



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Understanding Past and Present Changes in Latin American  
Cities

Dominique Vidal

Latin American Research Review, Volume 43, Number 1, 2008, pp. 235-244  
(Review)

Published by Latin American Studies Association

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/lar.2008.0010>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/232386>

# UNDERSTANDING PAST AND PRESENT CHANGES IN LATIN AMERICAN CITIES

*Dominique Vidal*  
*Université Charles-De-Gaulle (Lille3)*

**The Urban Poor in Latin America.** Edited by Marianne Fay. Washington, DC: World Bank, 2005. Pp. 279.

**The Politics of the Past in an Argentine Working-Class Neighbourhood.** By Lindsay DuBois. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005. Pp. 297. \$29.95 cloth.

**Bogotá: anatomía de una transformación: políticas de seguridad ciudadana, 1995–2003.** By Gerard Martin and Miguel Ceballos. Bogotá: Editorial Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2004. Pp. 774.

**Specular City: Transforming Culture, Consumption, and Space in Buenos Aires, 1955–1973.** By Laura Podalsky. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004. Pp. 304. \$57.00 cloth, \$23.95 paper.

**A invenção da favela: do mito de origem à favela.com.** By Licia do Prado Valladares. Rio de Janeiro: Editora FGV, 2005. Pp. 204.

A lot has been written on Latin American cities, but they frequently remain an enigma to scholars seeking to decipher their past and present because of their rapid transformation in recent decades. This has prompted scholars to examine the accuracy of myths and representations of urban areas, and to ask whether the latter are intelligible to social scientists in the same way they are to novelists and poets. More specifically, recent studies have asked: How do the poor live in the metropolises of Latin America? Why do they often vote for conservative and populist leaders? What can public officials do about urban poverty? How can the spread of violence be halted to give a feeling of security in urban spaces? What marks do political periods leave on architecture, urbanism, and other cultural productions? How can one analyze the relations between political events and popular memory? How do social representations of cities influence political actors and researchers? The five books reviewed in this essay respond to these questions in very diverse ways. Based on different data sources, methodologies, and contexts, each of these works presents an interesting perspective from which we can understand changes in Latin American cities.

*The Urban Poor in Latin America* gathers eight contributions to a World Bank research report on poverty in Latin American cities. As is known, the struggle against poverty is one of the Bank's priorities. Far from ending poverty, the urbanization of Latin America also produced the urbanization of its poor: three-quarters of Latin Americans today live in cities, and 60 percent of the poor are urban residents. The focus of this book is on urban poverty, a massive phenomenon that is less understood than rural poverty. In her overview, Marianne Fay shows in particular that three myths dominate most studies of this issue. The first is that the greater availability of social insurance in cities makes social assurance less necessary to urban workers. Unemployment, health insurance, and pensions are in fact usually available only to workers in the formal sector, who make up less than a third of the employed urban poor. The second myth lies in the conviction that social expenditures favor the urban over the rural poor. Even if this bias exists, it is much less important than the fact that health and education expenditures in Latin America favor the middle and upper classes. The third myth is deeply rooted in the belief that social assistance is more widely available to the poor in cities, in spite of the lack of data on this topic.

According to Fay, six factors explain the difference between urban and rural poverty. First, the urban poor are much more integrated into the market economy and much more vulnerable to its fluctuations. Second, urban poor are harder to target than in rural areas because they are more heterogeneous socioeconomically. This makes social assistance more difficult to implement. Third, urban poverty usually manifests itself in highly segregated cities, which provokes negative externalities or neighborhood effects. Fourth, social networks and family ties are less stable and weaker in cities than in rural areas. This limits the range of informal social arrangements such as rotating savings and the obligation to care for elderly family members. Fifth, the urban poor are much more exposed to criminality, which implies a higher degree of vulnerability. Finally, the urban poor have very unequal access to services. Coverage rates for infrastructure are higher than in rural areas, but important gaps exist between poor neighborhoods.

Despite the magnitude of the problems faced by the urban poor, the authors of the book agree that solutions for improving social cohesion and reducing the effects of poverty do exist. To reach these goals, it is above all necessary, among other policies, to facilitate the mobilization of social capital of the urban poor so that they can make better use of the resources at their disposal. In the chapter "Relying on Oneself: Assets of the Poor," Fay and Caterina Ruggeri Laderchi estimate that, because of constraints on their choices, the urban poor "probably overinvest in housing and durable goods and underinvest in financial assets" (214). Consequently, it is

important to increase their saving capacity and their access to financial services.

