Ethnic Self-regulation and Democratic Instability on Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast: The Case of Ratisuna[1]

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Despite the formal transitions to democracy in most parts of Latin America, a range of economic and political impediments have thwarted the processes of democratic consolidation and resulted in a huge gap between the formal political acquisitions and the harsh political and economic realities (Torres-Rivas 1996, Koonings and Kruijt 1999, Cruz 2000). This article explores a particular source of democratic instability in Latin America: the proliferation of self-regulation in regions marked by endemic ethnic conflicts. Self-regulation should be understood very broadly as referring to vernacular forms of authority and rule that emerge in civil society. The notion of self-regulation concerns the forms of authority below the level of the central state and its administrative institutions (Barry, Osborne and Rose 1996). The article will attempt to shed light on some of the shortcomings associated with the mantra of self-regulation by taking an empirical case study as a starting point.[2] Drawing on the specific case of Ratisuna[3], a small Miskitu community on Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast, this study seeks to address informal types of political initiatives to solve the ongoing land conflicts in the area. The emphasis will thus be on the self-regulatory practices community members engage in as they seek to reassert their sovereignty over local territory.

The questions to be discussed include the following: What types of informal politics emerge in the community? In what ways are everyday forms of hostility, violence and conflict expressed in practices of self-regulation? What are the processes of inclusion and exclusion produced as part of the self-regulatory practices? Does the absence of standard state institutions make room for alternative and non-emancipatory practices? What is the impact of these practices on the processes of democratic consolidation? And finally, are democratization, the retreat of the state, and increasing self-responsibility perhaps too naively conflated?

Politics of identity, self-help and democratization in the neo-liberal era

In recent decades there has been a growing scholarly interest in the role of civil society in the processes of democratization in Latin America. In this article I advance a conception of civil society as an avenue of social change, but one which also seeks to go beyond notions of civil society as the home of the good and enlightened. Civil society groups do often engage in purposive collective actions that lead to progressive transformations of society. Yet processes of social change in Latin America, and elsewhere, often take the form of fanaticism and violence, which is usually not associated with democratic change (Castells 1997, Kay 2001). Based on Central American experiences, some scholars, for example, have argued that an authoritarian political culture has developed in civil society. Some of the

indications of this culture are a general increase in violence as a means to solve conflicts and widespread support for authoritarian political figures (Cruz 2000, Koonings and Kruijt 1999).

I therefore argue that instead of taking the democratic potential of civil society for granted, we must ground the study of civil society activities in the contradictions and conflicts of the social context from which they emerge. Only by applying such an approach is it possible to grasp the enormous diversity, if not contradictory plurality (Castells 1997, 4), that civil society often encompasses. It can be useful to draw on Castells's distinction between *resistance identity* and *project identity* (Castells 1997, 8-12, 60-67, 356-362).[4] Although both identities are constructed in opposition to dominant institutions in society, they differ in the role they play in social change. Project identities, on the one hand, may lead to the transformation of social structures and to the redefinition of social positions in society. Resistance identities, on the other hand, generate defensive and secluded communities organized around religious, ethnic and territorial principles. Accordingly, whereas the former are potential sources of social change, the latter reinforce existing boundaries in society (1997, 66-67).

Today, Castells argues, project identities sometimes emerge out of resistance communities, but this does not mean that a community formed out of resistance identity automatically evolves toward more progressive forms. On the contrary, it may often remain defensive and enclosed (1997, 357). In these cases, the search for a better future takes place 'in the reconstruction of defensive identities around communal principles' (1997, 11). According to Castells, resistance identities are mainly constructed by poor and marginalized populations who are excluded from the global networks of wealth, power and information. The living conditions of these groups have worsened in recent years by the general removal of social safety nets and the privatization of public agencies. One of the central points in Castells' analysis is therefore that neo-liberalism is a primary engine in the formation of defensive communities. I agree on this point, but I also venture the hypothesis that the neo-liberal trend of self-help contributes to forming self-help communities. This is because the neo-liberal politics with the privatization and decentralization of governance, and the general turn to civic associations to help execute politics, often originate in self-sustained patterns of development, where the language of free enterprise, self-regulation and self-responsibility prevails (Long 2001, Veltmeyer and Petras 2000, Vilas 1997). Practices of self-regulation are thus particularly salient in social environments marked by the retreat of the state and associated cuts in the expenditures for social provision, health care and security. In this situation, the communities become organizing units that fill the social and political vacuum created by a state in retreat. Defensive communities, therefore, emanate from a dual process of political, cultural and economic disfranchisement on the one hand, and the organization of self-help communities formed around excluded identities on the other.

