New forms of citizenship:
democracy, family, and community in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

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In the context of macro-level political and economic changes, how do poor women and men living in Rio de Janeiro understand the idea of citizenship? Is it relevant to their daily lives? Because the poor have not reaped the rewards of macro-economic reforms and do not have confidence in the effectiveness of formal democratic participation, they have developed new ways of understanding citizenship. These have evolved in response to needs dictated by family, community, and gender relations, helping people to obtain access to the city's resources on a daily basis. Ultimately, citizenship means participation with dignity in the city's life.

Over the past 15 years, significant political and economic changes in Brazil have made a dramatic impact on women and men in poverty. The country moved from military dictatorship to formal democracy in 1988 and adopted a broad-reaching constitution, encoding numerous rights. In a plebiscite[2] held in 1993, 66 per cent of Brazilians confirmed that they wanted to maintain some form of democracy. Economically, the neo-liberal reforms of the Cardoso administration (1992-2000) have replaced the hyperinflation of the 1980s, and the military regime's subsidies designed to promote industrialisation through import substitution.[3]

Despite these changes, people in poverty remain excluded in Rio de Janeiro, on multiple levels: socially, politically, economically, spatially, and in terms of stigma and discrimination. In the *favelas* (illegal land occupations) and housing projects of Rio de Janeiro, the number of urban poor continues to grow; they now comprise 40 per cent of the city's population (UNDP 2001). Economic participation in the city has become increasingly informal under neo-liberal reform: more than 40 per cent of the population is now employed outside the formal sector (UNDP 2000).

There has been an accompanying informalisation of political activity, as drug-related violence has further eroded the link between poor communities and formal democratic mechanisms. The power of the drug mafias over poor communities in Rio de Janeiro has also eroded the once strong base of residents' associations that represented a more politically united block in the 1980s. Drug traffickers are known as the *poder paralelo* (parallel power), because they control *favelas* and housing projects as if they were independent states, exercising all the powers of an autocratic government over the residents.

Growing financial pressures on families due to neo-liberal reforms have forced more of the women of Rio de Janeiro to participate in the market economy (Bulbeck 1998, 99). In poor families, women's contributions now

make up 38 per cent of the family's income (UNECLAC 1997). The pressures of acting as a 'market citizen' do not fit easily with the traditional gender roles for women as mothers and wives. Women's work at home has increased, because neo-liberal reforms have resulted in the erosion of government-sponsored safety nets. As the state withdraws from providing social services, the family and social networks must fill in the gap. Despite women's additional workload, there has been no change in the distribution of household responsibilities. Women are still responsible for the vast majority of child care, cleaning, shopping, and provision of education and health care for the family. This problem is exacerbated in the case of single-mother households, whose number is dramatically on the rise in Brazil. Single mothers now head one in four households in Brazil (up from one in six in 1991), and earn an average US$246 per month, in comparison with men's average of US$344 per month (*Journal do Brasil*, 8 March 2002, 18). Poor women have responded to this tension between their roles in income generation and family care by linking their political participation and income generation directly to family needs.

The following sections will explore these issues in more depth. I draw on my findings from research conducted between September 2001 and March 2002 in Rio de Janeiro, including more than 40 open-ended interviews. The primary source of the research is the interviews conducted with women and men in six extended families from low-income communities (interviews with three to four members of the same family from three generations). These interviews incorporated families from *favelas*, families from housing projects, and families from the working-class suburbs. I also conducted interviews with key community leaders, workers in the non-profit sector, and members of the government.

'Privatisation of citizenship'

National political discourse on democracy and individual rights is very distant from daily struggles for survival. My respondents consistently identified their participation in their own communities – not specific rights or Brazilian national identity – as the core feature of citizenship. Among my respondents, ideas of citizenship seem to have changed through the generations, from a focus on formal political participation to an emphasis on families in low-income communities addressing the serious problems facing residents on a daily basis. These problems include violence, lack of infrastructure, poverty, and inadequate housing and education.

