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Rights without citizenship? Participation, family and community in Rio de Janeiro

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Over the past three decades, many things have changed in Brazil. Democracy has replaced a military dictatorship, and Cardoso's neo-liberal reforms have replaced hyperinflation and import substitution subsidies. However, despite some reductions in overall poverty rates, income and land distribution remain among the most unequal in the world. In the *favelas* (illegal land occupations) and housing projects of Rio de Janeiro, the number of urban poor has grown over the past 30 years to 40 per cent of the city's population (UNDP 2001). Drug trafficking groups now exert more control over low-income communities and *favelas* than any government. In the context of these dramatic changes, how have Rio de Janeiro's poor made use of notions of citizenship and rights? While certain rights are part of a basic language used by even the extremely poor and marginalized, traditional national democratic citizenship is failing to have meaning for the poor. This chapter will show how poor families in Rio de Janeiro are reinterpreting notions of citizenship on the basis of their experience of exclusion from formal political and economic structures.

The chapter draws on accounts of citizenship given by low-income families from different urban spaces, classes and races from within Rio de Janeiro: families from *favelas*, the housing projects and from the working class suburbs. By different urban spaces, I am referring to the stark spatial categories that characterize Rio de Janeiro. In addition to the ascribed class boundaries demarcated by the *Zona Sul* (traditional wealthy region), *Zona Norte* (industrialized working class area), *Zona Oeste* (newly rich, Miami-like region), and the *subúrbios* (working class allotments around the periphery), space in Rio de Janeiro is divided by degrees of legality. Although all *favelas* are technically illegal land

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occupations, some have clearer legal status than others. *Favelas* are interspersed throughout all three regions of the city, but concentrated in the *Zona Norte*, and as a result have greater legitimacy because there is little threat of removal there. By contrast, new *favelas* in the *Zona Oeste* are reminiscent of the shantytowns of the 1960s, with very precarious holds on the land and extremely poor conditions. These spatial categories have significant impacts on the lives of the poor in Rio de Janeiro (see Figure 6.1; for a more in-depth discussion see Wheeler 2001).

Data was collected through 40 open-ended interviews with extended families (three to four members of the same family from three generations) between September 2001 and March 2002. Questions focused on participants' perceptions of their citizenship, and participation in various aspects of city life. The following analysis also relies, as a secondary research source, on interviews with key community leaders, non-profit workers and members of the government.

Context

Hannah Arendt argues that 'the fundamental deprivation of human rights [and citizenship] is manifested first and above all *in the deprivation of a place in the world* [a political space] which makes opinions significant, and actions effective' (Jelin 1998, p. 405, emphasis added). A confluence of different factors in Rio de Janeiro has worked to dislodge the poor from their 'place in the world' and increase their distance from the political and economic mechanisms of power. First, despite increasing democratization in Brazil, extreme inequalities persist. The *2001 World Bank Development Report* gives Brazil's Gini coefficient as 0.60 – second only to Sierra Leone. For every year from 1970 to 1998, the richest 1 per cent of the population has received more income than the poorest 50 per cent of the population (Pães de Barros, Henriques and Mendonça 2000). And while the constitution of 1988 promises extensive rights and protections, the implementation of those rights has been slow to non-existent in many areas.

Second, neo-liberal reforms, as in much of Latin America, have been used to erode the boundary between public responsibilities and private roles. In particular, neo-liberal reforms have taxed the family structure, because as the state withdraws from social services, the family and social networks must fill the gap at a time when even fewer resources are available for those needs. The situation for women is particularly contradictory, because both growing financial pressures and the expectations behind neo-liberalism's 'market citizen' have forced more

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women to participate in remunerated work in the market economy (Bulbeck 1998, p. 99). In poor families, women's contributions make up to 38 per cent of the family's income (UNECLAC 1997). But there is no change in the distribution of household responsibilities: women are still responsible for childcare, cleaning, shopping and, in many cases, securing education and health care for the family. This problem is exacerbated in the case of single-mother households, which are dramatically on the rise in Brazil and Rio de Janeiro. Single mothers now head one in four households in Brazil (up from one in six in 1991) and earn an average US\$246 per month in comparison to men's US\$344 per month (IBGE: *Journal do Brasil* 2002, p. 18).

Finally, the power of drug trafficking groups in low-income communities is increasingly unqualified by any form of state intervention other than ineffectual and deadly raids by military police. Drug-traffic-related violence and the invasive power of drug mafias over poor communities in Rio de Janeiro are major factors in invalidating national democratic citizenship for the participants in this study. Drug traffickers are known as the *poder paralelo* (parallel power) because they control *favelas* and housing projects as if they were independent states and exercise all the powers of an autocratic government over the residents. The level of violence in some parts of the city peaked at 80 homicides per 100,000 people (equivalent to the levels of violence in Colombia and South Africa). From 1995 to 2000, the levels of violence declined somewhat (UNDP 2001), but in 2003 there was a significant resurgence, culminating in the bombing of city government buildings, bus burnings and army occupation of the streets during Carnival 2003. However, the violence in Rio de Janeiro, while endemic, is not homogeneous. It is, to use Holston and Appadurai's phrase, a 'city-specific violence of citizenship', meaning that it affects specific places and persons differently (2000, p. 16). The highest rates of violence are in *favelas* and poor neighbourhoods for Afro-Brazilians (*Zona Oeste* and *Zona Norte*) (see Figure 6.1) (UNDP 2001).

There, the violence is a combination of state-sponsored raids and battles with drug mafias (in 2001 over 900 civilians were killed by the police in Rio de Janeiro), and wars between competing factions and mafias of the drug trade (UNDP 2001). The extremely high level of violence in poor neighbourhoods due to the drug trade dramatically orders the daily lives of the residents of those communities. It is now unsafe to use public spaces like streets, bus stops and plazas after dark, and increasingly during the day. In one housing project involved in the study, one faction of traffickers took control of the local school and another of the local day care centre, and children were unable to attend