In Nicaragua, the neo-liberal reforms began with the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in 1990, and since then an epoch with subsequent governments ideologically dedicated to neo-liberalism has deepened the adjustment policies (Prevost and Vanden 1999). Some have argued that the neo-liberal structural adjustment programmes in Nicaragua were more strident than anywhere else in Latin America

(Pisani 2003, 112). Perhaps for this reason, Florence E. Babb goes so far as to argue that 'a systematic undoing of economic reforms introduced by the Sandinistas' has taken place (Babb 2001, 155). Apart from cutbacks in state-sponsored services and subsidies, industry, health and education have been privatized. Consequently, today the country is suffering from even higher unemployment and underemployment, as well as from declining levels of health, education and living standards among the majority of the population. The informal sector has experienced a simultaneous increase, particularly as the state sector has been cut back (Pisani 2003). A permanent crisis with ongoing political and economic deterioration has thus characterized the 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium (Pérez-Baltodano 2006). The result has been growing frustration, political chaos, and a disillusioned population that has taken matters into its own hands. Post-revolutionary Nicaragua therefore provides a case for the study of self-help initiatives under neo-liberal rule.[5]

Politics of identity and place in the community of Ratisuna

Ratisuna was selected as a case study for two reasons. First, it has an unusual political history. Ratisuna has a regional and even national reputation as being one of the most politically assertive communities on the Atlantic Coast. The approximate 1,500 inhabitants are known to nurture deep resentment against the Nicaraguan government. Together with members of other ethnic communities on the Atlantic Coast, many men and women from Ratisuna fought against the Sandinista revolution in the 1980s. When the hated Somoza dictatorship had finally been defeated, the new Sandinista government launched an ambitious plan for social and economic development. Central chapters in this plan focused on the integration of the Atlantic Coast, and in the first years after the revolution large sums were invested on the Coast. Nevertheless, in 1981 a large number of Miskitu-Indians and members of the other ethnic minorities left their communities to receive military training in Costa Rica or Honduras, and to take part in the ongoing war between the U.S.-backed *contras*[6] and the Sandinista government. Existing research on the underlying reasons for the anti-Sandinista mobilization argues that fundamental aspects of the state's anti-imperialistic, nationalist and paternalist approach to the modernization of the Atlantic Coast clashed with an emerging ethno-political consciousness and with a historical antipathy toward Spanish-speaking Nicaragua on the Atlantic Coast (Hale 1994, Gordon 1998, Vilas 1989). Accordingly, what the Sandinistas saw as progressive and revolutionary initiatives to create progress and development was interpreted as dishonest colonization by the Coast people. But a historical absence of the state is also part of the explanation. The Atlantic Coast has been part of the Nicaraguan nation-state since 1894, but during most part of the twentieth century a disinterested Somoza state had given rise to a de-facto U.S.-dominated enclave economy (Vilas 1989). Until the Sandinista Revolution there had thus only been very little human and institutional interaction between the Atlantic Coast and the rest of the country. The rapid appearance, however, of different state institutions, including the military, and many benevolent, but also paternalistic and often racist, Mestizos was therefore a source of widespread resentment on the Coast (Hale 1994).

Many community members of Ratisuna and other communities therefore decided to take part in the anti-Sandinista mobilization. In part, for this reason the inhabitants are known to be perhaps the most militantly anti-Sandinista combatants in the entire country. Moreover, the community has a long history of being one of the most belligerent in terms of safeguarding its communal lands (Henriksen 2002).

Second, Ratisuna has an unusual ethnic and colonial history. The community is located on the southern part of Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast, which is home to six different ethnic groups.[7] The colonization by Great Britain and Spain still makes its presence felt in the community. Today most community members identify themselves as Miskitu people, although their first language is Creole English, the language spoken by the Creole descendants of the African slaves who worked on British plantations. Not far from Ratisuna are Miskitu-speaking communities as well as villages where people identify themselves as belonging to the Creole population or to some of the other ethnic minorities. Moreover, as a result of the influx of landless peasants and other Spanish-speaking Mestizos from the Pacific Coast and central parts of the country, the area is extremely diversified today. This means that local identity is being constructed along a combination of spatial/territorial and ethnic lines. But much suggests that land rights have played a decisive role in Ratisuna and other ethnic communities on the Coast for many years.

Historical background: the development of a communal property regime in Ratisuna

Because Ratisuna is placed at the margin, and with a largely illiterate population, written sources of this history are very scarce. However, due to townspeople's vivid memory and the little, but very useful, CIDCA-archive in Bluefields on the coast of Nicaragua, it is possible to reconstruct fragments of Ratisuna's property history.[8] The evidence available suggests that Ratisuna received its first communal land title in 1915, a few years after the Harrison-Altamirano Treaty of 1906 had been established between Great Britain and Nicaragua. The Treaty recognized full Nicaraguan sovereignty over the Coast, and it created the legal conditions for the recognition of Indian and Creole lands. But a national Land Title Commission, formed shortly after, remained inactive in the first five to six years (Vilas 1989; Hale 1994, 48; Gordon 1998). Governmental indifference is part of the explanation, but the fact that the local population harboured 'the deepest distrust of all Nicaraguans'[9] must also have been a major obstacle. British diplomacy decided to take a more active role, and much suggests that this enabled the commission to work more satisfactorily. The Nicaraguan Governor of Bluefields was a member of the land commission, and in a letter sent to the British Consul H. O. Chalkley he reported that the commission had had positive experiences surveying land in the Indian and Creole communities. It was only in Ratisuna that the appearance of Spanish-speaking commission members appears to have triggered the inhabitants' anti-Nicaraguan sentiments:

> [C]on idéntico fin se visitó al pueblo de [Ratisuna], en donde no fue posible hacer nada, por tropezar con obstinada resistencia por parte de aquel vecin-

dario, quien siempre se ha negado a que se les demarque zonas para sus tra-
bajos agrícolas.[10]

Although Ratisuna, in fact, later received a land title, the Governor's experiences
in the community suggest that Ratisuna has a long history of collective resistance
and political mobilization. There also seems to be an inward orientation in the ac-
tivities. Although there must have been some communication and coordination
between the communities about how to deal with the Land Title Commission, there
is no indication of common 'pan-ethnic' or inter-communal manifestations. On the
contrary, the people in Ratisuna seem to have reacted in a different and more ag-
gressive way than the neighbouring communities. The collective orientation was,
thus, apparently more local than regional or ethnic in character.

