Chapter 2
Decolonial Social Movements, Leftist Governments and the Media

Abstract This chapter situates events in Nicaragua within a broader Latin American context and in relation to changes that have been actively producing a new media environment in the region. We consider both changes in the nature of social movements in Latin America after decades of neoliberalism and a shift to left-wing authoritarian populism, and the emergence of new media geographies associated with digitalization and media convergence. We show that the contemporary Latin American media environment is a highly contradictory, paradoxical and multidiscursive one in which a plurality of voices can find and forge new forms and spaces of expression.

Keywords Social movements · Media convergence · Clientelism
Decoloniality · Resistance · Indigenous peoples · Afro-descended peoples

The myriad failures of neoliberalism across Latin America have in recent decades led to substantial social movement mobilization and the election of a number of governments touting explicitly anti-neoliberal platforms. Under these so-called pink tide governments, there have been attempts to reduce poverty and nationalise natural resource extraction in order to channel profits towards social programmes. In many Latin American countries, during the same period, the struggles for indigenous and to a lesser extent Afro-descendant rights have gained new forms of political momentum and visibility. As a result, the concept of plurinationality has also found its way into a number of Latin American constitutions and the official appropriation of the indigenous concept of *buen vivir* in Bolivia and Ecuador has dislodged the political authority of neoliberal capitalism. These cultural and political shifts, while important, cannot be seen as bringing an end to neoliberalism or coloniality, and it is important to recognize that Latin America's leftist governments are not as progressive nor as democratic as might appear to outsiders. As Raúl Madrid et al. (2010: 146) write, 'in an effort to strengthen their hold on power, they have re-written the constitution to allow for their own re-election, dissolved or manipulated the legislature and stacked traditional nonpartisan institutions with their supporters'. In most countries, there are important continuities with the neoliberal model as economies continue to be based on predatory forms of capital

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accumulation or resource extraction. As Raúl Zibechi (2012) acknowledges, the poverty reduction programmes in a number of Latin American countries reduce poverty without substantially redistributing wealth.

Daniel Ortega's use of clientelistic mechanisms such as Zero Poverty programmes and the top-down creation of Councils of Citizen Power (CPCs) replicates models used in pink tide countries, most notably Venezuela. Ortega's strategy is therefore not unique, but it is important to note that unlike the election of Rafael Correa in Ecuador or Evo Morales in Bolivia, Ortega was returned to power not through social movement mobilization, but rather through the formation of problematic pacts between the ruling Liberals and the Sandinista-controlled Supreme Electoral Council to change the electoral law (Cupples and Larios 2005).[1] During its long period in opposition, the FSLN failed to rebuild a base of popular support that included younger Nicaraguans who did not experience the revolution or the civil war of the 1980s. Furthermore, they managed to alienate or expel from the party many of those who had. Hence there are many prominent, well-respected and outspoken revolutionary Nicaraguans who have distanced themselves from the FSLN and are openly critical of Ortega's actions. They are former guerrilla fighters and commanders, government ministers, and intellectuals, artists and writers who are historically recognized for their decisive contributions to the toppling of Somoza and the project of revolutionary transformation. They include Sergio Ramírez, Gioconda Belli, Dora María Téllez, Henry Ruiz, Hugo Torres, Victor Tirado López, Luis Carrión, Ernesto Cardenal, Mónica Baltodano, Victor Hugo Tinoco, René Vivas, Luis Enrique Mejía Godoy, Daisy Zamora and Vidaluz Meneses. These are the prominent names those who are, along with Daniel Ortega and Tomás Borge, central to any history of the Nicaraguan Revolution.

Shortly after they regained power in 2006, the FSLN tried to use the CPCs to replace the existing grassroots civil society organizations that had been mobilising against neoliberal policies for the previous decade and a half, though this FSLN strategy met with only limited success. Nevertheless, some grassroots activists did start working or collaborating with the Sandinista government, for which they often received paid positions, scholarships for their children or other goods in return for their political support. The FSLN's clientelistic strategies make little sense from a community development perspective, but appear more effective as a means to secure and maintain electoral support and political control for the ruling party. For example, the political secretary of the Sandinista Front in the Creole community of Pearl Lagoon in the South Caribbean told us that the government was providing 25 families with two years of government-funded satellite television from multinational Mexican-based telecommunications corporation Claro. When we asked how they identified the families whose satellite TV bills would be paid for by the government, he said it went to people who belong to the 'poorest class' and whose

