New Situations: between "Gang Rape" and the "Farce Of Rape" in Network Society *

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Abstract

This article reflects on the impacts of the Internet on the relationships between individuals, state agencies and social movements by analyzing the case of a gang rape in the Morro da Barão neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro in May 2016, which had national and international repercussions in the major media and on social networks. To do so, a mapping was conducted of news articles and videos about "rape culture" and of comments about this material, which led me to different understandings of the term and to moralities involved with these understandings and questionings of them.

Keyword: Sexual Violence, Differences, Rape Culture, Network Society.

Introduction

At the beginning of the twenty-first century Manuel Castells (2000:50), one of the pioneers in the analysis of network society, related the era of information to "an historic event with the same importance as the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth century, introducing a new standard of discontinuity at the material bases of the economy, society and culture". Among the discontinuities in the era of information, Zigmund Bauman (2012) problematized the concept of friendship on social networks, alluding to friendships on Facebook, which can be erased or deleted at any time, without the trauma involved in breaking off relationships constructed face to face. This is an interesting thought for considering the dizziness that technology acceleration causes us, a state of bewilderment in relation to uncertainties about definitions thought of as unalterable.

Ways of life were deeply modified in the 20th century with the creation of radio, a communication media associated to common encounters on sidewalks after an intense day of work and especially on Sundays. The invention of TV, whose moving images nearly immediately seduced spectators, encouraged family gatherings and also with neighbors, at a moment that few people had the ability to purchase a television. At the time, the contents were discussed with those nearby, not necessarily friends, in the sense understood by Bauman, but with acquaintances who shared opinions about what everyone watched. This production of the few for the many did not signify an anodyne reception, as identified by Stuart Hall (2003) when emphasizing the interdependence between production and reception.

It is precisely this interdependence that since the 1980s has led different communication media to invest in market segmentation, to address the individual/collective, which were increasingly difficult to reach in a single term. Generational and class differences mark the creation of entertainment and leisure magazines aimed at women (Mira, 2001). Issues of race and sexuality appeared on the scene with the expansion of the market

of magazines aimed at the gay public and the creation of a magazine for blacks in the 1990s, a period that also marked the appearance of the first advertising aimed at the "black" public in Brazil, to "include" this population in the sphere of consumption (Beleli, 2005). In an intertextual manner, television productions, especially telenovelas – which at that time were the most important programming on Brazil's largest television network, Globo, included characters who fed the debates about diversity.

The idea of intertextuality of the media, precognized by Marshall Macluhan (1994), and which is still valid, has become more complex in the current situation, to the degree to which a variety of media are now congregated in a network environment, in which the speed of propagation of content instigates individuals to accompany and quickly position themselves, which requires reflections about the recent impact of technologies on people's lives, their meanings and the relations of individuals with the production of the corporate media.

In this article I propose to reflect on the impacts of the Internet on relationships between people, with state agencies and with social movements, by analyzing the case of a gang rape in the Rio de Janeiro neighborhood of Morro da Barão[1] in May 2016, which had national and international repercussions in both the major media and on social networks. To do so, I conduct a mapping of news and videos about "rape culture" and the comments[2] on this production, which led me to different

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[1] Located in the Zona Oeste [Wesern Zone] of Rio de Janeiro, the Morro da Barão is a region disputed by rival drug traffickers, but only gained attention in the media after this gang rape.

[2] It is not possible to know who they are, what they do and where the people live who comment on the news and videos about the case. Most are identified with *nicknames* – which is a way to remain anonymous, a common idea among Internet users – others use their name, last name and at times give their profession. A deeper analysis that considers the social insertion of these individuals is beyond the scope of this article, but it is possible to affirm that they come from different parts of Brazil.

understandings of the term and to moralities that are embedded in these understandings and questionings made of them.[3]

Unlike the fiery discussions in the analyses about relations on the Internet – marked by the establishment of frontiers between the on-line and the off-line, which mark distinct universes, pointing to a relative independence between both – I follow the analyses that affirm a "strong interlinking of the two kingdoms" (Kendall, 1999:58) and the reflections of Miller & Slater (2004) who focus on an on/off-line continuum, affirming that the properties of the Internet are not inherent to it.[4] Instead of marking the separation between on and off-line, it is more interesting to reflect on this interaction that, based on the on-line, crosses political scenarios and moralities. The narratives about the case analyzed here can be divided between the questions of the "rape culture" and the "farce of rape", but the shadings found in both these views cannot be analyzed from perspectives that seek the logic and linearity of the ideas, without first questioning some notions that are at times calcified.