About 25 years later community members wrote a letter to a prominent and
influential American citizen living in Bluefields, in which they expressed com-
plaints about the illegal exploitation of community land:

> From the British Commissioner Mr. Chocolate [sic, Consul H. O. Chalkley]
> gave to the inhabitance of [Ratisuna] a block of land…, as our personal prop-
> erty which we have our title for same. From that time we had no trouble with
> no one…. Since this few years ago this Alexander Carr is claiming a portion of
> our property that was granted to us…. We are having plenty of trouble with this
> man Alexander Carr, we are almost tired of making complain to the *Jefe Políti-
> co*, and also to the Court, and we can't get a decided answer, they are just put-
> ting us of…. The *Jefe Político* told us that we are making too much trouble….
> Even after having our Title for our property they are trying to take it away from
> us…, for which reason we are compel to apply to the higher authority for our
> rights.[11]

Some of the older people in Ratisuna clearly remember Alexander Carr. He ap-
pears to have been a man from Providence Island, who bought a large portion of
land about ten miles south of the community from a community member. How-
ever, according to rules established by the community, individual plots are part of
the communal property regime and cannot be sold. Compared to contemporary
land conflicts, this incidence must be considered of minor importance. But it shows
us that the arrival of an outsider was seen as a threat to the community and that the
communal land areas were closely related to a communal identity.

This concern with the immediate setting and the communal soil was also pre-
sent during my stay in the community. It was often expressed in community mem-
bers' historical memories, which went far beyond lived experience. An extensive
part of the residents 'remember', for example, the events leading to the foundation
of the community, and subsequently to the annexation of vast areas of community
land. One community member, known to be a descendant of one of the 'founding
fathers', put it this way:

> The Miskitu King give the Indians them that amount of land, that's why up to
> the day we the forth generation claiming for our territory, for our demarcation
> and our line where belongs to [Ratisuna]…. Well, they have work for the Mi-
> skitu King, all kind of work they do. They do lots of work for the Miskitu King.
> In them time plenty people start to living here, you know! So he come into Ra-

tisuna and aks [asks]: who is the one that found [Ratisuna]? So they say Philip Haman and the Julias. So he take them two of them and carry them to Bluefields. After he carry them to Bluefields, he take them and give them axe and machete and file and carry them to one place name Rio Escondido, the Rama River, one place name Mango Plantation. They carry them there and work them. Let them chop bush from the day of April till December month. After December month Christmas was close. They tell the King them want to come to them wife, so they want their money. So the King say: 'money!!' I don't owe you no money. The work what we bring you to work here that is the payment of [Ratisuna]. But them days Indians didn't have no education, they didn't have no learning so they didn't take out no document.[12]

Expressed in a common sense form, the ideas and assumptions linking the residents to the locality were not solely having a territorial dimension; they had an emotional and symbolical sense about them, denoting an almost metaphysical rooted-ness. I suggest that we view this local attachment as a struggle, which includes not only ideas of rights and entitlements, but also a sense of belonging to and identification with the community and a communal past.

The ethnic mobilization in the 1980s

The construction of a communal identity does not imply a historical absence of broader and more regional or ethnic orientations. The anti-Sandinista insurrection in the 1980s is one of the outstanding moments in which pan-local alliances were constructed in the quest for territorial autonomy and political self-determination. In his interesting study of this mobilization Carlos Vilas points at the decisive role of the ethnic and indigenous organizations (1989). Formed shortly after the revolution, and officially recognized by the Sandinista leadership, MISURASATA is one of the organizations that gets the most attention. The name, MISURASATA (Miskitu, Sumu, Rama and Sandinistas working together), symbolized the hope of an alliance between the indigenous minorities and the Revolution. But the demands of MISURASATA rapidly radicalized (Vilas 1989, 79ff and 237ff). In December 1980, only a little more than a year after its formation, MISURASATA issued the Plan of Action (MISURASATA 1981, reprinted in Ohland and Schneider 1983, 89-94). This document introduced the discourse of indigenous nations and it proposed the establishment of parallel institutions on the Coast. Former communal land claims were now replaced with territorial demands. A short excerpt from a speech held in Creole English in Rama Cay by the important MISURASATA leader, Brooklyn Rivera, is illustrative of this radicalization:

It is not time to get afraid of somebody! But we are ready to die for our rights…. We have to fight. We have to strengthen our organization. In the future we have to look, how we can get the power in this Atlantic Coast. We have to work for the autonomy of the Atlantic Coast! Power in production and in administration of the Coast…. We don't need to go to somebody from Managua…. It is no good that they bring all these institutions to us. In the future we must do that ourselves (Rivera 1980, printed in Ohland and Schneider 1983).

