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## **CIVIL SOCIETY, COOPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT**

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## **Civil Society Under Different Political and Aid Regimes in Nicaragua**

**AXEL BORCHGREVINK**

### **1. Introduction**

While ‘civil society’ is a frequently used concept in academic writings and development discourses, its precise meaning is too seldom explicitly defined. Usually, it is taken for granted that we know what it refers to. This is unfortunate, as it leads to the conflation of different attributes ascribed to civil society, attributes which should not be taken *a priori* to be overlapping. While civil society on the one hand may be delimited as a society’s associational sphere, it is simultaneously ascribed an inherent civilising or democratising character. This easily leads to assumptions of uniformity of interests, creating a harmonious image of civil society. Furthermore, a clear separation of civil society from the state and the market is often assumed, while in reality boundaries may be blurred. In development cooperation, the lack of reflexivity towards the concept means that often it refers simply to NGOs. The consequent selectivity of funding may have a huge impact on the composition of the associational sphere, not necessarily in the form of increased popular representation.

This article argues for a more analytic concept by analysing various aspects of Nicaraguan civil society: its internal divisions and shifting composition; the intimate relationship between the evolving characteristics of the sphere and larger political changes; and the fundamental role that aid has played. Nicaragua’s turbulent political history of an overthrown dictatorship, a revolutionary regime eventually replaced by neoliberal governments, and the return of the former revolutionary President Ortega, has meant dramatic shifts in the relations between state, market and society. Civil society aid contributed to the creation of a strong and

outspoken NGO-sector, but the pull-out of most European bilateral donors after 2007 has meant that funds for the sector are drying up, with drastic consequences for many organisations.

The case of Nicaragua illustrates the usefulness of an analytically more stringent concept of civil society. The example shows that the boundaries between state, market and civil society are not fixed, but open to change. It also demonstrates how aid can have important structuring effects for civil society. Finally, the case warns us that we should not expect clear dividing lines between the spheres of state, civil society, market and development cooperation.

The article first briefly discusses the concept of civil society. The second part analyses three phases of Nicaraguan recent history from a civil society perspective. The conclusion draws out implications for how civil society should be conceptualised.

## **2. Civil society**

Over the past decades, the idea of civil society has come to occupy a central position within the development sphere, both among academics and aid agencies and practitioners. Indeed, among the latter, ‘strengthening civil society’ has come to be one of the key objectives of development interventions. Yet, there is little reflection on what the concept of civil society or its strengthening should mean. This lack of reflection leads to the conflation of different notions of civil society. Paradoxically, it may be this lack of definitional precision – or as Comaroff and Comaroff (2000: 8) put it, the “inchoate and polymorphous” character of the idea of civil society – that gives the concept such appeal: “[T]he key to its promise – its power as a sign that is as good to think and feel with as it is to act upon – lies in its very promiscuity, its polyvalence and protean incoherence”. Civil society has become a buzzword because of its ability to mean anything to anyone. In Edwards’ (2009: 3) view: “when the same phrase is used to justify [...] radically different viewpoints it is certainly time to ask some deeper questions about what is going on. After all, an idea that means everything probably signifies nothing.”

Alison Van Rooy (1998: 12ff) provides a useful deconstruction of the notion by delimiting six different facets of civil society. In her review of past and current understandings, she claims the concept can alternatively be seen as (a) the values of ‘civility’ (sometimes more specifically of Human Rights and democratisation); (b) a collective noun comprising a society’s associations; (c) a public sphere for debate and action; (d) the historical moment when modernisation allows autonomous, liberal, rights-bearing individuals to come together voluntarily; (e) the anti-hegemony and anti-globalisation movement; and (f) an antidote to the State. In a slightly different vein, Fischer (2009: 5) points out that there exist conservative, liberal and radical understandings of civil society, linked to different understandings of its characteristics and functions.

