DOCUMENTING LATIN AMERICAN CIVIL SOCIETY
Concept, Creation, Publication, Distribution

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<u>Introduction</u>

Since the 18th century Latin American societies struggled with the issues surrounding citizenship, and upon Independence, the nature of democracy and self-rule. For centuries the suppression and violence experienced by various segments of the population created societies of vast inequalities in terms of access to resources and power. Citizens questioned democratic institutions that allowed such abuses to prevail, thereby revealing the profound nature of distrust held by many individuals and groups. Although various institutional transitions occurred during the second half of the 20th century, ones with the intent of bringing democratic values and guarantees to society through reform measures, the reality often proved short of such objectives. What many critics of the process recognized, and consequently formulated strategies to address, was that a moral transition also had to occur but had not **[overhead: cuba]**. Such transitions take far longer for a country to recognize, and to understand the profound depth of the implications involved. The challenge therefore revolves around the ways to resolve those inequalities concerning differentials with access to power that inevitably address access to resources. Such quest encapsulates the tensions within a democracy because it tests in various ways the substantive quality and extent of citizenship as understood broadly.

This essay addresses the issues involved with the expression of various groups concerned with the allocation of resources and access to political and economic power during the last 30 years or so. Emphasis

is on how grass-roots organizations conceptualize an issue or problem and then transformed that understanding into images and text appropriate for reproduction and distribution. These efforts, designed to create greater space for broader participation in society and therefore the exercise of citizenship rights, test the democratic nature of the regime as to its openness and capability for addressing and resolving the concerns expressed by the authors of these publications. That such imprints often circulate at the margins of power, or fail to receive immediate attention of the ruling leadership, does not diminish the significance of the message or work (as an artifact) itself. Rather, concern needs to focus on authorship, message, context of distribution, and reception. Rarely can clear histories be constructed for each of these facets, but when assessed broadly over many years, and measured against the official record as pertaining to specific issues, a solid appreciation of the function of such works for drawing attention to problems and influencing the crafting of solutions is possible.

Since the 1960s most countries experienced significant political and economic change, often accompanied by new leadership, legislation and sometimes constitutions. Participation in this process of transition, whether it was to or from dictatorships, varied in its composition. What is consistent, however, is the presence of alternative voices, albeit in some circumstances (e.g., Cuba after 1968 and Chile during the early years of the Pinochet dictatorship) limited in number and influence. Leftist ideology figured prominently, comprised of populist or Marxist groups. Only the former achieved long-term power, with of course, the exception of Cuba. Often elites received shelter in think tanks sponsored by or fiscally supported by foreign foundations or governments **[overhead: primer seminario]**. These concentrations of intellectuals prepared highly sophisticated critiques

of the regime and its impact on the populace, but the very nature of these printed critiques, and often the authorship itself, limited the scope of distribution and political impact within the country. Nevertheless, such works, when approached historically, offer an important record of thought about current issues and provide insights into planning for the time when leadership and regime type would change. Furthermore, these think tanks sheltered many individuals later to become influential public figures, some rising to the presidency.

Concurrently, but with variation in the intensity and extent of penetration, political parties and movements operated, perhaps in a clandestine mode, but nevertheless with the intent to challenge the prevailing order **[overhead: ejercito mexicano]**. Frequently these organizations produced tracts critiquing specific actions of the government, but in the case of the more radical of groups, were vague on the specifics of plans for governing should power come into their hands. Although such groups and their ideas can be discounted for the absence of clearly articulated strategies to address structural deficiencies, some aspects of their messages did resonate with other groups, or government itself, and became co-opted **[overhead: plan nacional]**.

The more politically and socially marginalized organizations, whether due to ideology, topical specialization (e.g., HIV, child labor), regional location, or ethnicity, experienced mixed success due to the nature of the organization and its ability to attract supporters and financial backers. Under the best of circumstances, funds from abroad provided the necessary basis for a more expansive program of creation and publication. This is especially true with groups associated through ethnicity, gender, race, and economic activity **[overhead: el trabajo]**.

Political ephemera of this period also reveals much about the struggles in redefining citizenship, thereby providing a focus on the people who take part in a country's political and social life. Increasingly these struggles are ethnonacional in character with either a focus on restrictive boundaries (i.e., restricting membership to a given ethnonacional group), or an emphasis on *content* of citizenship in multiethnic settings. This latter category brings into play Indians asking for redefinitions of citizenship to include nation states parallel to the requirements of local autonomy for their own communities. What emerges is a broader way of thinking of citizenship: civil and political rights are to be co-equal and independent of either particular ethnic content or conflict. The basis for this rethinking involves social networks and political associational space, and hence the need to strengthen both. NGOs, social movements, ethnic associations, political parties, and other configurations of civic associations actively engage in this expansive project of citizenship. Extensive work on civil rights, especially the freedom of association, expression, faith, ownership of property, and seeking justice figure prominently. Political rights must be interwoven through participation in government, suffrage and election to office. And finally social rights, as yet not highly developed in many Latin American countries, address economic welfare and security. Many publications aim to meld these three rights areas so that readers see themselves as part of a wider national project. Through the scrutiny and study of an organization's publications researchers may discern the status of its objectives, the likely targeted populations, and relationship with other goals within a community.