Although the discourses of rights, self-determination and political autonomy to a large extent resonated with existing ideas among the ethnic minorities (Hale 1994, 160; Henriksen 2002, 141), it is beyond any doubt that the new ethnic organizations played a decisive role in deepening and transforming collective consciousness on the Coast. The leadership of these organizations was familiar with the emergent focus on the global movement for indigenous and historical rights, which can be dated back to the 1970s. These ideas were quickly appropriated by the ethnic minorities, especially in Ratisuna, where an increasing indigenous identification with Miskitu culture took place.

This ethnic revival occurred alongside the emergence of new conceptions of territory, which implied that the struggle for land also became a struggle for autonomy and self-determination. A new sense of belonging was thus created, which was linked to the political construction of a collective ethnic life project based on ethnicity and on indigenous and historical rights. However, we should be careful not to analyse the transformations from the previous, more local orientations to the pan-ethnic and qualitatively different alliances in the 1980s according to a prospective logic, which views the changes as a linear process of modernization towards more developed and complex organizational forms. Below I will argue that the neo-liberal turn in Nicaragua, with the general retreat of the state and the promotion of self-responsibility, have had a new impact on collective orientations in Ratisuna. Whereas the ethno-political ideas of self-determination and autonomy have been left intact, the regional, multiethnic alliances have resided into the background, and a new local identity has been constructed. Accordingly, today a new combination of self-determination and local community has gained strength.

Neo-liberal adjustment and constructions of ethnic and spatial identities
in Ratisuna

It follows from the short historical narrative above that ethnic and spatial identities in Ratisuna have been in flux. One ubiquitous boundary, however, established between 'Us' and the 'Spaniard Them' – the Creole expression most often used when talking about Nicaraguans of Mestizo origin – has been relatively stable. Since the Nicaraguan annexation of Atlantic Coast territory in early 1894, this distinction has been a driving force in shaping ethnic identities on the Atlantic Coast in general and in Ratisuna in particular (Hale 1994, Gordon 1998, Henriksen 2002).

Despite these continuities, however, the values attached to 'Them' and 'Us' have undergone some important changes. Some of the ethnographic and historic research that has been done on the Atlantic Coast observes that until the 1980s the ethnic minorities were ashamed of their ethnic status and afraid to publicly remember their collective history or to speak their native language outside of their homes (Gabriel 1996, 168; Gordon 1998, 183). Nevertheless, in 1998-99 when I was doing fieldwork in Ratisuna, many people demonstrated an amazing concern with local history and identity (Henriksen 2002). Community members expressed deep-felt pride in the fact that many male and female community members took part in the anti-Sandinista insurrection, and they are aware of their belligerent reputation. Self-denigration has been replaced by ethnic pride. In this case, however, pride does not automatically lead to forbearance and indulgence. Instead, community

members have embraced old nationalist and racist imaginations, which construct other indigenous populations as backward and uncivilized relics from the past. One community member, for example, put it this way:

> I am a Miskitu. But you see we have two classes of Miskitu. We the Miskitu from Ratisuna are descendants from Sandy Bay Tara [Big Sandy Bay] and we have self-ambition and pride. The Miskitu them from the north they come here with different clothes. We don't want to be like them. The Miskitu race is the lowest in Nicaragua. We are a little higher than them.

In addition, ethnic boundaries were constructed vis-à-vis other ethnic groups as well, especially in relation to Spanish-speaking Mestizos. Any person of Mestizo origin finding him/herself in Ratisuna will undoubtedly meet distrust or sometimes even overt deprecation. As mentioned above, this hostility towards Nicaraguan Mestizos has historical roots. Sandinista military cadres located in Ratisuna in the 1980s were subjected to blatant distrust, and people accused of cooperating with the 'Spaniards' were either expelled or killed (Gordon 1998). Even Mestizos with apparent benevolent intentions have been faced with community members' hatred of anything 'Spanish' (Henriksen 2002). Accordingly, in Ratisuna ethnic and spatial identities are deeply politicized. This becomes evident if we focus the attention on the position of the *síndico*, politically one of the most important institutions in Ratisuna.

The position of the síndico

In 1919, a few years after the Land Title Commission had finished its work on the Atlantic Coast, a government decree established the position of the síndico in most of the communities. Originally a Spanish institution, the position of the síndico has been implemented in most Central American countries as a person responsible for land measurements and establishment of property boundaries. According to the decree, the síndicos appointed on the Atlantic Coast were to have similar responsibilities:

> [El síndico] podrá dar poderes generales o especiales para que represente a la comunidad en los negocios judiciales o extrajudiciales que se relacionen con los terrenos.[13]

Importantly, the decree stipulated that the síndico was a government appointee, and that he was a political leader whose primary responsibilities were to guard the land documents, to oversee the communal land possessions, and to represent the community before the state in matters related to the land.

Within a few years the position of the síndico had been established in most communities, and it now provided the communities with a 'place' from which to speak and express concerns about land rights and to articulate protests against violations and illegal exploitation of the communal possessions. But the state was also provided with direct access to the newly annexed communities.

The síndico quickly became the highest political authority in most communities and in many cases he started to function as an intermediary or a facilitator of communication between the community and the Nicaraguan government (Hale 1994).

