



TALK RIGHT, MAKE RIGHT

Discourses and practices of cultural citizenship

Johanna Stenersen



This article explores discourses and practices of health, body and citizenship in civil society organizations in Nicaragua, Central America, working specifically to promote sexual and reproductive health and rights.

INTRODUCTION

Public health is a major field hosting a multitude of actors, disciplines and opinions. Consequently, health communication as a research field has expanded beyond medical care, information needs and behavior change. Health has a socio-cultural and political context, and is thus as much about socio-cultural considerations and perceptions as about rights. This article introduces the core questions of a research project in progress, based in the Department of Media and Communication Studies at Örebro University, Sweden, which explores discourses and practices of health, body and citizenship in civil society organizations in Nicaragua, Central America working specifically to promote sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).

Social change is not random. Theories of change and development are ideologically rooted and practices often guided by various interests from dominant groups in society, may be for political, economic, cultural, religious or other reasons. International development cooperation is a realm where a variety of interests and actors merge and part, and as such serves as a vehicle for knowledge and norm setting. The research project *Body Politics and Citizen Culture* aims to contribute to research and develop a critical perspective on communication for social change (CFSC). More specifically, its purpose is to develop the theoretical and empirical body of knowledge on health communication as research field that is increasingly interrelated to research and perspectives on social mobilization, advocacy, discourses of rights and citizens practices and activism. My core research questions are concerned with exploring discourses and practices of citizenship. In what follows, I will introduce the Nicaraguan context, in which my study is grounded, and then present

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my research questions and use them as the basis to outline the theoretical framework for my work.

CONTEXT FOR THE STUDY

Although Central America is relatively small geographically, it is quite complex socially and politically. The region has a long history of conflicts and civil wars, in which violence and confrontation has been a means to resolve disagreements and differences.

Within the region, Nicaragua has a history of long-term repressive dictatorship under the Somoza dynasty, followed by a left-wing revolution led by the Sandinista National Liberation Front, which came to power in 1979, and a civil war throughout the 80s. One of the poorest countries in the world and the third poorest country in Latin America, today Nicaragua faces serious challenges pertaining to its economy and democracy. Poverty is rising, despite adherence to the MDGs and the Nicaraguan Sandinista government's "Zero Hunger" campaign. Resources of all kinds are unequally distributed and a majority of the population is excluded from democratic decision-making processes. Analphabetism is 40 percent high.

In 2006, the Sandinist party came to power, and its leader, Daniel Ortega became president. The same year the Parliament abolished the century-long law that gave women right to medical (therapeutic) abortion. The law change had tactical political reasons, not least because of the strong position that the Catholic Church has in the region, and whose support for Ortega's government now has increased. The anti-abortion law has already caused the death of more than one hundred women. The penalization of abortion was a serious setback for the women's movement, and led to a harsh conflict between the government and civil society organizations, which has been deepening ever since. The public discourse regarding women's rights in general, and sexual and reproductive rights in particular is subject to fierce battle. Civil society organizations organized to fight against what are considered unequal and harmful politics and promote a de-penalization of medical abortion while the government, hand in hand with the Catholic Church and pro-life organizations, use powerful channels and methods to counter the arguments for those attempting to promote a change in the law.

Nicaragua has a relatively long history of organized social movements¹ and civil society mobilization in the country has, at least until quite recently, been considered rather strong. Since Ortega came to power there has been a change towards a more party-controlled citizen participation. Today, a considerable number of civil society organizations are being

subject to harassment, persecution and intimidation of various kinds, of which some of the most affected are organizations belonging to the women's' movement. Not surprisingly, these are also in opposition to the Sandinista party. Public politics and discourse are furthermore marked by the government's anti-imperialist position, which makes it more difficult for organizations with foreign funding to operate. The agenda of many civil society organizations and networks is both social and political, with the objective to transform power relationships and have an impact on the definition and implementation of public policies. Popular education, empowerment processes and social campaigns are core activities in their advocacy work, aiming at informing and mobilizing the public and impacting health and legislative politics. The movement, comprising a number of networks, organizations, NGOs, etc, is not homogenous and represents varying political positions and approaches.

CORE QUESTIONS

Theories on power orders, social change, communicative action and citizen practices will inform this research project in analyzing different discourses of health and rights in Nicaragua. The study has a strong connection to discussions on gender, post-colonialism and modernization as a dominant paradigm in development cooperation, since the ideas on health, body and freedom/emancipation that emerged from the enlightenment still are predominant, in the same way that patriarchy remains an organizing principle.