[1]Daniel Ortega, now in his 70s, has been the leader of the FSLN without interruption since the triumph of the Revolution in 1979. He won the elections of 1984 and the last three in 2006, 2011 and 2016. He lost in 1990, 1996 and 2001.

homes and way of living are ‘not quite good’. We’ve been told repeatedly by ordinary Nicaraguans that the bestowal of such largess upon some poor families functions principally as a form of electoral bribery to increase and maintain popular support for the FSLN. These accounts suggest, at the very least, the existence of widespread popular scepticism towards the government and its policies and objectives. Such scepticism is readily understandable in light of the fact that, despite an average economic growth rate of 3.6%, large amounts of Venezuelan aid, selective handouts for supporters and the implementation of so-called zero poverty programmes, living conditions in Nicaragua have barely improved in the decade since the FSLN regained power. According to figures from the Nicaraguan Central Bank (BCN), purchasing power for formal sector employees in 2015 was almost ten percent lower than it was in 2006 (Alvarez Hidalgo 2016).[2]

With respect to the impacts of pink tide governments on social movements, Zibechi (2012) notes two main tendencies, one negative and another more positive. He demonstrates how the post-neoliberal turn, through which social activists put progressive governments into power, has tended to neutralise the counter-hegemonic effects of social movements, which has led in some cases to their fragmentation and demobilization. For example, in Ecuador, government cooptation seriously weakened the mobilizational capacity and political influence of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), which was previously one of the most vibrant and active indigenous movements in all of Latin America. Zibechi views the enrolment of previously marginalized populations in state-led social movements and anti-poverty programmes as mechanisms designed to control and domesticate the movements in particular and the broader population in general. Consequently, however, the modalities and spatialities of power deployed by social movements are beginning to shift in important ways. As Zibechi (2012: 269) writes, there are large sections of societies ‘that are now uncontrollable and impossible to discipline through repression’. Hence the top-down, vertical and molar forms of power exerted by state agents are increasingly outmaneuvered by horizontal, spontaneous, immanent, dispersed and molecular forms of power and evasion mobilized by social movements like the recovered factories movement in Argentina, which has deployed stealth, opportunism, non-hierarchical practices and alternative exchange relations as a means of implementing non-capitalist modes and zones of production. Zibechi’s (2010) account of everyday life and political organisation in El Alto, Bolivia, where there is no practical distinction between ends and means, demonstrates how it is possible to reproduce non-capitalist economies and keep the state at a distance. Under such conditions, the power-bloc must attempt to ‘domesticate’ or ‘redirect’ the social movements ‘so that they benefit the ruling class’, but the ‘organizational dispersion’ of these movements is proving ‘far more potent than the centralized state’ and enabling social groups to create and defend their own autonomous spaces (Zibechi 2010: 309). The tactical

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[2]According to Alvarez Hidalgo (2016), a formal sector worker earned an average of 4,823.9 córdobas in 2006. By August 2015, average monthly wages had fallen to 4,358.4 córdobas.

responses of these social movements to dominating powers are underpinned and motivated by popular, black, indigenous and decolonial ways of knowing and being. They both contribute to and draw upon the growing epistemological crisis that afflicts Eurocentric rationality, as a political contestation of both extreme wealth inequalities and capitalist-driven climate change motivates and facilitates the assertion and circulation of alternative and historically repressed pluriversal knowledges (Quijano 2007; Escobar 2010). What de Sousa Santos (2014) calls the epistemologies of the south are responding to the intensifying failure of Eurocentric modernity to attend to the problems it has created. We need therefore to recognize that 'the emancipatory transformations in the world may follow grammars and scripts other than those developed by Western-centric critical theory' (de Sousa Santos 2014: viii).

It is an error to assume that there are singular Latin American societies comprised of disadvantaged groups that appeal to the state for redress (Zibechi 2012). Rather there are two asymmetrically opposed societies, 'an official society, hegemonic and of colonial heritage' (Zibechi 2012: 318), and another that is based on an indigenous cosmovision, indigenous modes of governance and justice, and non-capitalist community relations in which 'the past—not a modernist future—inspires action' (Zibechi 2012: 328). In his interrogation of the 'Latin' in Latin America, Walter Mignolo (2005: xv) notes that indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples across the continent are 'unfolding new knowledge projects that are making the idea of Latin America obsolete', so *mestizo* Latin America must co-exist with these social and cultural alternatives that do not disappear, despite historical and contemporary assimilation policies and the persistence of racialized democracies and discursive formations (see Wade 1997; Cupples 2013). In Nicaragua, the interactions between these competing social formations and modalities of power is producing a conjunctural crisis in the vertical, *mestizo* and Eurocentric state, which increasingly fails to achieve hegemony by popular consent and must therefore resort to strategies for the production of ignorance (which we might regard as a *politics of not knowing*), along with ever more coercive forms of control, including the rampant application of state-led repression and violence.

