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Connected citizens and networked resistance

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I was invited by one of my informants, via Facebook, to assist in a “marcha de las putas” (SlutWalk), by now a nearly worldwide feminist symbolic action with the multiple aims of protesting against sexual assault against women and showing that feminism still matters. The march I was invited to would take place in Matagalpa, Nicaragua, and although I would not make it to the march, I clicked “assist.” Why? Well, I sympathised with the idea and felt that attending the call on Facebook was, however weak, a contribution in itself, to the cause as such, as well as to this specific walk in Matagalpa.

In a globalised and networked society, civic involvement and social mobilisation become increasingly more connected to issues of communication, culture and consumption. On-and-off-line life and action mix to an ever increasing extent, and political engagement grows more and more intertwined with social practices in various media. Transnational communication flows add to the complex organisation of political and social life and offer new ways to engage with society, both within and between local and global realms. The aim of this article is to shed light on the ways in which social and political activism are embedded in different communicative practices, at a local as well as a global level, and the various ways in which these practices are part of people’s everyday life. The focus lies on civic practices and the kind of power relations that emerge from new and old ways of organising, mobilising and networking.

Empirically, this article draws on a study carried out in Nicaragua in February 2011. The study applies a critical ethnographic approach to look at feminist civil society organisations in Nicaragua and their work to advocate human rights and gender equality in a context marked by

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religious and political tension. I centred my study on a feminist organisation, *Grupo Venancia.* However, rather than the organisation per se, it is its activities, affiliations, discourses and involvement of people within and around it that were the focus of interest.

**Transnationalisation and civil society**

The women’s movement in Nicaragua is facing some serious challenges as a result of the anti-feminist politics of the Sandinista government, led by President Ortega. Over the past years, a strong and rather peculiar alliance between the Sandinista government and the Catholic Church has developed, which step by step has led to the return of patriarchal rule. The penalisation of therapeutic abortion in 2007 can be seen as the utmost manifestation of this regime. Abortion and issues related to sexual and reproductive health have triggered an infected public debate, and also made evident the discrepancies between the political feminist left and right. This has opened up for a new set of discourses around gender and citizen rights, equality, social justice, and power. These emerging discourses contest, to a high extent, the revolutionary legacy on which the Sandinista party and the political left depend ideologically, and this is one of several reasons to why the feminist movement also experiences internal struggles.

Nicaragua also sees a conflict over some key notions in both revolutionary and liberal (and, for that matter, communitarian conservative) tradition. Who gets, for example, to define the meaning of “participación ciudadana,” citizen participation? At macro level, the *discourse of participation* reveals participation as a concept and practice virtually turned into an imperative, mainstreamed into the leading development discourse, and “operationalised” in numerous ways by important and powerful donors and institutions. Critical voices talk of “participation for show,” and that the participatory paradigm is being used as a cover-up for neo-liberal individualism (Brown 2003, 2005; Sen 2007; Söderbaum 2008). Lisa Richey (2009) talks about the “compassionate consumer,” suggesting that consumerism, or “causumerism,” is a way of expanding citizen participation and civic compassion into the realm
of consumption. Wendy Brown (2003, 2005) claims that a whole new morality has developed, in which the individual – and thus citizen – is increasingly made responsible for “running the business” of his or her life. In Nicaragua, as in many “receiving” countries, international aid has largely contributed to the implementation of a democratic framework that rests on these principles and ideals. The vocabulary around social change, with an increased focus on “accountability,” “ownership,” etc, reflects this new orientation. For Grupo Venencia, citizenship has become a central concept, along with individual and collective “empowerment.”

Various researchers have looked at civil society as a platform for democracy and pointed to its potential to function as a “school of democracy where citizens learn the values of trust, compromise, peaceful conflict resolution, tolerance, and civic participation” (van Sickle 2008, p 2). Others have pointed to the conflictive character of civil society. Clifford Bob (2007, p 37) even suggests that civil society is not ruled by altruism, but is rather a “Darwinian marketplace where legions of desperate groups vie for scarce attention, sympathy, and money.” Clearly, civil society is heterogeneous with conflicting interests; nevertheless, it is a significant realm for social and political struggle and democratic practice. The new power dynamics and socio-political transformations that the world has experienced through globalisation in the past decades have led to that “citizenship defined as both practice and status becomes a field of contest” (Isin and Wood 1999, p 6). The character of political and social participation is rapidly changing, and it is understood that globalisation\(^5\) processes and the globalising technologies and processes (Chouliaraki 2010) add to the complexity of any analysis of social interaction. A characteristic feature running across all these dimensions is the mediatisation in and of society. An ever more compelling issue is the role media\(^6\) play in democracy as well as in the everyday lives of people. To a growing extent, various social and political processes are embedded in an equally expanding variety of cultural processes and practices, new and old. This calls for a closer analysis of how we understand and relate to “the social” as well as ”the political,” but also of the role media and communication technology play, or rather, how people use them.
Connected citizens, new media and public connection