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[3] I adopt here what Carmen Rial (2005) called an "ethnography of the screen". Despite presenting an overview of media studies before the Internet phenomenon, Rial proposed a systematic observation focused on what the characters say, their facial and corporal expressions and clothing. One can also see the article by Peter Fry (1995/1996) which analyzed a case of racism based on articles published in leading newspapers.

[4] The idea of interlinking, of continuum, questions the very naming of the field – "cyberspace" (defined as a space that encompasses practices and representations of different groups [Gibson, 1984]) and "cyberculture" (a set of sociocultural phenomenon that take place in this space [Levy,1999]), to the degree that various studies point to a continuum between "a here and a there" (Leitão & Gomes, 2011; Miskolci, in this issue; Buchamar, 2011; Togni, 2011; Beleli, 2015). In this perspective, denominations such as "real" and "virtual", also do not make sense, although they are widely used, to think of the Internet as a "laboratory of experimentation and reconstruction of the self" (Turkle, 1997:180), as if these experimentations were less "real" than those that take place in off-line environments.

"Gang rape " versus "the farce of the rape"

The recent spectacularization of the rape of a 16-year-old girl in Rio de Janeiro is a good case for mapping this discussion. What apparently caused the national commotion was the number of rapists, (between 30 and 36, depending on the news source). The coverage in Brazil's leading newspapers, whose headlines read "supposed rape", were immediately questioned on Facebook by groups who work in defense of women in situations of violence, demanding that the journalists not question something materialized in videos of the assault, which were accessed by thousands of people on a single day.

The sense of collective repulsion was fed by some social networks that denounced the poor handling of the case by the state in the first days after the victim suffered the violent attack.[5] One criticism immediately "went viral" on social media, particularly from feminist groups who associated the inquisitorial treatment of the victim's behavior to the rape culture, as defined by ONU Brasil:

> Rape culture is a term used to address the ways that society places guilt on the victims of sexual assault and normalizes the violent sexual behavior of men. (…) Rape culture is a consequence of the naturalization of macho, sexist and misogynous acts and behavior that encourage sexual aggression and other forms of violence against women. This behavior can be manifested in various forms, including catcalls on the street, sexist jokes, threats, moral or sexual harassment, rape and feminicide [https://nacoesunidas.org/por-que-falamos-de-cultura-do-estupro/].

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[5] Rejection of the procedures of attorneys who blame the victims as a line of defense of rapists began with the feminist movements against the "crimes of honor" in the mid 1970s. The classic work by Mariza Corrêa (1983) about crimes of honor inspired many studies about violence against women.

The attempt to begin the case with a moral judgment was not successful, which led to the substitution of the first police investigator who, before anything else, transformed the victim into a defendant. The investigator's question – "do you often have group sex"? – which was published in different newspapers and magazines and went viral on social media – was one of the factors that led the victim's lawyer – Elisa Sami – to request his removal from the case.

Some feminist social media promoted a debate about the silencing of violence against women. As Rial shows well (in this issue), the humiliations experienced by women, because they are women, go far beyond sexual intercourse, and first involve imaginations of female bodies, whose articulations of differences – of gender, class, race, sexuality, nationality, religion and others – operate in different ways to not recognize, or to selectively recognize, women as individuals with rights.

In this case of gang rape, the Internet had an important role, because it mobilized large Brazilian and foreign media companies and allowed the social media to establish transnational articulations. The term "rape culture" was so widely used that my manicurist, who uses Facebook regularly, asked me: "you study these things, explain to me what this means. Is it that people shouldn't be raped? If that's it, I agree!" The term was also quickly appropriated by various politicians, some of them who are certainly not in agreement with the discussions raised, because they relate, as indicated by Sonia Corrêa and Fábio Grotz (2016), to "strong analogies between the forced control over female bodies and the power struggles recently used to control the political body", associating the rape culture to the conservative wave that is currently sweeping Brazil.