In spite of the fact that such critical examination of the concept is fairly common in academic circles, a simplistic understanding of civil society seems to live on relatively undisturbed within the development sector (and in segments of academia). This understanding builds to a large extent on the liberal view of civil society, with fairly rosy ideas of the sector as the promoter of democratic values, without acknowledging the potential contradictions between the many meanings attached to the concept, and, as Grugel and Bishop (2014: 138) point out, with only a limited understanding of the workings of power. Based on such criticism, Comaroff and Comaroff (2000) and Eriksen (2001) suggest that the notion no longer has any use as an analytical concept. However, since the concept has considerable importance within the development apparatus, it still merits academic attention, but as an idea within the sphere of data rather than as a tool for analysis.

To my mind, this is going too far. Understood as a country’s associational sphere – the organisational structures that make them up, as well as the ‘space’ they occupy – the civil society concept can still be useful for analytical purposes by focusing attention on central dimensions of state-society relations. In order to realise this potential, it is necessary to narrow down its definition. One main difficulty is the concept’s normative, ideological and utopian character. If civil society is thought of as the sphere that promotes democracy, human rights, liberal values and the common good, how then do we deal with associations that may oppose those values? Should neo-Nazi or racist groups be included? Fundamentalist religious

organisations? If not, where do we draw the dividing line? Should all organisations we disagree with be excluded? It seems obvious that such a division cannot be drawn except in an ideologically and normatively subjective way. We need to delimit civil society in a way that avoids this conundrum.

We should avoid preconceived ideas of the various organisations of civil society or of their value orientation. Furthermore, we should keep in mind that the rifts and divisions between segments, groups, classes, ethnicities, genders, ideologies and religions within civil society may be just as deep as those relating to the state. Rather than seeing civil society as a unified force for democratisation, it is better conceptualised in Gramscian terms as a battleground for the struggle over power and hegemony.<sup>1</sup>

Civil society is often counterpoised to the institutions of the state, the market and the family. Analytically, this makes sense. In practice, we need to be aware that these spheres may not be easily delimited or separated, as there are areas of overlap and interpenetration. In addition, the relation to aid and donors must be included when analysing civil society in many developing countries. While the importance of this connection varies, it is of crucial importance in aid dependent countries like Nicaragua. In the following presentation, emphasis is placed on how civil society is an arena for the struggle between different political and value orientations, how boundaries between state and civil society are neither fixed nor absolute, and how aid structures civil society.

### **3. Nicaraguan civil society through three decades**

The Nicaraguan state has experienced radical transformations over the past decades, including a socialist revolution in 1979 led by the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN), the replacement of the revolutionary regime by a series of liberal governments after 1990, and the return to power of the FSLN and the former revolutionary president Daniel Ortega in 2007. Civil society has undergone equally profound changes, linked to these political processes. These changes have involved the internal composition of civil society, as well as its relationships with the Nicaraguan state. An understanding of the characteristics and dynamics of civil society in Nicaragua presupposes an appreciation of this history.<sup>2</sup>

### 3.1 The 1980s – the revolutionary decade

During the pre-1979 Somoza dictatorship, critical expressions were repressed and civil society was weak, even though widespread discontent and revolutionary mobilisation before 1979 did lead to the emergence of new organisational forms (Velásquez Pereira 1986).

The 1980s was the period of popular organisation *par excellence* in Nicaraguan history. The FSLN goal of a revolutionary society built on popular participation meant that great efforts were made to organise the Nicaraguan people. The Sandinista mass organisations (women's, farmers', youth and workers' associations, plus the neighbourhood organisations) had a total membership of 8-900,000 (Ruchwager 1985; Vilas 1985). These movements formed the organisational backbone for many of the impressive revolutionary efforts within health and education, such as vaccination and literacy campaigns. Still, the Sandinista vanguardist ideology, which saw the party as the legitimate leader of the revolutionary process, meant that these mass organisations were subordinated to the FSLN. Leaders of the organisations were elected by the party, and the mass organisations served to channel party orders towards its members rather than to represent the interests of the membership. The primary objective of these organisations became defending the revolution. Thus, in the corporative Sandinista model, the lines between state, party and mass organisations were blurred, while authority lay unquestioningly with the party and its centralised decision-making structure (Velásquez Pereira 1986).

