

## Book Review

### *Underground Sociabilities: Identity, culture and resistance in Rio de Janeiro's favelas*

S. Jovchelovitch and J. Priego-Hernandez (2013). Brasilia: UNESCO. ISBN: 978-85-7652-180-8

With the holding of the Football World Cup in Brazil this year and the Olympics in 2016, the situation of the poor in Rio de Janeiro and the chasm between the poor and the rich in that city is receiving more attention than usual in the world press. However, it is still difficult for outsiders to understand the reality of the situation. Who controls the favelas? Why do favela dwellers not move out of their environment and settle in other parts of the city? How can one reconcile the harsh conditions inside the favelas with the popular imagery of the carioca spirit: carnival, bossa nova, Carmen Miranda and her fruit hats, and the passion for football? Are these real but separate worlds, or are they just stereotypes which an outsider employs to simplify a much more complex picture?

The authors of a recent book that explores these issues are Sandra Jovchelovitch and Jacqueline Priego-Hernandez. Because of their background, experiential and academic, they are ideally placed to bring to this work the sensibility of those who know well the situation in the favelas together with the analytic gaze of professional researchers of social psychological issues. This book examines the complexities of life in a favela. The book does not provide a historical exposition of how the favelas came to be or predict the future course of events. The authors give an in-depth analysis of the situation now, which they present with some optimism without minimising the arduous tasks ahead for everyone who is working to improve the circumstance of favela-dwellers.

Rio de Janeiro is a *cuidad partida*, a divided city. The favela-dwellers, those living in the *morro*, the hills, are living a life made underground through social, political and geographical exclusions. But in spite of this, the authors describe how the favela-dwellers managed to construct an intricate web of sociabilities, which is often built around the festive, gutsy and defiant carioca nature of life within the favela itself. In the preface, Jovchelovich writes that the researchers 'wanted to understand how communities living under poverty and exclusion could produce positive responses and new pathways for social and individual development'.

The protagonists of the book, apart from the favela-dwellers themselves, are the NGOs AfroReggae and *Central Única das Favelas* (CUFA) and the *Unidade de Polícia Pacificadora* – Police Pacification Units (UPPs). The backdrop to the story is organised crime and the drug trade, which often replaces the State in shaping life within the favelas. Residents must always take into account rules for daily life set by drug cartels and the police.

Made famous in the 2005 award winning documentary 'Favela Rising', AfroReggae is an NGO established in 1993 by an ex-drug dealer in response to a massacre in 1993 when police entered a favela and killed 21 people as a retaliatory attack against the drug trade. This NGO attracts youths from the favelas by organising workshops on ethnic dance and music such as reggae, hip-hop and percussion. It shows young residents that education offers their best opportunity for social emancipation away from a life of violence of the drug trade on the one hand and police oppression on the other. CUFA is another movement, set up in 1999, which focuses its activities on education, culture and sports in order to empower the inhabitants of favelas to be able to help themselves, rather than relying on the State or the protection of the drug barons.

The research described in this book draws on various data collection techniques, such as interviews and surveys. The authors employ narrative and factor analysis, amongst other techniques, to analyse the data. They try to understand how the activities of these NGO's, which are deeply embedded in the culture of the favelas, furnish the favela-dwellers with identities that

empower them to resist their impoverished and violent environment and the prejudices of the Rio of the *asfalto*. An important conceptual framework that the authors use to explain this empowerment is that of psychosocial scaffolding. This framework is inspired by Jerome Bruner's theory of scaffolding, which draws on Vygotsky's 'zone of proximal development'. Vygotsky expounds 'the fundamental insight that human infants need society if they are to grow and fully realise their biological potential at birth'. This book explores the implications of this theoretical assertion for residents of the favelas.

What is perhaps remarkable in the story of the favelas is how theories of human and social development can actually be employed to extend our understanding of the cultural activities of AfroReggae and CUFA. The use of music, dance and sports could have turned out to be an alienating factor in the lives of favela-dwellers. Instead, these activities became a way of empowering residents so that they could 'develop strategies to resist the environment and to reaffirm the sense of agency and belonging, the social cohesion and rich culture that is expressed in the thinking of favela residents'.

The authors use social psychological theories to explain why and how positive developmental outcomes have occurred. From interviews conducted with residents and activists in AfroReggae and CUFA, the researchers identified the major psychosocial scaffolding that the daily life in the favela communities provides (such as family, role models and the Churches). The authors consider how the work of these NGOs is integrated within community support structures. In a figure in Chapter 6, the authors summarise the dynamic processes through which psychosocial mediators and psychosocial scaffolding combine to create behavioural outcomes (avoiding/joining the drug trade) and how these outcomes in turn feed back to change the context of favela life. This work is important both for theoreticians of social change and for practitioners working in the field.

In 2008, the Brazilian authorities set up the first UPPs. These units act as a combination of a law enforcement and social services unit, whose aim is to reclaim favelas from the control of the drug dealers. Around 40 UPPs have already been established that together vie with the drug trade for the control of more than 200 favelas. The authors of this book conducted interviews with UPP leaders and members and documented the changing attitudes of the law enforcers towards the favela-dwellers. This is important because it provides a drastic change in the context within which residents live and the NGOs operate. Change of attitudes is not easy in this situation and needs effort from all sides. Drawing on an interview with a community-based UPP commander, readers are presented with a poignant conversation during which a young boy asks the commander, 'Captain, are you the new owner of the hill now?' For the boy, the commander represents a replacement for the drug boss. The commander replied, 'What do you mean son? You are the owner of the hill, the owner of the hill is the community. Actually the hill does not have an owner, you have the right to study, to play, to cycle, to work. This is ours.'

Maybe, it is too early to say whether the UPPs will play a decisive role in the emancipation of the favela-dwellers or whether they have been set up mainly to pacify the situation in Rio in preparation for the upcoming World Cup and Olympics. However, the interviews presented in this book offer scope for hope. Whatever the political intention behind the setting up of the UPPs, they seem to have struck a chord amongst the inhabitants of the *cuidad partida*. The UPPs appear to be combating the drug trade in a manner that is complementary to the efforts of AfroReggae and CUFA. In one interview, we read that an ex-member of the Special Police Operations Battalion (now with the UPP) reported back to his commander while crying, 'Colonel, I never had a hug from people in the community, only bullets.'

Although the research presented in this book is underpinned by sophisticated social and psychological theories and methodological rigour, it is presented in a manner that would appeal to audiences beyond psychology or sociology. This book should be 'useful for governments, policy makers, academics, social movements, activists and all of those who are interested in human-centered community development and communication across asymmetries in the contemporary city.' (p.18). Further, there are several large cities all over the world where whole areas are controlled by criminal gangs and the inhabitants live in a context of poverty and exclusion. Professionals and activists working in such cities would likely find this book interesting, illuminating and useful. In the preface, Jovchelovich writes that the understanding of the 'Underground Sociabilities' that they report here could be a 'potential model for other contexts of exclusion.' Certainly, the spirit of AfroReggae and CUFA has spread beyond Rio. AfroReggae has expanded to other Brazilian cities and

countries such as Colombia, Canada, China, India, the UK and the USA. CUFA has also begun to develop branches in countries such as Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Haiti, Hungary, Italy, Spain and in the USA.

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