importantes en la organización social de los grupos domésticos y las familias de escasos recursos en el contexto de las transformaciones en los mercados laborales y, en general, en las estructuras de oportunidades. De manera casi obsesiva, sistemática pero también intuitiva, mis estudios me han llevado a estar inmersa en un constante proceso de reflexión basado en estudios longitudinales y diacrónicos sobre las bases sociales y económicas de la sobrevivencia en situaciones dinámicas que imponen nuevos y constantes retos a los pobres urbanos y a los sectores medios empobrecidos.

Basada en un estudio realizado en 1981–82 (inmediatamente previo al estallido de la crisis de los ochenta), argumenté que el grupo doméstico—poco armónico y caracterizado por diferencias internas de género y generación—es el escenario primario de sobrevivencia en contextos caracterizados por bajos salarios y escasa presencia de un Estado de Bienestar. Esta unidad contradictoria (en donde coexisten el conflicto y la solidaridad) aparecía como el escenario social en donde se instrumentaban mecanismos y “estrategias” de adaptación a los bajos salarios de los “pobres trabajadores” (*working poor*). Los recursos de la pobreza—la capacidad de generar ingresos de distintas fuentes—eran