The important changes in the temporalities, spatialities and tactical maneuvers of social movements are both enabled and paralleled by contemporary transformations in the media environment. Centralised media systems are increasingly disrupted and decentered through their interactions with new media platforms and mobilities. On the one hand, the contemporary media environment involves intensifying concentrations of media ownership and practices of conglomeration linked with mergers, acquisitions and the synergistic expansion of vertical and horizontal integration. Moreover, there are ongoing and alarming expansions and accelerations of both governmental and corporate forms and practices of mediated surveillance, tracking and algorithmic control. On the other hand, these processes are developing in tandem with a democratisation of media access that is enabling ordinary citizens to both produce their own media, and respond to and interact with content generated by conglomerates and official channels in ways that can sometimes be politically transformative (see, for example, Jenkins 2006; Martín-Barbero 2011; Jenkins et al.

2013; Cupples and Glynn 2013, 2014b, 2016; Castells 2012; Juris 2008). As Jesús Martín-Barbero (2011: 42) observes, new media forms and technologies 'are increasingly being appropriated by groups from lowly sectors, making *socio-cultural revenge* or a form of *socio-cultural return match* possible for them, that is, the construction of a counter-hegemony all over the world'. It is apparent that 'old' as well as 'new' media, and 'mainstream', 'community' and 'indigenous' media all provide resources for the construction of cultural citizenship among subordinated populations.[3] While members of both the dominant and subordinated sectors recognize that the media, broadly speaking, constitute powerful forces for or against political and social transformation, the contemporary mediascapes constitute a complex and dynamic articulation of modes of production and reception, texts, discourses, narratives and images that increasingly escapes the direct control of any particular social class or formation.

The contemporary media environment is then a highly contradictory one, fraught with surveillance and countersurveillance, consumerism and opposition, control and resistance. It is one in which a plurality of voices can find spaces of articulation, and dominant discourses are routinely rearticulated as they traverse increasingly interlinked media networks and platforms. The demands of marginalized and subordinated populations for human rights and cultural citizenship are increasingly forged through grassroots media practices and within what Manuel Castells (2007: 246) calls 'horizontal networks of interactive communication'. These networks have enabled social movements to '[escape] their confinement in the fragmented space of places and [seize] the global space of flows, while not virtualizing themselves to death, keeping their local experience and the landing sites of their struggle as the material foundation of their ultimate goal: the restoration of meaning in the new space/time of our existence, made of both flows, places and their interaction' (Castells 2007: 257). New tactical media uses and mobilities facilitate forms of countersurveillance and sometimes provide a measure of protection and maneuverability for subordinated peoples.[4] Counterhegemonic discourses and struggles articulate with one another as they cross the networked mediasphere in ways that enhance their visibility and political effectivity. Indigenous and Afro-descended communities around the world have been producing their own media in order to participate in horizontal networks with states, civil society organizations and other indigenous groups, to contest colonial relations of power, to produce counter-representations, to circulate counter-histories, to promote cultural and linguistic revitalization and to engage more effectively in activism aimed at the

[3]We use scare quotes here to emphasise the instability and contingency of these media formations and categories, as well as the ways in which they converge and overlap within the contemporary mediascape.

[4]We recognize that visibility in the media also puts activists' lives at risk and that Central America continues to be a dangerous place for political activism, as demonstrated by the 2016 murders of environmental activists Berta Cáceres and Nelson García in Honduras, and the 2009 assassination of Salvadoran environmental activist Marcelo Rivera.

attainment of autonomy and land rights.[5] At the same time, digitally connected citizens use computers and smartphones to speak back to mainstream media corporations, and to remix and share content that circulates and resonates with alternative sensemaking strategies or political and cultural ambitions. The next chapter examines these two key elements of the contemporary conjuncture: changes in indigenous and Afro-descendant social movements, and transformations of the Nicaraguan mediascape.

[5]There is a large and growing literature on indigenous media. See, *inter alia*, Weatherford 1990; Ginsburg 1991; Turner 1992; Glynn and Tyson 2007; Himpele 2008; Wilson and Stewart 2008; Schiwy 2009; Wilson 2015. On indigenous media on the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua, see Glynn and Cupples 2011 and Cupples and Glynn 2014a, 2014b.

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