The national NGO sector was small, and, with the hegemonic role of the large Sandinista organisations, the number of autonomous organisations established was limited. The international NGOs with offices in Nicaragua thus probably outnumbered their Nicaraguan counterparts throughout the eighties. International aid during the period was overwhelmingly given in solidarity with the Revolution and channelled through the institutions of the state or the Sandinista organisations. In the revolutionary fervour, as well as in the polarised setting when the Contra war escalated from the middle of the decade, organisational work outside of the FSLN project was viewed with suspicion. The few oppositional organisations still in existence remained fairly isolated in the overall associational landscape. As the main organisational expression of opposition was armed, based abroad, and heavily financed by another state, the

dominant logic within Nicaragua was very much ‘either you are for the Revolution or against it’. In this spirit, organised mobs – the so-called *turbas divinas* – were used by the Sandinistas to quell oppositional street demonstrations.

As the war and the economic crisis took its toll in the latter half of the decade, revolutionary enthusiasm abated considerably. Participation in the mass organisations declined, and the establishment of new NGOs by people with a revolutionary history reflected disillusionment with the FSLN project. While the founders maintained a leftist political identity, many of the new organisations represented different orientations from the Sandinista policies. Thus, new women’s organisations could be seen as expressions of dissatisfaction with the way the Sandinista women’s organisation had put specific (and potentially divisive) women’s issues as secondary to its number one priority of defending the revolution, while, through their work, ecologically oriented agricultural NGOs implicitly supported alternatives to the mainstream Sandinista agricultural policies.

### **3.2 The period from 1990–2006: 16 years of liberal presidents**

Two days after the Sandinistas lost the 1990 elections in Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega admitted defeat and announced that the party would respect the result. But he added that the FSLN would continue to fight and ‘govern from below’. Time has shown that, through its extensive organisational apparatus, the Sandinista party was able to maintain considerable influence during the 16 years of liberal rule. Although FSLN-affiliated organisations were weakened after the electoral loss, the party retained control over the strongest unions, the organisations of farmers, cooperatives and farm workers, and among students. Moreover, the large FSLN representation in the National Assembly throughout the period was important for Sandinista influence. In particular, the infamous ‘Pact’ made in 1999 with the right-wing president Arnoldo Alemán ensured continued Sandinista power. Through their majority, the two parties were able to change the rules to their favour in a number of ways, ensuring joint control over key institutions such as the Supreme Court, the Supreme Electoral Council and the Office of the Auditor General. The FSLN remained a key force in Nicaraguan politics by nimbly combining its parliamentary influence with the organization of strikes and tumultuous street protests.

However, the Sandinista mass organisations were rapidly weakened. Without access to the government funding that had previously sustained them, and with a new government which saw them as political enemies rather than allies and supporters, they experienced reductions in staff and activity levels, and they lost their dominant position within Nicaraguan civil society.

From 1990 and onwards, the organisational landscape of Nicaragua also experienced another fundamental change: the explosion in the number of NGOs. Their number more than doubled in 1990 and continued to grow rapidly in the following years. Several factors contributed to the rapid growth:

- *Available qualified people:* Many lost their jobs in the state sector in this period. Partly these were people who were expelled because they were considered Sandinistas, partly because structural adjustment programs reduced the state apparatus.
- *Opportunity for pursuing idealistic causes:* NGO work promised the continuation of a form of revolutionary identity.
- *Available donor funds:* Many donors had been attracted to Nicaragua by the revolution. With a new government in place, and drastic reductions in the social programme of the state, it was logical for many donors to transfer their support to the NGO sector.
- *Withdrawal of state services created needs:* The new NGOs responded to demands for social, health, educational, economic, financial and other services.
- *Initial small NGO-sector:* Nicaragua had an underdeveloped NGO-sector in relation to the international aid system and the reigning development ideology. The rapid growth of organisations can be seen as a response to a demand within the donor system.

The state was also reconfigured. The large Sandinista state of the 1980s was rolled back, as state companies were privatised, market regulations abolished and services within the health, education and social sectors cut. On the one hand this has resulted in a larger and more autonomous market sphere. On the other hand, many of the people previously employed in the state continued to do similar work, now within NGOs, as part of civil society, and still financed by the same donors.

