Book Review

Perlman, Janice (2010) *Favela. Four Decades of Living on the Edge in Rio de Janeiro,* New York: Oxford University Press. ISBN – 978-0-19-536836-9

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Between 1968 and 1969, Janice Perlman, a young American researcher, lived in the favelas of Brazil's "marvellous" city of Rio de Janeiro. Her research produced the book *The Myth of Marginality: Urban Poverty and Politics in Rio de Janeiro,* published in 1976. Fitting within a trend of scholarly thought that emerged in the mid-1960s, from writers such as Anibal Quijano, Manuel Castells, Florestan Fernandes and William Mangin, the book radically challenged the negative views of the urban poor that were prevalent at the time. The *Myth of Marginality* criticised the well-accepted attitude of assigning to the urban poor responsibility for their alleged lack of integration into the city's job market. Thus, one of its key arguments was to point out the absurdity of blaming the victims for their own poverty.

Thirty years later, in 1999, Perlman went back to Rio and began a new study of the same localities: the favela of *Catacumba*, which was destroyed in 1970, with its residents forcibly relocated to various *conjuntos* (low income apartment complexes); Nova Brasília, which became part of the (in) famous *Complexo do Alemão* (an agglomeration or "complex" of many favelas); the municipality of Duque de Caxias, located in a region known as the Lowlands of the State of Rio (*Baixada Fluminense*). This new research resulted in the book *Favela: Four Decades of Living on the Edge in Rio de Janeiro* which tells the stories of the people whose lives Perlman followed. She was driven by the desire to 'provide a time-lapse view of what had happened to them and why' (15). This is not only a study of the same people but also of their 'children and their children's children'. The aim is to 'reveal how patterns of context, attitudes, behaviour and luck play out in the struggle to overcome the exclusion and dehumanisation of poverty' (Ibid). Interestingly, the book also tells the story of getting the story, discussing the research team's efforts to locate as

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many of the 750 original study participants as possible. This was a 'daunting' process, in Perlman's words, particularly if we think of the topography of the favelas with their labyrinth of narrow alleys and lack of street addresses (16).

Favela is filled with moving stories, including Perlman's, as she offers many insightful reflections on her own life experiences in the favelas for four decades. Yet the book *Favela* is far from a fairytale. 'The favelas are not paradise' (333), as Perlman reminds us, in contrast to the phenomenon of 'favela chic', in which trendy nightclubs, restaurants and arts installations in Paris, London and New York celebrate the favela's 'image of otherness, its authentic aesthetic, and its libidinal energy' (329).

The author argues that the residents' fear of being removed from the favelas in the 1960s and 70s has been replaced by the fear of violence. The fear and the danger are very real and they are a consequence of the drug wars which have taken over the hills of the favelas in Rio. Perlman describes an incident in which she was threatened by a local gang when trying to photograph a *praça* (square) which used to be a community gathering space in 1969 and which, sadly, had been turned into a *boca de fumo* (a drug sales point) in 2001 (108). She then suggests that this violence marks the transition of marginality 'from myth to reality' and chapters six and seven are dedicated to the harsh realities of daily violence in the Rio favelas. Throughout the book there are disheartening accounts of residents who have had to leave their homes behind to escape the violence, who have struggled to keep their children away from the traffic (sometimes an attractive proposition for the stigmatised youth of the favela) or even whose close relatives have been murdered. According to Perlman, among all the people she interviewed in 2001, 'in all three generations, one in five had lost a family member to homicide' (187).

