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Masculinities in the continuum of violence in Latin America

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In June 2012 Colombia awoke to the news of the brutal murder of thirty-five-year-old Rosa Elvira Cely at the hands of a former high school classmate. She had been raped, tortured and impaled in Bogotá's iconic National Park, located in the heart of Colombia's capital city. At four o'clock that morning, she managed to call the local police for help, only to be found hours later. Although hospitalised, her wounds were so severe that she died five days later. Bogota's citizens expressed their outrage over this crime in a massive march through the park and at various public rallies. The enormous public outcry over this event in a city of almost 8 million people showed that something was changing in Colombian society.

A year before, the former coach of Colombia's soccer team, Hernán Gómez, beat a woman outside the entrance of a local pub. In this case, Colombians were divided on whether Gómez was a true aggressor. Some trivialised the matter, agreeing he was a 'brute' who drank too much but arguing that he should not be punished for something that had nothing to do with his career as a coach.

Ediberto Barreto, a candidate for city council in the eastern Colombian town of Yopal, publicly supported the coach and spoke with pride to the press about his own role as the founder of Colombia's Machista Movement. He said that this organisation fights against the feminist movements created to corrupt the minds of young women. In order to belong to it a man must demonstrate his 'manliness'. How? Through aggressive acts such as hitting his mother-in-law or being sued for sexual harassment or breach of child support obligations. He stated that men should educate women and have the right to beat them ('give it to them hard, as if they were cattle') when they do not obey (El Espectador.com, 2012).

Barreto's words, spoken and received at a time in which violence against women is increasingly at the heart of public debate, and in the wake of mounting acid attacks on women and the escalation of femicide, quickly earned him a criminal suit for discrimination and violence against women. The suit, consonant with the discontent expressed by many feminist leaders, was brought by Iván Cepeda,

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a member of Colombia's Congress and co-author of a bill that seeks to categorise sexually violent offences as crimes against humanity and not subject to a statute of limitations.

The characterisation, definition and classification of crimes related to this type of violence are persistent controversies within feminism. In Latin America the bloody deaths of women far exceed reported figures, and every death deserves to be analysed individually, without being eclipsed by homogenising figures. *So what can these types of gender-based crimes and masculinist attitudes, and the growing indignation they have recently begun to provoke, tell us about masculinities and power in Colombian society?*

The continuum of violence in Latin American history

In order to answer this question, we need to go back at least 500 years, as male violence against women occupies a foundational place in Latin American history. As Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004) have observed, violence is reproduced over time, in chains, spirals and mirrors that form a continuum of violence. The region's history was marked by a type of structural violence in the Spanish Conquest and Colonization that inevitably translated into intimate and domestic acts in which not only were colonised women disempowered within their communities, but colonised men were likewise subordinated within the masculine hierarchy. Violence was located in symbolic and social structures governing the mechanisms of racial inferiority and gender subordination, and these structures established relationships not only of opposition, but of complicity between the colonised populations and their colonisers (Martinez-Alier [Stolcke], [1974] 1989; Lugones, 2008; Wade, 2009).

During the colonial period and in the context of so-called 'miscegenation', sexual relations between Spanish men and indigenous and black women were based on intimidation and force. Though carried out in different forms and shaped by different historical contexts, such violence has continued up to the present day, as women, particularly indigenous women, Afro-descendants and mestizo women, continue to be abused (Mendoza, 2001).

That it is hard to find a period in Colombian and Latin American social history in which violence has not been present does not mean that violence is a Latin American cultural trait, per se. The social and cultural dimensions of this violence are what gives it its power and meaning (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004). The theory of 'coloniality of power' (Quijano, 2000) identifies and defines the living legacy of colonialism in contemporary societies in the form of social discrimination that has outlived formal colonialism and become integrated into succeeding social orders.

The pattern of global domination characteristic of the modern capitalist world-system that originated with European colonialism in the early sixteenth century impacted the masculine identities of conquerors and colonisers, as well as colonised and enslaved men (Connell, 2005). The expression of these masculine identities has

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varied depending on groupings of race, ethnicity (Viveros-Vigoya, 2002b), gender, sexuality and class that shaped the contexts in which such expressions were manifested.

Studies of men and masculinities in Latin America (Viveros-Vigoya, 2002a, 2011; Gutmann and Viveros-Vigoya, 2005; Ramírez, 2005; Cruz Sierra, 2013) show that such violence has been a constituent part of hegemonic as well as subordinated masculinities. In what we now call Latin America, many men of subaltern groups, whether based on class, ethnicity, race or sexuality, have been subjugated by the long-ruling supremacy of 'white', rich, heterosexual European men. Many of the men belonging to these dominated groups have come to believe that strengthening their masculinity and their authority over women is an essential part of their emancipation (Beattie, 2003; Boesten, 2008; Hume, 2009). The structural and symbolic violence of racism and classism of which men of subaltern groups are victims extends into political-military violence and in turn is translated into new forms of interpersonal violence within communities.

