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Referência eletrónica

Adriana Piscitelli e Valerio Simoni, « Masculinities in times of uncertainty and change: introduction », *Etnográfica* [Online], vol. 19 (2) | 2015, Online desde 22 Junho 2015, consultado em 22 Junho 2015. URL : <http://etnografica.revues.org/4010> ; DOI : 10.4000/etnografica.4010

Editor: CRIA

<http://etnografica.revues.org>

<http://www.revues.org>

Documento acessível online em: <http://etnografica.revues.org/4010>

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Masculinities in times of uncertainty and change: introduction

Adriana Piscitelli and Valerio Simoni

This text introduces the articles in the dossier considering the contributions of studies of gender and masculinities for anthropological theory in the last two decades. Taking into account the scholarship of authors that marked these studies in the mid-1990s, we explore continuities and advances in the field. We show how current debates on gender and masculinity suggest that the main insights developed during this period are still relevant. The methods of anthropology are considered particularly suited for the study of masculinities, given their potential to destabilize “conventional” categories of analysis. The comparative nature of anthropology is seen as extremely productive in that it enables to challenge universal categories and raises key questions on the social contexts in which these categories are employed. At the same time, such variety of contexts, especially in situations of radical change and/or crisis, brings new questions to the fore for the analysis of masculinities. Among them the question of the analytical fruitfulness of the notion of hegemonic masculinity in situations in which force, rather than consensus, appears to acquire more salience.

KEYWORDS: masculinities, gender, crisis, power, agency.

Masculinidades em tempos de incerteza e mudanças ♦ Neste texto apresentamos os artigos que compõem o dossiê, considerando as contribuições dos estudos sobre gênero e masculinidades para a teoria antropológica durante as duas últimas décadas. Levando em conta as formulações de diversos autores que marcaram esses estudos na metade da década de 1990, exploramos as permanências e os avanços nesse campo. Mostramos como o debate sobre essa problemática sugere que os principais *insights* antropológicos alcançados nesse período ainda são significativos. Os métodos da antropologia continuam sendo considerados privilegiados para o estudo das masculinidades, por seu potencial para desestabilizar categorias “convencionais” de análise. A natureza comparativa da antropologia ainda é percebida como altamente produtiva por possibilitar desafiar a ideia da existência de categorias universais e levantar questões chave sobre os contextos sociais nos quais são utilizadas. No entanto, a variedade de novos contextos, particularmente em situações de mudança radical e/ou de crises, coloca novas perguntas em termos das análises das masculinidades. Entre elas adquire destaque a questão da fertilidade analítica da noção de masculinidade hegemônica em situações nas quais a força, no lugar do consenso, se torna particularmente relevante.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: masculinidades, gênero, crise, poder, agência.

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IN JULY 2014, DURING TWO BRIGHT SPRING DAYS A GROUP OF SCHOLARS gathered for a lively Symposium at the University of Sussex.¹ Their aim was to celebrate the 20th anniversary of *Dislocating Masculinity* (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994), one of the ground-breaking books that marked research on the topic of masculinity, and to explore the major changes in the field of masculinity studies since the appearance of the publication. In the mid 1990s, an effervescent intellectual moment for gender studies, several authors converged in the effort of theorizing masculinities, questioning the widespread equation between gender and women studies but also challenging the vindictiveness of men's studies (Almeida 1996, 2000 [1996]; Connell 1995, 1996).

In those days diverse sociological and anthropological perspectives came to consider that examining men as engendered and engendering was not so much a complement to the study of women, but rather integral to understanding the ambiguities of gender differences (Gutmann 1997: 833). These perspectives problematized accounts of gender based on the theory of sex roles and on the "classificatory theory" that treats women and men as pre-formed categories (Connell 1996: 158; Strathern 1988). They also tended to converge in analytical approaches that scrutinized how power works in the production of gender orders, in considering masculinity as a configuration of practice in everyday interactions, and in paying attention both to culturally authoritative or hegemonic patterns of masculinity and to subordinated/marginalized masculinities (Almeida 1995, 2000 [1996]; Connell 1995, 1996; Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994).

In this context, anthropological approaches arguing that the premises and methods of social anthropology were particularly suited to the study of men and masculinities offered a unique contribution to the field. Following Strathern's (1988) formulations, these perspectives perceived gender as fluid and contingent. They considered that the conflation of the notions male/men/masculinity and female/women/femininity in constructions of difference ought to become an object of scrutiny, since the three terms in each cluster did not necessarily overlap and could have multiple referents that blurred and created the possibility of ambiguous interpretations in any particular setting. Finally, these perspectives considered gender as a potent metaphor for difference and power whose import should be understood in relation to historical and ethnographic specificities. A key idea was that there were no fixed ways in which these metaphors were employed in social life: they could permeate a diversity of dimensions, which were not always nor directly connected with sex and gender (Almeida 1995, 2000 [1996]; Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994).

