

# LIVING CONDITIONS OF THE POOR IN LATIN AMERICA

*Robert Gay*  
*Connecticut College*

**Flammable: Environmental Suffering in an Argentine Shantytown.** By Javier Auyero and Débora Alejandra Swistun. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. Pp. 188. \$19.95 paper. ISBN: 9780195372939.

**Reinventing Practice in a Disenchanted World: Bourdieu and Urban Poverty in Oaxaca, Mexico.** By Cheleen Ann-Catherine Mahar. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010. Pp. x + 181. \$55.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780292721920.

**Favela: Four Decades of Living on the Edge in Rio de Janeiro.** By Janice Perlman. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. xxix + 412. \$29.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780195368369.

**Working Hard, Drinking Hard: On Violence and Survival in Honduras.** By Adrienne Pine. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008. Pp. xiv + 253. \$50.00 cloth. \$24.95 paper. ISBN: 9780520255449.

The four books examined here ask the same fundamental question: How do Latin America's urban poor suffer and interpret the structural, symbolic, and physical violence that, we are told, has greatly increased as a result of two decades or so of neoliberal economic policies? Two of the books are especially interesting in this regard, in that they involve return visits to sites where their authors had done fieldwork in the late 1960s. The opportunity to track down and reinterview members of an original sample of participants, to evaluate their lives and experiences over the long run, is somewhat rare in the study of the urban poor in Latin America. All too often, we go in, gather information, and leave, never to be seen again, except perhaps as talking heads on the television or in editorial columns of newspapers.

In the case of Cheleen Ann-Catherine Mahar, there was a twenty-two-year gap between her first (1968–1974) and subsequent (1996–2000) visits to Colonia Hermosa, a squatter settlement on a hillside on the outskirts of the city of Oaxaca, Mexico. When she first arrived as a graduate student in 1968, she encountered—and was clearly enchanted by—a community of recent migrants who had left the countryside in search of a better life. Housed in wattle and daub huts, with minimal and irregular access to electricity, sewerage, and water, the residents of Colonia Hermosa worked hard, and together, to resolve the many problems associated with their shared position of marginality. Recounting her earlier experiences, Mahar states that “symbolic capital (status, honor, and prestige) was of upmost importance in creating and maintaining the social capital that is bound

to one's social relationships," and that "living a life worthy of respect was what counted most" (101).

On her return, however, Mahar found a very different community, indistinguishable from any number of others fully integrated into the hustle and bustle of a rapidly expanding city. Houses that were once small and precarious in both their physical structure and their legality had come to be larger and consolidated, replete with CD players, stereos, gas stoves, refrigerators, and televisions. Worse, the sense of collective identity, which was so strong before, had largely disappeared, replaced by a culture of individualism: rather than being a reflection of larger structural conditions, success—or failure for that matter—was viewed in terms of individual characteristics, qualities, and flaws. And instead of relying on neighbors and the larger community for assistance, the residents of Colonia Hermosa had turned increasingly inward, toward an ever-expanding network of relatives who, more than likely, resided in the same family compound.

So what did Mahar make of these changes, of the loss of a sense of community? On the one hand, she was delighted that her informants had made the transition from rural migrants to citizens integrated into the urban economy, and proud of all they had achieved over the course of twenty years. On the other hand, she could not help but feel that their lives had been compromised, that they were "fully colonized by the logic of the economy" (28) in such a way that their efforts to survive and accumulate consumer goods "sap[ped] them of the strength to fight the larger struggle in the nature of the social logic itself" (54). This is a state of affairs that Mahar characterizes, with a nod to Pierre Bourdieu, as *misrecognition*.

The bulk of Mahar's data consists of follow-up interviews with twenty-five of the three hundred families in her original sample, a handful of which are given star billing. The narratives drawn from the interviews focus primarily on the struggles of women as heads of households and on their attempts to secure a foothold for their families in the community and to provide for their children and their children's children. Men are largely absent, with only brief appearances, occasionally as drunken, abusive, and absent fathers. Because of the obvious depth of Mahar's relationship with her interviewees and the level of trust between them, the narratives presented display a fair degree of sensitivity and some detail. The question is, of course, to what extent can the few stories that Mahar chose to recount be used to generalize about integration, mobility, and success in the broader community of Colonia Hermosa, or in any community for that matter? I myself remain unconvinced.

