From the *Mocambo* to the *Favela*: Statistics and Social Policy in Brazil's Informal Cities

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From the *Mocambo* to the *Favela*: Statistics and Social Policy in Brazil's Informal Cities

Brodwyn FISCHER *

Abstract. This article explores the history of censusing in the informal neighborhoods that have always been foundational to the Brazilian cityscape. Focusing on Rio de Janeiro and Recife, it argues that the censusing of *favelas* and *mocambos* was at once a technology of governance and a performance of North Atlantic modernity. The eventual emergence of the “statistical favela”, which defined urban informality as a problem of collective social dysfunction, had important implications for twentieth century urban and social policy.

Keywords. urban informality, *favela*, census, Brazil, twentieth century

Résumé. Du *mocambo* à la *favela*: statistiques et politique sociale dans les villes informelles du Brésil. Cet article explore l'histoire des recensements des quartiers informels, qui ont toujours été un élément fondateur du paysage urbain brésilien. En se centrant sur Rio de Janeiro et Recife, il fait valoir que le recensement des *favelas* et des *mocambos* était à la fois une technique de gouvernement et une illustration de la modernité nord-atlantique de ces villes. L'émergence ultérieure de la « favela statistique », qui définissait l'informalité urbaine comme un problème de dysfonctionnement social collectif, eut des implications importantes pour les politiques urbaines et sociales du xx^e siècle.

Mots-clés. informalité urbaine, *favela*, recensement, Brésil, xx^e siècle

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On 1 September 1940, Brazil's fledgling Institute of Statistics and Geography (IBGE) conducted a national census. It was the first in 20 years, conceived by Getúlio Vargas' authoritarian Estado Novo, and it aimed to count all Brazilians, even those living in rural hamlets and urban shantytowns previously deemed unquantifiable. The IBGE vigorously encouraged participation; there were prizes for census agents, civic meetings, posters, skits, rallies, and lively press campaigns. On 30 August, Vargas made a "vehement appeal to the people" to "patriotically collaborate" and reveal "what Brazil is really worth now, and what it might become in the future".¹

Vargas' government had already embraced Afro-descendant popular culture as an essential strain of *mestiço* nationalism. It was thus gratifying when the famed Carmen Miranda recorded a samba entitled – simply – *Recenseamento* [Census].² With melodious rhythm, the samba ingeniously chronicled an encounter between a Rio favela resident and a punctilious census agent:

"In 1940
they began the census in the *morro*
and the census agent
examined my life
which was a horror
and when he saw my hand with no wedding ring
he looked at my child
sleeping on the floor
and asked if my *moreno* was decent
if he was a worker or a carouser".³

In those few lines, *Recenseamento* distilled the dread that the census agents provoked among favela residents under constant threat of eviction and police harassment.⁴ As the samba continued, the protagonist's wariness flipped to nationalistic fervor: she proclaimed her obedience to the law and proudly declared that "her man" was a naval gunner; their home might be poor, but they had samba, Rio's spectacular beauty, the Vargas government's social benefits, and a "nation without rival". But millions of Brazilians whose lives diverged from Vargas' quickly expanding legal and bureaucratic mandates must have recognized themselves in the samba's opening lines. What did it mean to be counted by a government that condemned the basic building blocks of popular survival?

Doubts about the purpose of statistical knowledge are endemic. From their modern inception, censuses were building blocks of liberal governance,

1. *O Imparcial*, 31 August 1940.

2. *O Imparcial*, 28 September and 11 October 1940, 18 January 1941; *Fon-Fon*, 23 November 1940.

3. J. DE ASSIS VALENTE, 1940.

4. M. SILVA, 2005; B. FISCHER, 2008; R. GONÇALVES, 2016.

conceived to advance national goals of political economy and social engineering. As such, they always embody the deep tension between description and proscription, especially in relation to the poor and marginalized.⁵ In Latin America, two factors exacerbated this tension. First, modern statistical governance coincided with decolonization and the emergence of a racially hierarchical and selectively liberal North Atlantic order. In this context, the census was a crucial performance, projecting capacity for civilization, prosperity and self-governance. In Brazil, beginning with the first national statistics bureau in 1870, censuses were not only instruments of governance, but also “beautiful portraits” constructed to convince a skeptical world that tropical civilization could attain North Atlantic benchmarks.⁶ Twentieth-century anxieties about development and modernization eventually eclipsed older preoccupations with race and civilization, but the central tensions remained. In addition, because censuses originated in the North Atlantic, their categories and priorities grew from European socio-historical experiences, and often proved woefully inadequate for Latin American societies.

The statistical representation of cities across the global south posed a specific challenge. In the late nineteenth century, the transnational imaginary of “the city” was already deeply entwined with western modernizing narratives.⁷ Cities were emblems, imagined not simply as densely settled bits of earth, but as endpoints for normative historical processes: scientific advancement, the rise of industrial capitalism and consumerism, the expansion of liberal governance and citizenship, the development of North Atlantic aesthetic and spatial logics.⁸ In Brazil, where ideologically diverse governments shared a positivistic commitment to technocratic governance, urban censuses measured progress along those normative and teleological paths, enabling interventions that would “modernize” Brazil’s supposedly distorted forms of urbanity. At the same time, urban censuses, like the pavilions of international expositions, projected virtuous governance and capacity for progress, profit, and culture.⁹ Before the mid-twentieth century, few questioned the primacy of North Atlantic urban ideals. But with so much at stake, how should urban census takers balance the competing imperatives of empirical study and propagandistic representation? How could they shape census categories that exposed Brazil’s urban realities, while also satisfying international statistical norms and showcasing their progress and modernity? How, especially, should they represent the vast territories where residents auto-constructed their own informal urbanities?

5. A. DESROSIÈRES, 1998; T. PORTER, 1986; K. LEVITAN, 2011.

6. J. BULHÕES DE CARVALHO, quoted in M. LOVEMAN, 2009, p. 459; N. SENRA, 2006.

7. D. CHAKRABARTY, 2000.

8. J. FERGUSON, 1999; J. ROBINSON, 2006.

9. M. TENORIO-TRILLO, 1996.

This article examines those tensions in Recife and Rio de Janeiro, the two Brazilian cities where authorities most forcefully constructed informality as an urban problem between 1890 and 1950. In 1890, Rio (population 522,651) was Brazil's national capital and one of Latin America's largest cities. Population growth accelerated after 1900; by 1950, the city held more than three million people. But even as Rio grew, São Paulo eclipsed its prominence and urban informality threatened its urban pretensions. Brazilian authorities conceived Brasília, the modernist experiment that became Brazil's capital in 1960, partially in response to Rio's perceived economic backwardness and uncontrolled urbanization.¹⁰ Recife emerged as a symbol of urban dysfunction even earlier. It was Brazil's third largest city in 1890, yet it had only 110,000 inhabitants and was the hub of a northeastern region already emerging as a symbol of Brazilian underdevelopment. Rapid migration brought Recife's population to over 500,000 by 1950, but critics argued that the result was distended chaos; instead of a metropolis, Recife had nurtured a *mucambópolis*.¹¹ In both cities, residential informality – symbolized by Recife's *mocambo* (literally shack) and Rio's *favela* – emerged as both a solution to the problem of scarce resources and a symbol of urban dysfunction.