No participant in the research defined citizenship as meaning an individual's entitlement to claim particular rights from a Brazilian state. This is an especially surprising result, given that Brazil passed through a very public process of debating and ratifying a new constitution in 1988, which gave extensive individual rights and privileges to all citizens, such as the right to health care, education, and labour protections. Both the concept of individual rights, and formal democratic practices, (such as signing petitions, joining political parties, and participating in commissions), have been heavily promoted by the state and also by international non-government organisations (NGOs). It is also surprising since, partly due to Brazil's history of populist regimes enforcing a national identity, 'Brazilian-ness' is believed to be widely valued as a category of identity (Davis 1999; Marx 1998; Machado 1980).

It appears that, while democracy and democratic impulses are important to poor women and men in Rio de Janeiro's *favelas*, they have redefined democratic practice in terms of their own values and beliefs, moving away from the national discourse of individual rights-based democratic practices. Instead, they focus on practices

that ensure the survival and well-being of their own families and community. Citizenship is expressed through specific forms of community participation, which provide essential resources and services for the family.

Several factors contribute to the distance between formal democratic mechanisms and the daily lives of poor women and men. Very few respondents could identify any major difference in their lives under dictatorship and democracy, meaning that formal democratic reforms have not dramatically affected their everyday lives. One participant claimed, 'I much prefer a legitimate dictatorship to a false democracy. What we have is a false democracy.' In particular, poor women consistently identified lack of access to urban services, jobs, adequate housing, education, and health care as evidence that they did not in fact live in a democracy – or at least that formal democracy had no meaning for them. They characterised their participation in family, community, and city life as the most meaningful aspect of their political participation.[4]

Participants from one housing project ringed by *favelas* identified the construction of a community centre as their most important form of political participation.[5] One man, living with his wife and two small children in a nearby housing project, who had committed considerable time and energy to community improvements, initiated this project. Although he has a job at the local university as a security guard, he has negotiated extended leave to carry out community development projects of his own design. Because the drug traffickers have taken control of the community where he lives, including control of the local political structure, he has developed a form of activism which carefully negotiates between the traffickers, other established local activists, and his own family's well-being. He has claimed a piece of land in one of the *favelas* to construct a centre to address the problems that he recognises in his community: lack of education and access to the job market, and poor infrastructure. The future centre will perform a wealth of functions: it will house a community association board, a recycling centre, language training, information-technology training, and a children's choir.

Over the past six years, friends and family members have contributed labour and money to start construction on the centre. Every day, the man who began the work walks through the community to see who has time to help for a few hours. Every day, children collect empty plastic bottles for the community centre's future recycling programme. Hundreds of bottles are stacked in one corner of the construction site. After six years, the first floor has yet to be completed. This is because, when there is no money or time, the project stops until circumstances improve, and the centre receives no support from government or NGOs. The instigator explained that 'the community centre is being built one bag of cement at a time – but it will be built'. He plans to name the centre after his daughter, reasoning that building it has 'taken the food out of her mouth, but it will make her life better'.

Most people involved in the construction had little or no interest in citywide or statewide politics. They consistently identified this community work as important to their own families, and they did not believe that the city government could ever do anything to address the problems in their community. At the community level, democratic impulses[6] in *favelas* are transformed into creative projects to improve specific aspects of the community. The major motivation for these projects, according to the participants in the study, was to build a better life for their children or their families.

'Qualified participation' in the market and formal politics

In the interviews that I conducted with men and women in *favelas*, participants consistently emphasised that their participation in their community and their city was more important than formal political participation, such as voting.

The people whom I interviewed, including self-identified community activists, saw democratic practice as being about participation in a just society, rather than being about formal political issues, such as open and fair elections and individual rights. For the poor, the evidence that society is not intrinsically just and fair is all around them, in the form of police raids, overcrowded buses, inadequate schools, and crumbling and overcrowded health clinics. In *favelas*, voting and formal political participation in Brazil's institutional democracy was seen as relatively unimportant. Democracy has been reclaimed and redefined to mean participation and contribution to family, community, and city life. In response to a question about political participation, one veteran community activist told me: 'I don't feel diminished because I live in a *favela* – each of us has tried to improve our own lives. All the intellectuals who came here, poor things – they never really understood anything because the changes you can make depend on the opportunities you take. [Governments] change and time passes and goes by, but who knows – tomorrow I might manage to do something else [to help the community].'

