Disarming charisma? Mayoralty, gender and power in Medellín, Colombia

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ABSTRACT

The 'Urban Century' has seen a rise in power of cities, and the emergence of city mayors as significant political actors both nationally and globally. The power of city mayors, which unifies pragmatic, techno-managerial leadership with the authority and legitimacy of public office, invites a reappraisal of the gendered construction of power in the 'Urban Century', and the particular notions of hegemonic masculinity that city mayors recreate. This article explores the example of Medellín, Colombia, whose mayor Sergio Fajardo is widely regarded to have stewarded the city's rapid reduction in violence. Fajardo's leadership can be characterised as typical of the phenomenon of smart, cosmopolitan, charismatic mayors who are seen to respond professionally to local needs by making smart investment decisions and attracting international capital. The emergence of a techno-managerial mayor in the city of Medellín, which during the 1990s was the epicentre of Colombia's multi-faceted conflict with the highest homicide rate in the world, represents a fundamental change to the identity and gender of power in a context of violent conflict where legitimate authority in terms of a monopoly on the use of force, was fiercely disputed. I use this example to explore how mayoral power is gendered and how it relates to violence, which is central to liberal theories of leadership and the focus of the feminist critique of them. The possibility that such a character attain power indicates underlying changes in the gendered structure of political space, including the institution of a Sub-Secretariat for Women and formalisation of participation in political process.

1. Introduction

Many powerful players in Colombian politics have built their position on violence. The country's complicated internal conflict, involving an exclusive, reactionary elite with a tight grip on the limited formal power that exists, guerrillas, narco cartels and paramilitaries, has produced leaders whose authority has in many cases been defined by militaristic, violent machismo (Cockburn, 2010; Viveros-Vigoya, 2016). Guerrilla, paramilitary and formal political leaders have openly perpetuated a hyper-masculine, violent image, as well as paternalist symbols of command and authority. Although a number of Colombian Presidents have not embodied the explicitly vengeful, violent approach of President Alvaro Uribe, whose father was murdered by the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* [FARC], the Colombian presidential office is marked by violence — whether assassination attempts, corruption scandals or collusion with paramilitaries. From the

alleged psychosis of drug lord Pablo Escobar, to the 'firm hand, big heart' approach of Uribe, it would seem that, as Mao Zedong said, political power — be it formal or informal - in Colombia did 'grow out of the barrel of a gun'.

Unlike the presidency, the municipal office of mayor does not have responsibility for defence, and does not have the theoretical need to establish a monopoly on the use of force. In the 1990s a number of 'maverick' mayors emerged who seemed to break the mould of political power in Colombia. Mathematician and former Rector of the National University of Colombia, Bogota, Antanas Mockus — a self-confessed 'geek' with a penchant for the spectacular (Tognato, 2015) — donned a superhero cape and adopted an eccentric approach to political campaigning and policy. He went on to win the Bogota mayoral election twice, in 1995 and 2001, and his innovative policies — including using mime artists to enforce traffic regulations - caught the public imagination, were effective, and his ludic, pedagogic approach to urban governance has been taken up and adapted around the world (Berney, 2011).

In 2003, Medellín, historically Colombia's most violent city by

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far, also elected an academic mayor in the form of Sergio Fajardo, of the newly formed political party *Compromiso Ciudadano*. He had a PhD in maths, and, like Mockus, did not represent either of Colombia's two hegemonic political parties, the Liberals or the Conservatives. His relaxed, jeans-wearing charisma, as well as his creativity and technical expertise are said to have transformed Medellín to the extent that various commentators have seen him as a 'hero' of development (Peirce, 2014; Fajardo and Andrews, 2014). Sergio Fajardo is held to have created the 'Medellín Miracle': the astonishing reduction of violence from 375 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 1991 to 39 per 100,000 in 2013, that, it is claimed, is a result of the progressive policies of economic and urban development, known collectively as 'social urbanism' (Brand and Dávila, 2011; Maclean, 2015; Uran, 2010).

To the outside world, Fajardo seems to fit this emerging model of charismatic mayors who are able to transform their cities with pragmatic policies. However, within Medellín, the 'Miracle' and Fajardo's role within it remain controversial. Social urbanism has been dismissed as a 'make-over' (Hylton, 2007), which merely re-brands the city, and, more perniciously, as a 'paramilitary peace' an epithet which refers to the much criticised deals struck with paramilitary groups in Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programmes (Rozema, 2008). It is frequently stated by those who are supportive of and were even involved in the development of social urbanism that, rather than Fajardo's leadership itself, the transformation of political institutions, social discourse, infrastructure and economy of Medellín were the necessary conditions for the transformation of the city and indeed for the emergence of a leader like Fajardo (Maclean, 2015).