No such accusation can be leveled at Janice Perlman, who returned to the favelas of Rio de Janeiro in 1999, after a thirty-year absence, to reexamine in exhaustive (and exhausting) detail the life trajectories of a sample of residents. In 1976, Perlman published the now-classic *Myth of Marginality: Urban Poverty and Politics in Rio de Janeiro*, using research conducted in 1968–1969 in three low-income communities in metropolitan Rio: the favela of Catacumba in Rio's wealthy Zona Sul; the favela of Nova Brasília in the industrial Zona Norte; and a group of favelas in the municipality of Duque de Caxias, in the Baixada Fluminense to the north of the city. Spending six months in each site, Perlman and a team of research assistants interviewed 750 people; 600 were selected randomly and the remaining

150 were community leaders. As the title of her original study suggests, Perlman found that favelas—"squatter settlements, shantytowns, or 'popular communities'" (*Favela*, xiii)—were not at all marginal to the city, but instead "tightly integrated into it, albeit in a marginal way" (14). The book was an instant success, selling thousands of copies and establishing Perlman as something of an academic superstar (as becomes apparent as you make your way through her new book).

When Perlman returned thirty years later, she initially set out to focus, like Mahar, on the lives of her original participants to see how they had changed and to identify long-term patterns and trends. She succeeded in locating 41 percent of the original 750 interviewees, despite the fact that Catacumba's residents had been moved to public housing projects in Rio's Zona Oeste when the favela was torn down in 1970. However, worried that the changes she observed might be due to the simple fact of aging or to changes in the broader socioeconomic and political environment, she decided to extend the analysis to the children and grandchildren of her original participants. Also worried that the 41 percent of the original participants that she had managed to track down were somehow self-selecting, and therefore unrepresentative, she conducted an additional 1,275 interviews with randomly chosen residents of Nova Brasília, Duque de Caxias, and the projects to which the former inhabitants of Catacumba had been removed.

In simplified terms, Perlman found that, although the divide between favelas and the rest of the city of Rio has yet to be overcome—as evidenced by the fact that favela residents are forced to lie about where they live when applying for jobs—definite progress has been made. Not only has the gap between rich and poor decreased, but also there is clear evidence that individual mobility is at least possible, albeit in small increments; the lives of her respondents have improved in terms of living conditions, access to urban services, consumption, education, and, to a lesser extent, jobs.

In seeking to identify factors that influence mobility and success, Perlman, like Mahar, is as ready to highlight individual qualities, family attitudes, and random causes as socioeconomic and political conditions in general. In fact, she argues that there is little evidence in the minds of her participants, or in their experiences, that globalization has had much effect on their lives. As a consequence, she states, we should "look beyond the facile positions and ideological platitudes that often dominate the discourse" on this matter (263). This is, unfortunately, something that Perlman herself does not do.

Perlman also argues that, although residents of low-income communities in Rio are, without doubt, severely disadvantaged, they do not necessarily see themselves in this way. In fact, despite conditions of extreme inequality and prejudice, most participants in Perlman's study remain upbeat and optimistic—except, that is, for the young. When asked whether their lives are better than those of their parents, younger respondents said no. Perlman attributes this to three factors. First, the young see a diminishing return from education, meaning that well-paid, secure employment in the formal sector remains largely out of reach, despite their increased years of schooling. Second, unlike their parents and grandparents, the young do not compare themselves to those left behind in the countryside. They are city born and global savvy; as Perlman suggests, they expect more because

they know more. The third factor that explains why the young consider themselves worse off than their parents is violence.

Rio de Janeiro has been in the news a lot lately, mainly for the wrong reasons. Since the mid-1980s, the city has been dealing with powerful and violent drug gangs based in favelas and competing for control of an extremely lucrative drug market historically centered on the sale of cocaine. Perlman suggests that the emergence of the gangs was made possible by decades of neglect of favelas; government incompetence or indifference; corrupt, ill-trained, unaccountable, and lethal public security forces; and the widespread availability of black-market guns and ammunition (which, contrary to Perlman's assertions, are produced primarily in Brazil). Together, these various ingredients turned the city into a virtual war zone, a situation exacerbated, as Perlman quite rightly points out, by a highly sensationalist media. Because of the very real dangers involved in making one's way around the city, whether one is rich or poor, Rio's residents have made drastic changes in their conduct and have called on the government to take extraordinary measures to remedy the situation, especially with the upcoming FIFA World Cup and summer Olympic Games, both of which will be held in large part in Rio.

Rather than associate increased violence with globalization, or what Loïc Wacquant dubs the "neoliberal penalty,"<sup>1</sup> Perlman argues that recent decades have not seen a contraction of the welfare state but instead its expansion. This, together with fiscal stabilization and lower levels of inequality, has brought, albeit briefly, a consumer bonanza for the poor. Nevertheless, there is no doubt in Perlman's mind that the lives of dark-skinned, poor young men in particular are strongly affected by the lack of anything but minimum-wage, dead-end jobs; the increasing stigmatization of favela residents; and the lure of money to be made from drug trafficking.