Interest is great in the connection between media and democracy, and especially in the potential role of internet and new media in political and public deliberation (Couldry 2005; Couldry et al 2007; Bakardjieva 2011; Bakardjieva 2009; Dahlgren 2009; Dahlgren 2005). The conceptual framework is expanding, and terms like “interactivity,” “connectivity,” “expressivity” and “creativity” have been explored at length in a variety of disciplines. They have also to a varying degree been informing research and theories in political and social sciences (Jenkins 2008; Dahlgren 2009). New communication technology has made it possible for civil society to transcend the limits of the local and national and have expanded the possibilities to interconnect, mobilise and advocate over geographic and demographic boundaries. In other words, new media and communication technology change the core of social life and – obviously – also civic life.

I participated in a workshop on citizenship and gender provided by Grupo Venancia, where some 30 women of different ages had gathered. Although theoretical concepts and ideas were introduced, the various exercises departed from the women’s daily lives and personal experiences. During the course of the day, numerous testimonies were shared, and discourses of empowerment and feminine solidarity blended with horrifying stories of abuse, violence and oppression, but also with laughter, dancing and hugs. The women came from different movements and organisations in the region. Their involvement in social or organisational work at the local level had mostly a very practical sense to it, and appeared immediately connected to the daily lives and experiences in the community. They wanted a better life for themselves and other women, and struggled to decrease domestic violence and help victims to report abuse. They also fought for better health care and more education, especially related to sexual and reproductive issues. Much of the focus during the workshop was on bridging the gap between abstract discourses on citizenship, emancipation and deliberation and the real, material conditions of everyday life. One exercise consisted in discussing and performing (through sociodrama) how, why and which values and norms come across in different social realms: in the family, in church, in the educational system, and the media. These moments opened up
for critical reflections and ideas about how to interfere, resist or change these values and structures. However, the subsequent discussions also witnessed of a kind of resigned pragmatism: symbolic action has, after all, limited effects on reality. On a similar note, some informants expressed scepticism in regards to the “true” democratic potential of the Internet, but recognised that it offered expanded visibility and networks, and that cultural production and circulation on-line is a comparatively affordable way to give voice and connect and join forces transnationally. One fruitful way to address this dilemma could be by connecting to Couldry, Livingstone and Markham’s (2010) term mediated public connection, describing how media usage can be a way to address or express a public orientation and negotiate between the private and the public realm. Couldry et al argue that we need to look beyond our “old” preconceptions of political participatory actions and see how people make sense of society, their place within it, and how they engage in debate or social and political questions at different levels. I believe that Carol Hanisch’s claim “the personal is political” (in Bakardjieva 2009, p 93) is key to understanding how citizenship emerges from private experiences and needs.

Representational space and sense-making

So, how can we understand new media in terms of citizen participation? The latest hype around social media’s “inherent” democratic potential that followed the uprising in Northern Africa in the beginning of 2011 made Swedish Minister for International Development Cooperation, Gunilla Carlsson, argue in favour of net activism and label Twitter and Facebook “technologies of liberation.” However, technology in itself is quite value neutral, and does not have some kind of in-built democratic meter. What technology can offer is the expansion of social relations, and an increased opportunity for individuals and collectives to engage publicly, build communities, and gain and spread knowledge. SlutWalks is but one example of how local worlds can transcend the barriers of physical and cultural contexts. In my many encounters with organised feminists, members of womens’ organisations, and local community developers/activists, this connection with some “virtual,” but equally real communities was considered significant. It inspired and spurred their cause,
but also represented a way for them to connect to realities beyond their own, and add a political significance to their everyday lives. In this sense the awakening of a political consciousness and recognition of a political identity become very connected to communicative action, but also the ability to reinterpret well-known everyday routines and relations. I find it useful here to discuss the term subactivism as introduced by Maria Bakardjieva (2009), referring to “the kind of politics that unfolds at the level of subjective experience and is subsumed in the flow of everyday life” (Bakardjieva 2009, p 92). She notes (Bakardjieva 2011, pp 6-7) that:

…novel practices intersecting new media (blogs, social networking sites, video-sharing sites and others) and traditional media (press, radio, television) bridge the everyday life of the subject and these previously remote deliberative spheres. The proliferation of such practices creates favorable conditions for subactivism to transform into activism proper.