The Inner Workings

Many of the NGOs operating in Latin America are not formally associated with a political party or political

alliance, yet the organization's objectives embrace many aspects of political activity. Popular movements are likely to subvert national order, with a consequence being a redefinition of democratic representation and a broadening of debate on citizenship. Whether it be sensitizing populations about an issue or speaking on behalf of a constituency, ultimately the demands of these movements and NGOs are likely to converge with political interests and activities **[overhead: carta]**. Formulating the proper messages for each becomes critically important for success, or at least gaining recognition of the issue and its association with the NGO. So not only is this phase of work devoted to a creative process of message formulation, but concurrently it is also a process of establishing or strengthening the reputation of legitimacy as a source of information, or in the position of spokesman. In highly contested areas of activity, multiple NGOs or social movements occupy the space, sometimes in competition, other times working in tandem or collaboratively.

In the case of ethnically based organizations, additional layers of complexity occur. Often publications and broadcast media transmissions must be in indigenous languages. Graphic elements also must reflect cultural sensitivity, ranging from design to color **[overhead: palabra]**. A critical dimension involves the complexity of the text in vocabulary and syntax given the commonly low educational attainment levels of the reader or listener. Crafting these messages into works that are engaging, trustworthy and effective is no small task. Often these groups receive assistance from foreign funding agencies, some of which offer technical assistance. Other groups benefit from association with such organizations as the Jesuits. Economic constraints may limit the size of the publication, so text needs to configure itself into a limited range of pages that likely will include graphics of individuals appearing with the physical

features and garb of the reader, along with iconographic elements easily recognized and understood by the reader.

For works of less immediate political nature, those focusing on didactic matters serve as good examples **[overhead: boletim]**. Educating a populace about issues or processes requires a variety of strategies. Some works in this category are highly practical in that they identify the rights of an individual or community (e.g., consumer rights NGOs or quasi-governmental agencies in this area), or serve to educate on environmental issues (e.g., recycling, water conservation, reforestation), or address health concerns (e.g., reproductive health, child care, nutrition). Converting technical information into appropriate language accompanied by attractive graphics requires considerable knowledge of the community's capacities to absorb and act on information. Often such work is the result of team effort, especially when linguistic competencies are involved. This type of collaborative authorship reflects how much of a NGO's work is accomplished.

The work as an artifact also figures highly in the overall plans of the creators **[overhead: con dignidad]**. Long gone are the days of the stencil and mimeographed publications on newsprint. While cheap paper still is common, technological innovations have brought far more sophisticated presentation options, including color, variant sizes and formats, and highly attractive type fonts as well as graphic elements. By utilizing recognized formats such as comic books, chapbooks, and posters, NGOs effectively tap into the known realm of printed sources for information. Especially effective are the comic book inspired designs, not only to broaden readership, but also to become part of traditional behavior of lending to other readers. With the decreased costs for color, higher quality paper, and improved graphic presentations, funding agencies

have come to expect a sophisticated output of
information. Some provide technical assistance, or are
willing to underwrite those costs. Others appear to be
more concerned with the artifact than the message, and
these become evident because of their all-too-obvious
disconnection from the nature of the community they
hope will read the work. Sometimes such publications
remain in NGO central offices, are readily distributed
to visitors, but rarely can be found amidst the target
populations.

To what extent do local populations come to rely
upon these works? Because the provision of information
is usually a critically important function of the most
NGOs' work, budgets and staffing reflect the need. Yet
it is not unusual to encounter NGOs largely utilizing
an oral approach, or at the most, small handouts to
convey their messages in workshops and assemblies.
Actual readership is often difficult to determine, but
when the objectives of the organization deal with
behavior modification (e.g., sanitation, reproductive
health, recycling), or a specifically political
objective (e.g., political campaign, election, removal
of politicians from office), then it becomes somewhat
easier to associate outcome with the sources of
knowledge about the topic. On rare occasions can direct
attribution be made between information diffusion and
impact on target populations. Hence, it's best to
consider these works as a *part* of the overall
strategies of an organization.

