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Masculinities and Femininities Between (Micro)war and (Macro)peace: a Case Study on Rio de Janeiro[1]

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This paper has two main objectives: to analyse 'masculinised' actors within global politics (armed groups in Rio de Janeiro, a city that can be considered an example of a 'newest war') and the resistance to hegemonic masculinities.

In sum, this article deals with a new conceptual category, *newest* wars, and women's agency and resistances to masculinised practices in contexts of "formal peace", thus challenging the myth and deconstructing stereotypes that identify *protection* or *security* with small arms.

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1. The New Geography of War

The decades of the 80s and 90s were marked by profound changes in references for analysis of international conflict. The so-called "new wars" (Kaldor, 1999), which occur most frequently in collapsed states, contrast with a Westesphalian matrix type of conflict. These new wars – also known as "low-intensity conflicts", privatized or informal wars – have characteristics that are substantially different from "traditional" wars. In practice, it is not easy to establish in these new wars the distinction between private and public, state and non-state, informal and formal – distinctions made for economic or political reasons. These are wars that diminish differences between people, armies, and governments (Duffield, 2001: 13 -14). They result in – and at the same time, bring about – a blurring of the boundaries (between internal and external, for example) that were previously considered rigid and well-defined.

Contrary to traditional wars, in which violence occurs in the public sphere, civil society is simultaneously the stage and the target of organised violence in new wars. This violence occurs in the private sphere – thus privatizing violence, the spaces or territories in which it takes place, its actors and its victims.

The units of combat involved in these new wars (public and private) are difficult to distinguish from the civilian population. The use of child soldiers, widespread use of small arms (which are easy to transport, more precise and can be handled without specialised training), use of new technologies (such as mobile phones and internet), new methods to obtain political control, and the creation and maintenance of a climate of hate, fear and insecurity constitute some of the main characteristics that distinguish this type of organised violence from the older kinds of wars.

In fact, the new characteristics of violence make the differences between combat zones and zones of peace less clear than in previous times and, in this new scenario, "as it is difficult to distinguish between political and economical, public and private, military and civilian, it is also increasingly difficult to distinguish between war and peace" (Kaldor, 2001: 143).

This lack of clearly defined zones is not a recent phenomenon. Throughout the 20th Century (in particular, the second half of the century) the casualties of "war" were not

exclusively from traditional armed conflicts. According to Mary Kaldor (2001), at the same time as traditionally declared wars, particularly in Europe, other conflicts also broke out in which more people died than in the Second World War. However, these conflicts did not conform to a determined concept of war, and were not taken into consideration; rather, they were seen as peripheral, marginal "low-intensity conflicts", irregular wars and therefore much less visible than conflicts considered to be more central.

These forms of violence that *door did not conform to a determined concept of war* with "atypical" actors, techniques and strategies have come to be, today, academically and politically accepted as "serious wars" – and recognized by the international community as such. We have come to witness, then, the emergence of a new geography of organised violence, on an increasingly micro-scale, with local wars that have impact on a global scale.

2. Newest Wars at the Margins of New Wars?

The dynamics of the physical dissemination of armed violence, on an increasingly micro-scale, is evident above all in undefined zones, where war can be confused with peace. In societies that experience a period of post-conflict rehabilitation, dominated by short-term concerns and by a framework of political, economic and social references of a neo-liberal profile, it is easy to transfer the prior experience of military violence to a disseminated social violence, in which the arsenal of a culture of violence accumulated over decades spills over as organised armed violence. See, for example, the case of El Salvador. Between 1990 and 1995, after the signing of the peace agreements, the country saw an increase in homicide rates from 79 to 139 homicides per 100,000 residents. As Briceño-León wrote, there were more deaths in the calm of peace than during the torments of war (2002: 13). Even outside these identified contexts of post-war rehabilitation, we have also situations of hyper-concentrated territorial (organised or not) armed violence in areas where institutionalised and formal peace is longstanding. Are "newest wars" emerging between the lines, in the gaps of new wars? The irregular and informal wars of the second half of the 20th Century were a prelude to new wars. Is a new type of violence emerging now that,

because it does not yet correspond to any concept of war, is marginalized and not seen as relevant?