Space-making relates to the ways in which citizenship, citizen practices and participation are linked to space, publicness and deliberation (Habermas 1989). Negotiations of space and place – physical and representational – make up an important dimension in the strategic work of Grupo Venancia. To make and claim space become politicised actions, where the politics of everyday life occur; it is part of the striving for recognition, and makes up a “constitutive dimension of radical or subversive forms of citizenship in itself” (Fraser 1997, in Chouliaraki 2010).

In interviews and observations I found that small everyday duties and actions could be filled with different and ambiguous meaning. The social character of human action and interaction is vital in understanding citizen participation as a social practice, and it would be wrong to disregard the importance of arenas and actions where politics manifest themselves or become embodied. For example, my informants behaved differently depending on the setting and situation and would generally act more “freely” during collective action within organisational settings. They would also be more courageous in these situations and make a more critical analysis of structural and institutional inequalities. Several informants referred to the physical environment, the safety and the liberating atmosphere of the workshop mentioned above, and these
feelings were closely related to the strength of the collective. However, the terms “citizen” and “citizenship” often appeared artificial to them. Instead, it was as “women” they assumed these civil rights and this status. This, although abstract, comfort – in belonging to a greater movement, and to have something in common with women one had not even met, and whose realities might appear unimaginable to some women – was in itself empowering.

Conclusion

It is crucial to distinguish between the various objectives and activities, but also the different realities that form a social movement. We have to remember that social movements are formed around already existing social constellations; it is easy in the hype around what is “new” to forget that sometimes the most relevant or urgent knowledge is found when we look deeper into the social and cultural sediments of life worlds. The link between communication and culture and the exercise of democratic or civic engagement is growing stronger with the ever increasing opportunities to engage with both public(s) and public spaces/spheres as well as with politics. This will obviously impact the preconditions for civic culture (Dahlgren 2005) and participation. But one must not disregard the materiality of peoples’ lives, nor the bias and inequalities built into the technology itself. There is a growing need for individual citizens as well as collectives to acquire and improve their communicative “skills,” or rather the communicative repertoire required to penetrate and be part of these potentially transnational flows of voices that can bring about social change.

Notes

1. SlutWalks started as a very local initiative in Toronto in April this year, but has quickly spread and have mobilised thousands of demonstrators – virtual and real – around the world; North and South America, Asia and Europe. Washington Post has labeled SlutWalks “the most successful feminist action of the past 20 years” (http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/slutwalks-and-the-future-of-feminism/2011/06/01/AGjB9LIH_story.html (accessed June 3, 2011).

2. The study is part of my PhD project on citizen participation and communicative practices and social change. The methods deployed include interviews, focal group
interviews and participant observation of organisational and communitarian activities, as well as of the informants’ everyday practices, such as domestic chores, shopping and attending church.

3. *Grupo Venancia* (GV) is a feminist organisation founded in 1992. GV is located in Matagalpa, and uses a cultural center as basis for its administrative staff. GV provides training for members and other civil society organisations in the region on diverse topics related to gender, equality, human rights etc. Furthermore, GV is a political force in the local community, and is affiliated with national and transnational women’s movements. GV’s mix of activities gathers people from remote rural areas as well as the urban zones.

4. Here I refer to rich Western donors and institutions such as the IMF and World Bank, but also philanthropic endeavors such as the Melissa and Bill Gates Foundation and similar resourceful initiatives.

5. I here use globalisation in a very broad sense to refer to a number of processes and changes that have taken and/or take place in economic, cultural, political, social realms, ranging from the demise of the Soviet Union to the impact of outsourcing on local communities.

6. I here refer to the increasing media saturation in society and the ways in which production, consumption, distribution, technology etc are changing.

References


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