Brazilian census authorities struggled to measure their cities' self-built urbanity. Officials sought to define informality as an urban problem, map its spatial contours, and explore its sociological and economic significance – all while showing their mastery of transnational censusing norms and highlighting their cities' achievement and potential. Early on, statisticians focused mainly on informality's material contours. This helped define informality as a sanitary and urban emergency, requiring urgent action, but it revealed little about its socioeconomic significance. This changed with the advent of Brazil's corporatist Estado Novo: after 1937, census takers highlighted the sociology of informality, using census data to fuel ambitious eradication campaigns that sought to re-shape people as well as cities. By 1950, Brazilian statisticians had settled on the notion that favelas – neighborhoods of shacks – posed a greater threat to urbanity than individual mocambos, and the national census cemented the favela community as informality's definitive statistical category. Ironically, however, one of the mid-century censuses' primary findings was the sheer extent and vitality of Brazil's informal cities. Just as *Recenseamento* had implied, the favelas that so often offended the governmental gaze were also the cradles of its citizenry. No statistical representation could overcome the grassroots city-making that had become entrenched in the Brazilian urban form.

10. J. HOLSTON, 1989.

11. M. MELO, 1940, p. 151.

1. Informality's origins

According to Rio lore, favelas emerged as a negative externality of modernity in the late nineteenth century, the novel result of rapid urban expansion and scant urban planning.¹² Yet residential informality – housing ungoverned by building or sanitary regulations, built on legally precarious land, with scant access to public services – was always a common feature of Brazilian urbanism. In Rio, journalists first described an informal neighborhood as a “*favela*” around 1901, but historians have traced self-built housing and the politics that tolerated it to the mid-nineteenth century.¹³ By the 1880s, shacks abounded in Rio’s swampy or hilly interstices, and the line between tenements and shantytowns was often tenuous.¹⁴ In Recife, informality’s roots also ran deep. In the 1810s, French cotton merchant L. F. de Tollenare wrote of “cabins...in which mulattoes and free blacks live”, built in swamps outside the city center. In Tollenare’s racist language, cheap rustic shelter allowed these “miserably poor people” to live in “careless laziness”, surviving on mud crabs.¹⁵ An 1828 proto-census counted hundreds of wattle and daub or “straw” homes.¹⁶ For Gilberto Freyre, Recife’s renowned twentieth-century interpreter, the *mocambo* – originally a Kimbundo word – emerged from slavery and emancipation: “Mocambos [...] provided refuge [...] for many negros and *pardos*, grasping for freedom, the *mocambo* was better than the *senzala* [slave quarters] of stone and lime, attached to the house of the *senhor*...”¹⁷

In Recife and Rio, formal and informal cities thus grew symbiotically. Yet several factors converged in the Belle Époque to denaturalize informality, now re-imagined as urbanity’s antithesis. Rapid transnational communication intensified the diffusion of elitist ideas about race, psychology, and urbanism. Atlantic cities competed fiercely for migrants and investment, and Brazilian elites bristled when visitors noticed favelas and *mocambos* rather than painstakingly cultivated factories, port-works, boulevards, or opera houses. Real estate speculators claimed fallow lands as prices rose and the city itself became a form of capitalistic production. Public health officials, horrified by high mortality rates and rampant epidemics, sought to transform life ways in order to transform lives.¹⁸ From these perspectives, *mocambos* and favelas appeared antithetical to urban modernity, which had no place for “hotbeds of

12. *Gazeta de Notícias*, 21 May 1903; V. MOURA, 1943; B. FISCHER, 2014.

13. *Gazeta de Notícias*, 14 February 1901; R. GONÇALVES, 2016, chap. 1, note 46.

14. R. GONÇALVES, 2016; L. VAZ, 2002; M. ABREU, 1994; L. VALLADARES, 2005; B. FISCHER, 2008; A. AZEVEDO, 1890.

15. L. F. DE TOLLENARE, 1905, p. 42.

16. J. MELLO, 1979, p. 183.

17. G. FREYRE, 2004, pp. 270, 350; J. LIRA, 1994.

18. S. CHALHOUB, 1996; L. VAZ, 2002; J. BENCHIMOL, 1990.

disorder and bad moral habits”¹⁹ or “huts without air, without light, built in miasmatic swamps [...] without sewage, without water, where all the tenants [...] live piled filthily in repugnant promiscuity”.²⁰

In this context, some boosters sought simply to silence informality by curating idealized print metropolises. Rio’s 1906 municipal census, opened with an elaborate photo essay memorializing “one of the largest, most opulent, and most beautiful cities in the world”, but entirely ignored the shacks that sheltered thousands.²¹ In Recife – where most homes were mocambos and most residents were Afro-descendant – a vaunted 1900 guide traced a figurative tramcar tour of an urban landscape so monumental, whitened and sanitized that it could have been a European capital.²² The urban authorities followed suit, creating in law the ideal cities that eluded them in practice by enacting regulations that outlawed “rustic” structures from ever-expanding urban geographies.²³

Yet representational and regulatory gymnastics could not eliminate poverty. Formal housing was expensive, and tolerance of informality was embedded in Brazilian economic structures and power relations. In 1906, Everardo Backheuser’s pioneering government survey of Rio’s housing conditions optimistically described the “beautiful and hygienic city” created after mayor Pereira Passos’ massive tenement demolitions. But it also acknowledged the “dismal abodes where the indigent population vegetated”, including crowded tenements but also “small shacks lacking hygiene (and) light” that had already “spread” over “Favela Hill” overlooking Rio’s Central Railway Station.²⁴ Similarly, Recife’s best-known public health official and statistician wrote frankly of the mocambos that he considered “the principle dwellings” of the “poor classes”.²⁵

Persistent informality cried out for statistical governance: maps, statistics, and cadastral registers were both vital tools for legal, infrastructural, medical, and social engineering and essential symbols of modern state capacity. Yet Brazil’s statistical record was bleak. Brazil’s Portuguese rulers had bemoaned scant statistics, and Brazil’s “patriarch of Independence” had called for statistical surveys as early as the 1810s.²⁶ By 1847 – six years before transnational statistical cooperation began – a Recife jurist wrote that statistics were “a light for the legislator, minister of state, or diplomat; history’s evidence and

19. *Gazeta de Notícias*, 10 May 1901.

