

## **Space, Class, and Party—Critical Tools of Democratization in Nicaragua**

## I. INTRODUCTION

In 1990, amidst an environment of exploitation, revolution, violence, and harsh dictatorship, the people of Nicaragua shifted their support behind Violeta Chamorro, a democratic and conservative candidate. Without the theoretical prerequisites of democratization, the poor electorate was able to peacefully transition their government from the socialist Sandinistas to a developing democracy. Although democracy would seem unlikely in the Nicaraguan context, Leslie E. Anderson and Lawrence C. Dodd argue in their book, *Learning Democracy: Civic Engagement and Electoral Choice in Nicaragua, 1990-2001*, that democracy, “Developed through the emergence of three specific historical conditions: political space, conscious class difference, and strong political parties, with these conditions emerging in a context that would seem antithetical to democracy” (42). Specifically, they believe space, class, and party interacted with one another to allow the key democratic conditions of inclusion and contestation to flourish—two of Dahl’s preconditions for democracy to develop. This paper clarifies that Anderson and Dodd see space, class, and party as historical developments that were used as tools for democratic foundation; once democracy was established, the inclusivity and contestation afforded by democratization allowed space, class, and party to evolve according to the people of Nicaragua’s values, effectively strengthening the quality of democracy.

## II. HISTORICAL ROOTS OF DEMOCRACY: SPACE, CLASS, AND PARTY

### A. Colonial Roots of Space, Class, and Party

While space, class, and party were the essential components that created a foundation for democracy in Nicaragua, they evolved slowly over the centuries. Anderson and Dodd believe these concepts were first developed in colonial times, explaining the tumultuous experience of the native population under Spanish rule, “Produced disagreement, protest, and rebellion, and

with them the beginning of political space for contestation” (44). Native unrest created a space for contestation, which allowed class divisions to emerge as issues to contend over. The larger, poorer segment of the population rebelled against the smaller, more affluent population of Spanish landlords. While space was initially created for more popular dissent, space was also created for contestation amongst the elites, which was fought through division of political camps into the Liberal and Conservative parties. Space for parties was critical as, “The formation of elite disagreement into political parties brought to Nicaragua a distinct advantage that would later favor democratization” (45). While the development of space, class, and party in colonial times did not allow for greater freedoms amongst the people, they served as critical tools that would teach the importance of contestation and inclusivity to the popular consciousness—creating a greater foundation for democratization in the future.

### **B. Space, Class, and Party under Somocismo**

Although the Somoza regime kept Nicaragua in a dictatorship from 1936-1979, the traditions of space, class, and party still existed. Regarding space, “The Somozas could restrict but not eliminate the voices of political dissent against the authoritarian dynasty. Nor could they eliminate the secret public spaces where dissent was nourished and spread. Popular contestation stood muted but not stifled” (51). This was accomplished through forums of opposition outside the dictatorship—which were expressed through class and party lines. As an oppressed group, the peasantry clung to the small spaces of opposition, using Sandino as a popular figure and learning the value of contestation and inclusivity this space provided. The authoritarian regime also redefined the party system, altering the perception of the Conservative party as, “The less extreme [...] of the two elite political parties” (52). The popularity of the traditional parties would increase by the end of the century—UNO, a coalition Conservative-Liberal party, became a more appealing option in 1990 as it promoted the civil liberties denied during the dictatorial oppression of the Somozas. It is ironic that while the authoritarian Somoza regimes attempted to clamp down on civil society through corruption and wealth concentration, leading to massive

poverty, they inadvertently created an opposition that would strengthen the preconditions for democracy. Continuing the traditions of space, class, and party under such stringent regimes actually reinforced these tools, allowing for a stronger foundation for a transition to democracy in 1990.

### **C. Space, Class, and Party under the Sandinistas**

Anderson and Dodd argue the space, class, and party developed most through Sandinista rule and allowed for inclusivity, which “Gave citizens the beginning of the democratic requisites scholars have described as necessary for democratization” (57). Under Ortega, class and space were empowered, specifically as these issues related to the majority of poor that existed within Nicaragua. Class was transformed through land redistribution, as land reforms aimed, “To transform the rural social class structure by extending access of the landless and near-landless to land and work” (59). By empowering the lower classes, Ortega was able to inculcate a critical prerequisite for democracy—inclusivity. Further, new spaces were created throughout Nicaragua that would empower sectors of society that were formerly excluded. This was accomplished through the creation of unions of groups such as peasants and women. More scholars agree that the Sandinista efforts provided the groundwork for democracy vis-à-vis inclusive participation. Luis Serra agreed, “The grassroots organizations served as important channels for the democratic expression of popular interests,” while Gary Ruchwarger felt the mass organizations under Sandinista rule served as, “Schools of democracy” (64). However, an essential lesson in democracy was undermined by Sandinista rule—contestation. Multi-party development was not encouraged under the unilateral rule of the Sandinistas, who held a general election in 1984 only at the behest of international pressure. This election drew upon, “The democratic foundations of political space, class politics, and parties [...] and encouraged contestation and participation as formulated by Dahl” (65). The Sandinistas created tools of their own demise as the space, class, and party they developed would be utilized by the masses to create social agency, allowing them to transition into a more conservative democracy through electoral choice. The space, class, and

party developed under Sandinista rule strengthened democratic foundations, allowing for democracy to emerge in a country that did not possess the theoretical prerequisites of democracy like affluence and urbanization. Instead, as Anderson and Dodd suggest, the working class and peasantry were able to use the social resources of space, class politics, and party in place of affluence to induce contestation and inclusivity, creating a basis for democratization.

