

# Anthropology Book Forum

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## Living in a Rio de Janeiro Favela

Review by Lucas Carneiro de Carvalho

*Living with Insecurity in a Brazilian Favela: Urban Violence and Daily Life*

by R. Ben Penglase

Rutgers University Press, 2014

In the early 1900s, Rio de Janeiro had gone through a massive urban transformation that inspired the writer and politician Coelho Neto to coin the term *Cidade Maravilhosa* (Marvelous City) to describe the new urban space. A few years later, in 1934, André Filho composed a carnival song also entitled *Cidade Maravilhosa*, and the term became emblematic to describe the city of Rio. In the verses of his song, André Filho describes Rio de Janeiro as a “(...) birthplace of Samba and beautiful songs; that live within people’s soul; you are the altar of our hearts; which happily sing; (...) flower-filled garden with love and *saudade* [1]; land that seduces all; may God cover you with happiness; nest of dreams and light; (...) Marvelous City; filled with thousands of enchantments; Marvelous City; heart of my Brazil.” In *Living with Insecurity in a Brazilian Favela: Urban Violence and Daily Life*, by R. Ben Penglase, we are presented with the other side of the coin. We read about the Rio of the hillsides, the Rio deprived of urban planning and public services, a Rio that, although, on the social margins, has the best views of this Marvelous City. Penglase’s ethnographic description does not focus on the exotica and gore of drug traffickers’ violence, police brutality, institutionalized corruption, and the constant sense of insecurity, but rather on the lived experiences of those who make the favela of Caxambu their home.

The book is based on 18 months of field research between the years 1998 and 1999, followed by a subsequent field visit in 2001. Violence is the theme that cuts through all the chapters, but it is framed by Michael Certeau’s distinction between tactics and strategies, where “strategies are the schema used by the powerful: they seek to produce regularity and stability; (...) Tactics, on the other hand, are the ways of operating of the powerless: they are ruses or tricks that do not necessarily challenge or resist systems of power but function within them” (p. 6). It is within this framework that the book explores the *saber viver* (knowing how to live) of the families who make Caxambu their home. It is this particular local knowledge that is presented and problematized throughout the book, and each chapter focuses on different but complementary topics.

In Chapter 1, Penglase presents his theoretical framework and situates his work within the larger scholarship on violence. He also highlights the destructive and constructive aspects of violence, and explores examples in which violence generated practices and discourses, reshaping how Brazilians think and experience their own social universe. He also presents and problematizes some methodological challenges in the research: “First, how to depict both order and disorder in ways that do not reify one as the normal counterpart to the other; and second, how to depict a situation of uncertainty and unpredictable violence when I myself was part of the story” (p. 26). Chapter 2 presents a discussion of how Penglase gained rapport in the community (*a la* Geertz), and how his field strategy of deep hanging out [2] allowed him to also fall within the local male comportment. This chapter not only explores the position of the research in the field, but also some important oppositions that help us understand the reality of Rio’s favelas. Some of these are: inside/outside the favela, hillside/neighborhood, legality/illegality, and violence/nonviolence. Throughout the chapter, Penglase problematizes some of these oppositions and argues for a more nuanced analysis, which looks at a particular situation within a continuum rather than inferring diacritical values.

Chapter 3 looks at the dangerous and familial dynamics residents have to assess and engage with in their daily affairs in Caxambu. The shared experiences in the favela, and “local social representations of the neighborhood created a moral map to guide and evaluate social interactions” (p. 71). The chapter also looks back in time to explore how favelas and their own distinct logic are not only a problem, but also a solution to specific social, political, and economic moments.

In Chapter 4, the author explores why and how violence is deployed by drug traffickers to reshape local ideologies, ways of being, and knowing. The state of (in)security is partially due to the fact that drug traffickers often break their own rules. In such a way, they “pursued a strategy of abnormalization: although they claimed to provide safety and security, they also often deliberately disrupted daily life” (p. 107). In this environment and permanent state of emergency, residents have to perform the act of hiding what is common knowledge in order to keep at bay acts of violence from drug traffickers and policemen. This chapter also deals with some gender issues in Caxambu and how the presence of drug trafficking and its promise of quick wealth creates intergenerational conflicts and changes the values ascribed to masculinity among the residents.