20. A. ORLANDO, 1908, p. 139.

21. BRASIL, 1907, p. lxi.

22. A. VIANNA, 1900.

23. R. GONÇALVES, 2016; B. FISCHER, 2008; M. MELO, 1985; Z. GOMINHO, 1998.

24. The Morro da Favela, named for a bloody battle in the Canudos War, introduced “favela” to the urban lexicon. E. BACKHEUSER, 1906, pp. 108, 111.

25. O. FREITAS, 1905, p. 50.

26. N. SENRA, 2006.

commentary; and the only sure grounding for calculations about what is to come”.²⁷ Yet unlike the US, England and France (where regular censuses began by the early 1800s), Brazil completed only one reliable nineteenth-century census.²⁸ A few provinces attempted their own surveys, and state agencies accumulated information on trade, industry, and health. Brazil was one of the first countries in Latin America to establish a general directory of statistics (in 1870), and civil registration began in earnest after 1890. But Belle Époque Brazil had no statistical record of change over time. Most cities lacked the maps, cadastral registers, and topographical surveys that engineers required for urban planning. And despite the fact that early nationalists had demanded statistics on poverty and public welfare, even major cities had done little to measure their residents’ precarious living conditions.

By 1900, engineers and public health officials recognized that scant housing statistics impeded urban progress. Yet counting shacks and tenements was both technically difficult and in direct tension with the demands of the global gaze, because quantification implied exposure. Once their scale emerged in hard numbers, *mocambos* and favelas could no longer be dismissed as a curiosity fetishized by foreigners, or as an unfamiliar and exotic reality. Informality’s prevalence, once showcased, might deter immigration and investment. Precisely because shacks were so widespread, their quantification was a delicate task, which Rio and Recife confronted very differently.

2. Rio’s statistical silence

In Rio – Brazil’s postcard city – favelas already infused the Belle Époque public sphere. But most observers depicted them as exotic urban anomalies rather than enduring urban processes, singling out high-profile favelas, detached from the city’s normative fabric, while ignoring more numerous shacks scattered less conspicuously throughout the city. Most also linked informality and blackness, emphasized lawlessness and crime, and construed informality as a bizarre atavism.

Rio’s lively urban press fed the lettered public’s idiosyncratic fascination. Articles about the “Morro da Favela” [Favela Hill] breathlessly chronicled the inhabitants’ miserable poverty, their “strange” habits, their African music and “superstitions”, and their criminality and immorality. A series of 1906 articles dug deeper, comparing various *bairros altos* [high neighborhoods] in the central city and distinguishing communities of “workers” from the Morro da Favela’s “dangerous canker”.²⁹ Many articles involved serious

27. J. MELLO, 1979, p. 22.

28. M. LOVEMAN, 2007; N. SENRA, 2006.

29. *Gazeta de Notícias*, 8 September, 21 September, 26 December 1906.

(if fanciful) investigative reporting; most aspired to the literary style of naturalists or *flâneurs*.

Urban governance expanded rapidly during Rio's Belle Époque, and authorities construed favelas as a problem of public policy. The Police complained from the beginning about the Morro da Favela, named partly for its reputed violence.³⁰ Favelas also shaped debates about urbanism, especially after prefect Francisco Perreira Passos (1902-6) ejected thousands of central tenement residents to make way for a Parisian-style boulevard.³¹ Rio's building and sanitary codes condemned widespread informality and restricted rustic shacks to Rio's hills and suburbs.³² The municipal census of 1906 counted informal residents; indeed, its "gallery of centenarians" – a curious biographical addendum – included ten shack residents, some from well-known favelas.³³ The Bahian Isabel Maria da Anunciação lived on the Morro de Santo Antônio in a "decrepit zinc shack, wrapped in a matted grove of fava and maracuja vines that shielded her from the cold"; she claimed to be 120 years old and remembered political events from the eighteenth century. Marcolino Jorge dos Santos, an African-born widow who lived in a shack in suburban Andaraí, was known as a healer with a "religious mania".

Yet informality's penetration of Rio's public sphere did not extend to official statistics. Journalists generated no hard data. Backheuser's 1905 report fell far short of studies already common in Europe. Censuses, including the 1890 and 1920 national surveys and the Municipal Census of 1906, echoed North Atlantic panic over tenements, counting "collective habitations" and tracking their population density, height, and condition. But they did not quantify shacks or research access to public services, land tenure, or the material composition of popular dwellings.³⁴ Rio kept a cadastral map and property tax rolls, as well as technical studies of water, drainage, and pavement, but none of these circulated publicly. Officials studied favelas targeted for demolition on the central hills of Santo Antônio and Castello, but did not publish the results.³⁵ In the late 1920s, a journalist and real-estate developer named João Augusto de Mattos Pimenta led an energetic publicity campaign against the favelas, and a French urbanist hired to elaborate Rio's first master plan, the Plano Diretor, condemned them as "serious obstacles" to security social order, hygiene, and aesthetics.³⁶ But without hard data, both men simply speculated about the issue's scale and the people who called the favelas home.

30. *Gazeta de Notícias*, 10 May 1901.

31. E. BACKHEUSER, 1906; J. BENCHIMOL, 1990.

32. R. GONÇALVES, 2016; B. FISCHER, 2008.

33. BRASIL, 1907, pp. xiv, 147-192.

34. BRASIL, 1895, pp. 424-5; id., 1907, pp. 390-391; id., 1925, vol. II, part 3.

35. R. GONÇALVES, 2016, ch. 2, note 55.

36. A. AGACHE, 1930, p. 190; L. VALLADARES, 2005, pp. 41-43.

3. Recife, Mocambópolis

Recife's geography, economy, demography, and politics converged to chart a very different reaction to the challenges of quantifying urban informality. Recife sat on a tidal floodplain, riddled with rivers and swamps, and had scarce public funds for massive engineering projects. It was a poor city, overwhelmingly dependent on sugar and on its status as a regional center for bureaucracy and higher education. After 1870, Recife absorbed generations of rural migrants; many were semi-destitute drought victims or freedpersons. Unlike European immigrants, they received no state support; in the absence of public welfare, Recifenses relied heavily on religious, private, and familial networks of authority and charity.

