

The gendering of spaces in Ciudad Juarez: a comment on Dr Wright's lecture



Lauren Maffeo is studying an MSc in Gender, Media and Culture at the LSE's Gender Institute. In this post she discusses Dr Melissa Wright's recent talk at the LSE about the gendering of spaces through the drug war violence in Mexico.

For those of the equality post-feminist persuasion, the idea of feminism is finished. This is not because it is seen as a problem, but rather because the idea that full equality has been achieved implies that it no longer serves a critical function. **Dr. Melissa Wright, Associate Professor of Women's Studies at Penn State University**, would beg to differ. With a résumé of research primarily focused on the emergence of an international social movement that protests violence against women along the Mexico-U.S. border, **Wright's discussion of drug wars and gendered violence in Ciudad Juarez**, held at the GI Monday night, centered around the gendering of public and private space alike that absolves those in authority of responsibility for public safety, an engaging take on a criminal matter.

Since the declaration of war on the drug cartel and corresponding dispatch of federal police to Ciudad Juarez to help combat the problem of violence, the opposite effect has occurred. **Between 2007 and 2010, the murder rate for people between 20 and 24 has increased 400%. More than 9,000 have been murdered since 2008.** Of these murders, close to 95% remain un-investigated. In her illustration of how the original killings began in the 90s, Wright argued that “A depression of wages, especially in Ciudad Juarez, has resulted in an extreme gap between the poor and the rich...the production of gender reflects itself in the treatment of laborers as disposable human beings.”

It is the idea of female laborers—indeed, women in general—as “disposable human beings” that Wright believes directly correlates to officials' attitude towards the drastic murders of women in Ciudad Juarez throughout the 90s. Characterized as “prostitutes who invited the pain they suffered,” these women were portrayed as destroying the family unit with their dangerous sexuality, male bates who were uncontrollable and rebellious in a patriarchal society. Corporate and political elites referred to the woman who appears in public as *mujer publica*, which translates in English to “lady of the evening” —a classification that stands in deliberate contrast to the definition of the man who appears in public—*hombre publico*—as “citizen.” By assigning different social meanings to the two sexes in public, Wright said that Mexican officials not only legitimized violence against women—they attempted to absolve themselves of all responsibility for public safety.

In the 21st century, murder in Ciudad Juarez has largely changed from femicide to the murder of youth—a difference that remains connected to the gendering of space. The victims of drug crimes are public men—an important distinction for how the government justifies the violence. The public woman discourse vilifies female sexuality, whereas the drug murders are portrayed as being ‘orderly’. This implies that criminals are rational enough not to kill those uninvolved in the drug trade. “The government's depiction of men as part of the drug violence does not vilify them for being in the public space the way it does women,” Wright claimed. “They are not, unlike women, ‘perversions of nature.’”

In an advisory put out by a Chihuahua public official, the privatization of the drug war was on full display. “[The dealer] will only kill you if you give him reason to do so,” the advisory said. “Faith in his rationality is your best bet...[the dealers] may be murderers, but they are still good patriarchs.” In gendering public and private space to justify the murders of women and men in separate contexts, the state has done more than reverse traditional notions of men occupying the public

sphere and women the private—it has absolved itself of responsibility to provide security for all citizens in the form of public safety. While the ongoing crisis in Ciudad Juarez has no easy solution, Wright argues that the numerous critiques of capitalism espoused by academics are not enough. “This is a war of interpretation,” she said, “and progressive scholarship must push further into the realm of action.” Interpretation of context and events is a key part to understanding this struggle. There is a need to launch battles over the meaning of events and significance of violence. And until acknowledgement of imposed gendered space is widespread, the problem will not go away.

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