The association of this case to national politics, appears, in different manners, in various videos found on YouTube[6] that accuse government leaders (especially former President Luis Inácio Lula da Silva and ousted President Dilma Rousseff) of ignoring

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[6] See the links of the videos consulted at the end of the paper.

criminals because they are more concerned with "stealing from the people". Following the line of the first police investigator assigned to the case, these videos – produced by young men and women, posted on their own blogs and by regular people, apparently accustomed to giving opinions about violence, politics and corruption – used images of the victim, in which she appears in home videos with friends, speaking of her past and potential partners. Totaling more than 1.5 million views, these productions, professional and homemade, question the morals of the "supposed victim", based on the fact that she had a son at the age of 13 or 14, and frequently attended funk dances, used drugs and had relationships with top drug dealers. But the central argument to affirm that there was no rape, used in most videos, is based on a statement made by one youth who asked not to be identified, presented as a resident of the Morro da Barão, who reiterated the "community's" code of honor: "and you know very well that in the favela rape is death, no one accepts it, not one faction accepts this!"[7]

The major media report that gained most attention, having gone viral on the Internet with more than two millions views, was a report from the program *Conexão Repórter* (29/05/2016),[8] which reiterated the notion of a "barbarous crime" and used the term "rape culture", reducing the complex discussion raised by the term to physical violence. The program presented statements from a friend of the victim; "she does this whenever using loló [a drug] with other people, every time"; and from her mother, "she goes to the communities, she takes drugs, she comes back with various bruises... she will be marked forever by this violence". While the

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[7] This idea was questioned vehemently by the new female investigator in the case in an interview repeatedly broadcast on television news. Alba Zaluar, a recognized researcher of the issue of violence in the peripheries, challenged the idea of the existence of a code of conduct in the favelas in relation to rape on the Facebook.

[8] *Conexão Repórter* is an investigative news program broadcast on Brazilian television by the SBT network on Sundays and presented by journalist Roberto Cabrini.

victim herself remained silent in response to the presenter's questions about the names of the aggressors and the drug dealing boss on the Morro da Barão.

In parallel, the barbarity of the crimes is associated to scenes of preparation of drugs for sale, emphasizing that "this is all related to drug dealing", but also to Afro-Brazil religions. By showing the façade of the house of the top dealer in the hillside neighborhood of the Morro da Barão, whose open door allows visualizing some chairs in the back yard and a statute of a saint, the TV announcer Roberto Cabrini affirms that there are "signs of rituals of macumba, black magic". The next scene shows a prison in Porto Velho, where the TV announcer says he wants to "get inside the mind of a rapist".

The narrative of an inmate – who was condemned for raping and killing his three-year old daughter – is combined with that of the woman journalist who emphasizes the use of alcohol and drugs as factors that facilitate violence. The humiliation he suffered in prison is attributed by the reporter to "parallel codes – rape is considered a crime without pardon", an idea corroborated by other people, who call themselves muggers, dealers, kidnappers, killers. For them, rape should be paid back with the same currency "with suffering" and add "our justice is totally different than the justice of the law…for us they have to become a woman, walk around in panties, wash clothes and suffer...".[9] The program ends with the statement of the presenter who attributes the perpetuation of the rape culture to impunity, in a cause and effect relation.

If in the prison context sexual crimes must be punished with gang rape, it is first necessary to transform the criminal into a

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[9] The voice of a prison agent, whose image shows only his body in uniform, affirms the existence of "Pavilhão E", where people convicted of sexual crimes are held. The report does not explain why the rapist is not in this pavilion. The mini-documentary *Pavilhão E* - produced by Poltrona Filmes and presented on TV Futura – tells of the struggle of the LGBTT population in Recife's prison system to attain a separate pavilion from the other inmates, where they were regularly forced to perform sexual services without consent, even if none of them had been accused of rape.