This is a book that should be read by anyone interested in understanding urban poverty in Latin America and the policies that aim to tackle it (especially those of the World Bank). It fosters theoretical and methodological questions, and provides an important bibliography. Nevertheless, its limitations are obvious. It mainly expresses the World Bank's views and recommendations, without really challenging conceptions of the struggle against poverty and development. To give an example, debates on the concept of social capital (and on the social and political uses of this concept) could have been given more thorough treatment. Nonetheless, *The Urban Poor* remains a stimulating book to readers interested in understanding the World Bank's perspectives on urban poverty.

*Bogotá: Anatomía de una transformación* reviews the effects of a set of public policies on the reduction of criminality in the capital of Colombia. In Bogotá, the homicide rate declined from 80 deaths per 100,000 people in 1994, a level similar to that of Colombia as a whole, to 24 per 100,000 in 2003, a rate largely below those of cities like Cali and Medellín. Nevertheless, armed groups and organized criminals never stopped acting during this time, maintaining the climate of generalized violence experienced by Colombia for over two decades. According to Martin and Ceballos, the quality of municipal governments under Antanas Mockus (1995–1997 and 2001–2003) and Enrique Peñalosa (1998–2000) is the major reason for the decrease of insecurity in the city. The aim of the book under review is thus to present these municipal policies, which express an institutional reinforcement in a country known for the weakness of the state apparatus. After providing an overview of the history, geography, and economy of Colombia, the authors recall that the changes observed in the struggle against criminality can also be attributed to demographic factors: the slowdown of urban growth has permitted urban planning to improve, and the aging population has led to a reduction of risk categories in the overall population. National factors as well have had an important impact on Bogotá: police reform has improved the image and trust in this institution; the policy of decentralization promoted by the 1991 constitution has given more means to local governments; Bogotá has received funding from international organizations and has become a pilot experiment in local governance; and compared to those of other cities, the mayors of Bogotá have had more information at their disposal to help implement their policies because of the important presence of government services in the capital.

Nonetheless, despite these factors, the transformations registered in Bogotá are, in the authors' eyes, above all the result of the excellence of municipal government between 1995 and 2003. Mockus and Peñalosa

demonstrated an extraordinary leadership style during this time period and administered the city with competence and transparency, building their policies with a sense of continuity. Specialists in local government and public policy will read with pleasure the chapters detailing each aspect of the programs implemented by the mayors of Bogotá. At the end of the book's 774 pages, they will know almost everything there is to know about urbanism, prevention of juvenile delinquency, access to justice, the struggle against poverty, and the political participation of citizens. However, thoroughness does not by any means ensure quality research and analysis. Martin and Ceballos often give the impression of being propagandists of the political balance of Mockus and Peñalosa. In many regards, the presentation of Bogotá's model for public security recalls the efforts made by the Brazilian Workers Party to promote the Porto Alegre model of participatory politics. It is reasonable to think that, as in the Brazilian case, other researchers will be less enthusiastic for and more critical of the actions of these mayors. Those who engage in this work will find in Martin and Ceballos's book a mine of information to back their analysis.

Politics in Latin American cities are not limited to the implementation of policies related to the urban poor, the rise of violence, and the struggle against insecurity. Politics can also be seen in the marks left by political events on the representation of the city and the memories of ordinary people. In this respect, Buenos Aires is an outstanding metropolis. In the history of Argentina, the city has been the place of the opposition between "civilization and barbarism," to use the terms of the famous dichotomy presented in Domingo F. Sarmiento's essay *Civilización y barbarie: Vida de Juan Facundo Quiroga* (1845). Buenos Aires is here the site of a civilizing project and of European modernity, opposed to the countryside, the rude world of the pampa dominated by the *caudillo*, the local strongman. Buenos Aires has also been at the center of political mobilizations over the twentieth century. The famous Plaza de Mayo in particular has hosted pro-Peronist and anti-Peronist rallies, demonstrations during the Falklands war, and weekly gatherings of the mothers of disappeared political prisoners. Two recent books on Buenos Aires, written from different perspectives, deal with the city as a place of memory.