The liberal period is also a struggle over how the country's recent liberal-democratic political system is to be shaped and institutionalised. This process has to a great extent been guided by short-term, partisan or personal interests of the main political forces, and resulted in frequent constitutional changes, the recourse to ad-hoc solutions to overcome political crises or inhibit political competitors – and to the Pact referred to above. Thus, the Nicaraguan political system remains weakly institutionalised. In this setting, the ability to mobilise large groups of people for street demonstrations – which the Sandinistas were able to do through their grassroots links – was a powerful instrument.

The state in the liberal period was not simply reduced but also more clearly separated from civil society than during the previous regime, when the lines dividing state, party and mass organisations were highly blurred. The emergent liberal state is far from penetrating civil society to the same extent. In general there is a relatively enabling environment for organisational activities; there is freedom of association and expression, a critical press and a plethora of radio and TV-stations. During the presidency of Alemán, there were attempts to put restrictions on aid-financed and left-wing NGOs (radical women's organisations were especially targeted), but due to donor pressure the attempts came to nothing. Conversely, NGO campaigning and donors' insistence on government consultation with civil society resulted in the establishment of a system of councils for state-society dialogue, from the national level to the municipal. This meant new spaces for cooperation between state institutions and representatives of civil society during the latter part of the liberal period.

Among civil society organisations not stemming from the Sandinista tradition, and not considering themselves on the left side of the spectrum, the private sector associations were well organised, represented powerful segments of Nicaraguan society, and had privileged access to the government. A handful of new NGOs representing the political spectrum from the centre to the right were also formed. Still, it is quite clear that the organisations with roots on the right side of the political spectrum remained a minority among Nicaraguan organisations. The majority of organisations had their roots in the revolution, even if both formal and informal links to the FSLN were being weakened or cut. Increasingly, a rift arose between those organisations loyal to the party and Daniel Ortega,

and those that wished to distance themselves from what they perceived as a hierarchic and undemocratic structure. The FSLN itself split, and relations between these two left-leaning groups with their roots in the revolution have become increasingly polarised. It may be fair to say that, since the 1990s, the most significant cleavage in civil society has been within the left.

In this period, Nicaragua's civil society has often been referred to as 'NGOised', as the NGOs were strong, visible, and relatively well-funded, and consequently tended to dominate the public sphere. In contrast, other segments of civil society appeared weaker, less active or less occupied with broader social and political issues. Unions were fragmented, the private sector organisations focused on sector demands, social movements were weak or non-existent, and community-based organisations tended to focus on local concerns. Between 1991 and 2007, Nicaragua has been among the top receivers of aid per capita, reportedly the number one country from 1999 to 2006 (Borchgrevink, forthcoming). Large parts of this aid have been for civil society, and have favoured the NGO sector over other segments of civil society.

The characterisation as of an NGOised civil society draws attention to weaknesses of this civil society: namely, that the organisations are not membership-based and therefore not really representative; that they base their activities on the work of salaried professional staff rather than activists who do voluntary work because they believe in it; and that they are dependent on aid and are thus primarily accountable to donors. These are valid points, but must be seen in relation to the strengths of this type of civil society. Many of these NGOs were highly professional organisations, efficient not only in implementing development projects, but also capable of engaging the government in technical discussion of complex development issues, or in promoting and developing better and more rights-oriented legal instruments. Through these capacities, the organisations were able to have considerable impact on legislation, on the opening of new institutionalised spaces for state-civil society consultations, and on emergency response coordination, such as after the Mitch hurricane in 1998. A few NGOs, including the *Red Nacional de Defensa de los Consumidores* (RNDC – the National Network in Defense of the Consumers), also managed to spearhead broad popular mobilisations against unpopular

government policies, such as the privatisation of public water and electricity services. Thus, the NGOised civil society did achieve significant results.

In sum, Nicaraguan civil society was dominated by the left throughout the liberal period, but by a divided left. Generalising broadly, one could say that while the FSLN retained the *'poder de convocatoria'* – the control over grassroots activists that allowed mobilisation for street demonstrations – 'the other left' dominated the more formal spheres, through media-savvy NGOs with professional expertise, high visibility in Managua and good access to donor funding.