My hypothesis is that in this new type of conflict, two opposing dynamics meet: on the one hand, a “descendent” dynamic translated in a “descent” of (organised) armed violence increasingly into the domestic terrain; on the other hand, an “ascendant” dynamic that is concretised in the intensification of so-called “traditional” forms of suburban violence. The singularity of this form of violence distinguishes it from the so-called “new wars”, or from internal conflicts that take place in collapsed states. In spite of similarities in terms of objectives (control of territory and strategic resources), the scale is different. These are not territorial conflicts or conflicts over resources that pit belligerent groups against the state for a monopoly on the use of force. Rather, they are a highly intense concentration of violence in very limited territories, or micro-territories (neighbourhoods, urban communities, suburban zones), within a national context of apparent formal and institutionalized peace. These conflicts do invoke power, but it is a parallel power, one that does not aim to replace the state. However, in the opinion of Manwaring (2005), strategies within this new form of conflict may involve control of micro-territories in countries or subregions within a country, thus creating enclaves that are essentially para-states.

This new type of conflict is distinct from simple internal large-scale criminality. The increasingly blurred boundaries between the internal and international spheres in newest wars mean that the characterization of these new kinds of conflicts depends on the “lenses” or the filters through which we analyze them. If we focus exclusively on the internal dimension, we will see little more than a scene of hyper-concentrated criminality, without political objectives. But if we understand the impacts of these local phenomena in the international context, we see the emergence of new kinds of conflicts, disseminated on a global scale. By calling these new kind of violent conflicts “newest wars”, I aim to highlight this important difference.

3. Hegemonic Masculinities and Resistances: a Case Study on Rio de Janeiro

Brazil is a clear example of a country submersed in this new type of conflict. It is not involved in an official declared war, but in certain regions of the country we find some of the highest gun homicide rates in the world. With the end of the military dictatorship maintained by the armed forces, which assumed control of the country in 1964, Brazil did not become a more peaceful society. The intensification of direct urban violence, currently quantifiable by statistics, resulted from the structural and cultural violence that have taken root in the country. In the opinion of Angelina Peralva (*apud* Lealdino, 2000: 91-92), the slow transition to democracy had as a consequence the weakening of the state and of its incapacity to control violence, while security continues in the hands of the military police, in a hold-over from the military dictatorship. The combination of factors such as the rapid urban growth and lack of residential infrastructure (which led to the growth of poor neighbourhoods or communities on the peripheries of large cities from the end of the 60s); vast inequalities in the distribution of wealth; slow economic growth; dependence on international loans; low quality of life; growing availability of firearms (Brazil is the second biggest exporter of small arms on the American continent and the fifth exporter in the world[2]); the emergence of narcotrafficking and organised armed groups (in particular in Rio de Janeiro); lack of an effective response by the state; the memory, culture and practice of violence maintained and perpetuated by the police and by private security groups – all these are factors that are at the root of the explosion of direct urban violence that began at the end of the 80s and that has remained high to the present, in particular in the city of Rio de Janeiro. Just as in societies in processes of post-war reconstruction, the memories of violence and state weakness contribute to the emergence of a new type of conflict.