In that context, mocambos were a quotidian reality rather than a curiosity or exoticism. Newspapers discussed mocambos without surprise or fanfare. Wealthy families built loyalty by allowing dependents to live in backyard huts and accumulated small fortunes by renting vacant land to *mocambeiros* (shack dwellers). City commissioners issued commerce licenses and special permits to build and repair illegal homes. Recifenses bought and sold mocambos through classified ads and treated them as normal addresses; firemen responded to their fires and floods; people entered raffles that advertised mocambos as prizes.³⁷ Recife's lettered classes naturalized mocambos within a patriarchal, racialized social hierarchy; they might be shameful, unhealthy reminders of Recife's slave past, but they were also integral to the urban fabric.

Recife's engineers, politicians, and public health officials thus accepted early on that statistical ignorance was not a viable option. Octavio de Freitas, Recife's first Superintendent of Municipal Hygiene, encapsulated the sentiment in 1905:

"I am among those who think that the best way [...] is to say the complete truth, hiding nothing, so that those responsible for public affairs might have real knowledge of the situation and [...] act with confidence."³⁸

Recife was, in his view, "an eminently unhealthy city"; if its residents wanted better, they needed solid numbers. In the absence of regular censuses, the only way to calculate population – and thus mortality coefficients – was by counting domiciles. Absurdly, given that about half of Recife's homes were informal, Recife's extant building counts relied on tax rolls, which mostly excluded mocambos. And so, in the interest of accurate mortality statistics, Freitas counted the mocambos (around 16,600) and roughly mapped their geography in swampy regions bordering roads and transport lines across

37. *Jornal do Recife*, 6 December 1879 and 21 August 1928.

38. O. FREITAS, 1905, p. 57.

Recife.³⁹ Freitas described mocambos as horrid repositories of misery and disease.⁴⁰ But to eliminate them, they had to be named, counted, and visible to all.

Multiple cartographical and statistical studies followed Freitas' lead. In 1906, British engineers Douglas Fox and Michell Whitley drafted a sophisticated map to guide Recife's sanitation efforts; in subsequent versions, they identified concentrations of mocambos throughout the city, labeling some as *casaes dos negros* (black settlements).⁴¹ Recife's first municipal census in 1913 prioritized housing, categorizing domiciles as "brick", "adobe", or "mocambos" ("small houses, badly constructed, disobedient to every aesthetic and hygienic precept").⁴² In 1923, a second census focused almost entirely on housing, counting 19,079 *residências* and 19,947 *mocambos*; only 15,521 houses were brick and 21,184 had dirt floors.⁴³

These statistics spurred outrage. Engineers and health officials decried the mocambo "infestation" as a sign of primitivity and a danger to the city and the family.⁴⁴ Journalists luxuriated in sordid details: leaky roofs; mud floors; walls full of bugs and worms; children playing in filth; hunger, sickness and disease.⁴⁵ Anarcho-syndicalists decried mocambos in hopes of sparking revolutionary furor.⁴⁶ Public debate, in turn, kindled policy reform, some of it modeled on Rio de Janeiro's experiments with construction codes and zoning laws.⁴⁷ Renowned engineer Saturnino de Brito considered the mocambo problem a serious threat to the efficacy of his ambitious drainage works in the 1910s.⁴⁸ In a wave of port renewal and gentrification, the city removed most rustic homes from Recife's tiny central districts (which housed only 7% of Recife's households).⁴⁹ State and municipal governments restricted mocambo construction and repair, and leveled steadily more onerous fees on mocambo landlords. City officials offered tax incentives for "worker" housing. In the 1920s Recife's authoritarian director of Health and Welfare, Amaury de Medeiros, prioritized mocambo eradication and constructed hundreds of model low-cost homes, whose residents received education and medical care meant to accustom them to civilized living.⁵⁰

39. O. FREITAS, 1905, p. 50.

40. O. FREITAS, 1910.

41. T. FRANCISCO, 2013, pp. 52-56.

42. PERNAMBUCO, 1915, p. 82.

43. PERNAMBUCO, 1924, p. 3.

44. A. ORLANDO, 1908; F. BRITO, 1917; A. MEDEIROS, 1926.

45. *Jornal do Recife*, 12 September 1922.

46. M. MELO, 1985, pp. 49, 51.

47. B. FISCHER, 2008, Part I.

48. F. BRITO, 1917, p. 85.

49. C. LUBAMBO, 1991.

50. *Jornal do Recife*, 23 May 1929.

Yet even as the rhetorical and legal storms raged, mocambos proliferated, often protected and exploited by the same actors who decried them. Firemen continued to tamp fires, and Recife's police regularly resolved mocambo property conflicts. Politicians deepened webs of favor and obligation by excusing constituents from mocambo taxes and fines; the 1930 governor's report revealed that only 200 of the city's estimated 23,000 mocambos paid the state fee.⁵¹ There was no outcry for stricter enforcement; on the contrary, journalists condemned the fees and criticized heartless municipal inspectors who denied mocambo residents due tolerance.⁵² The state tax office undertook a private mocambo census in 1930 to facilitate enforcement, but the survey also helped establish claims to property and permanence.⁵³ When they were not sensationalizing the mocambos' crime and depravity, journalists mounted campaigns against "foreign" mocambo landlords who charged excessive rent or punished derelict tenants by spectacularly tearing off their mocambos' roofs. One paper ran a months-long appeal from *pessoas caridosas* (charitable people) who aimed to purchase a mocambo for a suffering widow.⁵⁴ The mocambos might have been denaturalized and demonized in the city's official representations, but they were still firmly entrenched in the city's urban form.

4. Censuses and social crusades

After 1930, Getúlio Vargas' revolutionary government oversaw the most ambitious process of institutional and legal reform in Brazil's history. The urban question was central to Vargas' populist politics and industrial development policies, and the new government's response to mocambos and favelas would be a critical test of its resolve to remedy Brazil's "social question". But the nature of Vargas' policies would depend on how they defined, measured, and analyzed the problem of informality. Was it material, social, or moral? Should the unit of analysis be the shack, the family, or the community? Did responsibility rest with individuals, states, or the broader social body?

Rio and Recife continued to answer such questions differently, but in both cities, censuses were critical tools. Through the early 1930s, censuses treated informality as a purely material problem, documenting the shacks' composition, geography and scale as part of a general evaluation of the urban building stock. This changed in the late 1930s. Recife's pioneering 1938 mocambo census (published in 1939) established informality as a discrete analytical object, documenting material circumstances and land tenure arrangements, but also analyzing informal residents' economic, sociological

51. Z. GOMINHO, 1998, pp. 29-30.

52. *Jornal do Recife*, 3 January 1930.