However, Perlman was reluctant to write 'a depressing saga with a hopeless ending' (19) and has succeeded. Her study's findings are often surprisingly positive. The research team managed to find 41 percent of the 750 original study participants - an extraordinary achievement. Out of these original participants, less than 40 percent were still living in favelas in 2001. This contradicts 'the prevailing wisdom in the literature—and among *cariocas* (the residents of Rio)—which views favelas as dead ends' (225). The study also found 'considerable intragenerational and intergenerational improvements' which were evident in 'many indicators of well-being, including the building materials of the home, the range and access to urban services, household goods, individual consumption, education and occupation' (228). Therefore, the research reveals a

hopeful scenario characterised by a weak transmission of poverty within and between generations. 'Rio's urban poor may be struggling', Perlman argues, 'but are not trapped in chronic poverty' (238).

In recent years, a lot has been said and written about Brazil as an emerging economy and a key world player. A study published by the *Getúlio Vargas* Foundation indicated that 29 million Brazilians had moved up the social ladder, joining the so-called middle class between 2003 and 2009 (BBC Brazil, 2010[1]). These economic and social improvements have often been associated with President Lula's years in government and his implementation and expansion of social welfare schemes such as *Bolsa Família.* I was curious to see whether these policies had any effect in the favela resident's histories and stories of social mobility. However, Perlman does not really explore these—probably because the number of beneficiaries of *Bolsa Família* in the cities is much lower than in the countryside (285) and perhaps because large parts of her secondary study were done in the early 2000s, shortly after Lula took office for his first term in 2002.

The book is not written from the perspective of Latin American media studies. It does, however, shed light on various issues which have been extensively explored by media and communications research in the continent, such as globalisation, democracy, migration and identity. Yet, *Favela* does not really delve into issues of media representation of the favelas or discusses the recent success of films about the favelas, such as *City of God* and *Elite Squad.* The media is only dealt with very briefly when Perlman identifies a 'sensationalist mass media' in general, and Brazil's media empire Rede Globo in particular (185), as being 'ingredients' of what she refers to as 'a violence stew', in an analogy to Brazil's national dish *feijoada* (a stew made of beans and various discarded pieces of meat) (174).

Favela certainly has many merits. It makes for a very good read as it demonstrates the good degree of immersion and richness in detail typical of ethnographic studies. It also draws on a wide range of methods such as surveys, in-depth interviews and community meetings in which the residents were prompted to collectively reconstruct their histories (Rapid Participatory Diagnosis). Yet, its main strength lies in its longitudinal and intergenerational nature. Perlman wisely argues that "research done at one single point in time, which include nearly all research,

[1] Throsell, Liz. Lula's Legacy for Brazil's Next President. BBC Brazil: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-11414276 (Accessed 01 March 2011)

may not provide a sound basis for policy guidance (288). She also bravely revisits some of her own recommendations and admits that she might have been wrong in 1969. In Chapter 3 Perlman describes the residents' trauma and humiliation of having their houses destroyed, their close friends sent away and their possessions dumped in garbage trucks following the removal of the Favela of Catacumba in 1970. If she had not returned three decades later, she notes, she would never have known that 'on balance, moving from favelas to *conjuntos* turned out to be advantageous for most people' (290). To quote her:

> Over time, making monthly payments for the apartments, for water and electricity, and having a legitimate street address conferred a sense of pride and legitimacy on people that had been inaccessible to them in the favelas. They also had an easier time getting jobs once they had legal addresses to use. (290)

To conclude, it is worth recounting here one of the book's anecdotes about the aftermath of the removal of Favela da Catacumba. One of the city of Rio's mayors decided to create a park on the area where the favela once stood. Together with a former resident, Janice Perlman went for a walk there. Whilst following the trail, they noticed that there were plaques identifying the local animals, birds, trees and plants but nothing at all about the people who had lived there. This serves as a sad reality check for academics, policy makers or anyone who is not embarrassed to be called an idealist for caring about issues of exclusion, poverty and injustice. Governments and international agencies often have good intentions when making improvements on infra-structure; indeed, these are essential for the communities. Nevertheless, they tend to neglect what matters the most: people. One of Perlman's important findings is that, more than pavement, water or electricity, favela residents yearn for decent work, opportunities and, most of all, respect.