"woman", an idea that is not questioned by the report, which, in fact, reifies the place of women in society. The theory of impunity, used by different voices on the Internet, led to a revival of debates about solutions that appear forgotten: chemical castration, the death penalty, lowering the age of criminal responsibility, increasing the penalty for rape, particularly if the violence is committed by two or more people.[10]

The struggle against the setbacks in terms of sexual and reproductive rights appeared on the social media long before the discussions about this case of gang rape. In November 2015, thousands of women went to the streets to protest against federal deputy Eduardo Cunha, who presented proposed Law 5069, which threatened rape victims' right to legal abortion and weakened the care they received.[11] There were also large street demonstrations, promoted in the social networks in early 2016 against the removal of discussions about gender and sexuality from education plans. The inclusion of these issues in school curriculums had been proposed by feminist and LGBT movements to consolidate the discussion in schools about differences, a debate that is necessary to be able to consider the meanings of the rape culture.

If the comments of common citizens or organized groups that supported removing issues of gender from school had previously been restricted to limited circles, there is now a proliferation of hateful discourses, which combine in an unorganized manner with attacks upon those seen as different – women, blacks, the poor, homosexuals – and often appear

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[10] In 2013, federal deputy Bolsonaro presented proposed law 5398/2013 which proposed chemical castration – the use of hormonal medications to reduce the libido – for rapists. Francisco Dornelles, acting governor of Rio de Janeiro state, declared on national television that he supported the death penalty for sexual crimes.

[11] About the complex discourses concerning the decriminalization of abortion, for which support from feminists is barred by agreements of the ruling party with the religious block in the national congress, see the excellent analysis by Lia Machado (in this issue).

associated to the defense of political-ideological positions, triggering moralities that impute "correct" forms of behavior for individuals.

These discourses, which are made openly, quickly and without concern, have gone viral, establishing a type of inquisitional court, outside the law, given that it believes in anonymity and, therefore, in impunity, even if it violates and offends collectivities. In the narratives about collective rape, the discourses of hate cut the opportunity for dialog, so that the construction of new and creative forms of adding to the debate about social problems dim the enthusiasm of those who invest in the network society.

Do it yourself!

What changes in the organization of information when the production of content is conduct by many for many? Unlike Castells' first analyses (1997:30), what is at stake is no longer the "*self*" *versus* the "web", but if and how the "I's" strategically constructed to gain visibility on social media – have earned projection with a power to question, either modular bodies, or the moralities that surround these bodies.

The intensification of interpersonal relations made possible by the Internet leads to questioning about the destabilization of old references, especially concerning concepts of space, time, territory and mobility. Moreover, there is an expectation that this new scenario allows the production of contents that are ripe with gender differences, and articulated to other markers (race/ethnicity, generation, sexuality, nationality), in such a way to question the moralities involved in the operationalization of differences in the "cyberculture".

The organization of information, which had previously been essentially mediated by large corporations, is now also conducted by organized groups and common people who believe they are free of restrictions. Some studies have shown that liberty in the creation of personal texts, imputed with a certain authenticity, is

limited, because individuals are not free of their own experience (Beleli, 2015; Miskolci, in this issue). The very organization of information is guided by this experience in which distinct moralities coexist. For Jarret Zigon (2007), a morality is a set of norms that are internalized by individuals in an unreflected manner. The reflection on these norms and their questioning in relation to certain situations leads to what the author calls a moral breakdown - a breaking point.

In this new context, marked by professional or amateur content, the mainstream products are questioned.[12] I am not affirming that the traditional media, driven by economic capital, are coming to an end. First, as Nicky Couldry (2009) affirms, it is necessary to perceive the interplay, both subtle and not so subtle, of the interdependencies that can significantly affect large media corporations, commercial interests, governments and civil society. If self-management on the Internet radicalizes the idea of "do it yourself", which has been gaining extremely positive perceptions concerning liberty, democracy and horizontalization, the speed of the circulation of news on the Internet – a powerful instrument in the dissemination of power of intervention – and the greed of "having an opinion about everything", to paraphrase Raul Seixas, promotes unconsidered readings.