### **III. THE EVOLUTION OF SPACE, CLASS, AND PARTY**

#### **A. Evolution of Space after 1990**

As democracy took shape after the 1990 election, the tool of space was able to evolve further, strengthening democracy in the region. This was apparent through the public's reaction to Chamorro's initial economic reforms. Although the people voted for a conservative, democratic government believing it would alleviate the woes created by the radical Sandinistas, Chamorro's economic reforms actually intensified domestic poverty. In response, "The very citizens who had elected Chamorro moved to curb her policies once she was in power, uniting in mobilized opposition" (212). As an accountable, democratic government, Chamorro listened to her constituents by moderating, although not stopping, these economic reforms. By voting in a democratic government, the people were allowed a more open space for contestation and inclusive participation that the government would more effectively respond to. Throughout the nineties, "The political space for contestation and participation expanded to include a more meaningful role for democratic institutions" (215). This action secured and formalized the political space that was more vulnerable in the past. Not only did space create the foundation for democracy, but democratic governance helped evolve the role of political space, effectively improving the quality of democracy.

#### **B. Evolution of Class after 1990**

Although class politics were an essential component in bringing a democratic, conservative government to power, the transition to democracy initially weakened the power of the poorer classes. Anderson and Dodd explain that upon the transition, “Nicaraguans faced the long-term implications of their choice: the transition to a market economy and the loss of the Sandinista social safety net” (213). A market economy and the elimination of Sandinista social services led to greater inequality amongst class wherein the majority poor populous became increasingly subordinate to more affluent elites. Under Chamorro, “Not only were there more poor citizens, [but] poor citizens were considerably poorer” (220). Although class inequality continued, Chamorro remained popular as her regime still afforded the people their political space. The fact that Chamorro remained popular through her governance implies that the Nicaraguan people put more value on their civil liberties created through space, leading to inclusivity and contestation, than on the economic hardships created out of class inequality. The theoretical quality of democracy was weakened by class inequality, but to the people of Nicaragua the quality of democracy was high as their values, specifically civil liberties, were supported and promoted by the government.

### **C. Evolution of Party after 1990**

Party politics evolved after 1990 through the reemergence of traditional political parties; this created contestation amongst political elites, causing them to pander to the values of the populous, thereby strengthening the quality of democracy. By the middle of the nineties, “Nicaragua’s party system had begun to resemble the ‘two and a half party systems’ that occasionally arise in established democracy” (224). In 1996, the two main parties people identified with were the Sandinistas and the traditional Liberal party. The “half” party was identified as the Conservatives while 22.7 percent of the population still identified themselves as independent. The fact that more than one-fifth of the population was not loyal to a party would force the more major parties to contend over issues salient to the public. To engage the public, the traditional parties would promote a, “Regime devoted to civil liberties and democratic

process, then all classes could unite behind a rightist candidate of democratic conservatism. By contrast, an election centering on social policies could generate a class-based result beneficial to the Sandinistas” (224). Mindful of the cross-class value of civil liberties, the traditional parties contended in a political space over this issue. By battling over an issue so significant to the majority of the public a sense of inclusivity was created, effectively increasing the quality of democracy in Nicaragua.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

On a theoretical basis, the environment in Nicaragua was inadequate for democratization to occur; however, the historical evolution of space, class, and party under oppressive and revolutionary regimes allowed democracy to develop in the nation. Anderson and Dodd support space, class, and party as the essential components to democratization in Nicaragua, arguing, “A country with strong foundations of space, class, and party, whether derived through gradualist evolution or social revolution, has most of the domestic conditions necessary for rapid learning of electoral democracy” (32). A long history of repression and radical revolution has taught the people of Nicaragua the value of democracy. Through the informal contestation and inclusivity that was cultivated through their history, the people of Nicaragua were finally able to vote in a government that supported their vital value—civil liberties. Though democratic conservatism may have hindered class equality, the people still supported this rule as the evolution of spatial inclusivity and party contestation afforded the public the cherished liberties they were denied throughout a shared history of oppression. Anderson and Dodd use space, class, and party as conditions in Nicaragua to show that when, “Mobilized politics combine with genuine electoral competition, [...] the poor and poorly educated can engage in extensive citizen participation and serious vote choice, thereby taking their fate and that of their nation into their own hands” (33). By using space, class, and party as tools to support Dahl’s democratic prerequisites of inclusivity and contestation, Anderson and Dodd show that Nicaragua is not an anomaly—instead, it is a

case that provides an alternative theoretical explanation of how democratization can develop and the quality of democracy can improve in a nation without the standard prerequisites for the transition to democracy.



### Works Cited

Anderson, Leslie E. and Lawrence C. Dodd. *Learning Democracy: Citizen Engagement and Electoral Choice in Nicaragua*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005.