



Book Review

Roxana Pessoa Cavalcanti (2020) *A Southern Criminology of Violence, Youth and Policing: Governing Insecurity in Urban Brazil*. New York, NY: Routledge

Omar Phoenix Khan

University of Westminster, United Kingdom

Brazilian *favelas* are known as spaces of criminal enterprise, of poor to non-existent infrastructure and extreme violence. They are places of informal industry conducted by unregistered workers, living in unofficial settlements, beyond the boundaries of sanctioned society. But *favelas* are also spaces of class solidarity, close-knit convivial communities and hardworking people existing within an area where the state does not have a monopoly on violence. Unprotected by conventional social contract, residents of *favelas* are regularly victims of state violence, with officers routinely conducting raids, torture and extrajudicial killings.

Much of the literature about Brazilian urban violence focuses on gangs, drug lords and territory, with discussion of police brutality logically focusing on the police. Little work exists to highlight the everyday plight of those existing within the sphere of influence of both groups, but this book brings such lived experience to the fore. Cavalcanti's account of police violence is not that of the Hollywood drama of *favela* life in the film *City of God*, nor the examination of police taking the law into their own hands found in *Elite Squad*, but focuses on the real-life frustrations and experiences of those encountering violence as part of daily existence. Cavalcanti also situates this experience in its post-colonial context, highlighting the relevance of previously formed hierarchies of power and legacies of slavery for contemporary critical analysis.

Cavalcanti provides critical analysis of the existing literature, but a substantial part of the book relates to her own ethnographic work, which centres on residents of two *favela* communities in Recife, North Brazil, and the communities' relationships with violence and policing. She writes openly about her approach to fieldwork with a reflective awareness of her own positionality and includes this as an integral part of her analysis. As with all ethnographic interviewing, building rapport with the community is vital and Cavalcanti reflects on how this process may have been aided by her pregnancy. She observes how people connected with her via what she perceived to be a bond based on the creation of family. The suggestion is that the notion of a shared future or humanity meant that the communities did not see her as a threatening or alien presence in their space, and were open and honest with their opinions. Cavalcanti's use of *jeitinho*—the Brazilian notion of being able to find a way, via formal or informal connections, to achieve one's aim—to access the communities, is unapologetic and its subjective nature is shown to be a positive factor.

The full methodology is outlined in detail in Chapter 2 ('Unpacking security, context and research design').

Revealing personal accounts of violence and policing, encapsulating micro-level illustrations of injustice are woven throughout the book with macro-level analysis of comparative dualisms, such as the crimes of the powerful and the powerless. Chapter 4 ('Policing the poor') also provides multiple layers of analysis when it explores how different levels of access to justice are created via an intersectional analysis of race, gender and class. While the empirical discussion is largely interview based, Cavalcanti emphasises that the individual testaments of injustice are not merely personal issues, but, where such violence affects the lives of millions, they must be considered public and political.

Calvacanti's contribution to the interpretivist examination of *favela* communities is clear, as is the emphasis on critical reflection, but perhaps the most significant contribution is to the emerging southern criminology paradigm. The book provides a clear critique of existing justice initiatives across several dimensions, but there is a clear through line illustrating the historical dependence on the importation of criminal justice policies from the global North to Brazil. In Chapter 5 ('Reforming the system'), Cavalcanti exposes the inadequacies of mainstream Euro-American criminological theories such as broken windows and zero-tolerance policing for a context vastly different to those in which they were created, due to centuries of exploitative colonialism. She makes an example of how *war on drugs* policing policies and increased securitisation have been damaging for marginalised communities, further serving to criminalise and entrench their status as problematic and dangerous to society.

While not claiming to offer all the alternative answers—although Chapter 7 ('Policy and practice: what is to be done?') does directly address such questions—Cavalcanti instead raises the voices of the marginalised groups, recognising them as legitimate sources of knowledge. Where the traditional centres of colonial power still remain the main locations for the production and legitimisation of knowledge, this book adds to the literature calling for the decolonisation of criminology. Rather than automatically considering the issue from the position of a white, Euro-American male, often presented as universally applicable, Cavalcanti repositions the point of departure, or Ramón Grosfoguel's locus of enunciation, to that of the marginalised Brazilian populations.

While now living and working in the United Kingdom, yet cognisant of the nuances specific to North Brazil and the imperative to emphasise the differences of the global South to the hegemonic discourse, Cavalcanti aims to sabotage the Eurocentrism of the discipline from within. This Trojan method will appeal to many criminologists who wish to support the interests of the global South, as allies aware of their position of relative privilege in the North or situated in metropolitan centres of knowledge production and legitimation. Perhaps this is what Zafforoni dreamed of when advocating for the need to *do* criminology from the margins.

At a moment in Brazilian history when the number of police killings of their own citizens has broken records over the last two years, a book calling for policies and practice reflecting the reality of the Brazilian situation (and not those theorised from outside), where voices of the marginalised are included as central legitimate accounts, could not be more timely.

Correspondence: Omar Phoenix Khan, Doctoral Candidate, Criminology Department, School of Social Sciences, University of Westminster, 32 - 38 Wells Street, London W1T 3UW, United Kingdom. Email: O.Khan@Westminster.ac.uk

Please cite this book review as:

Khan OP (2020) Review of *A Southern Criminology of Violence, Youth and Policing: Governing Insecurity in Urban Brazil* by Roxana Pessoa Cavalcanti. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 9(2): 203-205. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ijcjsd.v9i2.1554>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). As an open access journal, articles are free to use with proper attribution. ISSN: 2202-8005