In Ratisuna, community members often claimed that the position of the síndico was the most important in the community and because of the illegal exploitation of the land he was now more important than he had ever been before. The man holding the position of the síndico during my fieldwork explained the transformations in this way:

> In Somoza time there wasn't too much problem about the land. The changing of government bring these problem. Especially with this government right now, the Alemán government. He want to take away land, you see! [...] First time it was not like this. The changing of government is bringing these problems. The problem is from my take over. So I received the problem. It's hard and you see what I fight for, and I win it. And right now I think I get it clear [...] we [unintelligible] with the Spaniards them. No more people can go in and cut no land, you see, no more cutting of these big woods there I am fighting for. You see, on the next side, the Wawashang, I have to see what I can. I have to have meeting there, talk to the people them, I will be running around there and if I capture anything I taking them out, I just tell them move out, giving them some time, maybe they have something planted to eat; when they done take that out, OK, leave out. Sorry but what to do [...]. Those people who are there they don't come under a good *acuerdo* [agreement], under a good position to come and situate there. Because they didn't come to aks [ask] for no land to live there. They just come in *mala fe* [bad faith]. I can take them out, that my job. That is my position to fight for the land, as a síndico. In Sandinista time another kind of problem, the war.

Charles Hale writes that the síndico of a community close to Ratisuna took up the role of promoting dialogue and reconciliation between local *contras* and the government during the war in the 1980s. He therefore developed close working relations with government officials (Hale 1994, 149f and 181ff). This type of cooperation is absent from the síndico's narrative above and outweighed by a discourse that stresses the síndico's (and the community's) capacity and right to handle his/its own affairs. Consider this account about a nearby village (Pueblo Nuevo):

> If them [the people of Pueblo Nuevo] go to the government to aks [ask] for help the government don't have nothing to do with our community land…. They have to come here; they have to come here the Pueblo Nuevo people and the government if they want. The Central government he don't have nothing to do with us, what he is looking is war, he is dangerous, it is very delicate…. We don't want no more war.

Pueblo Nuevo is a Mestizo village located on what people in Ratisuna hold to be community land. Community members argue that the village is illegitimate and that the campesinos have no rights to clear land for cultivation. This situation suggests that today the síndico faces problems associated with larger societal transformations, in this case a growing number of landless peasants and a concomitant eastward migration into agrarian frontier areas on the Atlantic Coast. Such a problem usually requires close cooperation between the state and the parties involved in the conflict. It is however interesting that the síndico of Ratisuna does not reproach the state for its institutional passivity. Instead of calling for heightened state en-

gagement, his discourse is loaded with ideas of self-responsibility. This discourse portrays the state as an alien that has no right to intervene in matters concerning the communal properties. The community is perceived as located at the margins of the Nicaraguan nation-state, and the síndico as a primary local authority with the capacity to take his own measures in order to solve the problems. Moreover, he constructs the Spanish-speaking Mestizos as alien 'Others' residing on foreign territory.

If we compare the síndico's narrative with the legal, institutional identity provided around 1920, it becomes clear that the position has undergone profound transformations. Originally a state institution, it is now re-signified as a local phenomenon and the ties that connected it with the state have been cut. Part of the explanation for this is undoubtedly a disinterested and weak state, which has created an institutional vacuum that has allowed the localization or domestication of the position of the síndico to take place. Forgotten by the state, the people in Ratisuna have transformed it into a local, indigenous institution whose primary task is to defend the community against outsiders. Again, the síndico offers a precise explanation of this, in which he reconstructs his responsibility in a moral link with the past:

> A síndico, he elected by the community… The síndico is from the community…. He is the responsible one for the community property; he is the one that take caring about the whole community land property. He have to take care of the whole community property, land, sea, and everything. The town elect you, the town, not no one else, the town elect you. That is from our ancestors' time, you see. Those land our ancestors get them working for the Miskitu King. So all those land what my old ancestors have those *mojones* [territorial markers] put we owning them. Through that we have our land ubicated [situated]. And from our own ancestor time we have a síndico in this community. That is the one who see about the welfare of this whole territory, land, water, sea and everything, the land for the community.

Importantly, the síndico dates it back to a distant past, long before the Nicaraguan annexation of 1894. This interpretation echoes most community members' historical memory, which constructs it as an indigenous institution rooted in pre-colonial society (Henriksen 2002, 182-186). In local imaginations, the position of síndico is thus not an offshoot of the land title granted by the Nicaraguan Land Title Commission in 1915, but rooted in the above- mentioned remembrance of the hardworking founding fathers of the community. Accordingly, due to a combination of governmental neglect and local imagination, the position of síndico has been domesticated and, in this process, it has been transformed into an indigenous institution.

How does this indigenization affect practices of self-regulation? What types of boundaries and identities are constructed in processes whereby local land conflicts are regulated and eventually resolved?

