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From State Intervention to Cultural Synthesizism in Bogotá, Colombia

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Introduction

Due to mass displacement caused by violent armed conflict — a war involving guerrilla groups, paramilitary militias, and drug trafficking — Colombia's capital city of Bogotá has a population over eight million. Despite its violent and political reality, Colombia's cultural sector is diverse, immense, and brilliant. It is producing high quality arts and cultural events that build community throughout the Capital District, paving the way for an active citizenry in Colombia. When I first wrote the proposal for my Fulbright research, I intended to examine if the Columbian National Culture Plan's goal of moving "towards democratic cultural citizens" was being fostered in Bogotá, Colombia (Colombian Ministry of Culture, 2002). The study has modified a bit; I found that I needed to look at a slice of the cultural sector -- nongovernmental organizations and their relationship to the Colombian State. By looking at this relationship, I have been able to derive recommendations that might help further the plan's overarching goal of creating democratic cultural citizens.

This paper presents select results taken from the larger research project mentioned above. I argue that State intervention in the cultural sector should shift from direct intervention to *synthesizi*sm. To synthesize [synthesis] is "to combine parts or elements so as to form a whole."([1](#)) In Colombia, the State's role in the cultural sector has become increasingly important for recognizing cultural diversity and strengthening information flow and availability. Miller & Yudice (2002) stated that Colombia is "riven by armed conflict among guerrillas, paramilitary groups, narcotrafficers, and the military, as part of the US-financed war on drugs. Mediating diversity is thus a life and death issue" (p. 138). In addition to the armed conflict, Colombia is characterized by "regional diversity"; as a country Colombia has begun to honor cultural "claims of indigenous and black groups" (p. 138). Colombian's diversity and the armed conflict have become key foundations and, at times, challenges to the formulation of cultural policies and the work of the cultural sector. *Cultural dialogue* has become a pillar in policy objectives to strengthen the cultural sector, particularly in the National Culture Plan.([2](#)) It acknowledges such rights as cultural autonomy and fostering communication and information flow in languages and in ways appropriate for diverse cultural communities (Colombian Ministry of Culture, 2002).

Synthesizism, as described above, needs to be further focused into a *cultural synthesizim. Cultural synthesizism* addresses two urgent trends in the cultural sector. The State's role must: 1) respond to the diversity of Colombia, as a whole and in its cultural sector; and 2) remedy challenges of information flow and availability within the sector. In Colombia, the government has taken initiatives to address these trends; for example, by aiming to increase participation in monitoring the spending of and fair distribution of public funds in culture and in the formation of cultural policy. In order to explore the levels of challenge and success for these initiatives, this article will focus on four key areas. First, I will give a brief introduction to State intervention in Colombia. Following this, I present examples derived from surveys of 47 nongovernmental administrators that highlight the state of the cultural nongovernmental sector (CNGS). Then, I will briefly introduce the two prevalent opinions of State intervention. Finally, I assert that the role of the State must shift from direct intervention to *synthesizism* introducing a third realm of State intervention, *cultural synthesizism.* I conclude by suggesting 3 steps that begin this process.

State Intervention in Colombia

Historically, in the first half of the 20th century, Latin America's private sector saw very little motivation to produce arts and cultural

works. Following from its colonized past, direct public support of arts productions and services had been the norm. When countries became independent of colonial rule, public institutions continued this pattern and chose to support the *high arts.* This resulted in the exclusion of several minority groups (particularly indigenous) in public cultural funding. Since the 1980s, though, many Latin American countries have adopted new constitutions or constitutional amendments that include references to grant indigenous and other marginalized groups the right to culture and freedom of expression (Stavenhagen, 1998). Since Colombia's 1991 Constitution, the State has produced several plans and policies to promote the inclusion of all groups in Colombian society and to increase monitoring of public spending in the cultural sector. There have been efforts to decentralize the cultural sector, create means to disperse information, and initiate funding opportunities for private institutions, notably the National Program for the Coordination of Artistic and Cultural Activities. However, State contact with private institutions fostering growth and management of cultural work in Colombia is still weak.

The cultural sector in Colombia has been defined by the Colombian State as "manifestations, creators, producers, researchers, managers, institutions, associations and companies dedicated to the production and consumption of cultural goods and services" (Colombian Ministry of Culture, 2002, p. 11). Cultural nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) arguably are strong actors in the cultural sector and are considered organizations that administer "activities related to the training, circulation, creation and investigation" of culture (Bogotá Mayor's Office, 2006). Within the sector, Colombia has had a history of State intervention. The role of culture was included in the 1991 Constitution:

> As a foundation of nationality, as a special development dimension, as society's right and as a resource which identifies Colombia as a multiethnic and pluricultural country. The Constitution guarantees cultural rights and provides the normative settings for the sector's legislative development. (Colombian Ministry of Culture, 2002a, p. 11)

Furthermore, in its Article 55, the Constitution has obligated the State to protect Colombia's "cultural riches" and "foster the access to culture to all Colombians" (Colombian Ministry of Culture, 2002, p. 11). State intervention is directly addressed by asserting that:

> It is essential that the State intervenes in this sector, as far as the market alone is not capable of exploiting all of its potential, especially because a good deal of the contributions are outside the market's domain. (Colombian Ministry of Culture, 2002a, p. 11)

Cultural Nongovernmental Sector (CNGS) in Bogotá, Colombia

Despite the Colombian State's history of intervention, it has often had challenges as a supportive, organizational force, particularly within the cultural nongovernmental sector (CNGS). The disconnect between the State and the CNGS highlights the need for the re-articulation of the State's role in the cultural sector.