53. E. COIMBRA, 1930, pp. 170-171.

54. *Jornal do Recife*, July-December 1927.

and familial circumstances. From that point forward, Brazilian census agents aimed not only to measure and transform mocambos and favelas, but also to measure and transform their inhabitants. In Recife, they did this by analyzing self-contained domestic units – mocambo households – and portraying mocambeiros as victims of socioeconomic forces beyond their control, and thus worthy targets for paternalistic social engineering. Notably, while older racist characterizations of the mocambos lingered, analysts and policymakers in this majority Afro-descendant city also began to deliberately silence explicit racial analysis. Rio’s authorities, by contrast, increasingly focused on favelas – communities – rather than households, construing the problem of informality as one of collective sociological dysfunction, anomie, and deviance. In Rio, where a majority of residents identified as white, mid-century analysts also frequently depicted favelas as the direct product of defective racial or cultural formation. By the late 1940s, Brazilian statisticians and sociologists had settled on Rio’s favela – and not Recife’s mocambo – as their favored unit of analysis, a decision that would shape policy debates and grassroots activism for decades.

5. Recife

The political conjuncture of the 1930s radicalized Recife’s urban politics and strengthened the city’s institutional capacity. The mocambos became an especially bitter bone of political contention. Communists and labor activists used the miserable housing conditions to mobilize collective consciousness, organizing neighborhood associations, placing mocambo demands at the top of their political platforms, publishing fiery denunciations of exploitation, and even writing a novel about mocambo land conflicts.⁵⁵ In the wake of a failed communist rebellion in 1935, Vargas repressed radical politics and established the authoritarian Estado Novo (1937-45). But Pernambucan Interventor Agamenon Magalhães – who had previously served as Vargas’ labor and justice minister – recognized the issue’s potency. In 1939, Recife became the first Brazilian city to mount a full-on eradication campaign against informal housing, the “Liga Social contra o Mocambo”. The Liga fused crusading authoritarian reformism with a pioneering emphasis on empirical research and quantification. Its rhetoric and censusing techniques provided a critical precedent for Brazil’s subsequent favela initiatives.

The Liga built on old mocambo tropes. Magalhães often revived discourses of civic shame: in one article, he described a friend’s embarrassment when a transatlantic flight menu depicted a folkloric mocambo as Pernambuco’s “native habitat”.⁵⁶ Press coverage advocating for the Liga emphasized social

55. A. C. RIBEIRO, 1935; *Folha do Povo*, 1935.

56. *Folha da Manhã*, 15 July 1939.

and sanitary danger: “The mocambo, infected and miserably poor, spreads frighteningly through every quadrant of the capital, lending it a depressing physiognomy. Deep in the swamps, open to the invasion of every evil that affects the health of the collective, a social group is forming that is far distant from the normal type...”⁵⁷ Magalhães’ aimed to dissipate that “social group” by renewing vertical, paternalistic social bonds. In one propagandistic article, he described a once respectable *velhinha* (little old lady) who had fallen on hard times. When state tax collectors threatened to evict her from a decrepit mocambo, she wrote to Magalhães seeking grace. He forgave her debt, and she crossed the city to thank him and recount her hellish mocambo winters. Between muddy floors and leaky roofs, “children cry, mothers scream, there is such revolt and hopelessness [...] so much pain without relief, that if the rich and the government could hear they would already have constructed houses and gotten rid of the mocambos”.⁵⁸ This description encouraged Recifenses to view the mocambo as a lonely unit, headed by a suffering but virtuous victim, whose only salvation came from the grace of a patriarchal authority. In aiding the *velhinha*, Magalhães also legitimized a deeply unequal social order.

Yet the Liga also sparked innovative debate. Recife’s papers incorporated social science, construing the mocambo as a sociological problem nestled within larger structural challenges. The availability of cheap mocambos encouraged rural outmigration, emptying Brazil’s agricultural economy, destroying Recife’s urban pretensions and forcing public authorities to spend vital developmental resources on urban infrastructure. An “industry of mocambos” created “urban *latifúndios*”, (urban latifundia) exploiting ignorant peasants and extracting exorbitant profits.⁵⁹ Ignorant *mocambeiros* fueled clientelist politics, and mocambo-bred disease sapped work force vitality, creating a “vegetative population” that weakened the economy and constituted an “element of moral disaggregation”.⁶⁰ Brazil’s benevolent corporatist government – in alliance with the Catholic Church – was obligated to act, mobilizing every sector of society to eliminate the huts and resettle their residents in neat rows of modest hygienic houses.

Recife’s officials waged the urban battles of the 1930s with the tools and media of modern governance: tax registries, surveys, nutritional studies, maps, housing designs, zoning laws, photographs, journalistic exposés – even fiction, theater, music and film. The Liga also carried out Brazil’s first public census of informality. In October 1938, Magalhães created the Comissão Censitária dos Mucambos do Recife, comprised of seven carefully trained agents whose teams would scour Recife’s 15 zones and 96 sub-zones; “not a single locality occupied by mocambos would escape notice”. The rationale

57. *Jornal do Recife*, 26 August 1937.

58. *Folha da Manhã*, 17 July 1939.

59. *Folha da Manhã*, 26 June 1939.

60. *Folha da Manhã*, 30 July and 1 August 1939.

was clear: only accurate information would facilitate governmental action, and every mocambeiro had a patriotic duty to cooperate.⁶¹

Officials carefully crafted the census to justify eradication and socially engineered resettlement. Census agents created a mocambo typology, based on the materials that comprised their roofs, walls, and floors. They estimated each mocambo's value and determined if its inhabitants rented or owned the structure and the land it sat on. They detailed each mocambo's age, size, physical condition, waste disposal, and access to garden plots. They compiled rents, recorded incomes and mapped employment. Agents also researched residents' age, sex, disabilities, literacy, and school attendance in order to analyze family structures, moral probity, and capacity for "productive" social contributions.

Published in June of 1939, the census data substantiated a series of points central to Magalhães' crusade.⁶² First, profiteering was rampant: most mocambeiros paid rent, annually equivalent to 56% of the mocambo's value, "an extortion, a usury, a crime against the collective economy".⁶³ Second, mocambo households were very poor: half earned less than the minimum salary. Third, mocambeiros were diligent and eager for education; 63% were literate, 63% of children went to school, and 97% of household heads worked. The census construed residents as victims, and thus as the rightful "beneficiaries" of energetic, hierarchical, authoritarian public action.