Laura Podalsky's *Specular City* studies the Argentine capital from the fall of Perón in September 1955 until the elections of March 1973, which heralded the return of Peronism to power. Employing a cultural-studies approach, Podalsky offers interdisciplinary research dealing with the architectural and spatial changes of the city in a period dominated by political turmoil and the development of new cultural practices. She analyzes the ways in which writers and cinéastes have worked to propose alternative visions of Buenos Aires in a time characterized by the rise of mass culture. Her central thesis posits that despite the exacerbated political tensions that prevailed in the period, transformations of the city

express the emergence of a less elitist and more integrated society. In her opinion, this process of democratization that began in a deeply politically divided society has not been interrupted by the 1976 coup and the project of social reorganization set in motion by the military. To demonstrate her argument, she examines cultural productions that marked the two decades and relates them to political events. Besides a review of emblematic books, the most interesting parts of her research are dedicated to Antonio Berni's collages of *villas miserias*, the slums of rural migrants that changed the aspect of the rapidly growing Buenos Aires, and to the role of the Di Tella Institute, a foundation at the intersection of the worlds of business and culture, in the transformation of the cultural field.

Podalsky's book provides a huge amount of information on debates about Buenos Aires, especially its urbanism and architecture. For this reason alone, it is highly recommended to any researcher interested in these topics. Nevertheless, some criticism typically applied to cultural studies can be made about her work. The search for "underlying discourses" sometimes seems to force, rather than simply reveal, the objective reality. Was there any moment when representations vanished before the extreme polarization of political actors? More broadly, Podalsky perhaps gives too much value to discourses to the detriment of the real practices of the population. For instance, it is a pity that we learn more about the representation of *villas miserias* in collages than about their dwellers and the way in which they received the cultural productions presented by the author.

*The Politics of the Past in an Argentine Working-Class Neighbourhood* proposes a very different interpretation of the presence of politics in Buenos Aires. Lindsay DuBois operates in the anthropological tradition of ethnographic methods. On the basis of fieldwork in the working-class housing project of José Ingenieros in La Matanza, a major suburb, she studies the impact of the military regime's Process of National Reorganization on the memory of its residents. She raises the question, "How did a militant Peronist working class become a Peronist working class without work, supporting a neoliberal Peronist presidency?" (4). The backdrop for the book is the memory of thirty years of Argentine history, since José Ingenieros is a squatter settlement that sprouted up in 1968. DuBois dissociates herself from political science approaches to the transition from authoritarianism to democracy, arguing that, if the idea of transition as a process is useful, the concept of transition is also "tricky" because it is linear and teleological, which makes it unable to give an account of the complexity of the political process (113). She affirms: "An ethnographic approach uncovers the ways in which the watershed dates of regime change are fuzzy, while some continuities between periods of democratic and military rule are clearer. This approach also reveals how people understand and evaluate these different periods against and through each other" (9). Her research aims more specifically at identifying the way in which structural processes can be

found in the memory of ordinary people by using data gathered through her observations while living in José Ingenieros, and through in-depth interviews and informal conversations. She also organized community history workshops to allow a group to orally remember past events and, in this way, provide a “‘history from below’ . . . for uncovering subaltern histories and silenced voices” (134).

After presenting the neighborhood formation process, in which she recalls the importance of Peronism in Argentine politics and the predominant role of women in the social world, DuBois analyzes the period of repression and reorganization under the military regime (1976–1982) and shows that, terrifying though this was, a large part of the population agreed with it because the action of the military had a positive effect in re-establishing order. However, the violence of repression was so brutal that it destroyed the forms of cooperation previously existing in José Ingenieros and also created a climate of generalized suspicion, undermining the relationships of trust within families. The decade following the end of authoritarianism (1982–1992) was a time of disappointment with democracy. The military left power in the context of a deep economic crisis that led to the pauperization of many Argentines and to the adoption of neoliberal policies by the Peronist government of Carlos Menem.

The last four chapters of the book treat the weight of the past in popular memory. DuBois shows very well how the brutality of the dictatorship caused the “disarticulation of social ties,” which explains the current difficulties that the inhabitants of José Ingenieros have in trying to organize themselves. She also emphasizes the extent to which social and political changes in Argentina over the last three decades have engendered, in her words, a “culture of fear” and a “culture of cynicism” that drive the urban poor to utilitarian behaviors and to accept the Peronist “patronage game.” In conclusion, she insists on the importance of the role of the state, “a central figure in the story of José Ingenieros” during the dictatorship as well as during the implementation of neoliberal policies. The state—unlike what some analysts of Argentine think—played a decisive role in the making of Argentine society and “still matters tremendously” in that it is in relation to it that the poor evaluate the weakness of public action and express their demands (207).