The self-regulation of land conflicts in Ratisuna

A large number of external factors contributed to a reactivation of the agrarian frontier on the Atlantic Coast (Mordt 2001; Acosta 2000; Howard 1996, 1998). It can be useful to distinguish between risks caused by land that is being cleared for

speculation and the threats associated with areas that are being cultivated for sub-sistence by poor Mestizo peasants. Both illustrate the complexities surrounding the demarcation and upholding of indigenous land rights, and they reflect the govern-mental indifference and institutional weaknesses that have allowed Ratisuna's land problems to go unresolved (Vanden 1999, Howard 1998, Mordt 2001).[14] As a sign of this neglect, the state has not developed a framework for implementing the Autonomy Statute, which was passed by the Sandinista government in 1987 (Prevost and Vanden 1999, Butler 1997, Kindblad 2001, Henriksen 2002). The statute introduces a set of collective rights for the ethnic communities, among those, the right to control communal land.[15] But although the law may have been changed, governmental attitudes have not (Acosta 2000; Butler 1997, 229). It is therefore important to emphasize the fact that the mobilization for land rights in Ratisuna is the direct result of a deep sense of desperation and frustration, which stems from years of governmental neglect. In this situation the ideas of self-responsibility help fill the legal and political vacuum created by a state in retreat.

In an attempt to control and reduce the influx of campesino settlers, the síndico, along with other leaders of the community, has taken a range of political initia-tives, including the creation of a cartographic map of the Ratisuna territory. This map includes local place names (in Miskitu) that are unknown to outsiders. But from the point of view of the community members they serve to embed local his-tory in the landscape and as a medium for mobilizing and maintaining a sense of belonging and attachment to local territory. As recent work on cartography has demonstrated, map making is an ideologically encoded discourse that facilitates surveillance and serves to produce national identities (Hansen 1998, Harley 1997, Harvey 1996, Anderson 1983, Radcliffe and Westwood 1996). Here, I highlight the ideological practices involved in ordinary people's map making, which go be-yond and contest official cartography. Apart from indicating the communal land possessions, it strengthens people's local sense of belonging, and it contributes to constructing a communal ethnic territory through the inscription of local history and meaning into place.[16]

The flip side of the coin is, however, disclosed if we consider the multiethnic context with its historical ethnic conflicts and cleavages. In this light, the map does not only create a sense of local belonging; it also serves to re-enforce existing divi-sions in society through the exclusion of undesired 'Others'. Just as the síndico portrayed the Mestizo campesinos as undesired aliens, the map creates a local terri-tory and a local type of citizenship to which foreigners only have access insofar as they are invited. The result is the dichotomization of people into insiders and out-siders. Two different social groups are thus constructed: one group, which consists of the members of the community, and who have the right to make use of local resources and another group of aliens whose rights are denied. Moreover, the map also functions as a technology of surveillance that enables the reduction of the in-flux of 'outsiders', especially Mestizo campesinos.

Importantly, whereas the síndico and community members paid much attention to the problems related to the influx of Mestizo settlers, they largely ignored the commercial exploitation of natural resources. I often inquired into plausible rea-sons for the lack of action against illegal land concessions granted to logging firms. Many leaders expressed deep-felt frustration, but they were unable to suggest any

solutions. They claimed that the state or high ranking persons within the state apparatus took part in the illegal activities. The use of formal legal procedures would therefore be of little avail, they said. Another problem is undoubtedly the illegal and clandestine nature of the activities where corruption, violence and the dissemination of fear are widespread. Any type of action would therefore be dangerous, even life-threatening. This is probably part of the explanation as to why there was this exaggerated concern with Mestizo settlers. The failure of the state to properly regulate the exploitation of communal lands, thus, creates a deflection of the political priorities. On the one hand the illegal and commercial exploitation of the land are largely ignored; on the other hand the understandable frustration of the community members is taken out on poor Mestizo campesinos, who have tried to find means of surviving in the tropical lowland forests. These campesinos are in positions devalued and stigmatized by the logic of neo-liberal modernization. However, when trying to survive as internal immigrants on the Atlantic Coast, they are faced with another source of exclusion: angry and frustrated Miskitu Indians who perceive them as alien and deportable *Others*. The historical hatred of Spanish speaking Nicaraguans is thus expressed as a local citizenship constructed along ethnic lines. Mestizo campesinos are seen as illegal intruders residing on foreign territory, and, thus, with no rights to land or other privileges. Whatever the campesinos had expected when moving into the forest, they must therefore have realized that it is difficult to totally avoid social control and surveillance. Settled far from the formal institutions of state surveillance, they have instead been faced with 'alternative' governmental practices, enacted by angry community leaders and their associates. The local police volunteers have played a pivotal role in this surveillance of the communal possessions.

The emergence of police volunteers in Ratisuna and in other marginal locations is another project of the neo-liberal state in Nicaragua. Shortly after the Sandinista defeat in the 1990 elections, the police and the military outpost were removed from Ratisuna. The leaders of the community have therefore formed a squad of police volunteers, whose primary task is to handle thefts, violence and other more immediate problems that emerge in the village. During my fieldwork in the community, the volunteers were mainly recruited among former 'freedom fighters'. 'Freedom fighter' is a local expression used for the young men and women who took part in the anti-state insurrection in the 1980s. As in many other post-conflict situations, the integration of former combatants in Nicaragua has proven difficult.[17] The leaders of the community had therefore decided to appoint some of the 'freedom fighters' as police volunteers. Apart from securing better integration into ordinary community life, this initiative would eventually contribute to improving security in the community.[18]