The survey pointedly omitted critical information that might have harmed its cause, including race, marital status, rates of single motherhood, or residents' place of origin. It did not investigate mocambo neighborhoods as social systems or trace their histories. The census gave no information about the mocambos' locations, as if they were mere statistics rather than homes rooted in place. While such abstraction might have encouraged Recife's civic society to unite in a corporate project of social engineering, it also communicated a harsher message. Mocambos were inherently untethered and ephemeral. Grouped together, they constituted a sociological problem, born of exploitation or misguided grace and best remedied by dispersal. Mocambos did not constitute communities and implied no right to self-determination or to the city.

The Liga mobilized Recife, incorporating students, industrialists, sugar producers, bankers, shop owners, workers, and even some repentant mocambo landlords. Recifenses donated money, industrialists and Federal agencies pledged that they would build houses, and a melodramatic play about the Liga toured Recife's working-class neighborhoods. Telegrams flooded in from around the country, and Federal officials visited to show their support.

61. *Diário de Pernambuco*, 19 October 1938: APEJE, Fundos Diversos 158.

62. *PERNAMBUCO*, 1939.

63. *Folha da Manhã*, 13 July 1939.

Censors and police muffled any protest, and the Liga doggedly pursued its goals: to uproot mocambos, to build heavily regulated worker housing; to heavily tax mocambo terrains; and to quickly and profitably “develop” centrally located mocambo sites.

None of this eliminated Recife’s mucambópolis, largely because replacement housing fell far short. The Liga destroyed 14,600 mocambos but built only 1,397 homes; most were occupationally segregated, strictly policed, and relatively expensive.⁶⁴ Displaced mocambeiros simply rebuilt in new swamps and peripheries. The 1939 census documented 45,581 mocambos; the 1940 census counted over 50,000 similar homes.⁶⁵ In 1950, around half of Recife’s households still lacked electricity or septic systems, and most went without running water.⁶⁶

All the same, the Liga and its census left significant conceptual and political legacies. They pioneered censusing techniques that emphasized the sociological features of informal residents as well as the material features of their dwellings. They further denaturalized the mocambos, cleanly excluding them from Recife’s legal and administrative fabric. They conceptualized mocambos as atomized units bereft of community or solidarity, facilitating a mode of governance that re-enforced direct, paternalistic, and highly unequal power relations. The Liga thus helped to create a distinctive and unequal urban geography, wherein mocambos persisted but were dispersed or peripheralized, excluded from urban citizenship and the public resources it implied. It would take a subsequent generation of political mobilization for Recife’s mucambópolis to assert its right to urban belonging.⁶⁷

6. Rio and the statistical favela

In Rio, the Vargas era marked the end of the favelas’ statistical silence. Between 1930 and 1940, the public finally gained access to the sorts of material and technical surveys that Recife had pioneered decades before. After 1940, Rio’s officials followed the Liga’s example in emphasizing informality’s structural and sociological dimensions. In Rio, however, sociological analysis quickly shifted from the household to the community. Analysts construed the “problem” of the favela as a communal dystopia and a uniquely crippling negative externality of modernization and development. In a series of

64. M. MELO, 1985, p. 154, for mocambos destroyed between 1939-1948; for homes constructed between 1939 and 1944, see M. MELO, 1985, p. 60; 4,800 more “worker homes” were built by industries or pension funds with federal subsidy. See also *Jornal Pequeno*, 29 April 1946.

65. BRASIL, 1950, p. 274.

66. BRASIL, 1955, p. 120.

67. M. MELO, 1985; M. CÉZAR, 1985; W. ASSIES, 1991.

unpublished community surveys, and especially in a much-publicized 1948 favela census, Rio de Janeiro's technocrats helped to construct the statistical "favela" as a disjunctive social agglomeration that threatened the very possibility of urban modernity. That dark vision would influence the politics of Brazilian informality for generations.

In 1933, Brazil's Labor Ministry conducted Rio's first comprehensive building census, surveying virtually every structure in the city – formal and informal – and tallying the public services (electricity, water, drainage, pavement, and public transport) available on its every street, alley, and hillside. The results revealed why previous authorities, conscious of the postcard city's international image, might have avoided public accountings: 26% of Rio's buildings were wooden or "rustic", only 31.7% of Rio's streets had sewer lines, 43.9% had electricity, 57.5% had running water, and 33.7% were paved. Higher standards prevailed in central Rio, but only four tiny neighborhoods had substantially eliminated shacks. Some 23% of Rio's shacks were in clusters of 50 or more, mostly on steep hills or swampy areas; the vast majority were interspersed with sturdier buildings throughout the city and suburbs. The building census substantiated the gulf between Rio's self-image and its social reality: Rio projected itself as an essentially "modern" city, where favelas were exceptional pockmarks on a normative urban landscape; the street-by-street survey revealed a city built significantly from scratch.

The 1933 census attracted only a few public mentions.⁶⁸ Advocates of affordable housing cited it, as did alarmists propagating the idea that Rio was overrun by "favela-style houses".⁶⁹ But as a technical survey, divorced from the favelas' actual inhabitants, the 1933 census paled beside the media accounts and sambas that fed the public imagination. The city published updated building counts in the late 1930s, and the 1940 national census expended unprecedented resources to survey Rio's 52,085 shacks, including queries about land tenure and material conditions.⁷⁰ But neither provided insight about shack residents or their communities. While census results facilitated a technocratic evaluation of Rio's formal housing and service deficit, they did little to inform public understanding of favela communities or shape public policies aimed at transforming them.

This changed in the early 1940s, when Rio Interventor Henrique Dodsworth turned his prodigious energies to the favelas. One catalyst was a Pernambucan doctor, Victor Tavares de Moura, who served as director of Rio's Albergue da Boa Vontade. Moura's work with homeless migrants had taught him about the favelas. So had agents for the 1940 census, whose prejudiced portrayal of the Morro da Favela's precariousness, promiscuity, and

68. *O Jornal*, 14 June 1935; *A Noite*, 21 October 1935; *Jornal do Brasil*, 17 October 1935.

69. *Jornal do Brasil*, 13 June 1936, 27 August 1936.

70. BRASIL, 1951, pp. 167-171.

vulgarity justified Carmen Miranda's foreboding in *Recenseamento*.⁷¹ Moura was a friend of Magalhães, and he considered Recife's Liga a "victorious experience".⁷² An advocate for "social medicine", Moura understood medical practice as a holistic integration of science, sociology, and public policy. He argued that Rio's favelas should be the object of analysis and intervention rather than the stuff of song and legend: "...we can only choose which path to follow on the basis of real, detailed information...".⁷³ Dodsworth, convinced, appointed Moura to a committee charged with studying and then eradicating the favelas. By 1942, the campaign was on: Dodsworth himself set fire to the "Largo da Memória", a community of 2,026 people built near the Lagoa Rodrigo de Freitas in Rio's swanky Zona Sul district. By 1947, the city had destroyed thousands more shacks in several south-zone favelas. To house a select portion of the displaced, Dodsworth built 7,500 "provisional" wooden houses, in four strictly regulated Parque Proletária (Proletarian Parks).