Methodologically and theoretically, the study will draw on critical discourse analysis and ethnographic research techniques in order to analyze and discuss the discursive construction of social change in relation to sexual and reproductive health and rights. I will look at perceptions of gender and body (with particular focus on sexuality and reproductive rights and abortion) and the interrelated issues of rights, freedom, ownership and practices of citizenship. Special attention is given to the dynamics between the politicization of health and body and the emergence of communicative practices and social mobilization.

Body politics and discipline

What are the existing discourses of sexual and reproductive health and rights and of health in relation to social change (international development policy and national context/politics)?

Ideas of body and culture have long spread through global practices such as trade and faith. Treatment as well as conduct have been much debated

and subject to extensive literature. When looking at the existing discourses on health and body I will focus on aspects of discipline and ownership, since I am interested in looking at different perceptions of where our responsibilities and rights to decide over the body start and stop.

Although the purpose of my research work is not primarily to investigate gender, it is inevitable to put these lenses on when looking into SRHR and equality. My aspiration, however, is to discuss issues of power and politics beyond the dualistic discourse of gender. I am interested in power discourses and how they inform practices, and vice versa. Foucault's theories on body and discipline will guide this study to analyze how ideas from the enlightenment and colonialism influence and blend with ideas of universal rights and freedom from the same period.

Why discourse matters

Discourse matters because it has real consequences and because discourse as social action and interaction is a vital part in knowledge production. As such discourse is both a social construction of reality, but at the same time constituting reality, potentially contributing to uphold hegemonic structures. Gramsci refers to hegemony as the permeation throughout society of an entire system of values, attitudes, beliefs and morality that has the effect of supporting the status quo in power relations, such as gender and class. Hegemony in this sense might be defined as an 'organizing principle' that is diffused by the process of socialization into every area of daily life. To the extent that this prevailing consciousness is internalized by the population it becomes part of what is generally called 'common sense' so that the philosophy, culture and morality of the ruling comes to appear as the natural order of things (Boggs, 1976). I would argue that in the case of SRHR in international cooperation there is a conflict between two hegemonic structures: the liberal emancipatory universalism on the one hand, and the patriarchy on the other.

The international community and its agencies and agents can be perceived as the vehicle for the globalization of 'universal principles' and ideas of how to perceive development in general, imposing imperatives by various means of coercion/ruling (funding, programming etc). These ideas or strategies lean on universal truths or 'imperatives' (see e.g. D. Lupton, M. Last, M. Foucault) and thus risk not being sensible to cultural variations and specifics, while at the same time confirming existing power hegemonies/consensus (see e.g. Appadurai, Tomlinson). A more participatory approach, that engages local communities and 'target groups' not only in the production, but also in distribution, interaction and evaluation, could be a way to counter such an effect (cf. Servaes, Cadiz, Appadurai, Thornton).

Discourse analyst Norman Fairclough argues that “discourse is a crucial and irreducible dimension for processes of social change” and suggests that the cultural turn in political economy is also a turn towards discourse (2000, 2004). He points to the transnational political-economic agenda and its mainstreamed rhetoric as determinants for a number of change processes. Fairclough refers to the kind of master strategies for change that work through discourses and narratives such as for example transition, good governance, participation and partnership. These strategies are present in policy-making and have real consequences – they give way to the emergence of new ways of organizing time and space: through the creation of new institutions, relations, procedures and so on. In the case of social change and development cooperation, a shift in master strategies (or paradigm) evokes a re-programming or re-contextualization of the nature of social phenomena and social relations. An example of this is how poverty and social deprivation are re-contextualized and re-construed as ‘inclusion’ and ‘exclusion’.

This shift in approach implies other narratives of the origin and nature of poverty, ‘exclusion’, and how to achieve social ‘inclusion’. often public discourse is not consistent but tend to “slide between” competing narratives. In the case of SRHR, the two ‘competing’ ones would be liberal and the patriarchic (Levitas 1998 in Fairclough 2000).

A rights-based approach to health and body: sexual and reproductive rights

The perception of health has broadened, and the complexity of the issue has come to be recognized to a greater extent. Within development cooperation, there is also a clearer emphasis on a rights based approach, which favors other methods and approaches to health. Health communication has moved beyond simplistic models of information and behavior, and the theoretical framework is becoming more eclectic, as my research work aims to show.

In 2001, a group of UN agencies initiated a workshop aimed at developing an implementation strategy for a human rights-based approach (RBA) in international cooperation. In short, a rights-based approach means to move away from considering human rights as a separate activity, to start integrating the perspective in all development activities. Such an approach implies redefining and transforming relationships between ‘donor’ and recipient and moving away from the charity-discourse to talk about right-holders instead of beneficiaries -about citizens rather than inhabitants.

