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Hard Times in the Marvelous City: From Dictatorship to Democracy in the Favelas of Rio de Janeiro

Bryan McCann

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Beginning in the late 1970s, activists from the favelas of Rio de Janeiro challenged the conditions—such as limited access to security, sanitation, public education, and formal employment—that separated favela residents from Rio's other citizens. The activists built a movement that helped to push the nation toward redemocratization. They joined with political allies in an effort to institute an ambitious slate of municipal reforms. Those measures ultimately fell short of aspirations, and soon the reformers were struggling to hold together a fraying coalition. Rio was bankrupted by natural disasters and hyperinflation and ravaged by drug wars. Well-armed drug traffickers had become the new lords of the favelas, protecting their turf through violence and patronage. By the early 1990s, the promise of the favela residents' mobilization of the late 1970s and early 1980s seemed out of reach. Yet the aspirations that fueled that mobilization have endured, and its legacy continues to shape favela politics in Rio de Janeiro.

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