### **3.3 From 2007 to the present – the return of the FSLN and Daniel Ortega**

In 2007, Ortega returned to the presidency. While some of the old rhetoric of the left is intact – such as when he is condemning global capitalism and US foreign policy – he has softened his national politics considerably, in particular appeasing business and religious sectors. Economic policies are developed in consultation with the private sector organisations and assessed favourably by the IMF. Ortega has also gone to lengths to emphasise his religious credentials, for instance voting in favour of a restrictive law on abortion. Financed by generous support from Venezuela, his government has implemented extensive social programmes for housing, credit, agricultural inputs, nutrition, schooling and health. Throughout the presidential term, the FSLN's hold on power was strengthened, both by tightening control over electoral institutions and by attempting to extend its hold over civil society. In 2011, amid charges of widespread fraud, Ortega won 62% of the vote giving him his third term as president from January 2012.

There has been little love lost between Ortega and most of the NGOs, which had explicitly expressed positions against Ortega and the FSLN (Cannon/Hume 2012). As president, Ortega has maintained an aggressive tone against the NGOs, in speeches characterising them as 'conspirators' and 'traitors' 'funded by the Empire's intelligence services' (Valle Orozco 2010: 165). This hostile rhetoric has been followed up by various attempts at undercutting the aid on which these organisations depend. The government has sought to introduce new regulations for channelling funds to

civil society organisations, regulations which, it was alleged, would place strict limitations on international funding for activities related to democracy and governance (Valle Orozco 2010: 167). The new Unit of Financial Analysis (UAF), established by law in 2012 to combat money laundering, is given wide authority to investigate NGOs. The accusation of money laundering was used in 2008 and 2009, when charges were brought against the oppositional organisations *Autonomous Women's Movement* (MAM) and *Centro de la Investigación de la Comunicación* (CINCO) as well as the international NGOs Oxfam UK and Forum Syd. While nothing came out of the cases in the end, the organisations experienced considerable harassment. The government has also tried to reduce aid for the sector by pressuring donors.

As an alternative to what Ortega has labelled a false and unrepresentative civil society, he has sought to establish what he argues is a more genuine one. One of his first decrees created the *Consejos de Poder Ciudadano* (CPC), a structure of councils from the neighbourhood level up to the national to promote participatory democracy. These councils have quasi-administrative functions in the government's welfare programmes and mobilise volunteers for health campaigns (Valle Orozco 2010: 176). Ortega is in line with a general trend of the Latin American left: the search for models for increased popular participation and a deepening of democracy. But, as pointed out by Kirby and Cannon (2012), there are inherent dilemmas within state-led forms of popular participation. For Ortega's critics, the CPC are nothing more than an attempt at entrenching the FSLN's political power by creating a party-controlled structure that distributes benefits for clientilistic purposes. Studies of the CPC confirm that they are largely controlled by the party and serve to promote its interests, even if the welfare benefits distributed are normally not restricted just to party members or sympathisers (Stuart Almendárez 2009; Bay-Meyer 2013). The CPCs have sidelined and in practice replaced the Development Committees that had been established a few years earlier to ensure civil society participation in planning at municipal and higher levels (Prado/Mejía 2009; Valle Orozco 2010: 166). Thus, establishing the CPC has both given the governing party a direct hold over parts of civil society, and simultaneously reduced the influence and importance of the segments of civil society outside party control.

More ominously, there are also informal practices for inhibiting oppositional activity within civil society. Valle Orozco describes the systematic use of intimidation and violence in connection with public demonstrations and protests. During the Ortega period, there have been strikes and protests from different groups – transport workers, doctors, teachers, civil society organisations and political parties. Generally, these legal demonstrations have been met by counter-demonstrations by FSLN sympathisers prone to initiate violence with fists, sticks, stones and even homemade explosives. The police have done little to intervene and stop this violence. Furthermore, leaders of mobilisations against government policies have experienced threats, vandalism and violence before or after the protests (Valle Orozco 2010: 172-175). Thus, there are attempts at stifling protest through the creation of a climate of fear, reminiscent of the *turbas divinas* of the 1980s.