Rio de Janeiro today has one of the highest homicide rates in the world. Between 1991 and 2002, nearly 90,000 people were killed by firearms. The Brazilian population has 2.8% of the world population, but between 9% and 13% of the firearms deaths in the world in the 90s. The increases in violence are directly related to the emergence of

[2] Rangel Bandeira, Antonio (2003), "Congresso Brasileiro aprova proibição de armas", 10/12/2003, on www.vivario.org.br/publique/.

narcotrafficking, of arms trafficking and of the groups that control them. In spite of the fact that drug trafficking in Rio is not recent (it dates from the beginning of the 20th Century), it was only at the end of the 70s and the beginning of the 80s, with the arrival of enormous quantities of cocaine to the city, that it became an important transit point for exporting cocaine to the United States, Europe and South Africa (Dowdney, 2003: 25). The statistics show that direct armed violence, mirrored in the mortality rates, began to increase exactly after the end of the 70s: in 1980 there were 1,807 homicides in Rio de Janeiro (or 35.5 homicides per 100,000 residents); but in 1989 this number increased to 3,516, or 64.9 homicides per 100,000 residents. This rate has remained steady through the year 2000 (Dowdney, 2003: 92).

As throughout Latin America, firearms are responsible for the majority of these deaths. In Brazil in 2002, firearms were responsible for 68% of all homicides (ISER: 2005). In 1960, police in Rio de Janeiro state seized 841 firearms, but in 1999 this number increased to 11,633 illegal firearms, a great number of which were of a highly lethal and more advanced variety. This increase in seizure of weapons, from the end of the 80s, "[...] follows the emergence of drug factions, their fragmentation, militarization and armed territorial disputes, as well as increases in confrontations with police" (Dowdney, 2003: 93). In Rio de Janeiro there are three types of drug factions or armed groups that dispute territorial control in poor communities or *favelas* with the economic objective of controlling narcotrafficking: Third Command (*Terceiro Comando),* Red Command (*Comando Vermelho)* and Friends of Friends *(Amigos dos Amigos)*. Following the pattern of new violence in Latin America, in Rio de Janeiro, a large metropolis, violence is notably greater in some neighbourhoods and does not affect the entire population equally. As affirmed by Luke Dowdney (2003: 94), "Some regions have a number of deaths similar to cities in Europe or the United States, with less than 10 homicides per 100,000 residents, and other regions have rates similar to areas in armed conflict or at war (with rates between 100 and 501 homicides per 100,000 residents)". In spite of firearms mortality rates that are comparable to losses suffered in many contemporary wars, the city and the country are not at war (Dowdney, 2003: 13). However, the illegal drugs trade in Rio de Janeiro has given way to extremely high levels of armed violence, firearms-related mortality rates, a paramilitary organisation, geographical territorialisation, political domination of poor

communities, and the participation of state authorities that reach levels rarely seen anywhere else in the world (*ibid*.: 239).

The main protagonists of Rio de Janeiro's armed conflicts are the different drug factions, which have similar characteristics and modes of action. They are structured hierarchically (as organised armed units) at the local level. They have economic objectives and are not ideologically different (although the groups have different codes of conduct, organisational structures and notions of justice, they have in common the economic objective of illegal drug sales in the city, as well as similar strategies of community domination and of territory as the base of power). As armed groups they are financially self-sufficient and do not depend on other crimes to arm themselves. Although there are no ideological differences between them, the factions demonize their rivals, indoctrinate members of the community and in particular, the youth, in a culture of hate and fear of the "other" (that is, of rival factions and the communities dominated by them). The factions are territorial, geographically defined through the domination of *favelas* where they or their drug sales points are located. They constitute a permanent armed presence in the communities and ostentatiously hold and use war-grade weapons. Their use of gun violence has resulted in a greater number of deaths than those registered in some areas considered to be involved in a "new war".

As the state is not the deliberate target of the drug factions' attacks in Rio, neither the city nor the country can be considered to be at war in the traditional sense. The narcotrafficking factions in the city of Rio de Janeiro do not oppose nor do they have an interest in taking the place of the state. They each hold power, and the state can formally enter and intervene in all spaces of the city. And in spite of having an internal organisation, codes of conduct and a defined chain of command, the factions are not structured as military organisations, where all the members have one boss, independent of the local unit they represent (Dowdney, 2003: 193-195).

