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Sexual politics and regime transition: Understanding the struggle around gender and sexuality in post-revolutionary Nicaragua

After the breakdown of the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua in 1990, sexuality became an important object of political debate, struggle and mobilization. An initial period of flourishing of feminism was followed by a decline in mobilizing capacity of the women’s movement, particularly in relation to sexual and reproductive rights. At the same time a social conservative (“pro-life”) movement emerged that would gain increasing political power, mobilizing capacity, and discursive resonance throughout the 1990s. While the “pro-life” movement emerged at first as a Catholic movement, by the end of the decade it had united Catholics and Evangelicals - historically adversaries. The Sandinista party, once a symbol of democracy and women’s rights among the political left, moved more and more to the political right and started supporting an anti-feminist agenda.

The aim of this book is to explain how and why these puzzling developments came about. It is based on over sixty in-depth interviews with social movement activists, (former) public functionaries and religious leaders, participant observation in social movement organizations and churches, and analysis of more than a decade of archival data, conducted in altogether 16 months of fieldwork between 2003 and 2008. In addition I lived in Nicaragua throughout the decade of the 1990s (my main period of analysis), spending six of those years working together with women’s organizations. Drawing on social movement theory, feminism, discourse analysis, and insights from oral history and sociology of emotions, the struggle around sexuality in Nicaragua is approached from three different angles.

First, I take an historical look. Throughout the decade of the 1980s and 1990s I trace the trajectories of social movement actors involved in struggles around sexuality: women’s rights, sexual rights, and reproductive rights activists on the one hand, and Catholic and Evangelical social conservatives on the other. The aim is to reveal how the actors’ experience of (and interaction with) changing political regimes affected both their motivations and their capacity to mobilize. Chapter II provides an analysis of the complex and ambivalent relation between feminism and Sandinismo (both as political forces and sources of collective identity) as well as the response of the women’s movement to regime transition, to explain the development of feminism and sexual and reproductive rights activism in Nicaragua. Chapter III captures the development of activism and organizational platforms of social conservatives in the changing political contexts of the 1980s and 1990s, in interaction with the Sandinista and post-Sandinista regimes, and
also in close intertwining with religious movements, institutions and networks. Religious networks constitute the most important mobilizing structures of the “pro-life” movement. Nevertheless I argue that the churches should not be seen as bastions of the “pro-life” movement, but rather as arenas of struggle around gender and sexuality themselves. Catholic and Evangelical social conservatives display very different mobilizing patterns because of differences in internal church dynamics, in appropriation of church networks, and in the ways they are positioned vis-à-vis the state.

Second, I analyze two specific episodes of contention, one in the beginning of the 1990s and one at the end of the decade. Chapter IV offers an analysis of the 1992 penal code reform on sexual crimes that produced the first open debate and mobilization around homosexuality and became known for what was perceived as a strikingly contradictory outcome: a ‘success’ for women’s rights in terms of the enhancement of sexual violence legislation, and a ‘backlash’ in the form of a reinforcement of “anti-sodomy” legislation. I offer a reinterpretation of this law reform by showing that despite the polarization of the debate along partisan lines, political actors across party lines in fact shared considerable common grounds related to the perceived perils of sexuality, the vulnerability of children, the potential dangers of homosexuality, and the fear of losing male, heterosexual privilege. Chapter V examines the debate around abortion legislation between 1999 and 2001, which produced an unprecedented anti-abortion mobilization that included politicians from almost all parties and government officials. I show how social conservatives capitalized upon the legitimacy crisis of both the governing liberal party and the Sandinista opposition party; on the increasing conflict between the Sandinista leadership and the women’s movement; and on the mobilizing capacity of Catholic and Evangelical churches. Drawing interchangeably on Religion and Science, God and Nature, they produced a powerful imagery of the fetus as an innocent child and constructed abortion as murder.

Political economy accounts for the increasing political opportunities and allies of social conservatives. Yet it does not account for the emotional resonance social conservative discourses produced and their capacity to interpellate people. This question is addressed in chapters VI and VII, and represents my third entry point: the analysis of activists’ personal discourses on gender, sexuality, and abortion and the ways these are articulated with religious discourses. It shows what activists are fighting for, how particular discourses on gender and sexuality resonated with people’s personal experiences, grievances, and desires, and also what possibilities these discourses offer for the construction (or not) of collective identities. In the case of “pro-life” activists conservative religiosity played an important role in generating both cognitive and emotional resonance, and allowed Catholics and Evangelicals to generate a sense of collectiveness across denominational lines. Activists for women’s, sexual and reproductive rights struggle for resonance because they challenge dominant interpretations of both Sandinismo and conservative...
religion. While they also display a greater diversity than the “pro-life” movement, I maintain that the fragmentation and loss of mobilizing capacity of the women’s movement is not due to its diversity but to the prevalence of exclusive identities and solidarities, that impede a sense of collectiveness.