In the postcolonial period, racialised working class men made multiple claims for citizenship, asking to be included as part of the nation and to have access to certain economic privileges that would allow them to establish alliances with men from the upper classes. Such privileges had historically been denied to them due to colonial notions of national honour (Boyer, 1998; Johnson, 1998) and concerns for the protection of women (Wade, 2009). References to manly pride and sexual aggressiveness are intertwined with political actions in many accounts of Latin America's political struggles, by commanders and leaders, including recent battles waged by insurgents and even revolutionary counter-discourses (Débray, 1980).

Mendoza (2001) and Wade (2009) draw attention to the 'aggressively masculine' role played by the mestizo figure and the praise of manhood in Mexican post-revolutionary narratives and in national stories from different Latin American countries. The processes of modernisation and Westernisation and the mestizo-male symbolic order of these national projects have closely interwoven ethnic and racial hierarchies with gender orders and inner and inter-sexuality.

Male resistance to social change, and violence

Today, in countries around the world as far apart as Colombia and South Africa, groups of men such those in Colombia's Machista Movement and men like David Benatar of the University of Cape Town[1] affirm the need to protect their peers from 'the excesses of feminism'. They bring together various complaints voiced by the so-called 'masculinist movements', for whom the struggle for women's rights has led to the establishment of a 'castrating matriarchy' and discrimination against men.

The actions and arguments originating from the masculinist movements are of special concern in Latin America, where violence against women has alarmed authorities and civil society. These movements promote an extension of male domination that is rooted in gender inequality and the perpetuation of a patriarchal

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order, and based on a defensive logic against the demands of liberty and equality raised by feminist and gay and lesbian social movements (Fabre and Fassin, 2003). They represent a tyrannical reaction to a perceived loss of power, and active resistance to a feeling of weakness and inadequacy. Thus, repressive and violent methods are not signs of male power but the reaction to a loss of power.[2]

The powerlessness experienced by men for quite some time in many parts of Latin America and elsewhere (Mies, 1986; Silbershmidt, 2001) is also linked to socio-economic changes ushered in by the neoliberal transformation, which has increased women's burdens while reducing men's opportunities to fulfill roles as breadwinners and heads of households. The neoliberal philosophy has impacted society with unforeseen consequences, reducing men's perceived social value and masculine pride, and bringing about increasing violence and sexual aggressiveness as part of an effort to restore male self-esteem. Such statements as 'giv[ing] it to [women] hard, as if they were cattle' are amplified and dramatised manifestations of such male frustration and alienation.

Some men object to women's work outside the home because the proper place for women is considered to be the home – that is, because of a desire to preserve the traditional gender order. In this case, the man is asserting his power. In the case of the masculinist movements, in contrast, men seek to stop women's advancement in the workplace because they feel a lack of power. The distinction between these two forms of male domination may be useful in identifying and seeking to transform men's practices of domination.

The gender violence referred to earlier and the machista assertions made by male public figures are not only applied to females within the territory traditionally controlled by their male assailants; they may be associated with broader-based rituals intended to defend their deeply threatened sense of virility. Femicide[3] is an extreme example of such a male reaction and represents a new, contemporary transformation of gender violence that is not confined to murder but even includes the destruction of women's bodies,[4] as in the case of Cely in Colombia, or the disfigurement of women's faces, as in the cases of acid attacks.

The context in which such forms of violence against women occur in Latin America today does not involve demarcated state territories or ceremonies of victory or defeat. The groups that use these strategies are factions, gangs and mafias, as well as state and para-state military forces (Dominguez-Ruvalcaba and Corona, 2010; Segato, 2011, 2014). In these situations, 'power is exercised through the circulation of terror' (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004: 17; Taussig, 2004; Carey and Torres, 2010).

Femicide, the 'socially tolerated murder of women', needs to be understood not only in relation to this new modality of war, but also through the ties that link terror with 'normal' social practices in gender relations and historical gendered violence. Assault on women for the mere fact of being women 'is sustained by culturally accepted practices that promote gendered violence, including the socially tolerated forms of sexual abuse, physical and emotional battery, and sexual harassment' (Russel, 2001; Carey and Torres, 2010: 143).

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There is also continuity between these forms of violence and the rape of women in armed conflicts where power is enacted through the degradation of women and feminised men (Prada et al., 2012). Indeed, crimes against women in the armed conflict in Colombia[5] involve, in most cases, high levels of brutality and are often associated with other types of violence, including not only femicides and rape, but psychological violence, trafficking in women and girls, sexual slavery, emotional and sexual control, forced abortion or pregnancy and symbolic and economic coercion, among other kinds of violence that are exacerbated in situations of armed conflict (Sánchez-Gomez, 2010: 77).