Chapter 5 explores the interplay of police and drug traffickers in the production of (in)security in Caxambu. Penglase’s historical analysis of the role of policing during Brazil’s military dictatorship offers some insight into the ways in which the police force today deals with those “disrupting civic order.” Moreover, “it is clear that the police do not naturalize the power of the state, producing a docile population. Rather, they are widely seen as dangerous and unpredictable, to be avoided if possible” (p. 155). Chapter 5 also explores how the police tie together assumptions about criminality, race, and types of person, thus overlapping place, race, and people. And in the conclusion, the author points to a few ethnographic cases that show how residents are constantly forgetting and remembering certain spaces and histories of such spaces, which in the end empower the community to (re)write their own stories and histories of violence through their lived experiences.

Although the book is an accessible read, I have a few minor critiques. The chapters present interesting arguments, but seem to be too isolated from one another, focusing on race, gender, police strategies, historiography, and the dichotomy between *morro* and *bairro* (hillside and neighborhood). I think the whole project would benefit if the text were more dialogic within

itself. In reading, I kept coming up with questions about race, gender, early social and economic strategies of urban development in Rio, the state of the local and international drug trade, etc. Many of these questions were answered in the text, but in subsequent chapters, so I think a mention of these should have come up earlier on in the text whenever pertinent. Another critique is with the discussion of the development of the drug trade in Latin America in the 1980s onward, and its status during the author's field research. It is clear from the scope of the project, that this aspect is beyond the research that was conducted, since the goal is to look at the strategies of Caxambu residents in dealing with a state of (in)security. However, this leaves a whole set of questions unanswered. For example: who are the other national and international stakeholders at play? Do they influence the kind of violence experienced in Rio's favelas? Where do drug traffickers acquire their armaments? Are any other aspects of the Brazilian state involved in this kind of corruption besides the police (Federal Police, Armed Forces, politicians, etc.)? If so, to what extent? A more nuanced description of relations of the drug trafficking violence in Caxambu with the drug trafficking in Rio, Brazil, and Latin America would fill a void in the book. Another observation is the timeframe of the research itself. The ethnography was conducted in 1998, 1999, and 2001, and since then significant changes have occurred in the way policing is conducted in Rio's favelas, as well as in the configuration of Rio's organized crime itself. Penglase himself points to this issue and how the Units of Police Pacification (UPP) and changes in the *Comando Vermelho* altered the dynamics in the state of (in)security.

Notwithstanding these critiques, *Living with Insecurity in a Brazilian Favela: Urban Violence and Daily Life* is a phenomenal book that presents a humanistic approach to violence in a Rio favela. Penglase puts police and drug traffickers at the same structural level as agents that contribute to the state of constant insecurity, rather than looking at them as diametrically opposed. Both have the potential for violence, but the drug trafficker is the one who residents know intimately. These are the people he calls "dangerous intimates" (p. 29). Penglase delivers in his promise of not writing a pornography of violence (p. 27), but a description that is based on traumatic events that leave lingering effects and scars in the social fabric of society. Although the book should be read by all those interested in violence and the representation of violence and danger in Brazil and Latin America, as I was reading I could not help but relate some aspects described by Penglase to current political and social events in Europe, the Middle East, and the US. This was especially the case when describing how police tend to conflate place, race, and qualities of people. It is frightening to see how recent political discourses draw from essentialist assumptions to push for policies that negatively affect large groups. Perhaps these peoples, not living in favelas, but in neighborhoods marked by cultural, religious, racial or ethnic specificities, are also living states of (in)security, where representatives of the state are also perceived as the agents of violence and terror.

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[1] Roughly equates to feelings of longing and nostalgia.

[2] Geertz, C., 1998. Deep hanging out. *The New York review of books*, 45 (16), 69.



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