The study shows that the struggle around sexuality in Nicaragua is impossible to understand without invoking the impact and legacy of the Sandinista regime. Both social conservatives and feminists had accumulated grievances throughout the 1980s, but for different reasons and in very different ways. Social conservatives associated the Sandinista regime with communism, atheism, and “anti-family” values, and resented the destabilization of family relations during the revolution and the civil war. Women’s rights, sexual rights, and reproductive rights activists’ grievances were related to the limitations that the Sandinista leadership imposed on the advance of women’s rights (in particular in relation to domestic violence and sexual and reproductive rights) and to its failure to address gender-based discrimination and abuses within the party. It is however important to take into account that social conservatives constructed their collective identity in straight opposition to the Sandinista regime, and in this sense experienced Sandinismo as an external political force. Most women’s rights activists however were part of the Sandinista movement, and their relationship with Sandinismo was much more complex. The fact that the Sandinista leaders constructed feminism as a potential threat to the revolution caused deep identity conflicts in women that (also) identified with feminism. The censorship they experienced was thus also a form of self-censorship that emerged out of the fear of being excluded from the Sandinista movement, and in part also as an effect of the internalization of the Sandinista discourse in which “national” interests were opposed to “specific” interests of women and sexual minorities. This self-disciplining of feminists contributed to keeping the precarious alliance between feminists and Sandinistas in place. The growing anti-feminism of the Sandinista leadership over the course of the 1990s has thus also to be seen as a consequence of the fact that feminists were not willing to engage in this self-censorship anymore. This was epitomized in the conflict that emerged when in 1998 Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega faced a public accusation from his stepdaughter Zoilamérica Narvaez of long-term sexual abuse and the autonomous women’s movement took a stance in her support.

The general political cleavage that prevailed in the 1980s is important to explain why social conservatives reviled the Sandinistas so strongly, but also why a debate around sexuality did not emerge before regime transition. It is only gradually - towards the end of the 1980s that their grievances shifted towards the sexual politics of the Sandinista regime. This had partly to do with the increasing pressure of feminists on the Sandinista regime, and a number of concessions by the Sandinistas towards feminist demands, such as the introduction of sexuality education in schools, the easing of access to therapeutic abortion, the recognition of de facto partnerships, and the introduction of unilateral (“no-fault”) divorce.
The struggle around sexuality in the beginning of the 1990s thus emerged out of this “old” cleavage, and was also at first structured along partisan lines. Social conservative discourses revolved around the “destruction of the family” and explicitly targeted the Sandinistas - not feminists. I show that it was the growth of feminist activism and the change in the alliance strategy of the Sandinista party that produced a gradual reorientation of social conservative discourse and political realignment of the debate, in which the women's movement ended up with virtually no political allies and the Sandinistas moved out of the crosshairs of social conservatives, first by remaining silent in the public debate, and later by supporting their agenda.

Social conservatives and feminists thus experienced the Sandinista regime in very different ways, and regime transition had completely different meanings and implications for these actors. But why was that so? I argue that it is not experiences alone that shape people’s worldviews, but that the available frames to make sense out of these experiences also play an important role.

Through in-depth interviews it became clear that “pro-life” and feminist women both had experiences related to women’s oppression, but interpreted these in completely different ways. “Pro-life” women found an important and empowering interpretative tool in a conservative version of Christianity. Feminists found a (rather ambivalent) tool in Sandinismo and its social justice claims. As to the question of which frameworks were available and appealing, people’s closest networks played an important role. Emotions were important in politicization of identities. For both the women’s movement and the “pro-life” movement, experiences of suffering played a significant role in initiating processes of reflection, reframing, and reinterpretation which would trigger them to become activists.