Several factors have contributed to the shift away from formal political and economic participation towards activity that focuses on the needs of family and community. More than 90 per cent of the participants interviewed said they did not trust the national government. This distrust of the formal political structure goes deeper than any particular administration. One poor black woman, who lives in a city housing project, said: 'Brazil would be better off with a dictatorship. At least then things were working.' Another poor elderly woman from the suburbs could only identify 'more buses' as the major difference in her life between dictatorship and democracy.

In the 1993 plebiscite mentioned earlier, only 66 per cent voted to maintain democracy (either as presidential or parliamentary), while 11 per cent voted for a monarchy, and an additional 33 per cent voted for 'other form of government'.[7] Several participants voted against democracy for Brazil. One woman explained that she voted for the monarchy, because she did not believe that the form of government would make any difference in her life, and 'a king or queen sounds more interesting than a president.' The refusal of several participants to take such a vote seriously, demonstrated by their choice of the highly improbable monarchy, is a symptom of deep mistrust and disinterest in macro-level politics. In total, 44 per cent of the population voted *against* democracy, which is a significant number, given the length of the military dictatorship.

Governance in Rio de Janeiro: violence and poder paralelo

The violence in Rio de Janeiro, while endemic, is not homogeneous. It is, to use Holston and Appadurai's phrase, 'a city-specific violence of citizenship', meaning that it affects specific places and persons differently (Holston and Appadurai 1999, 16). The level of violence in some parts of the city peaked at 80 homicides per 100,000 people (equivalent to the levels of violence in Colombia and South Africa). From 1995 to 2000, the levels of violence declined somewhat (UNDP 2001), but in the past year there has been a significant resurgence, culminating in the bombing of city government buildings, bus burnings, and army occupation of the streets during the 2003 Carnival.[8] The highest rates of violence are in *favelas* and poor neighbourhoods

inhabited by Afro-Brazilians (Zona Oeste and Zona Norte) (UNDP 2001). In these areas, the violence takes the form of state-sponsored raids and battles with drug mafias (in 2001 more than 900 civilians were killed by the police in Rio de Janeiro), and wars between competing factions and mafias of the drug trade (UNDP 2001).

Violence related to drug trafficking, and the invasive power of drug mafias over poor communities in Rio de Janeiro, means that national democratic citizenship has little meaning for the participants in this research. The extremely high levels of violence dramatically affect the daily lives of the residents. It is unsafe to use public spaces like streets, bus stops, and plazas after dark, and increasingly during the day. In one housing project involved in the study, a faction of traffickers took control of the local school, while another took control of the local day-care nursery, and the children were unable to attend for more than a month, for fear of being caught in the crossfire between the warring groups.

The overall result is that formal political rights become ever less relevant for the poor: 'Democratic rights are compromised by other power circuits [including the military police, and the drug and gambling mafias] that obliterate the public dimension of citizenship, re-establishing violence and arbitrary power in the sphere of private relations, class, gender and ethnicity, thereby rendering the state increasingly ineffective…'(Paoli and Telles 1998, 65).

Recasting citizenship through the family

As highlighted earlier, residents in Rio de Janeiro's *favelas* face exclusion from the city, a problem which is exacerbated by extremely poor schools, drug-related violence, and poor infrastructure. Almost every respondent considered participation in the market through paid employment, both formal and informal, to be essential. The ideals of neo-liberalism – that is, the 'market logic' of efficiency, competitiveness, and individualism – have interacted in unexpected ways

with notions of citizenship in *favelas*. These economic ideals have been widely discussed in public, and heavily promoted by the state. For example, Rio de Janeiro's city government has set up numerous micro-credit and funding programmes.

The market, and certain aspects of market-driven logic, have become prevalent in *favelas*, but *favela* residents have adapted market practices to the needs of their own family and community structures. The family has become the point of articulation between the market and individuals. That is to say, the participants in this study on the whole did not approach the market as individuals, but rather as members of families. Getting a job, credit, and obtaining access to education and health care were mediated by family needs and relationships. Certain aspects of 'market logic' are promoted, while others are rejected.