The nature of the NGO world is such that birth and
death occurs within a relative short period, and upon
demise, other organizations may arise. Relatively
little institutional record is left, and institutional
memory may soon blur as employees become engaged in new
efforts in the same or different fields. It is not
uncommon to meet individuals with employment histories
in several dozen NGOs, social movements, and political
associations. These realities underscore the importance

of the printed and recorded (e.g., videos, CD-ROMs, tape recordings) materials produced for popular sector consumption. As the only surviving record of information sources available at the grassroots level, these works also serve to suggest an institutional configuration present at a given point in time. If funding originated abroad through major foundations, chances are that some institutional history will be present in those archives. But if the NGO operated on the basis of local support, or small-scale subventions from a variety of agencies, again the institutional record is likely to be difficult to recover.

Precisely through the analysis of the publications a researcher can glean not only the issues of a given moment, but also gain a sense of some of the agents committed to the stated causes **[overhead: carta menusal]**. With a wide enough representation, the different arguments can be discerned, and the principal participants identified for subsequent analysis. The longitudinal nature of such collections becomes critically important for gaining a fuller understanding not only of the issues themselves, but also of the life and times at that sector of society. Mere sampling of a few documents, while better than nothing, cannot convey the substantive depth essential for researchers to understand the transitions occurring in society and the factors influencing changes in political support, and with the behavior or commitment of the populace itself.

Use of the Internet introduces entirely new prospects for information diffusion as well as additional difficulties for the retention of documentation in a systematic manner **[overhead: fundación]**. Certainly the incorporation of electronic means of document creation, distribution and retention is increasingly common throughout much of Latin America. Yet within the popular sectors, especially in areas without easy access to computers, or the habit to consult the Internet for information, printed and

recorded formats continue to prevail. At this stage of incorporating electronic media into the daily functioning of NGOs and related groups, what reigns supreme is the availability to vast amounts of information. Through accessing such sources, new networks of political actors arise, and a general globalization of at the grassroots level is enabled as never before. This transformation becomes especially relevant with human rights, gender, environmental, and indigenous issues **[overhead:frente]**. What heretofore had remained at a local, provincial or perhaps national level, now cuts across political boundaries to influence the thinking and behavior of others confronting similar or identical situations (e.g., environmental pollution caused by international oil companies, construction of dams on indigenously owned lands). Ease of communication through e-mail, along with document transfer protocols, enables vastly more sophisticated approaches to issues. For leadership linked in this manner, the sense of isolation diminishes and solidarity with others increases. The long-term implications of this empowerment at the grassroots level should not be underestimated.

Conclusions

    The continually increasing presence of NGOs, social movements and related political groups suggests that popular sector participation in various issues influencing their lives is deemed relevant for bettering individuals and communities. In the process of learning about options and implementing strategies to address problems, a certain amount of fundamental democratic practice occurs. From popular assemblies to community dialogues to selection of leadership, people take control of aspects of their lives that the state or other agencies have neglected to address adequately. In the last three decades these new configurations of interest groups have gained the respect of various types of funding agencies, ranging from bilateral

government aid to that coming from private foreign foundations. Confidence is placed in the relevance of these grassroots organizations to develop not only political consciousness (e.g., often with the use of Paulo Freire methods), but also to serve as a hothouse for the growth of local leadership committed to the improvement of lives through strategies based on social equity, and access to resources and power. Basic to this entire process is the State's adherence to human and civil rights, two areas the State has committed itself to through international treaties and its own constitution and legislation. Greater awareness of the State's deficiencies in upholding these legal instruments to protect citizens has become a hallmark of the work of NGOs. Such private sector participation has in some countries motivated the creation of new official organizations and legislation to address citizen concerns and needs **[overhead: participar]**.

Through creative utilization of locally based knowledge, thorough familiarity with target populations, and the passion for the cause, NGOs and related groups have successfully brought new ideas, approaches and solutions to millions of citizens. In the course of this work, the nature of citizenship has broadened considerably, to allow for fuller participation at different levels of society while also recognizing the rights of access to resources heretofore inaccessible to a majority. Key to this process is effective communication through the print and broadcast media (especially radio), coupled with the development of leadership capacity in workshops and through experience. Although the pace of change lags behind the expectation of many, through personal engagement in the process greater knowledge of how government does and does not work becomes a reality. From such familiarity, coupled with increased information and factual knowledge of immediate utility (especially as accessed through the Internet),

communities are able to experience some change for the better.

Critical for our understanding of these years, and those to come, will be comprehensive collections of documentation, gathered systematically from issuing agencies and arranged in a timely fashion. Such collections should be accessed easily by researchers from many different disciplines if appropriate access points and preservation methods are present. Indeed, these configurations of ephemera hold far more than purely historical interest. They mirror reality while serving to motivate others, and interpret a myriad of realities often invisible to the foreign observer or, as is frequently the case, the politically powerful.