The case of the consumer organisation RNDC may serve to illustrate another change for civil society. The organisation was successful in mobilising large groups of people for protests against privatisation under president Bolaños. Led by the outspoken Ruth Selma Herrera, the RNDC did not identify with any party and maintained critical distance from the FSLN. Yet, there were common interests between the two. RNDC was, for instance, highly successful in mobilising people for demonstrations against electricity privatisation, as it could draw on the grassroots activists of the FSLN. This ‘strategic alliance’ gave the RNDC a mobilising capacity and an agenda-setting impact it would not have had on its own. Since the change of government, however, the RNDC has had to give up public campaigns and mass demonstrations. A representative explained to me that, since Ortega’s election, the RNDC can no longer draw on the Sandinista grassroots structures for popular mobilisation. “The irony”, he said, “is that while the current government is more supportive [of consumers] than the previous ones, this still leaves them with less possibility to mobilise and protest.”<sup>3</sup>

Instead, the organisation decided that its best chance of wielding influence was by developing legal and technical proposals for ministries and the National Assembly party benches. The RNDC has, for instance, elaborated proposals for new laws on micro-credit and regulating the use of credit cards. While the laws have not been adopted, there have been

tangible results, such as new regulations on the interest rates that credit card companies are allowed to charge. A main issue for the RNDC during the former government had been to protest against the privatisation of electricity distribution. Now, the focus shifted to acquiring professional expertise and studying the current institutional, legislative and economic arrangements of the electricity sector, as a basis for coming up with proposals for an improved regulatory framework. “We are today the organisation with the deepest knowledge of how Nicaragua’s energy system and electricity market functions”, I was told in 2011. This shift in organisational strategy was also reflected in its staff. New, young and professional people were hired. At the same time, former key staff left, including Ruth Selma Herrera, who was given ‘an offer she couldn’t refuse’, as director of the Nicaraguan Water and Sanitation Enterprise. Additionally, other employees were recruited into government positions. Whether this reflected a strategy of the new regime to co-opt critical voices – as some have alleged – or was simply a way of recruiting qualified people, the net effect has been that organisations like the RNDC have lost experienced staff members.

As with many Nicaraguan NGOs, the RNDC has been highly dependent on aid funding. Since 2007, however, almost all the European bilateral donors, including Austria, Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, and the UK, have closed down or dramatically reduced their aid programmes. In terms of state-to-state aid, Nicaragua has been more than compensated by the new support from Venezuela. However, for Nicaraguan NGOs, there has been a drastic drop in available funding, and competition for what is left is becoming increasingly hard. Many organisations have had to reduce their activity, lay off staff, and sometimes stop operating completely. This was the fate of the RNDC. According to its former coordinator, the organisation had been struggling financially since 2009, and had to close down in January 2012 (El Nuevo Diario, 30.3.2012).

While being a special case, the transformation and fall of the RNDC can be seen as emblematic for some of the changes that Nicaraguan civil society has undergone. The organisation lost its mobilising capacity, a number of its key people, and eventually its funding, and had to close down. The net effect is that the current regime has been quite successful in curbing civil society protests. Grassroots activist structures previously

supplying manpower to turbulent mass demonstrations have largely been transformed into the neighbourhood committees (CPC) that perform local administrative functions. The visibility and influence of the many Managua-based and outspoken critical NGOs, on the other hand, has waned as donor funds have become greatly reduced and they are facing increasing formal and informal restrictions. The surviving NGOs have reduced their activity levels and/or shifted their work from lobbying and awareness-raising towards more service-delivery type programmes. Currently it makes less sense to talk of NGOisation, while state penetration of and control over civil society has increased.

#### **4. Concluding remarks**

The above condensation of 30-40 years of history is of course an oversimplification. Important distinctions and processes have been left out. I have, for instance, not been able to present the role of the media or the churches. However, this sketched history of civil society is useful for offering a perspective through which to understand and assess the changes, and for showing how the concept of civil society can be most usefully employed. By way of conclusion, I will draw out some lessons.

Firstly, the case shows how a focus on civil society can be useful for understanding evolving state-society relations. The fact that Nicaragua is such a special case – where dramatic regime changes have taken place over a relatively short time period, and where development aid has played such an important role – makes it particularly relevant. In order to capture these changes, it has been necessary to operate with a more analytic concept of civil society than the fuzzy understanding that dominates within development circles. In particular, the idea of civil society as inherently representing certain values, such as democracy and human rights, needs to be discarded. Likewise, the related notion of civil society as harmonious, with all its associations pulling in the same direction, is a myth. By looking at civil society without any such presuppositions, we can empirically investigate the contradictions within, and the evolving relations to, the state.

