

Book Review: Underground Sociabilities: Identity, Culture, and Resistance in Rio de Janeiro's Favelas, by Sandra Jovchelovitch and Jacqueline Priego-Hernandez

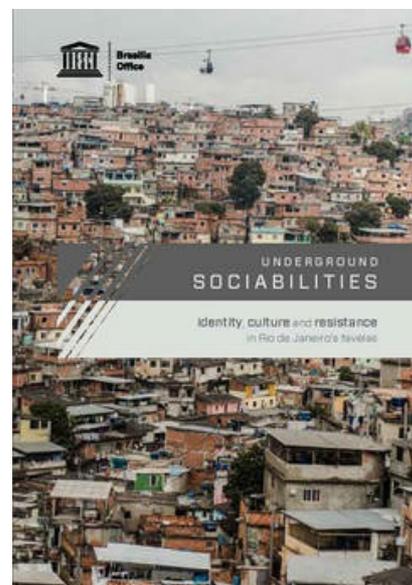
*Dedicated to the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, to their people and their history, **Underground Sociabilities** showcases research into how Rio's favelas are using cultural activities, identity, and the imagination in an attempt to regenerate public spheres and construct positive futures for young people at risk of drugs, violence and drug trafficking wars. Interspersed with quotes from the research interviews, beautiful photography, and pleasantly presented data and tables, this book has the potential to serve as real inspiration to those interested in social inclusion and the arts, writes **Vinicius Mariano de Carvalho**.*



Underground Sociabilities: Identity, Culture, and Resistance in Rio de Janeiro's Favelas. Sandra Jovchelovitch and Jacqueline Priego-Hernandez. UNESCO Publications. 2013.

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Underground Sociabilities offers a comprehensive analysis of a very complex phenomenon within Brazilian society: the world of Rio de Janeiro's favelas. Together with the widespread images of carnival, samba, beaches, and football, favelas are recognised the world over as another strong image of Rio de Janeiro. Alongside increased media coverage, academics are engaged in trying to understand and explain this particular aspect of the so-called "marvelous city". Within this context, this book by [Sandra Jovchelovitch](#) and [Jacqueline Priego-Hernandez](#), both at the London School of Economics, is another important contribution on this under-studied topic.



The book forms the report from a [research project](#) developed by the authors in a partnership between UNESCO Office in Brazil, Itaú Cultural and Fundação Itaú Social (both sponsored by Banco Itaú), the Brazilian Ministry of Culture, [Central Única das Favelas – CUFA](#), and [Grupo Cultural AfroReggae](#). The main focus of the research investigates how segregated and poor neighbourhoods inside the complex and fragmented metropolis that is Rio de Janeiro – normally identified as violent and dangerous – develop alternative forms of sociability in order to resist exclusion. These "underground sociabilities" are defined by the authors as "subterranean forms of social life that are made invisible to mainstream society by geographical, economic, symbolic, behavioural and cultural barriers" (p. 21).

The research, which spans a period from 2009 to 2011 in four of Rio de Janeiro's neighbourhoods (Cantagalo, Cidade de Deus, Vigário Geral and Madureira), first studies the lifeworld of these communities in order to capture the perceptions that the dwellers have about themselves and how they see their lives in the favelas and in the city. Secondly, the focus turns to CUFA and AfroReggae (a hybrid of NGO, social movement, business, and culture entrepreneur), recognized as mediators between the world of favelas and mainstream society. Both organisations are favela-based and use the arts, sports, and civic engagement to "transform favela environments and establish lines of communication and exchange between marginalised communities and mainstream society" (p.21). Readers may also know AfroReggae from the documentary film [Favela Rising](#).

The book is organized into seven chapters, each ordered in a way that allows the reader to follow the foundations of the research, the analyses, and the interpretation of the data. Working with a phrase that those in Brazil often use about Rio, the authors take the concept of the "broken city", or "cidade partida", and describe in detail the

geographical and symbolical division of the city and provide a comprehensive picture of the life in favelas, pointing out how questions of poverty and race are based on the basis of this division. Arguing against the widespread assumption that Rio de Janeiro's favelas are a social problem that ought to be solved by external agents, the authors demonstrate with this research that positive bottom-up responses to exclusion and violence, such as those of CUFA and Afro Reggae, have a strong influence on these communities and can be considered as a counterpart to subaltern conditions imposed on the favela dwellers.