The Parque Proletária campaign echoed Recife's. Moura construed poverty as a collective problem, "dishonorable for the society that generated and sustains it".⁷⁴ Fault did not lie with most favela residents, but with structural disequilibria between rural and urban Brazil, and with favela "exploiters".⁷⁵ The solution was corporatist and authoritarian; poor residents would receive "grandiose benefits" in exchange for obedience to an "enlightened and well-disposed government".⁷⁶ Moura proposed restrictions on rural to urban migration, and advocated punishing favela landlords for "crimes against the popular economy". The campaign sought to build "an extensive and sympathetic social movement around the problem" using newspapers, photography, film, and public spectacle to promote cross-class solidarity.⁷⁷ And Moura's efforts, like the Liga's, involved a phased sequence of study and action, beginning with an ambitious census and ending with mass resettlement in homes built to promote sociocultural readaptation as well as health and urbanism.

Yet Moura's campaign exceeded the Liga's in its sociological depth and ambition. Moura acknowledged societal ignorance and recognized the difficulty of censusing long-stigmatized communities. Moura's daughter later recalled her father's efforts to use his *jeitinho* (guile) to ingratiate himself with *malandros* (rogues, often considered folk heroes) who could ensure local trust, buying them drinks and calling on police to forgive their infractions.⁷⁸

71. V. MOURA, unpublished report for J. Albuquerque (c. 1940), COC Archives, FVTM, PPF, cx. 1.

72. V. MOURA, *A Manhã*, 25 September 1949. Moura was a witness at Magalhães' daughter's 1947 wedding.

73. V. MOURA, unpublished report..., op. cit. (note 71).

74. "Eles Vivem", COC Archives, FVTM, PI.

75. V. MOURA, 1943.

76. V. MOURA; *O Imparcial*, 23 November 1941.

77. V. MOURA, unpublished report..., op. cit. (note 71).

78. J. PINHEIRO, 2014.

In designing the census, Moura approached favelas holistically. His household surveys burrowed deep, detailing material conditions, property arrangements, informal economies, jobs and salaries, state documentation, family structures, geographical origin, race, and education. And Moura did not understand favela residents as interchangeable units bereft of local social ties, whose relocation could follow purely functionalist logics; they were instead building blocks of social systems, dynamic elements of broader psychological, biological, and social processes. Favelas differed significantly from one another and could not be reduced to the sum of their parts. In eliminating favelas, Moura sought “not to make homes, but to make people” – which necessarily required attention to the ways in which people made one another through community.⁷⁹

All the same, Moura’s conclusions revealed a judgmental, disciplinary zeal. Moura considered most favelas areas of “social disintegration”, noting that “the study of the vicious types who live there could fill chapters”⁸⁰ Moura’s criteria for identifying 76 communities as “favelas” included population density and social dysfunction.⁸¹ Social workers wrote of the need to “descend” to the favelas’ level to carry out their “socially impactful” work.⁸² The censuses sought in part to distinguish deserving families – orderly, hard-working, religious, civic-minded with a strong sense of “we” – from the exploiters, “*malandros*” and “dead-weights” who had no place in the new Proletarian Parks.⁸³ Even the deserving poor required a period of “supervised readaptation” before occupying permanent homes: only the vigilant guidance of social workers, doctors, and educators would prevent them from recreating the “favela”, “the social vice of living badly”, by hoarding garbage, taking ten showers a day, playing samba and drinking *cachaça* (sugarcane liquor). “How could a house be entrusted to such people?”⁸⁴ In the name of re-education, Moura insisted that Proletarian Park residents undergo medical exams, fingerprinting, psychological profiling, and home visits; index cards placed all information at the authority’s easy disposal. Moura’s censuses explored favela realities, but they also allowed authorities to disaggregate favela communities, channeling some residents toward redemptive rehousing and subjecting others to discipline and exclusion.

The Proletarian Parks faltered quickly, giving way to a long series of ineffective commissions and campaigns. Moura stepped down in 1947, and the Parks, intentionally “provisional”, soon merged with the surrounding favelas.⁸⁵

79. “Aspectos Sociais da Habitação Conjunta”, unpublished manuscript, COC Archives, FVTM, PI, cx.2.

80. “Aspectos Sociais...”, op. cit. (note 79).

81. “Favelas do Rio”, unpublished manuscript, COC Archives, FVTM, PPF, cx. 1.

82. “Apuração do censo realizado no ‘Morro de Santo Antônio’” (1946), FVTM, PPF, cx. 1.

83. V. MOURA, 1943, pp. 264-9.

84. “Aspectos Sociais...”, op. cit.; “Informações sobre a favela do Jockey Club” (1947), unpublished manuscript, COC archives, FVTM, PPF, cx. 1.

85. L. PARISSE, 1969, pp. 75-9.

Yet Moura's legacy endured. The Fundação Leão XIII, charged with favela policy after 1947, placed Moura on the board and echoed his commitment to Catholic social engineering, replicating his index card system conducting censuses in Jacarezinho and São Carlos.⁸⁶ Moura's crusading spirit also survived: Carlos Lacerda's notorious "Battle for Rio de Janeiro" – a public relations blitz with little practical impact – included many pillars of Moura's plans, including migration restrictions, attacks on "exploiters" and informal economies, sociopsychological evaluations, and phased resettlement.⁸⁷ Just as importantly, virtually every agency or researcher who studied the favelas after 1945 followed Moura in defining the favela as a site of concentrated social dysfunction.

Data collection and census taking, however, may have been Moura's most significant legacy. In 1947, the *vereador* (city councilor) Carlos Lacerda introduced an ambitious affordable housing bill that mandated an extensive favela census.⁸⁸ The project came to naught, but the census did not. From November 1947 to March 1948, young social workers fanned out across the city, surveying every resident and affixing tags to every shack in the 119 favelas deemed large enough to merit study.⁸⁹ The resulting census, published in 1949, formalized a statistical vision of urban informality long in the making. Like the Recife survey, it emphasized the shacks' materiality and micro-economies. 43% of had zinc roofs, 47% had dirt floors, 76% had improper sewerage, 38% had electricity; 38% paid rent to illegal "exploiters", and many housed clandestine commerce and accessed pirated services. The census followed Moura in defining favelas by size; of 119 communities and 280,000 residents initially surveyed, only 105 communities and 138,837 inhabitants appeared in the final publication.⁹⁰ Their 34,567 homes constituted only 38.6% of the 89,635 Rio shacks counted by the National Yellow Fever service in 1949.⁹¹ The census also amplified Moura's invasive sociological bent, surveying not only education, incomes, jobs, and family structures but also race and compliance with state documentation requirements. Unlike the Recife census, which had silenced racist dogma in an attempt to build collective solidarity, the 1949 census articulated noxious racist stereotypes about ex-slaves who "did not or could not take advantage of freedom" and regressed to "atavistic laziness".⁹² Rural migrants were "disoriented" in the big city, and favela residents in general were "backward classes", "unable to withstand sustained

86. *Correio da Manhã*, 19 February 1948; BRASIL, 1953, p. 13.

