

Survival and life improvement in everyday life: how families interact with state housing policy

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This paper analyses how family dynamics, especially at household level, are an important dimension to think about contemporary State Paradoxes. Based on fieldwork and in-depth interviews with members of domestic groups, inhabitants of a recently urbanized “favela” in Sao Paulo, the paper focus on “the house in favela” as a heuristic issue to observe the interactions between individuals (and families) and public and private spheres. Individual agency and collective action at domestic and familial level, including individual and collective projects, gendered and generational collaboration and conflicts, are highlighted to show how households matter as social forces, and are not simple passive objects of state policy interventions – normatively supposed to fight against poverty and vulnerability.

When slum urbanization process comes, it finds individuals and domestic groups in varied socioeconomic situations, experiencing different “stages” in their family trajectories; house conditions – already a brick house or still a wooden shack –, represents the crystallization of previous processes at household level (extension, subdivisions and ameliorations to accommodate next generation and their familial new nucleus, or for economic purposes, as renting).

To be or not to be (living in) a slum anymore? Certainly it is a question. Given the new legal situation, it is no longer a slum. And also because, even with a lower quality if compared with “formal” surroundings, infrastructure and public services arrived, and improved living conditions. The whole process has triggered intense speculation in the local property real market values, within and outside the favela. Inequalities remain, and reproduce even inside the urbanized nucleus. For more vulnerable people, it got more expensive to buy, to rent, to pay bills; for others, enhances the project of getting out, selling and buying, or even renting, in another (not so stigmatized) place in the city.

Urbanization process encouraged further housing building and subdivision (new separated housing units) for rent, and today “New Jaguaré” population seems to have increased grown, and even renewed. It’s said, here and there, that members of organized crime are completely involved with this. I believe that this is in part truth, but this also yielded by Family dynamics, survival and life amelioration. The ex-favela is today a good place to think about ascendant and descendent social mobility among the “poor”- and how state policy impacts, but is also appropriated by their inhabitants.

To analyze this, besides the Introduction, I revisit an important studies tradition in Latin America, that of “survival strategies”, criticized and renewed by authors as Carole Moser and Mercedes González de La Rocha, Ruben Kaztman and Carlo Filguera, and also mobilize theoretical tools from Life Course perspective. This will be followed by the fieldwork findings, in dialogue with that tradition; and the conclusions.

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