DuBois’s book should be of great interest to those studying politics in contemporary Argentina. It provides an empirical response to the issue of the articulation of macro and micro spheres in trying to link individual experiences and social processes. It is also a contribution to the debate on the evolution and the legacy of Peronism.<sup>1</sup> Far from an analysis focusing

1. See Daniel James, *Resistance and Integration: Peronism and the Argentine Working Class, 1946–1976* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Danilo Martuccelli and Maristella Svampa, *La plaza vacía: Las transformaciones del peronismo* (Buenos Aires: Editorial

on institutional functioning, it reveals what politics mean for the urban poor. Nevertheless, one has to regret that a book published in 2005 does not mention the mobilizations of December 2001, when a popular uprising pressured President De la Rúa to resign and prompted the presidential leadership to turn over several times in a matter of weeks. After a long period of absence, the people of Buenos Aires were back in the Plaza de Mayo to change the history of Argentina. The reader could also lament that more pages are dedicated to contextual elements than to the presentation of data from fieldwork. This tendency to give too much importance to background in an effort to ensure being correctly understood by non-specialists is a well-known difficulty for those writing for foreign readers. However, despite these minor limitations, DuBois's book is an excellent resource for understanding the urban poor in Argentina and should easily find a place in courses on Latin American cities and politics.

Licia Valladares's *A invenção da favela* examines discourses and understandings of the favelas of Rio de Janeiro in the frame of an epistemological reflection about writings on the city. As she makes clear in her preface, the aim of the book is

to present and discuss . . . the social representations produced by the favela in Rio de Janeiro throughout the last hundred years . . . [and] indicate the way in which the construction of social representations has historically occurred by commenting in several chapters on the "discoveries" of the favela by the most diverse social actors, [and] by analyzing the change observed in the evolution of the category "favela" and "favelado" and of notions expressed by these terms, as well as their synonyms, associations and oppositions. (13, my translation)

Thus, it is a work of historical sociology distinct from discussions about the growth of favelas, their demographic characteristics, or the violence occurring in these spaces.

The author, it is true, is entitled to undertake such a project because of her research trajectory. Valladares belongs to the first generation of Brazilian sociologists that began to study Carioca favelas in the 1960s. As soon as it was published, her Ph.D. thesis became a classic book<sup>2</sup> about the failed attempts to remove the favelas and their inhabitants by force. She also carried out numerous studies on family and child work in the favelas, on popular housing, on neighborhood associations, and on the diversity of the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. Last but not the least, she founded the database URBANDATA ([www.urbandata.org](http://www.urbandata.org)), arguably the best research instrument on urban Brazil.

---

Losada, 1997); Javier Auyero, *Poor People's Politics: Peronist Survival Networks and the Legacy of Evita* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); Silvia Sigal, *Intelectuales y poder en la década del sesenta* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2002); Denis Merklen, *Pobres ciudadanos: Las clases populares en la era democrática (Argentina, 1983–2003)* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Gorla, 2005).

2. *Passa-se uma casa: Análise do programa de remoção de favelas do Rio de Janeiro* (Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 1978).

The main idea of Valladares's book is clearly stated at the end of the preface: "the category of favela used today in scholarly productions as well as in media representations is the result, more or less cumulative, more or less contradictory, of successive representations whose origins are in the constructions of social actors who have mobilized the social and urban object" (21). The book is divided into three chapters, each focused on a specific time characterized by the relative homogeneity of its representations and ways of analysis.

The first chapter ("The Genesis of the Carioca Favela: From Countryside to City, from Rejection to Control") recalls the largely forgotten fact that, during the first half of the twentieth century, the favela was considered a "rural world in town" within the dual representations of Brazil and Rio de Janeiro: "*litoral versus sertão*," "city versus favela." Rio's first favelas were formed by the illegal occupation of hills by former soldiers of the Canudos war (1896–1897) and by inhabitants removed from downtown at the time of urban reforms at the end of the nineteenth century. As Valladares points out, "it is important to underline that the phenomenon of favela is clearly prior to the appearance of the category favela" (26). These favelas roused the attention of journalists, urban planners, and hygienist physicians, who sought solutions to the hard living conditions of their residents. The 1930 Revolution, which led to the Vargas dictatorship, transformed the favelas into a major political problem. The objective was now to control these urban spaces and their inhabitants. This was also the beginning of clientelistic practices in those areas. This is why, as well, better knowledge of the favelas was pursued by the production of statistics and monographs in the 1940s.