Behind this violence we can identify an old failure of established authorities to avert and penalise all kinds of violence against women, as well as a new expression of a crisis in gender order that is resistant to change. This powerful resistance is linked to other dominant, conservative and stereotypical discourses about women, and to the negligence of the State in facing up to its duty to prevent and punish violence against women.

Femicide also serves to frame masculinities in a context of reciprocal and reinforcing types of violence. When men belonging to 'enemy groups', parents, brothers, husbands or political authorities where the women live cannot protect their women (a central task of dominant masculinity), perpetrators of gendered violence use women to delegitimise, dishonor and disempower the enemy men and to display their own 'manliness'. In this kind of scenario, where armed organisations are interwoven and blended with state or para-state forces, violence against women becomes expressive and pedagogical (Segato, 2014). This violence conveys a message of impunity and expresses, in a truculent way, the power of control over bodies and territories. In such expressive violence, women are the territory on which the terms of the contest are set.

Segato provides an example in the practice of femicide in Ciudad Juarez, México, where the presence of partners, a male peer group, is equally or more important than the victim herself. This peer group includes the entire male business mafia of the region. The perpetrators do not direct their discourse to the victim, but to their peers, to whom they demonstrate their ability use cruelty and to kill, which enables them to participate in the mafia brotherhood. This network has in turn economic and political resources that ensure the impunity of the participants.

Final reflections

In discussing expressions of masculinity and new forms of violence against women that have been increasing in the last decade and a half in Latin America, it is necessary to consider some underlying geopolitical issues. Traces of the coloniality of power are evident in the privileges and social inequalities that characterise the context in which these acts of violence are taking place, in which two worlds and two universes of meaning coexist and confront each other on a daily basis: that of the privileged and that of the excluded. We cannot afford and we must not permit a cultural interpretation in which this kind of violence is seen as the expression of

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some trans-historical regional 'specificity'. The issue is not barbaric crimes perpetrated by dark men hailing from the subcontinental cradle of machismo. Violence against women must be addressed from a critical and comprehensive perspective that takes into account the persistence of the coloniality of power and its effects on different hegemonic and subordinate masculinities as the new geopolitical and historical dynamics that encourage such crimes as femicide.

In addition, there are links between new types of warfare and the expansion of the modern world and market that encourage predatory occupation of the female body and increase the helplessness and cruelty towards them (Segato, 2014). In such cases, women serve to demonstrate men's dominance over conquered enemies and the helplessness of the local population or authorities. Femicide is the murder of a generic woman; in this crime, women are depersonalised. A personal relationship or motivation between perpetrator and victim becomes unnecessary.

Whilst the violent nature of patriarchy may shed light on all varieties of deaths of women as a result of anti-female terrorism (Radford and Russell, 1992), it is essential to recognise the limits of this interpretation in accounting for these new forms of crimes against women in Latin America.

In order to combat femicide we need to:

- develop a specific typology that will allow us to attack the problem at the root;
- identify male parallel powers operating in an informal and diffuse new arena of struggle that affects different areas of political and economic life;
- establish legal categories and laws that classify femicide as a separate offence[6] and allow legal remedies to be activated (Agatón, 2013); and finally
- gain awareness of the importance and significance of these crimes in maintaining arbitrary domination over people and territories (Segato, 2014).

These goals need to be incorporated into the political agendas of social movements against neoliberal policies that exacerbate inequalities and weaken the social fabric. Only then can these struggles enhance awareness of interlocking systems of oppression, and only then can we hope to break this vicious circle linking masculinity and violence.

Notes

1. Professor of philosophy and author of *The Second Sexism: Discrimination Against Men and Boys* (2012).
2. Hannah Arendt (1969) argues that violence is to be understood as a failure of power.
3. Femicide, defined by feminist sociologist Diana Russel (2001) as 'the killing of females by males *because* they are female,' represents a web of gendered social practices and relations of violence and needs to be understood beyond individual acts of violence. Some theoretical feminists such as Marcela Lagarde (2006) and Rita Segato (2011) assert that it is necessary to differentiate femicide from other forms of gender violence, including sexually motivated or domestic violence, so as to render it legally classifiable in order to better act against it.

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4. The mutilations in the Juarez femicides are a striking example (Cruz Sierra, 2013).
5. Between 2004 and 2009, of 5516 murders of women, 864 were characterised as killings by armed aggressors (Abelardo Carrillo, based on INMLCF, SIRDEC, 2002–2009).
6. Colombia's new law on femicide is a key step in combating violence against women. It was named after Rosa Elvira Cely, the woman mentioned at the beginning of this article. It came into effect on 6 July 2015 and makes femicide a distinct and legally defined crime, with jail sentences of twenty to forty-one years (Agatón, 2013).

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