

Smiles, Misery and Crack in the Favelas of Brazil

Contributed by Justin Hansford
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When I entered the "favelas" for the first time, I couldn't believe my eyes. I am no stranger to the projects in the U.S., but third world living conditions are a different level of poverty.

The Brazilian favelas were for the most part created by the rural migrants who came to the cities of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and Salvador during the 50's looking to cash in on the economic promise of the budding economy, which was powered by the coffee industry.

But when cities became overcrowded and housing prices skyrocketed, people had to make shelter for themselves the best way they knew how. Soon they formed communities wherever there was space, like on the outskirts of town in what they call the "periferia," or the perimeter, of the city.

And so you have these communities built on the sides of hills or on the bottoms of valleys, something maybe equivalent to the shantytowns in Jamaica. The houses they've built here, they call them "barracos," make the one room shacks they had in southeast D.C. when I was growing up look like luxury suites.

People here are too poor to even buy tiles for their floors, so they live on the house's pure stone foundation, or packed in dirt. Some of these people have never had hot water in their homes, will never use a washer machine, and only have lighting because the community has found a way to rig the wires to get free electricity.

They've created a makeshift sewage system that, unfortunately, sometimes leaves a foul smell and overflows when it rains. Because these are usually open sewers, the children must be careful not to fall in when playing in the streets.

But there are a lot of children playing in the streets. One thing that affected me from the first time I set foot in the favelas was the fantastic spirit that the communities have, in spite of the poverty in which they live.

I must have received hundreds of warm smiles and pats on the back from the people in the favelas, as my friend introduced me to what seemed like everyone in the neighborhood.

At home in the U.S., because they live in the richest society in history, people complain about their poverty and feel sorry for themselves, as they sit in a carpeted room, with cable T.V., about to go to the grocery store in their car.

90% of the people in the favelas will never drive a car in their lifetime, but they still enjoy their lives.

Maybe it has something to do with the culture. Like at home, brothers would sit on the block, discussing the game (here it's soccer), the latest happenings on the local Hip Hop scene, or world politics. But here, old and young alike would be on the block, entire families having a chance to spend lots of time together everyday.

Even so, as I got to know the people more and more, it really hit me how tragic the situation here is. I've learned a lot from my friends here.

I've learned things about U.S. foreign policy, and how corporate globalism has created living conditions like these in the favelas, and helps to maintain them. I've learned things that the mass media, owned by these corporations, has "forgotten" to report.

But most of my friends here, who I've learned so much from, will never have an opportunity to leave the favelas, let alone travel abroad or see the things that I've seen in my short life.

Going to college is almost unrealistic except for the richest class of Brazilians, who live in luxury and paradise on the beaches, and are almost without exception of European descent and light skin.

These families in the favelas are not only under attack from poverty and a broken system of social advancement, but they are under constant attack from the brutal, racist police in Brazil.

In an effort to secure their unequal grasp on the nations' wealth, the rich classes push for more and more harsh oppression, and have created an environment of police impunity.

Beatings, shootings, and random detentions are commonplace, and they can only be halted through bribes; whatever money the people might have.

The only protection people in the favelas have from the police are the drug dealing gangs, some of whom use their drug money to help residents get the basic necessities that the society denies them.

To encourage the people to escape reality instead of taking the initiative to change their situation, the favela has a bar or a church on every corner, in addition to a steady serving of crack and heroin. In the midst of these complicated relationships, life goes on in the favelas of Brazil.

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