In analyzing the new conflicts that manifest themselves particularly in Rio de Janeiro, it is clear that men are the main direct victims of armed violence. For every woman between the ages of 15 and 29 killed by guns, 24 young men in the same age group who

will die the same way[3]. The face of this violence is not only male, but predominantly young. The homicides rate among young men between 15 and 29 years of age was 239 per 100,000 in 1999. At the same time, the number of deaths among children of 10-14 years old is also on the rise.

On the other hand, young men are also the main agents of this violence. At play here are the mystics of masculinity (Fisas, 1998) and all the symbolism of guns associated with it, with strong roots in the culture of violence that dominates in Latin America. The near-monopoly on the use and possession of firearms by males is in reality an expression of a kind of masculinity, violent and militarized, and of local and national cultures in which the use of firearms by men is the norm. In times of war and in "peaceful" countries, these weapons often are part of a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood among young men, who are frequently socialized into a familiarity and fascination with firearms (Connell, 1985). These symbolic elements are associated with the other factors referred to above to characterize the singularity of these newest wars.

The broad spectrum of civil society and government efforts that specifically aim to reduce armed violence have focused mainly on this principal risk group (boys and young men), and consequently little attention has been paid to the roles and impacts of women on armed violence in Rio de Janeiro. In reality, the lack of studies and analyses that include women or use sex-disaggregated data, *is in itself a political option* to silence and marginalize determined groups. At the same time, armed violence (possession and use of firearms in general) is a result of a sexualized construction of gender. It depends on hegemonic and violent constructions of masculinity that oppose peaceful and passive notions of femininity and constitute an instrument to exercise masculine power over marginalized collectives, especially women. It is expected that women will accept social constructions of *unprotected* women who *depend on* the status, power and protection of men[4].

But if we take a closer look at what has been silenced, we are confronted with realities that challenge myths and stereotypes: in spite of the fact that the main victims and agents of violence are men, there is a growing tendency for women to be killed by these

[3] Galeria, Jessica and Sullivan, Jacqueline (2001), "Arma Não! Ela ou Eu!" em www.vivario.org.br.
[4] AI, Oxfam and IANSA (2005), "The impact of guns on women's lives".

weapons as well (going against the justification that firearms are necessary for security). And we find that the femininity that serves as the antithesis to militarized masculinity is not, in any way, a passive femininity. On the one hand, some women take on support roles in these contexts of newest wars; and on the other, some women react actively against the proliferation of small arms. It is these examples that I will now analyse.

Between 1979 and 1981 the homicide rate for women in the country was two deaths per 100,000 women. Between 1997 and 1999 this number increased to four per 100,000 women, with firearms being the weapon most used to commit the murders (Aguiar, 2004). In this period, firearms were responsible for 54% of the homicides of women aged 20-29 and 49.9% of the homicides of women between 40 and 49 years of age. Although women are not the main victims or perpetrators of gun violence, they suffer the consequences of small arms proliferation and misuse in specific ways.

Women and girls in Rio are also involved in armed violence as well. Interviews[5] with young women in *favela* communities show that females do occupy functions with the drug-trafficking structures, and that they play a significant support role in hiding or transporting drugs, guns and information. And girls' and young women's attitudes can in fact encourage gun-holding, by continuing to see men as having greater status if they carry guns. These same interviews showed how young men who carry guns to participate in the drug trade represent status, money and power. All in all, these girls and women interviewed affirm that guns do not represent security for them, but the opposite.

Further, women in Rio are actively engaged in demanding tougher gun laws and justice for victims of gun violence. One of the counterpoints to the young male face of armed violence is the protagonism of women in finding responses to it. In the opinion of Luciana Phebo and Michel Robim (2004), "Fear, insecurity, resentment, and financial difficulties are part of the legacy left by the deaths of young men". At the same time, they say, women are not only victims, but are also agents in the prevention of gun violence. In fact, many organised reactions against these newest wars are led by women. Their role is increasingly important, in particular in attempts to reduce demand for firearms, in

[5] *Viva Rio* interviews with focus group of girls and young women, aged 14-23, January 2004, Complexo da Maré, Rio de Janeiro.

movements to sensitise public opinion, as pressure groups on the government, and in the particular case of Rio de Janeiro, an important movement against armed violence.