Another important task of the police volunteers is to assist the síndico and other community leaders in 'overhauling the land'. Once or twice a year they arrange a three or four-day trip into different parts of the forest. The síndico states that the purpose is to survey the influx of Mestizo campesinos and to review the damages caused by swidden agriculture. But on one occasion, when I joined the leaders in the jungle, I realized that they also try to control the number of 'strangers' settling on the communal territory. The method applied was the dissemination of fear. Whenever we came to a settlement or a place where a family had cleared a plot of

land, the police volunteers, dressed in official police uniforms, approached the people with loaded arms in their hands.[19] In an atmosphere of distrust and menace, they told the campesinos that they were staying on foreign territory, that the land belonged to Ratisuna, and that the clearing of land was against the rules established by the community. They also interviewed the settlers on various private issues. Then they required additional information about other campesinos living in the area. Finally, although they did not utter explicit threats to the settler's lives, they told them that the communal authorities intended to use every means at their disposal to stop the foreigner's illegal exploitation of community land.[20]

The rationalization of these surveillance activities lies in the name, 'freedom fighters', which is an explicit attempt to create continuity with the recent past. Whereas the 'freedom fighters' of the 1980s struggled for autonomy and ethnic self-determination, the later incarnation of the 'freedom fighters' is concerned with more immediate threats: illegal settlements. In both cases, however, 'freedom' is interpreted in ethnic and spatial terms.[21] 'Freedom' means ethnic self-determination, and breaking the ties with Nicaragua and Spanish-speaking Mestizos.

The settlers have tried to find a way out of a desperate situation as excluded landless peasants in the western part of Nicaragua. One of the few options available is to try to make a living at the agricultural frontier on the Atlantic Coast. This strategy, however, is not without setbacks. Apart from trying to survive in an extremely difficult environment, the campesinos find themselves in the midst of a conflict where hostile ethnic groups with a historically grounded hatred of anything 'Spanish' actively exert a chauvinist and violent form of ethnic dichotomization. The campesinos' situation is therefore compounded by having to live in a dangerous and uncertain situation as excluded and unwanted 'Others'.

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that discourses and other practices of self-regulation have a negative impact on ethnic relations and, thus, on the processes of democratization on Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast. A main reason is the character of the self-regulatory practices. They are informal, self-chosen, and not subject to any type of governmental control. They emerge not as the implementation of a governmental act or as an outcome of an agreement between community authorities and the state, but of necessity. A disinterested state, which lacks the resources and the political will to create a just multi-ethnic society, has generated a social and political vacuum that has to be filled out. With the absence of the state, community members have to take matters into their own hands. It is therefore important to note that, whether we like their methods or not, the community members' activities are borne out of frustration and desperation, and this frustration results from many years of governmental mismanagement.

In fact, the interethnic frictions in and around Ratisuna begin with the negative impact of neo-liberal adjustment in the western part of the country where the politics of modernization have resulted in a massive eastward migration of landless campesinos, who have to find new ways of surviving in the forests. The agricultural frontier is therefore extended into the indigenous land areas. The Autonomy

Statute could have been one legal and political institution applied in the prevention of the problems. Instead, the governmental neglect of this Statute accentuates the frustration of the indigenous population and, thus, the ongoing conflicts and cleavages. The state's failure to pursue a just and fair development strategy for the country in general and for the Atlantic Coast in particular has thus created the social context in which the practices of self-regulation in Ratisuna are embedded. This means that although the community members of Ratisuna are the actual agents of self-regulatory practices the state assumes the primary responsibility for the undemocratic outcome.

However, since inciting individuals and communities to self-regulation is a common neo-liberal governance strategy there is also a need to reconsider the underlying assertion that civil society is necessarily an arena of virtue. Surely, this is often the case. The inhabitants of Ratisuna, for example, actively defy their historical exclusion and marginalization by defining themselves, forming a community, and creating a space of ethnic and social rights. But in doing so, they deny membership to other excluded groups, and they actively violate the rights of these undesired 'Others' through the use of illegitimate forms of control and castigation. In this study I have pointed out three different, but interrelated, explanations for these undemocratic practices.

First, a deep sense of desperation and frustration – with new and more serious incursions and violations every day, and therefore a growing sense of despair – are some of the hard social realities that give rise to such practices. The tragedy of it is a sort of obscure retribution whereby the collective desperation is taken out on poor Mestizos whom the indigenous people on the Atlantic Coast have always associated with colonization and overthrow.

Second, there is a historical presence of ethnic violence and exclusion. In general terms, the history of the Atlantic Coast is one of exploitation, marginalization and governmental neglect. Often, the ethnic minorities have contested this policy, sometimes through the collective mobilization for rights and recognition. The ethnic revival in the 1980s and the broad alliances struggling against the Sandinista state and for autonomy and self-determination has been one of the outstanding moments. This was a mobilization that was built on a *project identity*, and thus on the struggle for redefining ethnic relations and changing the social structures of exploitation and exclusion. Today, with the turn to neo-liberalism and the institutionalization of a *laissez-faire* political and economic structure, a new combination of resistance and self-regulation seems to have emerged. This combination is based on a new interpretation of the state. Whereas the state was actively contested in the 1980s, local discourses today construct it as an alien entity with no legitimate rights to interfere in local politics. The community acts as a state surrogate, and local institutions, such as the síndico, search for influence through the *execution* of political authority and the *creation* of social and political space. These practices are built on an idea of local citizenship, where membership and political authority are defined and established by the community. The political influence thus lies not in the ability to mobilize against or challenge the state, but in the fact that non-official bodies have acquired regulatory functions and in this way have obtained a substantial impact on what has traditionally been viewed as official politics. Unfortunately, self-regulation is enforced in a social and political environment where ex-

clusion and violence have always been standard ingredients in everyday politics. Accordingly, instead of contesting exclusion, the new informal authorities reproduce existing political culture.