A rights-based approach to poverty reduction focuses on opportunity,

empowerment and security. Building the assets of poor people and addressing inequalities across gender, ethnic, racial and social divides is seen as a way to enhance opportunities for the poor. Empowerment is sought through democratic governance, including elections, parliamentary development, legal reform, public administration reform, inclusive decentralization, and the removal of gender, social and cultural barriers. This approach to poverty stresses equal access to justice, equality of opportunity, growth of economic opportunities and participation. National ownership and national capacity for the promotion of human rights is the sine qua non of a rights-based approach.

According to WHO, “Reproductive rights rest on the recognition of the basic right of all couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of their children and to have the information and means to do so, and the right to attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health. They also include the right of all to make decisions concerning reproduction free of discrimination, coercion and violence.” SRHR is thus a multi-faceted notion of peoples’ right to health care, health (including sexual/reproductive) education and power to make decisions that concern a woman’s own body, including the right to abortion. As noted earlier, the abortion issue is highly controversial for a number of reasons, and is a source for dispute in policy and strategies alike.

CITIZEN CULTURE AND PRACTICE

In what ways is the rights based approach reflected in citizen culture and practices in civil society organizations that advocate sexual and reproductive rights?

Development/social change communication consists of both theory and practice as an umbrella term for communication programs and fields of research areas. I have chosen to use the term *communication for social change* (CFSC), because I prefer the notion of ‘social change’ to development. A reason to avoid using a denomination that includes the term ‘development’ is that it is not a neutral concept. As Pieterse Nederveen points out, to say ‘development’ intrinsically implies a change from a status of being ‘under-developed’ and hence there is a judgment and positioning that obviously include a power relationship. I prefer to understand change as a social (political and cultural) process that above all has to do with people and that change processes should be motivated by people. Ailish Byrne defines communication for social change as the “strategic use of advocacy, communication and social mobilization to systematically facilitate and accelerate change”. I will look closer into the strategic and the social elements in this definition. How can civil society

organizations operate as driving forces in change processes through communicative action? How are these change processes constructed discursively and how are they enacted?

The very nature of change, as well as the development perspectives guiding its direction, is political and politicized. Increasingly, media and communicative practices are recognized as important components in social change processes, be it for their believed inherent potential for large-scale impact or capacity to 'foster' citizens to participate in democratic processes. Communication and social processes are interrelated, and my study intends to focus on two aspects of these interrelated processes: the discursive and representational power on the one hand, and on the other, the very practices from where they emerge.

This study will deal with social and communicative aspects of participatory democracy against the backdrop of new technology and its appropriation into people's daily lives, beliefs and practices. I will also draw on Habermas' concepts of communicative action and public sphere, the preconditions for its constant transformation, and how individuals and institutions engage in it. By addressing ideas on civic participation, consensus and rationality, I will discuss the social mechanisms of political mobilization in 'new' media as well as other forms of advocacy and its investigate their potential as vehicles for social participation and change. The debate of the public sphere is marked by the political-economic implications of its transformation, which is a compelling component in any discussion on media and public sphere. One assumption in this study is that there is a strong connection between ways of participating in public spheres and the organization of (public) spaces, but that this very relationship constantly is subject to change and therefore ambiguous and evasive to its nature. Another is that the increasingly mediatized and interconnected relationship between the private and the public – the blurring of boundaries between these two spheres – may present both opportunity and threat to democratic participation. Currents of either technological optimism or culture critique pessimism deeply affect our perception of this.

CONCLUSION

I will look at how the public discourse and especially how government and civil society organizations relate to the wider discourse of social change from the agencies of the international community. My study will touch upon communicative and cultural mechanisms in relation to health and educational institutions (clinics and schools and policy makers), but also ideas about and practices on health, healthiness, prevention and cure on a wider level. What are the current dynamics and (possible) tensions

between existing notion on health, health imperatives and 'universally' or at least internationally spread ideas, practices and concern about pandemics and global development? And what is health, anyway?

I hope that this study will contribute to problematizing the path from charity to rights in international development cooperation, and provide knowledge on how communication strategies and practices within civil society enhance citizens' exercise of rights.

Johanna Stenersen is a PhD candidate at the Department of Media and Communication Studies, Örebro University, specializing in research on communication for social change, citizen participation and culture. She runs Plateau Communication, a consultancy business specialized in development communication. She has worked with monitoring and evaluation, communication and advocacy in the private and public sector and with civil society.

johanna.stenersen@oru.se

1. One popular explanation for this is because of the Sandinista revolution and the huge popular mobilization that occurred soon after Sandinistas came to power, including solidarity work, community driven efforts, alphabetization campaigns etc.

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