Access to different interpretative frameworks is also important to understand changes over time. For (would be) feminists, the eventual access to the expanding feminist spaces played an important role in their process of transformation, especially during the 1980s. In the 1990s, changes in the predominant political discourses were crucial to reinterpret both their experience with Sandinismo and their idea of feminism. For social conservatives, on the contrary, it was experiences of religious conversion, involvement in particular (conservative) spaces of their churches, or direct contact with “pro-life” activists that deepened or changed their convictions and triggered activism.

My findings confirm the importance of moving away from the idea of the state as the privileged site of power and social change, with power coming from ‘above’. Seeing the state and the law instead as hegemonic effects - as crystallizations of power relations that are reproduced in the local centers of everyday life, as proposed by Foucault - allows us to rethink the relationship between the personal and the political in the reproduction of power relations. It means that power is not simply imposed from “outside”, but something that works from “within”, through our worldviews, moral conceptions, through the ideas and assumptions that we take for
granted. My research further suggests that this occurs not simply through cognitive but through deeply emotional processes.

This is evident in my analysis of the 1992 parliamentary debate on sex crime reform, which illustrates how the fears of political actors across party lines shaped the course of the reform: anxieties about the sexual abuse of children, but also concerns about the loss of privilege or about altering the established “places” of men and women in society. It is also visible in the appeal and resonance of social conservative discourses that build their legitimacy upon ideas about Nature and God, and also on everyday assumptions about gender and the place of men and women in society. Conservative discourses are also predicated on the gendered desires that are generated in a patriarchal society, such as the desire of women to be protected by men and find fulfillment through a particular model of marriage and motherhood, and the desire of men to have a role that validates their ideals of masculinity.

In the case of activists in the women’s movement, the way that power operates from within is shown most dramatically in the construction of exclusive and “total” identities: Feminists inherited from the Sandinistas certain ideas about a social and political movement based on a privileged identity, a corresponding hierarchy of rights and the notion that the state is a critical arena of social change. It is this legacy that hindered the development of feminist activism in Nicaragua and especially the mobilization around sexual and reproductive rights, also throughout the 1990s. Firstly because the demand for disciplined unity failed to do justice to the diversity of the movement, leading to conflict and fragmentation, and secondly because the outward-oriented nature of political action resulted in a disregard of the personal as an important sphere of transformation.

To understand political processes, it is therefore necessary to understand the personal stakes of the actors involved and of the people who are (meant to be) interpellated. This goes in line with previous attempts to look at the relation between the cultural and the political by looking at cultural politics of social movements. My emphasis on the “personal” (as both cultural and political) seeks to shift the analytical gaze to include processes that have received less attention, precisely because they were seen as confined to the “individual,” “private,” and “emotional” domain.

Hence, in my analysis of struggle and mobilization around sexuality in Nicaragua I propose to re-think two important relationships. One is the relationship between social conservatism and religion, and consequently with the churches. Though religion offers an important interpretative and organizational frame for “pro-life” activism, religious conservatism should not be taken for granted. Instead we have to ask how and why, and in which moments, conservative religious frames gain resonance. Rather than “bastions” of the “pro-life” movement the churches should be seen themselves as arenas of struggle around sexuality. Their participation in the political struggle for social conservatism should be seen as a (relatively recent)
historical development that has to do with changing political contexts, changing political agendas of the churches, their shifting relationship to the state, and the recruitment strategies of “pro-life activists” directed towards appropriating religious networks as mobilizing structures for the “pro-life” movement.

The other relationship that has to be re-examined is the one between “sex and the left” and more specifically feminism and revolution. Feminism has been analyzed primarily as a legacy of revolution, and this has led analysts to miss some important points. Together with González and Barbosa I show that feminist ideas and ideas of sexual liberation were not new to Nicaragua, and that they did not first emerge as a product of the Sandinista revolution. Rather, they were present in the social movements of the 1970s, and inspired the movement that would lead to the Sandinista revolution. In other words revolutionary movements attracted a diversity of people with ideals about social change, and were subsequently disciplined into a Marxist inspired revolutionary model propagated by the Sandinista leadership. One of the arguments put forth in this thesis is that the relationship between feminism and revolution should therefore not be seen as one directional, but reciprocal. Recognizing feminist agency as co-constitutive of the revolutionary process means acknowledging the role (would be) feminists played, both in forging its achievements and in sustaining its silences. It further challenges the idea of the primacy of the struggle for economic and political rights over the struggle for sexual rights and instead exposes this discourse as a discourse of power that succeeded in marginalizing sexual and reproductive rights from the revolutionary project.