Increased violence has also hurt political participation, not so much in terms of the vote, but in terms of undermining neighborhood associations and the like, which played a critical role in the early to mid-1980s, first in bringing an end to military rule and then in pressing for social services from subsequent, democratically elected administrations. Now dominated by drug gangs or, increasingly, government-tolerated militias, such organizations have lost their legitimacy and are, quite rightly, perceived as instruments of authoritarian control. In fact, the only community associations that continue to enjoy high levels of participation are religious. Although Perlman's data do not allow one to explore this issue in any depth, there is much evidence to suggest that this sustained religious participation masks a steady migration of souls toward Evangelicalism, which provides a refuge, of sorts, from the violence of the outside world.

Adrienne Pine addresses the relationship between globalization and violence much more directly in her ethnography of a maquiladora (foreign-owned factory) town in Honduras. Pine began with the intention of studying maquiladoras as one of the more brutal and obvious manifestations of the current phase of global capitalist development. Before long, however, she realized that the shift

1. Loïc Wacquant, "Toward a Dictatorship over the Poor? Notes on the Penalization of Poverty in Brazil," *Punishment & Society* 5, no. 2 (2003): 197–205.

in production relations—from growing bananas to clothing manufacture, from countryside to city, and from predominantly male to female labor—is associated with a host of other phenomena that warrant attention. The first of these is violence. After only a few days in the field, Pine observed that violence dominates almost every conversation and that there is a visceral and pervasive fear, not of violence done by the state, but of random, interpersonal violence, and of violence perpetrated by gangs in particular.

Intrigued, Pine arranged through an acquaintance to interview members of a local gang, whom she describes as “not all that different from other Honduran youths” (42). This led her to conclude that gangs provide a means to resist a social structure that offers little or nothing in the way of jobs or education and that robs young men of their manhood, by constructing a defiant, positive, yet ultimately short-lived and destructive self-image. Tragically, as in the case of Rio de Janeiro, gang-related violence, has unleashed a media-fueled frenzy that has granted elements of the public security force (clearly associated with Honduras’s authoritarian past) free rein to hunt down and eliminate suspicious youths, which means anyone who is young and poor. Even more tragically, Pine asserts, the poor themselves have bought into this metanarrative of fear, thus legitimizing the same *mano dura* (ironfisted) policies that are hell-bent on destroying them.

Pine’s second focus is on the role of alcohol. Much like violence, she argues, Hondurans have come to understand that the abuse of alcohol is a pervasive and growing national problem, intimately associated with (predominantly male) violence and aggression. Just as disturbing is that new opportunities for women to work for wages in maquiladoras has given them the opportunity and means to drink, further subverting and destabilizing gender roles in ways that are not necessarily positive for them or for the men upon whom they used to depend. In essence, according to Pine, drinking and violence are both manifestations of a disorder inimical to the operation and success of capitalism, which demands discipline, above all else, and self-control. *Mano dura* policies, she argues, are based on, and reinforce, the notion that people do and should fear one another and that the current violence arises from something intrinsic to Honduras and its people, rather than from structural adjustments imposed by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, and their obfuscatory discourse.

According to Pine, the state is not the only agent active in creating this mindset. Among other organizations, evangelical Christianity and Alcoholics Anonymous promote discipline and self-control by calling on Hondurans to give up drinking, smoking, drugs, dancing, gang activity, tight-fitting clothing, and even political activism or masculinity. They seek to inculcate behaviors necessary for men and women to function in the capitalist system, not only by subverting what they understand of themselves—that is, by getting them to give up the world as they know it—but also by persuading them of the merits of individual achievement, an ideology that ultimately blames the victim for his or her own failure.

This brings us, finally, to maquiladoras. When Pine began her research, she asked herself why so many Hondurans, especially young women, choose to work in maquiladoras. Why would they tolerate long hours, low pay, and frequent abuse by (Korean) overseers and managers? The first thing that Pine discovered in the

field was that the reality of maquiladoras is very different from what she had been led to believe, as they are much cleaner and much brighter. Furthermore, the women who work there told her over and over again that work in a maquiladora is far superior to being a maid, which is “humiliation, pure and simple” (149). But there is a cost: the tyranny and discipline of the machine, the clock, and the market, which socialize young women, in particular, “into a new regime of work and a new, modern mode of womanhood” (193). Pine avers that this new regime—together with *mano dura* policies, evangelical Christianity, and institutions such as Alcoholics Anonymous—has a profound effect on Honduran subjectivities and (in accord with Bourdieu) is inscribed in their bodies as habitus, making systematic resistance and change all the more difficult, if not impossible.

Javier Auyero and Débora Alejandra Swistun raise the stakes of poverty a considerable notch in *Flammable: Environmental Suffering in an Argentinean Shantytown*. For, if life when “slum growth and industrialization are now decoupled” (24) were not difficult enough, imagine being subject to toxic assault. The study’s focus is Villa Inflamable, a squatter settlement in the docklands of Buenos Aires, surrounded not only by the largest petrochemical compound in the country—with operations of such multinational giants as Petrobras, Dow Chemicals, and Shell—but also by a highly polluted river, a hazardous waste incinerator, and an unmonitored landfill.