Finally, when reproducing the historical presence of violence and exclusion, the community relies upon the discourses of indigenous and historical rights that were introduced and disseminated by the ethnic organizations in the 1980s. In the case of Ratisuna, the reasons for the undemocratic practices are to be found not only in a history of ethnic cleavages and hatred, but also in the nativist sentiments that community members act upon when they claim historical rights to land and other natural resources. Ideas of indigenous rights are strategically important assets when ethnic minorities claim rights to land, but they may also serve to exclude and marginalize other vulnerable groups, who cannot as easily claim these rights.

In the examples presented above, self-regulation combined a defensive attitude concerned with loss of control of social and spatial boundaries with an ethnicity on the offensive, which was focused on expansion and domination. This contradiction is inscribed on the campesinos, who were constructed as undesired aliens. The nativist sentiments are therefore important ingredients in the formation of resistance identities very similar to those theorized by Manuel Castells. The social outcome of such identities is an exaggerated fragmentation of society into secluded and autonomous spatial units based on inward-looking principles. The collective allegiance for the community is thus formed at the cost of sharpening and potentially aggravating existing conflicts vis-à-vis the surrounding society. The consequences are the cultivation of fear, the exclusion of undesired 'Others', and an exaggerated enclavization of society into disconnected spatial and social units.

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Notes

1. I would like to thank the anonymous referees who made a number of very helpful comments on an earlier draft.
2. The main source of data for this article is fieldwork done on the Atlantic Coast in 1998-99 and again in 2001.
3. Ratisuna is a pseudonym.
4. Castells also introduces a third form of identity: legitimizing identity.
5. The recent electoral victory of the former revolutionary leader Daniel Ortega can be seen as the beginning of the end of neo-liberalism in Nicaragua. It is, however, too early to evaluate Ortega's willingness and capacity to impose institutional changes.
6. The term *contra* is an official contraction for the *contrarevolucionarios,* a large group of Somoza-supporters and others who fought against the Sandinista revolution.
7. The ethnic population living on Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast includes Mestizos (approximate population 180,000), Miskitu-Indians (70,000), Creole of African descent (25,000), Sumu-Indians (5,000), Rama-Indians (1000), and a group of black Caribs called Garífunas (1,500).
8. CIDCA, Centro de Investigaciones y Documentación de la Costa Atlántica, is a cross-disciplinary research institution with chapters in Managua, Puerto Cabezas and Bluefields.
9. Letter from the British Consul H.O. Chalkley to Lionel E.G. Garden, Minister Plenipotentiary, Guatemala, 27 May 1911. Crowdell files, CIDCA Bluefields archive.
10. Letter from the Governor of Bluefields to H.O. Chalkley, 8 September 1915. Crowdell files, CIDCA-Bluefields archive. Original spelling preserved.
11. Letter from Ratisuna to Mrs. Ana Crowdell, 30 November 1941. Crowdell files, CIDCA Bluefields archive. The British Commissioner Mr. Chocolate (sic) to whom they refer is probably an inadvertent euphemism, which refers to the British Consul H.O. Chalkley.
12. Unless otherwise mentioned, the quotes are transcribed tape-recorded interviews. Interviews have been transcribed using a method that has removed idiosyncratic elements such as pauses, non-verbals and involuntary vocalizations. I have, however, tried to make accurate transcriptions of the local Creole-English language. This means that the use Spanish and Miskitu loanwords, grammar and spelling/pronunciation have not been corrected. In some cases translations of loanwords and correct Standard English spelling are added in brackets.
13. Decree # 61, article # 5, 13 March 1919.
14. In 1996 a national commission for the demarcation of indigenous territories was formed, but it has remained inoperative since then.
15. Estatuto de Autonomía de las dos regiones de la Costa Atlántica, Ley no. 28, 1987.
16. For unknown reasons the land titles from 1915 had disappeared. Some argued that they had been stolen, others that they were lost during the war, and some people argued that a corrupt *síndico* had sold them many years ago. The map had thus been created, not according to formal demarcation guidelines but to a local collective historical memory.
17. Drug abuse is one of the problems.
18. The volunteers were often armed with weapons (from the war) when patrolling the streets.
19. In order to enhance the police volunteer's authority, the leaders had requested the national police to donate a few police uniforms.
20. I never heard about any *campesino* settlers being killed, but the leaders seriously discussed the idea on many occasions.
21. Here I am merely concerned with Atlantic Coast interpretations of the term 'freedom fighters'. In the United States the term has a long history. During the Cold War it was used to describe rebels in countries under the control of the Soviet Union. When Ronald Reagan used the term to describe the *contras* it therefore also embraced ideas of anti-communism.

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