1 "Dislocating Masculinity Revisited" Symposium, University of Sussex, July 4-5, 2014.

As Vale de Almeida (1996) highlighted, this analysis was based on a critique of diverse aspects of a constructionist approach that left the dichotomic categories of men and women intact. Such perspectives failed to question how apparently unitary persons are constituted, assumed that there is a single way of “being a man” – that being masculine is an exclusive identity – and neglected the analysis of how bodies are gendered. Along similar lines of thought, in *Dislocating Masculinity* Cornwall and Lindisfarne (1994: 3) observed that if notions of masculinity, like the notion of gender itself, are fluid and situational, we must then consider the various ways people understand masculinity in any particular setting, and explore how various masculinities are defined and redefined in social interaction. The main questions that should therefore be addressed are: how do individuals present and negotiate a gendered identity? How and why are particular images and behaviors given gender labels? Who benefits from such labeling? And how do such labels assume different meanings and connotations for different audiences and in different settings?

Twenty years after Cornwall and Lindisfarne’s publication, masculinity studies have disseminated widely, as exemplified by the array of academic journals and books on the subject published in different regions of the world. Several of the ideas formulated by Cornwall and Lindisfarne and by Vale de Almeida in the mid 1990s have been incorporated in feminist and queer analyses of a variety of topics – women’s masculinities, masculine hybrids, transnational analyses that allow us to perceive how gender operates as a language for alluding to inequalities of social class and “race,” to regional inequalities and relationships between countries of the “North” and the “South,” to differentiated degrees of civilization or of “Westernization” (Halberstam 2008; Archetti 2003; González Pagés 2010; Piscitelli 2014).

Paying close attention to an array of recent studies of masculinities, the scholars gathered at the University of Sussex’s meeting reached the conclusion that the main anthropological insights about gender analysis of the mid 1990s are still significant. The methods of anthropology are still seen as a privileged asset for studying masculinities, given their potential to dismantle “conventional” categories of analysis. The comparative nature of anthropology continues to be seen as highly relevant and productive in that it encourages us to challenge the existence of any universal category, and raises key questions about the social contexts in which such categories are used. Finally, ethnographic studies continue to be considered fundamental also in order to unveil and problematize anthropologists’ own preconceptions. Yet, scholars in the meeting also perceived that a variety of emerging contexts, particularly in situations of radical change and/or crisis, pose a series of new questions for the analysis of masculinities.

The articles in this dossier interrogate precisely these situations, considering how intense transformations associated with economic and political

change affect notions of masculinity and the ways these are deployed, negotiated, and eventually modified. During the last decades, political turmoils and a range of crises have impinged on many regions of the world, including European countries. As Narotzky and Besnier (2014) observe, crises are processes beyond individual control that force change in traditional modes of livelihood, and that simultaneously express people's breach of confidence in the elements that provided relative systemic stability and reasonable expectations for the future.

According to Narotzky and Besnier (2014), crises reconfigure values and reshuffle frameworks of moral obligation. As a result, the imagining of possible futures and how to make them happen also changes. In times of crisis, people deploy coping strategies that enable them to locate and access increasingly elusive resources. These strategies may include relations of trust and care, economies of affect, networks of reciprocity encompassing both tangible and intangible resources, and material and emotional transfers that are supported by moral obligations. But these strategies can also have the effect of defining and marginalizing categories of people whose access to resources will be hampered and curtailed. These authors consider that while some institutions that regulate moral and political frameworks of responsibility and support the transfer of resources are being undermined in various ways, other institutional frameworks (e.g., religious, ethnic, nationalistic) for guiding human behavior and channeling goods are being created or reconfigured. This creativity, however, may involve exclusionary practices that create and demonize an Other (in terms of race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, or other lines of differentiation), making it a target of violence in struggles over access to resources and respect.

In this dossier, which is an outcome of a workshop that took place in 2012 at the Biannual Meeting of the European Association of Social Anthropologists in Nanterre, the authors consider situations of radical change and/or crisis, exploring what the production of multiple and shifting notions of masculinities tells us about diverse political and economic frames and their transformations, and analyzing in turn how these conjunctures shed light on transformations of masculinity. Considering that in situations of economic and social turmoil gender relationships tend to be volatile and unsteady, leading to shifts and alterations in the balance of power, the authors analyze how masculinities are re-enacted, reworked and reshaped to cope with conditions of (continuous) crisis and rapid transformation.