87. L. PARISSE, 1969; A. LEEDS & E. LEEDS, 1978; M. SILVA, 2005.

88. *Correio da Manhã*, 27 June 1947.

89. *O Observador Econômico e Financeiro*, June 1949; *O Jornal*, 13 Nov. 1947; *A Noite*, 18 Nov. 1947; *Diário de Notícias*, 31 Dec. 1947; BRASIL, 1949.

90. BRASIL, 1949, pp. 6-7.

91. BRASIL, 1953, pp. 11, 15 and 16.

92. BRASIL, 1949, p. 11.

work”⁹³ Since “eugenic” solutions had been blocked by the “reservations” of timid authorities, the only solution was draconian removal of this “palpable socioeconomic problem”⁹⁴ In its conception, execution, and interpretation, the census aimed to portray favelas as a “factor in the disintegration of the human personality”⁹⁵ and spur their extinction.

The Favela Census’ tone and bent were retrograde, even for its time. Its insistence on minimizing the favelas’ scale recalled Belle Époque civic shame, as did its positivistic tone and its exoticizing refusal to recognize the favelas as anything but a symptom of the backwardness of the Brazilian “race” or a distortion in the natural path of industrial modernization. But for all its extremism, the 1949 census was also a landmark that vigorously reinforced the notion that the “favela” was defined not by material and legal informality, but rather by illegal, dysfunctional concentrations of substandard housing, which constituted a threat not only to health and urbanism, but also to progress toward the mythical “sociological modern”.⁹⁶ This conception would ground many of the “myths of marginality” that have since shaped policies toward urban informality around the globe; it would also spark decades of community activism bent on giving lie to such denigration.

Conclusion

In June of 1950, residents of urban shacks across Brazil prepared for a new census. The Estado Novo’s fervor had faded; no *sambista* (samba artist) stepped up, and the presence of a census agent in a favela was no longer news. Still, the effort was impressive. The president gave a speech; the government produced a film; the post office emitted commemorative stamps; the Portland Company even printed “Help with the 1950 census!” on all of its cement sacks. In Rio, 1673 census agents fanned out to collect data from 447,592 households; Recife surveyed 102,002. Census agents were expressly directed to assist favela families so that the “portrait of Brazil” could be complete.⁹⁷ A Santa Teresa favela was the first to finish all of its surveys in early July; in a separate notice, a reporter observed that the Jacarezinho favela, with 7,000 domiciles and 35,000 people, was larger than the majority of Brazilian cities and boasted some 600 businesses, including a jeweler.⁹⁸

93. BRASIL, 1949, pp. 11 and 18.

94. Ibid., pp. 5 and 11.

95. Ibid., p. 18.

96. J. ADAMS, E. CLEMENS & A. ORLOFF, 2005.

97. *Correio da Manhã*, 28-30 June and 3 July 1950; *Diário da Noite*, 7 July 1950; *Diário de Pernambuco*, 1 July 1950.

98. *Correio da Manhã*, 2 July 1950.

In general, the 1950 census agents asked fewer questions about the favelas than they had in 1940. They did not explore the material composition of Brazil's urban housing stock or the extent, geography, or nature of informality outside of Rio; in Recife, analysts were left to extrapolate informality's scale from the fact that 29% of homes had water pipes and 50% had electricity.⁹⁹ Otavio de Freitas – the early Recife statistician – would have found the 1950 census paltry.

None the less, it marked a coming of age: in 1953, for the first time, Brazil's IBGE published a census of Rio's favelas.¹⁰⁰ *As Favelas do Distrito Federal* diverged from Rio's 1949 survey in both tone and substance. Its authors found the favelas symptomatic rather than strange, arguing that favela huts symbolized a far broader crisis of poverty and substandard housing; in Brazil as a whole, 65% of families lived in rustic homes.¹⁰¹ The census emphasized structural poverty rather than racial or social degeneracy; Afro-descendants prevailed in the favelas because they were poor, and favelas were the consequence rather than the cause of low wages, ignorance, or poor hygiene.¹⁰² Anticipating arguments made famous in the 1960s, the census pointed out that the favelas were a "solution" as well as a "problem", and rejected any suggestion that favela residents were "marginal" or isolated from "social life".¹⁰³ Quoting a congressman who pointed out that it would take three years for all of Rio's factories to produce enough materials to replace even a third of Rio's shacks, the census takers concluded that favelas comprised an "extremely complex" problem, intimately tied to structural poverty and inequality, with no easy solution.¹⁰⁴

Yet in one respect the 1949 and 1950 censuses concurred. When it came to informality, their object of study was the *carioca* "favela" (Rio favela) defined as a "dense and disorderly grouping" of more than fifty shacks, a "human agglomeration" construed as a distinctive social phenomenon because of its concentration and presence in the central city.¹⁰⁵ This conception allowed the 1950 census to further restrict informality's recognized scale to 58 favelas, 169,305 residents and 45,236 shacks (perhaps half of Rio's total). And it also culminated a decades-long evolution in public policy. Individual shacks or mocambos might have been a national embarrassment or a legal, sanitary, or urbanistic challenge. But they were ultimately a technical problem, resolved by modernization and development. The "favela" was something more: a socioeconomic, cultural and political system, rooted in place and emblematic

99. BRASIL, 1955, p. 120.

100. BRASIL, 1953.

101. Ibid., pp. 8-9.

102. Ibid., p. 9.

103. Ibid., pp. 11, and 23.

104. Ibid., pp. 25-26.

105. Ibid., p. 17.

of much broader dysfunction. In narrowing its focus to the *carioca* “favela”, the 1950 census cemented a conception of urban informality that rendered the issue inseparable from contentious and painful debates about the rights and capabilities of Brazil’s poorest citizens and their proper relationship with the privileges of urban life. From that point forward, the favela – as a socio-statistical category – would be counted, analyzed, mobilized, and repressed as the collective emblem of Brazil’s deepest social rifts.

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