The second chapter ("The Transition to Social Sciences: Valorization of the Favela and Discovery of Fieldwork") focuses on the period from the beginning of the 1950s to the end of the 1960s. In accordance with the theme announced in the chapter's title, Valladares describes two foreign researchers who contributed to the shift in how the favela was studied and represented. Father Louis-Joseph Lebreton, a French Dominican at the core of the international movement *Économie et Humanisme*, introduced quantitative methods of data gathering to Brazil, valorized the graphic representation of data, and thought of the neighborhood as a privileged space of observation and social action. In this he was supported by Dom Hélder Câmara, auxiliary bishop of Rio. In the 1960s, the American anthropologist Anthony Leeds participated in training many of those interested in Rio's favelas. In 1967 and 1968, he organized in particular a seminar frequented by numerous Peace Corps volunteers and young Brazilian social scientists, including Licia Valladares herself. He contributed to the diffusion of the First Chicago School's fieldwork methodology and insisted on the necessity of not thinking about the favelas as separate from the rest of the city and national society. In 1969, *América Latina* (a review published

by the Centro Latino-Americano em Ciências Sociais, with its head office in Rio) dedicated a special issue to the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, with contributions by Leeds and other American, Brazilian, and French researchers. For Valladares, this publication represents “the symbolic mark of the inscription of the favela not only in the political agenda, but also in the academic one” (118).

The third chapter (“The Favela of the Social Sciences”) picks up in the 1970s. Although in continuity with what precedes, this new phase nevertheless has three characteristics that make it specific: the favela became a legitimate object of study in the social sciences; study of the favela participated in theoretical debates on popular housing and urban poverty; and the dogma about the favelas was consolidated and generalized, especially in the academic research community. These developments are contemporaneous with other phenomena: the growth of the Brazilian university, and in particular of postgraduate studies that contributed to research on favelas; a growing interest in urban poverty in Brazil and in Latin America; and the removal of favelas from public policy. It is also in this period that a dual reading of Brazilian society strengthened, opposing the favela to the rest of the city, or, as it is said in Rio, the *morro* to the *asfalto*. As Valladares shows, this erroneous representation is based on three mistaken ideas: the favela as a single space, the favela as a place of poverty, and the favela as a unified place. On the contrary, many studies reveal the diversity among favelas, the fact that a large number of Rio’s poor live in legally urbanized neighborhoods, and the existence of socioeconomic differences within each favela.

Valladares attributes the persistence of false ideas about the favela to social and political interests: the actors in charge of public policy as well as nongovernmental organizations need a reified and homogenizing representation to get resources and implement social programs. Many social scientists share this representation because it allows them to suggest easy political solutions, to have easily identifiable field research, and to obtain funding to study fashionable topics such as access to citizenship and the struggle against poverty. Yet, in Valladares’s opinion, the changes observed within the favelas, as well as the mistaken tendency of others to think of favela as synonymous with poor, urge renewal of research on Rio’s favelas to focus in particular on the processes of social mobility and the dynamics of social differentiation.

For all these reasons, *A invenção da favela* is a capital book, not only for those interested in the favelas of Rio, but also for anyone studying the history and sociology of social sciences in Brazil. It is well written, compact, and judiciously structured. Its iconography opportunely illustrates its argument, and there is a huge bibliography. Nevertheless, it has two arguable shortcomings. On the one hand, one might ask whether the will to show the predominant role of Brazilian scholars since the 1970s

doesn't sometimes lead Valladares to underestimate the contributions of foreign researchers, especially Americans, who, without necessarily taking the favela as a specific object of study, have done noteworthy research on religion, neighborhood organizations, political practices, and social relationships in them.<sup>3</sup> Having read this sociology of social representations of the favelas of Rio, it is possible, on the other hand, to hope for books on the social history of the favela based on primary and secondary sources, in order to restore the historical evolution of these spaces and their residents, without falling into the pitfalls that Valladares has well pointed out. But this is another intellectual enterprise, and one cannot criticize Valladares for not having done it. We can only hope her book will stimulate other researchers to proceed down similar avenues.

Writing on the cities of Latin America is a never-ending work. New objects of study and new approaches will undoubtedly produce new forms of knowledge in the near future. As more and more works are published, it is increasingly necessary to master the history of field research to ensure the originality of one's project. Taking different angles, each of these books paves the way for this better and renewed understanding of Latin American cities.

3. See, among others, John Burdick, *Looking for God in Brazil: The Progressive Catholic Church in Urban Brazil's Religious Arena* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993); Robert Gay, *Popular Organization and Democracy in Rio de Janeiro: A Tale of Two Favelas* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993); Camille Goirand, *La politique des favelas* (Paris: Karthala, 2000); Robin E. Sheriff, *Dreaming Equality: Color, Race, and Racism in Urban Brazil* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001); Donna M. Goldstein, *Laughter Out of Place: Race, Class, Violence, and Sexuality in a Rio Shantytown* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003).