The situations considered in this dossier are extremely diverse in terms of the political, economic and social pressure bearing upon the agents involved: the Special Period in Time of Peace in Cuba that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union (Simoni; Härkönen); the migratory contexts of Pentecostal converts of African or Latin-American origin in Brussels (Maskens); the post-socialist

Chinese state in contemporary globalizing China (Zheng) and the militant organization of Hamas in the Palestinian/Israeli struggle (Malmström). In relation to these varied contextual frames, the articles explore the tensions between global imaginaries of “maleness” and the models/styles of masculinity on which people draw to cope with changes and uncertainties, uncovering their transnational diffusion and local translations and appropriations.

In shedding light on how masculinities incorporate new defining elements and reformulate ideals and normativities, the articles offer substantive contributions for the theorizing of masculinities. One of the innovative aspects relates to the problematization of analyses that have largely approached masculinity from a “Western” perspective and attended to peripheral masculinities such as “gay” or “black” (Zheng). Discussing the case of contemporary China, Zheng analysis shows how gender hybridity, in the form of effeminate men, comes to be seen as a peril to the security of the nation once it reflects powerlessness, inferiority, feminized passivity, and social deterioration reminiscent of the colonial past when China was defeated by the colonizing West and plagued by its image as the Sick Man of East Asia. The articles also allow us to perceive how styles of masculinity can operate as expressions of a “non-Western modernity.” Suggesting that the politics of Hamas and Islamization are part of a global system and expressions of globalization, Malmström’s analysis of Palestinian male youth’s identities shows how such identities are part of the process by which these young men cast themselves as subjects of modernity. Yet, and in contrast with Western notions of modernity that emphasize secularization, what emerges here is a modern project embedded in religious faith. Within this frame, the analysis of how bodies are gendered, in an interplay of political violence, suffering, resistance and Islamization, acquires particular significance.

A second aspect that deserves attention is the consideration of how competing and contradictory models of masculinity are enacted according to situational dimensions in contexts of intense change, which leads the articles in this dossier to uncover the actualization, production, and transformation of different styles of masculine subjectification (see Maskens, Härkönen, Simoni). Depicting different relational possibilities and expressions of masculinity, and analyzing what they tell us about the transformations that tourism engenders in present-day Cuba, Simoni shows how, in a context in which sexual economies are central for the survival strategies of many Cubans and where dispassionate *macho* attitudes are common, it is also important to recognize Cuban men’s aspiration to love and pay attention, more generally, to the competing emotional, moral, and pragmatic concerns that their different enactments of masculinity responded to. Touristic encounters are thus shown to provide new venues for subjectification and self-stylization, leading for instance people to (re)align masculinities to global circulating romantic

ideals of love and romance. Looking at the Pentecostal reworking of masculinities among converts of African or Latin-American origin in Brussels, Maskens shows that ambiguity remains at the heart of such transformations of gender identity. Uncovering the competing, gender-related demands and transformations that impinge on migrants, the analysis shows how religious ideology and normativity can provide ways to channel and express male resistance and adaptation, while still leaving the door open for a multiplicity of discourses on masculinity that vary situationally and are also indexed to people's biographic trajectories. Focusing on the gendered consequences of the large-scale transformations and economic crisis that have affected Cuba since the 1990s, Härkönen shows how Cuban men cope with women's intensified demands by embracing distinct cultural notions of masculinity. Expressions of "responsible masculinity" and of *machismo*, each with its own affordances and challenges, are actualized in precarious attempts to respond to changing expectations. By paying attention to these negotiations, the article illustrates how distinct aspects of local conceptualizations of how to be a man are situationally deployed and worked over.

A third aspect to be considered relates to how notions of power are addressed in the articles that compose this dossier. Twenty years ago, Cornwall and Lindisfarne (1994) debated whether conceptualizations such as "patriarchy" or male dominance were appropriate tools for analysis, and a number of authors converged in according relevance to the notion of "hegemonic masculinity." While not absent (see Maskens's contribution), this conceptualization appears relatively diluted in the analyses presented here. The idea of "hegemonic masculinity" as a model that prescribes the image of the "real man" in a given society, produced throughout the daily socialization of boys and girls as well as the subordination of other forms of masculinity, seems to be problematic and encounter several challenges in contexts of crisis. Ultimately, the analytical fruitfulness of this notion comes into question in situations where force, instead of consensus, acquires the utmost visibility.

The articles in the dossier address these situations and help us reflect more broadly, in an ethnographically grounded manner, on how the profound transformations associated with economic and political change affect notions of masculinity and the ways they are enacted, negotiated, and modified.

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