To address the gender aspects of small arms violence, the NGO Viva Rio launched on Mothers Day 2001 a disarmament campaign called “Choose Gun Free! Its Your Weapon or Me”. The campaign attempted to bring together, give voice and public expression to women of all sectors of Brazilian society in a unified struggle to reduce violence and to encourage the voluntary surrender of weapons. Many families in Brazil see guns as a way to protect themselves in an insecure environment; the campaign sought to turn this commonly-held notion on its head. In a country with high rates of domestic violence, the campaign’s message was that guns do not bring security or safety, so women should work together to disarm their homes and their country. The campaign uses women’s activism to spread the message that, contrary to cultural and media messages, guns do not make a man more manly or attractive. The idea was to “de-masculinise” the gun, using puns suggesting that men don’t need to carry or have a gun to be or show that he’s a “real man”. What initially could be explained as a survival strategy (for their protection and that of their families) quickly became an attempt to conquer space in the public sphere.

In August 2001, just months after the campaign was launched, dozens of activists, including several mothers of victims of fatal gun violence, pressured the Rio state assembly to pass stricter gun legislation, making it more difficult to obtain a license to buy firearms and stiffening penalties for those who would use them illegally.

By late 2003, the Brazilian Congress was set to vote on sweeping reforms to the federal gun legislation, including raising the minimum age for purchasing firearms from 21 to 25, adding 16 new requirements in order to purchase a firearm, and setting a national referendum for October 2005 to vote on an outright ban on commercial gun sales throughout the country. The campaign’s message was clearly echoed in public opinion polls showing that nearly 80% of Brazilians were in favour of the new law, and that the public had assimilated the campaign’s message that owning or using a firearm is more of a risk than a security measure.[6]

In 2004 the Brazilian government launched a gun collection campaign in partnership with NGOs such as Viva Rio and Sou da Paz, collecting over 200,000 weapons

[6] Instituto Sensus: December, 2003.

in the first five months. Of 1,023 people polled at a collection point, about 28% were women; among the men, about 18% said they got rid of their gun because their wife or girlfriend convinced them. It is expected that women will continue to play a key role in mobilising support for the gun ban referendum, resisting to hegemonic masculinities.

In February 2005 the Brazilian NGO Viva Rio and the Peace Studies Group (University of Coimbra, Portugal) started a project entitled "Women and Girls in Contexts of Armed Violence: a Case Study on Rio de Janeiro". This research project stems from the need to document the roles of women and girls in new kinds of urban conflicts (newest wars) and evaluate the impact this violence has on their lives, as well as their formal and informal reactions. The main objective is to gather and analyze theoretical and field data that leads to the design and implementation of more efficient security policies, gendering the concept and the practices. Intensive field research will aim to go beyond the victimization discourse as well as the stereotypical connections between women and peace, recognizing all the roles they play. At the same time, it will identify women's 'individual insecurities' at the microlevel, making visible the (often silent and marginalised) impact of armed violence on women.

This framework will allow for comparison with other countries that face similar problems with organised armed violence and aims to advance multi-lateral discussions (as in the United Nations and regional bodies like the OAS and the EU) around women, small arms, and new kinds of conflict including organised armed violence.

In summary:

The near-monopoly by men on the use and possession of firearms is an expression of socialization in a type of violent and militarized masculinity. The manifestations of these violent forms of masculinity equate firearms possession with an exercise of power, and constitute a significant threat and source of insecurity for women.

The exacerbation of hegemonic and militarized masculinity is the common backdrop that unifies the cultures of violence present in all the scales of war (the "old", the "new" and the "newest").

Articulating these types of violence, with greater emphasis on subjectivity, represents an enormous contribution to redefining and recognizing unclear zones, where (micro)wars are diluted in an apparent context of (macro)peace.

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