For example, one woman to whom I spoke lives with her husband and son in a house built on the family's property, together with more than 40 members of her extended family. The land was inherited from her great-grandfather, who emigrated from Portugal. Although her salary as a housekeeper in the city is essential income for the family, she commutes nearly five hours a day to the city centre, in order to continue to live with her family. Several employers have offered her accommodation in the city during the week, so that she can avoid this lengthy and costly commute, but she refuses to move away from her family. She uses her salary to pay for daily household expenses, while her husband's salary goes towards bills. When she has extra money, she transfers her son from state-funded to private school.

While my respondent could save a considerable amount by living in Rio and avoiding transportation costs, she refuses to do this. When she became seriously ill, her mother and sister (also housekeepers in the city centre) filled in at her jobs, so that she would not lose them. Her other sister stays at

home and provides child care for the extended family, and also does the washing and cleaning. Although she could make more money if she were to get a job outside the home, she and her sisters believe it is more important for her to provide child care and laundry services for the family. Together, these women are participating in the market to secure jobs, health care, child care, and education for their children. However, while they participate in the market, and make rational economic decisions, paid work is only one element in their livelihood strategy as members of a family. The family works together to respond to crisis and uncertainty, fulfilling market demand for cheap day-labour in the city, but using the connections of family members to guarantee other benefits.

The need for women to integrate themselves into the market has affected family structures, and the gendered division of labour. Increasing numbers of women travel long distances for work, while men are more likely to find work nearer to the home (UNDP 2000). Women with little formal education are most likely to work in the informal service sector – for example, as housekeepers, cooks, or nannies – and must travel from the low-income communities ringing the city into more wealthy areas closer to the city centre. Men from low-income communities, on the other hand, often find work in civil construction, factories, or other manual work – which is often much closer to low-income areas of the city. Since women are still responsible for household tasks, this puts an increasing strain on them to fulfil their work obligations. As a result, men are forced to take a larger role in the home. Women's entry into the labour market has also increased their control over family finances, and women often opt to keep their children in school for longer than would have been possible if they were not working.

Citizenship and dignity

The final piece in this narrative of citizenship from poor communities in Rio de Janeiro is the issue of dignity in everyday life. Dignity was the most important aspect of citizenship identified by 74 per cent of the participants of the study. Dignity was strongly associated with their daily attempts to secure education, health care, urban services, and housing from the city authorities. Most participants cited a lack of dignity as proof that they were, in fact, not really citizens at all. One woman said: 'Dignity is everything for a citizen – and we have no dignity. We are treated like cattle in the clinics, on the buses, and in the shops. Only in rich neighbourhoods are people treated with dignity.'

To illustrate what they meant, the participants in this study most frequently referred to their daily experiences of life in the city – especially lack of access to public services including health care, education, urban services, and public housing. Meaningful citizenship cannot exist without dignity. For the participants in this study, it was not poverty or lack of rights that robbed them of dignity. Rather, the difference between dignity and exclusion hinged on their overall experience of survival, with its conflicts and triumphs.

Dignity for the poor, in terms of daily life, meant *dignified* access to public services – facilitated or blocked by women's and men's everyday interactions with the health-care and education systems, urban services, and housing. While access to these public services may be guaranteed by Brazil's constitution as a right, it is the nature of that access that is most important to the poor. The erosion of health, education, housing, and urban services over the past 30 years has compromised the dignity of the poor in everyday life. The participants in this study identified dignified access to these services as the most important characteristics of citizenship, and also the biggest lack in terms of their citizenship.

Public services in Rio de Janeiro: the case of public health care

It is the challenge of regular access to public services, such as the health-care system, that erodes the dignity of the poor in Rio de Janeiro, and it is dignity that they place at the centre of their conception of citizenship. While access may be limited and services poor, it is the nature of such access that most affects participants' daily lives.

The end of the dictatorship coincided with a marked disintegration of many public services, because the new democratic government did not have the funds to make up for 15 years of under-investment and neglect. The neo-liberal reforms over the past eight years have further diminished the resources available for public services. The result is minimal public education and health-care systems, which have been abandoned by anyone with enough money to afford private education or health services.

