

Edge of a barrel: Gun violence and the politics of gun control in Brazil

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The massacre of twenty school children and six women in Connecticut, USA in December 2012 bore many resemblances to the slaughter of twelve school children in Realengo, Rio de Janeiro, earlier in the year. But what could be the sociological and criminological connections between these events in distinct parts of the globe? What lessons can social scientists learn from these tragedies and from the developments in gun control in these countries? Brazil presents itself as a fascinating case study for an investigation of armed violence, gun control and the politics of fear and punitiveness.

In 2005 Brazil held a radical referendum on gun control. The first of its kind in the world, the referendum was the culmination of years of ideologically charged political campaigns and disputes in diverse public spheres, in parliament and in the media, between gun lobbyists and anti-violence activists from civil society. The referendum was an attempt to curb the country's notorious record of violence - Brazil has the highest number of gun deaths among the twelve most populous countries in the world (Waiselfisz, 2013). In comparison to India, for instance, Brazil has twelve times more homicides with firearms and yet six times fewer inhabitants. The growth of lethal violence and the epidemic scale of fear of crime and death have been the most devastating changes in Brazilian society in the last thirty years (see Caldeira, 2000; Perlman, 2010).

In 1980, a total of 8,710 people were killed with firearms in Brazil. By 2010 the situation had got worse: 38,892 were killed with guns, an increase of nearly 346.5 percent in the overall number of victims of firearms in just thirty years. Even more troubling, among young victims (aged 15-29) the number of deaths increased by 502 percent (Waiselfisz, 2013). Armed violence has reached extreme levels in the country and has become the leading cause of death amongst young people. It is in this context that Brazil began its disarmament campaign, culminating in a radical referendum on the sales of firearms to civilians. In this paper, I will discuss how the referendum came about, who supported it and why it was unsuccessful in banning the sale of firearms to civilians. I will argue that firearm proliferation and barriers to gun control are largely driven by fear, commercial, private and personal interests. The political agenda sustaining these interests is made intelligible by neoliberal ideologies supporting the freedom to own a gun alongside ideologies of self-defence, promoted by gun lobbyists and international pressure groups such as the American National Rifle Association (NRA). Taken together, this 'gun crime complex' carries enormous social costs.

Why a referendum on gun control?

Students from the law school in São Paulo began an anti-violence campaign in 1997, which gained media attention and spread across the country. A number of NGOs, academics and even celebrities became involved in the campaign. Over the years, they presented rigorous research evidence to parliament and politicians showing that (1) gun control was essential to reduce violence and (2) that there was popular support for a country with fewer firearms. After much debate, many delays and political manoeuvring from gun lobby members (some of whom I interviewed in 2010), anti-violence activists were successful in having the 'Disarmament Statute' approved during the Lula government in 2003. The statute introduced over 60 legislative bills on gun control, including mandatory psychological tests; it increased the minimum age for purchase from 21 to 25; and prohibited civilians

from carrying firearms in public. The Brazilian government also approved a period of ‘amnesty’ in which firearms could be voluntarily abdicated to the police for public destruction. Nearly half a million firearms were destroyed in public (Crespo, 2006). As a result of all these efforts, in 2004 the country experienced the first drop in firearm homicides: 13 percent. Ultimately, the disarmament statute established that a referendum would be held and the population would decide whether firearms should be banned or not.

Did the referendum have popular support? Where, with whom and why?

Large opinion polls showed that prior to the referendum campaign, there was around 80 percent support for a gun ban in Brazil (Datafolha, 2005; Anastasia et al., 2006). However, groups profiting from the gun industry and represented in parliament were able to delay the referendum and manipulate efforts to control firearms. With such a high level of popular support, and elections approaching, populist politicians found support for a gun ban a useful way of voicing a public commitment to ‘law and order’. Correspondingly, a major survey by Soares (2006) revealed that the referendum and a firearm ban were most supported by women, low-income groups and residents of the northeast of Brazil. These were precisely the groups most affected by armed violence and for whom security (whether private or public) is least accessible. This support however, started to wane during the TV advertising campaign broadcast three weeks prior to the voting date.

Why did the referendum fail?

Notwithstanding the already uneven competition between an NGO-based campaign led by anti-violence activists and a well-funded pro-gun campaign supported by the armaments industry, Brazil’s gun lobby had sought help from the experienced US NRA. In 2003, Charles Cunningham, an NRA lobbyist, had visited São Paulo on the invitation of the Brazilian Society for the Defence of Tradition, Family and Property, a pro-gun group, meeting privately with gun supporters to discuss strategies (Hearn, 2005). The NRA was able to offer campaign funding, ideological support and plenty of fear-mongering rhetoric and propaganda to the Brazilian lobbyists. Much of this material was hardly applicable to the Brazilian context. For instance, some adverts deployed US statistics claiming that citizens needed a gun for self-defence because the police could take up to seven minutes to arrive. In Brazil it is common knowledge that, if the police answered a call, they could take a lot longer than seven minutes to attend – assuming they came at all.

