

Far Beyond the “Cidade Maravilhosa”: What Rio de Janeiro’s Favelas Taught Me About the State

“Tia, why should I save money if I don’t even know whether I’ll be alive tomorrow?”

No political science textbook could have prepared me for her question. I was leading a financial literacy workshop in Complexo do Alemão, one of Rio de Janeiro’s largest favelas, explaining how saving money meant sacrificing a little today for a more stable future. Her response dismantled everything. While I was delivering a textbook lecture on long-term planning, she was quietly questioning whether she would live long enough to have a future at all. In an instant, I realized we were using the exact same words, but speaking from entirely different worlds.

As a Political Science and International Relations student from Portugal, I flew to Brazil eager to understand Latin America and the deep-seated inequality that continues to define it. In university, I had learned to analyze the state through its formal structures, its laws, institutions, sovereignty, and duty to protect its people. But I wanted to see how those abstract theories translated into daily life. That search brought me to a neighborhood in Rio, where I arrived expecting to teach financial literacy. Looking back, I was the one who walked away with the deepest lessons.

During one workshop, I asked the kids to picture where they saw themselves in five years. Coming from Portugal, I expected the usual classroom answers: doctor, teacher, lawyer. Some answered with confidence, but others just stared at blank sheets of paper. It wasn’t a lack of talent, intelligence, or drive. For them, the future wasn’t a guarantee. It was a gamble. The gap between our worlds wasn’t about effort, it was about where we were born. I had grown up taking tomorrow for granted, trusting that studying opened doors and hard work created paths. I never had to wonder if my school would close, if gunfire would shatter the afternoon, or if I’d make it home safely. My greatest privilege wasn’t just economic, it was growing up never having to ask if I had a right to a future.

This contrast became even sharper when I prepared a lesson on the role of the state. I walked them through the basics: how schools, hospitals, courts, and law enforcement exist to protect citizens and guarantee equal rights. I was describing

the state as I knew it, built on a European reality. But for many of the kids in that room, the state's most visible presence wasn't a school, a health care center, or a social program. It was an armed police operation.

Recognizing these hard truths isn't about romanticizing life in the favelas, excusing crime, or ignoring the devastation armed groups inflict on these communities. Public safety is a basic human right. But when a government's primary presence in a neighborhood is heavy-handed force, we have to ask whether its core duties are being neglected. Schools, healthcare, infrastructure, and institutional trust ought to be the foundation of a state's presence, leaving force as a last resort rather than the main way citizens experience authority.

During my time in Rio, I witnessed the consequences of police operations that resulted in numerous deaths and generated intense public debate. What stayed with me most was what happened afterwards: life continued and ordinary routines resumed. I was struck not only by the violence but also by its normalization. From a young age, children grew up distinguishing the sound of gunfire from fireworks, families adapted their routines to the risk of armed confrontations and uncertainty became part of everyday life. In Portugal, an event of comparable magnitude would provoke sustained public attention. In the communities I visited, I was struck by how easily the extraordinary could become ordinary.

These experiences shifted how I viewed personal choice. When daily survival takes priority, planning for the future can feel like an unreachable luxury. In speaking with kids in the favelas, I saw firsthand how an environment defined by limited options shapes every decision around work, money, and ambition. I met people forced into informal or illicit work just to get by, including a young man dealing drugs along Copacabana beach. It is easy to judge from the outside, but my background pushed me to look deeper: what realistic alternatives did he actually have? Pointing this out doesn't excuse illegal activity or remove personal accountability. It simply exposes how structural failures narrow the choices people feel are genuinely open to them.

The more time I spent in Rio, the clearer it became that inequality goes far beyond income and material wealth. What I witnessed was institutional inequality, the fundamental difference between growing up expecting public institutions to protect you, and growing up wondering if they even exist for people like you. When access to quality education, healthcare, security, and justice is so profoundly uneven, inequality does more than dictate living conditions: it shapes expectations, breaks down trust in authority, and quietly erodes the ability to plan for tomorrow.

Returning to Portugal, I came back with far more questions than answers. Abstract

terms like legitimacy, sovereignty, and the rule of law suddenly had a human face, one no textbook could ever capture. I came to realize that a state doesn't fail only when it loses control of a territory. It fails when its people stop believing they belong, that their rights matter, or that the system has any stake in their future. Institutional legitimacy relies on more than laws and a legal monopoly on force; it is built on the trust people feel in their daily lives.

Perhaps the greatest lesson those kids taught me was that the deepest form of inequality is an inequality of hope. It is the distinction between growing up believing your efforts can shape tomorrow, and growing up unsure if you can even afford to dream. Ultimately, a state reveals its true strength not through how strictly it exerts power, but through its commitment to offer education, security, and opportunity. A child's neighborhood should never draw the boundary of their potential. The real test of any government is not just holding territory, but ensuring every citizen, regardless of where they are born, can believe that the future belongs to them.