It is not only in Colombia that mayors have attained political prominence. Due to the urbanisation of global population and capital, and the consequent rise in power of cities vis a vis nation states, urban governance and leadership has become a distinctive political practice, characterised by a techno-managerial, 'non-ideological' approach. From Rudy Giuliani in New York to Klaus Wowereit in Berlin, city mayors have been lauded as the new rulers in a 21st century globalised world; rulers that can best respond to the needs of their city and allow it to compete internationally for investment, mega-events and tourists (Barber, 2013). However, the rise of mayors also corresponds to the decline in importance of the nation state, and it may be that, far from implementing a technical fix to local issues, mayors are forced to attract transnational capital in an ever more competitive global market place, leading to pressure to reduce the tax base, to the accompanying detriment of public services and social rights (Curtis, 2016; Swyngedouw, 2011). However, although the prominence of cities as hubs of techno-managerial power is a consistent phenomenon around the world, these policies and approaches have distinct impacts, not only in terms of their implementation, but also in terms of the way that engagement with international discourses, scrutiny and institutions of governance recreate and challenge political process on the ground (Dean, 2009).

Whether the rise of city mayors is seen as a triumph for local governance or as a post-political resignation to the power of global capital, the power that mayors wield as leaders is not fully accounted for by feminist theories of governance which have focussed on the nation state (e.g. Arendt, 1970; Pateman, 1988), or accounts of gendered leadership in contexts — for example business and management - where the role does not carry with it the political, historical or cultural power of public office (e.g. Fotaki, 2013). There is work on 'women mayors', that ranges from studies of electoral behaviour (Ferreira & Gyourko, 2014) to women's experiences in this role (Tremaine, 2000), but a critical, gendered analysis of the construction of power and authority at the city scale is yet to be developed. Processes of power have changed over the

period that has seen the emergence of significant city mayors, and, in addition to the structural and economic developments which have underpinned this, local configurations of power, violence and gender have transformed, opening up space for different tropes of gendered leadership at city level.

In this article I analyse how Sergio Fajardo's ascension to and exercise of power, indicates and creates changes in the gendered construction of leadership and political space, and in hegemonic gendered practice. I will explore the gendered construction of techno-managerial leadership and related changes in the relationship between violence and power. My argument builds on the idea that both leadership and violence are inherently gendered, and, specifically, definitive of hegemonic masculinity (Cockburn, 2010; Munck, 2008), in liberal political systems in which formal political leadership is defined as having a monopoly on the use of force. Urban governance and the authority of city mayors, in unifying pragmatic, techno-managerial leadership with the authority and legitimacy of public office, invite a reappraisal of the gendered construction of power in the 'Urban Century', and the notions of hegemonic masculinity that city mayors represent.

This article first looks at how the concepts of violence, power, leadership and gender have been constructed and create, in general terms, a world in which most leaders are men and most violence is perpetrated by men. This conceptual debate is then grounded in the Colombian context with a discussion of leaders from all sides of the country's complex violent conflict. I then discuss whether Fajardo's leadership can be seen as representing changes in hegemonic masculinity and the gendered construction of political space — the institutions, and social and political practices that frame how power is attained and exercised. In particular, the growth of the women's movement, and its ability to develop a space within formal mechanisms of power over this period, contested the masculine construction of power.

This article is based on interviews and focus groups conducted over two field visits to Medellín in 2011 and 2012, with an extended period of fieldwork in July and August of 2012. The fieldwork period in 2012 included thirty interviews and seven focus groups held with leaders from the city's political and business elites, social movements and community organisations who were involved in the political changes instigated by the recognition that violence was at crisis point in 1991. It also included visits to programmes to support income generation, co-operatives and various educational and cultural projects run by the Mayoralty, universities and businesses there. Documents from the period in question, including reports generated by investigations into the violence at local, national and international level, as well as press coverage, were also analysed.

2. Gender, power and leadership

The leaders that emerge in a particular political setting are a product of the institutional and discursive context which frames how power is obtained. Contrary to the idea, underpinned by social contract theory, that violence emerges in a 'power vacuum', if the way for, 'one actor within a social relationship [to] be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance' (Weber, 1978, p. 53) is to employ violence, then violent leaders will emerge. A context in which aims are achieved by collaboration, mediated not only by checks and balances, but the values and norms around appropriate behaviour and the cultural construction of power, will be reflected in the skills and approach of leaders. However, leaders themselves and the discourses of leadership do not sit outside of these dynamics. Leadership is performative — the way the characteristics of those who have power are portrayed, can alter the cultural construction of power. As such, the micro enactments of leadership —