The most concerted reflection comes from some organized groups that question the rape culture, and this is where some ruptures appear, because they carefully analyze the situations of violence against women, including common gestures and words, which are perceived as normal and even the target of ridicule, in

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[12] In fact, in the current situation, there are doubts about the very notion of *mainstream* – as a production of few for many – given that different media products – advertising, novelas, journalism – have increasingly changed direction, precisely as a function of the widening debate about various themes present in blogs, personal pages and or institutional pages or even in comments to news presented in printed and televised reports. In the case of televised media, as warned by Silverstone in 1994, there is a constant exploration of information technologies, which provide contexts for their production, promotion and consumption.

the daily life of men and women. As Carolina Branco de Castro Ferreira highlights, in the excellent reflection of Washington Castilhos about the pedagogy of rape:

> The political grammar of the feminisms focuses on diffuse anxieties and fears, transforming them into indignation and weaving a moral, cognitive and emotional plot that inspired political action, which is quite useful as a form of social communication among multiple publics. But that, in the case which we are addressing, produces a series of ambivalences…such as selective indignation and the (re)production of moral subjects in the realm of sexual politics [http://www.clam.org.br/destaque/].

It is precisely the ambivalence that deserves greater reflection. Some of the comments to the interviews, published in leading newspapers, with feminist researchers dedicated to the theme of violence against women and which share a broadening of the expansion of the meaning of the term rape culture, is alarmingly riddled by accusatory adjectives such as "smelly feminists", "communists", "petistas" [supporters of the Worker's Party PT] – and question their titles as doctors in philosophy and anthropology.[13]

Some of these researchers, critics of mainstream cultural production, particularly of representations of women, are accused of being "sold to Globo", and also associating them to "bizarre sluts", in reference to a video that mocks a presentation of the Slutwalk in Recife against the rape culture. The disdain for Brazil's leading television network, *Rede Globo*, particularly an interview with the victim broadcast on the popular Sunday evening magazine format program *Fantástico* (29/05/2016), accused the program's producers of not raising any suspicions about the victim's behavior, but of emphasizing her indignant statements about the violence suffered, suggesting that the TV network had mounted a spectacle around a "false rape" to turn attention away

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[13] http://brasil.estadao.com.br/noticias/geral

from the focus of charges against former President Lula and ousted president Dilma Roussef, which have received attention in the national and international press.

In this sense, it can be asked if the "will" to transgress established models and promote symbolic changes has "contaminated" the collective. A reflection by Remédios Zafra is worth quoting (2011:126):

> As in any symbolic pact, individual will is not enough to transgress the pact (either on the screen or face to face). A symbolic change requires a collective revolution (…) the ideation of new figurations that are able to inspire and spread other possible imaginaries or to revise the classics; a revolution that in a necessary manner requires deep intervention in the industries that create the imaginary and visuality, testing its contagiousness.

The power to "be contagious" is broadened with the elimination of geographic distance – one of the themes that has become central in the debate about the contemporary scenario of Internet relations – which allows direct access to the so-called global village. The rapid communication between those who share any activities (production of knowledge, hobby's, opinions about daily issues) include demands for a protagonism and social recognition, from both common people (Sibilia, 2008), and groups that have been vilified by governments, markets and by part of society. The social networks allow the formation of groups of people who, even by geographic distance, have never met face to face and perhaps never will, but come together to demand rights. This associative model brings to the scene redefinitions of space and time, questioning notions of mobility.

Mobility does not only refer to movement from one place to another, but also involves, as Felicity Amaya Schaeffer emphasizes (in this issue), inequalities, status and classification of people that are mobile, which can lead to a judgment of their projects for social improvement. The classification of individuals through the articulation of differences (Piscitelli, 2008) has been a distinctive

point in the recent analyses about relations mediated by technologies.

Some comments on the news/articles/videos about the "farce of rape" include questioning of the victim's circulation through neighborhoods that are not "appropriate" for a middle class girl, a mobility limited to places whose codes cannot be understood. This incomprehension alludes to an abhorrence to a mixing of classes, whose imagination identifies and classifies the people who live in the "communities"[14] – "what did she want there? Those people from the favela, the funk dances, its dangerous! Didn't she know that? If she wanted drugs, there are lots of places to get them here in Ibirapuera"[15], suggesting that there are also points of sale in "not dangerous" neighborhoods of Rio de Janeiro, so that mobility, considered to be a risk factor, revises the idea of "corrective rape".[16] This sexual violence is not particular to the less favored classes. Data also widely promoted on the Internet show high rates of this violence in the middle and upper classes, in general, committed by men who circulate in family environments. Most of the comments to this news classify the aggressor as a "monster", "mentally ill", which naturalizes the sexual violence in poor neighborhoods, whose population is widely perceived as black.