As one might expect, the residents of this setting display, and complain of, a multitude of ailments commonly associated with environmental poisoning, from vomiting and convulsions to developmental and learning disabilities in their children. Nevertheless, the residents are largely and, for Auyero and Swistun, eerily passive; although most blame their industrial neighbors for their ill health, they do little or nothing about it. In fact, the authors were initially attracted to the site because they had read in the local press that some residents of Villa Inflamable were up in arms, pressuring the government to relocate them, while others were not. This led Auyero and Swistun to believe they had stumbled on a paired comparison, as it is known methodologically. What they found instead was a community plagued by internal divisions, denial, and doubt.

Undeterred, and recognizing that Villa Inflamable did not fit the usual scripted pattern of popular epidemiology—in which collective ignorance is shattered by a revelatory and defining event, a process of cognitive liberation, and finally activism—the authors’ uncertain ethnography instead presumes, following Bourdieu, to show how “domination is achieved with the subaltern’s complicity” (6). With Auyero focused on the role of outsiders such as reporters, doctors, lawyers, activists, company representatives, and government officials, and Swistun on the experiences of affected residents, they together sifted through a minefield of accusations, denials, contradictory evidence, misinformation, and doubt until, after more than two years in the field, they themselves, like the residents of Villa Inflamable, were left bemused and confused by the situation.

One of the problems that Auyero and Swistun found is the complete lack of government oversight of the compound. Then there is the on-again, off-again attention of the media, doctors, politicians, and lawyers, who appear, denounce, promise, and then disappear. And finally, there is the inconsistent and ambiva-

lent relationship between the residents of Villa Inflamable and the petrochemical companies (particularly Shell), which are alternatively vilified and praised for their practices in the community. Is it any wonder, the authors ask, that mystification and self-doubt reign?

There are many things to like about *Flammable*. First, it is engaging and eminently readable, sprinkled as it is with extracts from field notes, transcribed interviews, and the like. Second, it makes the point that “it is crucial to put environmental justice at the center of analyses of poverty in Latin America,” and that “analyses of the causes and manifestations of urban deprivation should take account of poor people’s differential exposure to environmental hazards” (158). Finally, of all the books discussed in this review, it does the best job of combining theory with evidence. As you have probably realized, all the authors, except Perlman, draw heavily on Bourdieu’s theories of symbolic violence and domination, yet Auyero and Swistun address and incorporate his insights more effectively in the whole of their work. So, too, is their fieldwork—their use of participant observation—deeper and more introspective than that of the other authors whose books are surveyed here. This is partly because Swistun is from Villa Inflamable itself. As the authors point out, this circumstance enables them not only to minimize the symbolic violence inherent in the interviewing process but also to access the backstage of residents’ lives, allowing them even to recognize and understand the performative aspects of their interface with outsiders, including themselves. In contrast, because Perlman’s analysis is based not only on fieldwork but also on large and carefully constructed sets of data, it is able to achieve a much greater degree of generalization, albeit at a somewhat more superficial level.

Toward the midpoint of her book, Perlman cites a well-known statement made by the late U.S. Supreme Court justice Louis Brandeis: “We can have democracy in this country, or we can have great wealth concentration in the hands of the few, but we can’t have both” (219). If, by the word *democracy*, Brandeis meant “democratic elections,” he was apparently wrong, not only about the United States but about Latin America as well. The question is, then, why do the poor in Latin America not resort to protest or rebellion when democracy fails to deliver on its promises? The books in this review bring to light a number of factors. First, they suggest that mere survival involves a gargantuan struggle, and as a consequence, it is not surprising that, after a hard day’s or week’s work, the urban poor do not attend meetings or stage protests. Second, although those of us engaged in North American academia may know—or think we know—how the world works, the picture is a lot less clear at the other end of the socioeconomic spectrum, where there is not a lot of time for debate and leisurely contemplation. Third, although the urban poor portrayed in these books may appear afflicted by commodity fetishism, we should not undervalue the pleasure and relief afforded by things that we take for granted, such as a flushing toilet or owning a pair of brand-name sneakers. Finally, there are the problems of violence, globalization, and the failure to provide the younger and poorer sectors of Latin America’s populace with even a semblance of a future. The middle classes and rich can achieve a measure of protection by barricading themselves in, or by moving out, yet the poor are

left to fend for themselves. Policies adopted to combat violence are a large, if not the largest, part of the problem itself. Subsequent to Perlman's research, there are signs that authorities in Rio de Janeiro have finally come to realize that violence only begets violence. But are things too far gone? Are they so out of control as to be unmanageable? Only time will tell.