Boy in the Complexo do Alemão favela region in Rio. Credit: [Joao Lima](#) CC BY-NC 2.0

Using AfroReggae and CUFA as case studies, the authors describe how these “play a central role in providing psychosocial scaffoldings and developing new pathways to citizenship and integration between favelas and the city” (p. 208). Through their core aims of building support and self-esteem, these organisations build a family-like support for those in the favelas, and help to foster “a new set of positive representations about the favelas and about the city”. Included on page 119 is a quote from a partner at the UNESCO Office in Brazil, which is worth repeating here:

“...These groups are the favelas; these groups are the very expression of the genuine and true strength of the favelas, of what is beautiful, diverse, original in the favelas of Rio, in the communities of Rio de Janeiro.”

Together with a detailed account of the differences among the favelas and the work of AfroReggae and CUFA in these communities, the authors also give space to the perspective of the Military Police, who usually represent the state's only presence in the favelas. Interview participants in all communities studied were recorded as expressing fear of the police, with some seeing it as an “unruly and aggressive force” (p.62). Traditionally seen as violent and repressive, the Military Police are now beginning a process of change in attitude after the introduction of the Pacification Police Units (UPPs) in the favelas.

The book has the quality of being accessible to a reader with no prior specialist knowledge on the world of Rio de Janeiro's favelas, but will also provide fresh insights for those already familiar with this complex and vibrant subject. The combination of oral testimony, quantitative data, and a solid theoretical framework supports the central discussion around how underground sociabilities creatively produce their own responses to social exclusion with bottom-up organizations and the arts. The book will additionally appeal to and inspire academics, activists, and others working with social projects.

However, the book fails to problematize what the authors call the “phenomenology of the ‘broken city’” (p.28). The division between the favelas in the hills and the elegant neighbourhoods in the asphalted areas (the *morro-asfalto* division, p.39) is assumed rather than questioned and the developed academic debate around this representation of the city is not discussed in the book.

In analysing the communities and their relations with the whole city the authors work with the concept of border porosity (Chapter 6) to represent the way sociability is built up within these communities. It could be argued that employing this very concept makes it necessary to discuss Rio in the frame of a ‘broken’ city, divided between *favela* and *asfalto*. The authors missed a trick in not challenging this and connecting it to the results of the actions of AfroReggae and CUFA as a way of questioning this simplified representation of the city as divided in two.

In summary, *Underground Sociabilities* offers a provocative perspective on the significance of organizations like AfroReggae and CUFA as an example of democratic and innovative bottom-up movements of social inclusion. It certainly has the potential to serve as inspiration to other parts of the world.

Download this book for free in [English](#) and [Portuguese](#).

Vinicius Mariano de Carvalho received his Ph.D. degree at Passau University, Germany. He graduated from the University of Juiz de Fora, Brazil, with a BA in *Letras* and a MA in Religious Studies. From 2008 to 2014 Dr. Carvalho coordinated the Brazilian Studies programme at Aarhus University (AU), in Denmark. He was director of the Latin American Centre at AU, from January 2012 to 2014. Dr. Carvalho has a broad interest within the field of Brazilian Studies. He is the Chief Editor of *Brasiliana – Journal for Brazilian Studies*. In September 2014 Dr. Carvalho will start as Lecturer at King’s Brazil Institute at [King’s College London](#). [Read more reviews by Vinicius](#).

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Episode 2: Favela Life: From Drug Gangs to Drum Beats

Sandra Jovchelovitch, Director of the Social and Cultural Psychology Programme at the LSE, and researcher Jacqueline Priego-Hernandez, speak about their new book: *Underground Sociabilities: Identity, culture and resistance in Rio’s favelas*. Paul Heritage, Professor of Drama and Performance at Queen Mary College in London, also talks about art in the city’s periphery at a circus school in central Rio. Other guests include: Silvia Ramos, Public Security expert in Rio and Celso Athayde, founder of CUFA (Central Unicas das Favelas) and more.



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