The anti-violence activists I interviewed explained that the Brazilian gun-lobby directly translated and used NRA propaganda materials. They used identical statistics and narratives as the NRA’s own US broadcast adverts. This is especially noticeable as the NRA’s conservative theme of security and the ‘right to own a gun’ were embedded in campaign discourses, leaflets and adverts widely circulated at the time of the referendum.

Another factor which influenced the result of the referendum was the infamous political ‘Mensalão’ scandal which emerged in June 2005. Monthly bribes of R\$30,000 (approximately £9,000) were allegedly paid to parliamentarians to vote in favour of the president’s key projects. The scandal received continuing media attention between the referendum approval and the voting date. It resulted in an association in public opinion between the federal government, the gun ban campaign and political corruption. This played into a familiar US NRA debating tactic, that free people needed their guns because governments couldn’t be trusted. (Crespo, 2006; Goldstein, 2007).

The NRA and Brazilian gun lobbyists argued that only an armed citizenry could prevent crime. In their view, citizens have a right to shoot and kill perceived ‘criminals’. This rather punitive rhetoric is easily marketed to fearful, unequal and spatially segregated societies where intolerance of the excluded ‘other’ is common. This has serious implications: it provides individuals with an alleged right to be the judge, jury and executioner, and it contributes to cycles of violence and intolerance.

What is more, the argument for an armed citizenry draws on a form of narcissism and on the belief that heroic individuals will have the ability to identify crime and fight back. These NRA themes: the rhetoric lauding individual freedoms (e.g. the freedom to buy and use a firearm), the narrative of ‘self-defence’ and ‘protection of the family’, which draws on traditional masculine ideals of ‘honour’ and bravado, were visible in the campaign material deployed in Brazil. As was their use of ‘mistrust’ narratives, such as ‘don’t trust the government who want to disarm you’ and fear propaganda alluding to the well-known inefficiency (and corruption) of the Brazilian police and therefore to the need to ‘defend oneself’... with a firearm; a proposition that clearly serves the interests and profits of the gun industry, which pumps millions of firearms around the globe each year.

The media campaigns and rhetorical discourses of the gun industry diluted and misinterpreted the original purpose of the referendum. The conservative agenda that dominated the pro-gun campaign with its focus on personal security and the individualism of self-defence had no scope to incorporate the more public agenda of collective security by means of disarmament and reduced gun availability.

Conclusion

One of the lessons that social scientists can learn from this case study is that a ‘public sociology’ (or for that matter a ‘public criminology’) can have far reaching impact. Just as the aforementioned 13 percent drop in firearm mortality and the subsequent handover of nearly half a million guns for public destruction were the result of campaigning and active researchers who got their message across to a willing and leftist government. The time for political action was also ripe – the historical and social context played a key role too.

But referendums have not been known as an effective way of governing. The devolution of decision making power toward smaller units – in this case, individual voters – can work to increase inequality, both within and across groups. There is at all times the possibility that the more vociferous, economically privileged and energetic members of a small faction can dominate the discussion and push an agenda that is not widely supported, as was the case in Brazil, when the gun-lobby drew on the experience and marketing strategy of its international allies. Across groups, certain organizations typically possess greater political and rhetorical skills than others and can thereby prosper when there is competition for outcomes that can be politically profitable

This commentary has argued that Brazil’s potential firearms reforms were thwarted by pro-gun lobbyists with support from the US National Rifle Association (NRA). The various factors that led to the referendum are complex and various, and sometimes hidden from view. Thus I have not attempted a complete account of how and why the referendum was defeated. Nevertheless, the issues outlined sketch some of the context in which the debate on gun control developed; they show how it began to shape gun control initiatives and demonstrated the potential to halt the escalation of violence; but, finally, on encountering the internationally powerful, yet also deeply parasitic gun industry and its allies, the referendum ultimately failed to deliver the result that many ordinary Brazilians had hoped for.

The extent of concentrated disadvantage in Brazil remains exceedingly high, however the national political will to create a sense of collective interest has increased since the country’s political turn to the left. The referendum demonstrates that the influence of global actors and political groups, in particular those of American origin, such as the NRA, also remains exceedingly high in Brazilian politics. The neoliberal ideologies of private security, of self-defence and gun ownership that these groups propose obscure larger-scale dynamics, and render more difficult the creation of a public interest, of a country with less lethal violence. These dynamics and ideologies deserve questioning.

In spite of the referendum’s failure, states like São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro have launched violence reduction efforts with remarkable reductions in gun mortality. A recent study by IPEA shows that since the approval of gun control measures sales of firearms have dropped by 40 percent in Brazil (IPEA, 2013) - yet much still needs to be done, and it will take Brazil a very long time to rid itself of

the existing 17 million firearms in circulation (Dreyfus et al., 2005). Firearms were not banned in the country, they are still relatively accessible and the country still suffers from high levels of lethal firearm violence, while small but powerful sections of society continue to profit from the ideologies of a 'gun culture' (Squires, 2000), leaving behind a trail of blood and injustice.

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