

Abstract

Brazilian slums and squatter settlements have acquired a generally unattractive public image that often obscures differences between peripheral urban situations. Based on research in a socially stigmatised neighbourhood of the city of Salvador, Bahia, this paper begins with a broad structural view of the processes that have shaped the situations of its poor residents, from the conservative modernisation led by the Bahian strongman and protégé of the military, Antônio Carlos Magalhães, to a multi-cultural present of anti-poverty and Afro-Brazilian empowerment initiatives, NGO interventions, and private-public partnerships. It then illustrates a range of variables that influence the ability of poor communities to counteract tendencies towards social and political fragmentation. It highlights the need to consider the particular histories of poor neighbourhoods, their differing relations with richer surrounding areas, their internal divisions and the way these reflect links with broader social, political and religious forces, and the social networks between different poor neighbourhoods that the poor themselves construct as they pursue strategies to maintain livelihoods and acquire assets. Consideration of the processes involved suggests a need to question conventional accounts of social segregation in Salvador and indicates ways in which more rounded ethnographic perspectives on how people live their lives help us to understand their greater or lesser capacity for collective action and why, in some cases but not others, residents are still trying to build 'places' that conform to their long-term aspirations to live better.

Keywords:

Urban development, Housing policies, Brazilian politics, Community organisations, Social networks, NGOs

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