Final considerations

The connection to any moment and place breaks the exclusivity of access to information held by the elites, especially with the popularization of mobile technologies. The strategic construction of the self is not only concretized in desires to be, but fundamentally that others see, and recognize that which we project for ourselves. The large media companies, which still have a strong presence, have not appeared to have advanced towards

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[14] As low income neighborhoods are known.

[15] Neighborhood in the city of São Paulo considered to be upper middle class.

[16] I would like to thank Carolina Branco for calling my attention to this point.

promoting an erasure of stigmas of gender and other differences. But have the social networks?

Dominique Wolton (2000), for whom technical questions are subsumed by political questions, warned of the risk of the society of information becoming a "society of the same", by favoring connections between those who defend the same causes. In our "tainted" timelines on which circulate news from different communication media, the same comments are exhaustively repeated, whether to open a debate about the place of women in society, which goes far beyond physical violence, or to broaden the perception of living in "communities."

The reputation of the "rape culture" coexists on the communication media with the "farce of rape", linking emotional states that guide a debate that is certainly broadened by the use of new technologies. But the Internet does not produce ideas, it is first a tool that increases the opportunities to "do it yourself" for those who have access to it, broadening distinct visions about facts that are certainly influenced by their daily experiences, which revises the idea of the on/off line *continuum*.

The case of a "gang rape" produced a debate that goes beyond violence against women, to the degree that different visions point to disagreements with political conduct in Brazil, where the slogans – "Fora Temer"; "Fora Lula"; "Fora Dilma" [Out with Temer, Out with Lula, Out with Dilma]" – may identify different political positions, but which coincide in "Fora Rede Globo" [Out with the Globo TV network" and "No corruption". But they also make visible distinct understandings of the rape culture. Some feminists question the consent, which is at the base of questioning of the rape culture, and include sex professionals, pornography and women who participate in sado-masochistic practices as victims of this culture, triggering other moralities.[17]

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[17] In a debate about sexual tourism and the culture of rape promoted by the group Jornalistas Livres, Elisa Sami – an attorney for the gang rape victim – was one of the defenders of this vision. It should be emphasized that the victimization of women has been questioned by feminist researchers in contexts of the sex

According to Adriana Vianna (2001), moralities do not relate only to the normatization of conduct, but can be used by individuals as instruments of agency, so that their proponents can grasp a certain protagonism. One can also find on Facebook adhesions by feminists to chemical castration, as vehemently defended by federal deputy Jair Bolsonaro, one of the politicians most questioned by feminist and LGBT movements for his retrograde proposals, including the removal of discussions of gender and sexuality from educational plans.

This is the imbroglio! In the on and off-line *continuum* different ideas and proposals circulate that, even because they link emotional states,[18] can contaminate both collectives that are seeking ruptures, as well as those that follow the immediatism of poorly considered comments. The society of information is an excellent field of research, whose methodologies are still being tested (Miskolci, 2011; Pelúcio, 2015), but there is still a long path of research needed for us to be able to perceive if and how the ideas debated there promote symbolic modifications, whether of the demands of contemporary social movements – which question society in different realms in the twentieth century, and in the current situation have seen various conquests threatened – whether of the contexts perceived as that of violence, generally associated to bodies marked by gender, race/color, location, in such a way that imaginations about bodies, and what appears around them, do not perpetuate sociocultural identities. Perhaps the large social gain provided by the Internet society is precisely the amplification of ideas, even if they may appear disorganized and contribute to disorganizing social thinking.

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market (Piscitelli, 2006), of sadomasochistic practices (Gregori, 2016; Facchini; Machado, 2013) and the pornography industry (Benitez, 2009).

[18] The ties and scope of emotional states is discussed by Carolina Branco de Castro Ferreira in another context (in this issue).

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