The public health-care system (*Sistema Único de Saúde Brasiliera*), which is supported by a heavy tax paid by employers, is woefully inadequate. Public hospitals do not have the resources to provide basic care. Currently 40 per cent of the total population in Rio de Janeiro has resorted to private health care (UNDP 2001). The most readily available form of health service for poor women is pre-natal care. Nonetheless, Brazil has the highest mortality rate among pregnant women in Latin America. The United Nations estimates that 200 women die in childbirth for every 100,000 children born (UNECLAC 1997). For all other types of health service, from family planning to treatment for hypertension, one has to wait for months or even years for appointments. In order to be seen by a doctor in a public hospital, the queue starts to form at three o'clock in the morning, to get a ticket to enter the waiting list for an appointment. Several participants in my research reported having travelled for three hours across the entire city with their children, to go to a public hospital that was rumoured to a have better paediatric service. The participants in this study went to great lengths to gain access to private health care and education. Most frequently, this meant women working in domestic-service jobs for the middle classes, and using their employers to gain access to private health care and better education.

The daily struggle of the poor with the public health-care system most clearly demonstrates how lack of dignified access to public services affects their lives. Despite the clear problems in getting service in the system, the main complaint of the participants was that, at the public hospitals, they felt as though they were treated as 'cattle' and 'not as a real person with dignity'. In one interview with a poor black woman who lives in a housing project in the *Zona Norte*, I was told that her former employer had arranged an appointment for her in a private hospital after she had had no success in getting treatment for her hypertension in the public hospital. She commented that at the private hospital she was treated 'like a person', with 'politeness and respect', whereas at the public hospital the doctors and nurses were 'rude' and treated her 'like an animal'.

Conclusion

The women and men who participated in this study did not identify themselves as activists in organised social movements, nor were they involved in political campaigns. They have recast citizenship in terms of the needs and interests of families and communities, in order to contest access to their society's resources. This understanding is more relevant than more conventional understandings of their daily lives.[9] This process of addressing the problems of their own communities, and reinforcing their sense of community at a local level, is the most important form of democratic practice in their view. The women and men whom I interviewed redefined citizenship in their daily lives in three ways:

- as relating more to the 'private' than the public sphere
- as a qualified form of political and economic participation, which privileges their own families and communities
- as dignity in their daily life.

In conclusion, the idea of citizenship for the poor in Rio de Janeiro incorporates aspects of democratic and market logic, but stresses the importance of supporting family and community structures, and participating with dignity in the life of the city. Hannah Arendt makes the point that 'The fundamental deprivation of human rights [and citizenship] is manifested first and above all in the deprivation of a place in the world [a political space] which makes opinions significant, and actions effective…'(Arendt, cited in Jelin 1998, 405). In the absence of opportunities for debate about government and economic policy and its impact on citizenship, participants have developed their own idea of citizenship, with the dignity of individuals, families, and communities at its centre.

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Notes

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2 The 1993 plebiscite was mandated by the 1988 constitution as part of the democratic reforms that began in the early 1980s. The plebiscite was an obligatory nationwide vote to endorse a form of government. The options for types of government included presidential democracy, parliamentary democracy, monarchy, and autocracy.

3 Import-substitution subsidies were the basis of much of Latin America's economic policy from the 1960s to the 1980s. The underlying premise of this policy was to impose high tariffs on imports, and simultaneously subsidise national industries in order to promote the domestic production of manufactured goods, for which most countries in Latin America relied on imports.

4 This finding is interesting in light of the fact that various scholars have attributed the lack of women in leadership positions within social movements to patriarchal bias within these movements (Houtzager 2000; Neuhouser 1995). However, this may have more to do with the fact that women in *favelas* understand citizenship and democracy differently from men.

5 Participants were asked: 'Do you participate politically? And if so, what is the most important way you participate?'

6 In terms of democratic impulses, the focus here is on forms of political participation that work for the good of some broader collectivity, rather than promoting representative governance, because that was the notion most commonly elaborated by the study's participants.

7 See www.conhecimentosgerais.com.br/historia-do-brasil/redemocratizacao.html (last checked by the author 26 November 2003). I would also like to acknowledge Carlos Pio of the Federal University of Brasilia for his correspondence regarding the plebiscite on governance.

8 In February 2003, growing levels of violence, including bombings of government business, mass bus

burnings, and hijackings on major roadways, led to the temporary presence of the military on Rio de Janeiro's streets to enforce public order.

9 Ong (1996, 737) makes a similar argument in reference to Asian immigrants to California.

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