Secondly, the case shows that the dividing lines between state, civil society and markets are not fixed and eternal. In the transition to the

neoliberal period, state functions were transferred to civil society. At the same time, the market expanded through the privatisation of state companies and the abandonment of price controls and other regulations. The transition after Ortega returned to power has maintained the border between state and market, but relations between state and civil society have shifted considerably. Analytically, perhaps the greatest change is the way that the Ortega government has attempted to 'penetrate' civil society through the creation of the party-controlled CPC. This implies a blurring of the boundary between state and civil society, echoing the situation during the 1980s.

Thirdly, the example of Nicaragua illustrates the important role of aid in structuring civil society. There is a direct effect in the formation of a new segment of civil society 'created in the image of development aid' – that is, the NGO sector of largely Managua-based organisations staffed with middle class professionals mastering the development jargon and capable of fulfilling the planning and reporting requirements of the donors. While there are strengths to such an NGOised civil society, some of its vulnerabilities become very evident when funding becomes scarcer after Ortega returns to the presidency. By pushing for and supporting structural adjustment and a reduced state during the liberal period, aid also contributed to the shifting of functions from the state to civil society.

Fourthly, while it makes analytic sense to distinguish the spheres of state, civil society, and market, it is often impossible to empirically draw any well-defined separating lines between them. Some civil society organisations operate according to market logics and fulfil state functions, thus embodying aspects of three of the analytical spheres. In particular, the way the two Sandinista regimes have sought to dominate civil society – ideologically as well as organisationally – imply a form of penetration that is challenging to deal with analytically. Similarly, while development cooperation can be seen as another analytical sector, outside civil society and against which it must be defined, we see that its logic becomes internalised within aid-dependent segments of civil society – another form of penetration. Thus, an empirical investigation must be attuned to the way that the interfaces between spheres are constituted, and to the fact that clear dividing lines cannot be assumed.

- 1 Gramsci's notion of civil society as a site of ideological struggle is useful as a counterweight to notions of a harmonious civil society. This does not mean that the present article builds on Gramsci's full social theory.
- 2 Empirically, the article builds on close to 30 years engagement with Nicaragua and its civil society. Six weeks of data collection in 2005, and two field periods of two weeks each, in October-November 2011 and April 2012, were used for targeted data collection on civil society issues. The two following subsections, on the period up to 2006, are largely based on Borchgrevink (2006), where I give a more detailed description and a wider set of references.
- 3 Giovanni Gonzalez, interviewed in the office of RNDC, 3 November 2011.

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## Abstracts

While the term 'civil society' is frequently used in academic writings and development discourses, there is a tendency to conflate different and potentially conflicting meanings of the concept. This article uses a historical analysis of Nicaragua to develop a more useful understanding of civil society. Nicaragua has undergone dramatic political changes over the past 35 years, including significant changes to its civil society. I argue that assumptions of civil society's value orientation must be discarded; that boundaries between civil society and the state are neither fixed nor absolute; and that development cooperation has important structuring effects for civil society in aid-dependent countries.

„Zivilgesellschaft“ ist im wissenschaftlichen und entwicklungspolitischen Diskurs ein häufig verwendeter Begriff. Doch es gibt die Tendenz, verschiedene und potenziell widersprüchliche Bedeutungen des Konzeptes

zu vermengen. Am Beispiel einer historischen Analyse Nicaraguas möchte dieser Artikel ein nützlicheres Verständnis von Zivilgesellschaft entwickeln. Dort gab es während der letzten 35 Jahre dramatische politische Verschiebungen mit signifikanten zivilgesellschaftlichen Auswirkungen. Es wird argumentiert, dass auf Annahmen über die Werteorientierung einer Zivilgesellschaft verzichtet werden sollte, dass die Grenzen zwischen Zivilgesellschaft und Staat weder fixiert noch absolut sind und dass Entwicklungszusammenarbeit wichtige strukturierende Einflüsse auf die Zivilgesellschaft in von Entwicklungshilfe abhängigen Empfängerländern hat.

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