A significant amount of research time was given to finding a comprehensive list of cultural NGOs in Bogotá. This challenge can be attributed to the political fragmentation and difficulties in information flow and availability. Currently, The Network of Cooperation for Development of the Bogotá Mayor's Office (Network) is mapping the private and public sectors in Bogotá. Created just two years ago, the Network has begun collecting data and registering private actors in Bogotá (Patricia Navas (3), personal communication, November, 11, 2006). NGOs in Bogotá were asked to participate in a questionnaire. Along with all contact information, the questionnaire asked each of the organizations to identify themselves according to one or more of the eighteen classifications. Each classification was then broken into sub-categories. The questionnaire sought to find the following of each organization: What do they do? How do they do it? With whom do they do it? Where do they do it? (Patricia Navas, personal communication, November 11, 2006). The Network has collected 8,186 nongovernmental organizations that classified themselves into one or more of the eighteen classifications (see Figures 1 & 2 below).

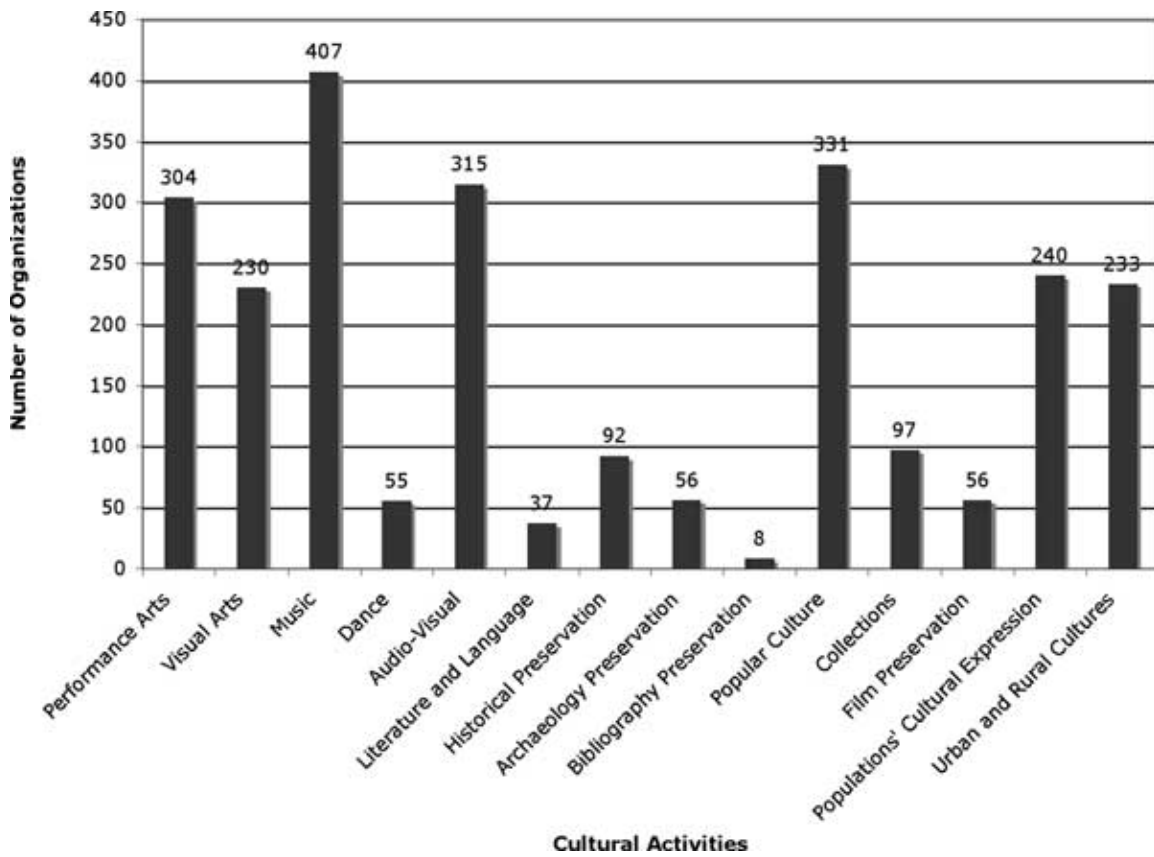From State Intervention to Cultural Synthesizism in Bogotá, Colombia

Figure 1: Cultural Activities of all 780 Cultural Nongovernmental Organizations Registered with the Bogotá Mayor's Office
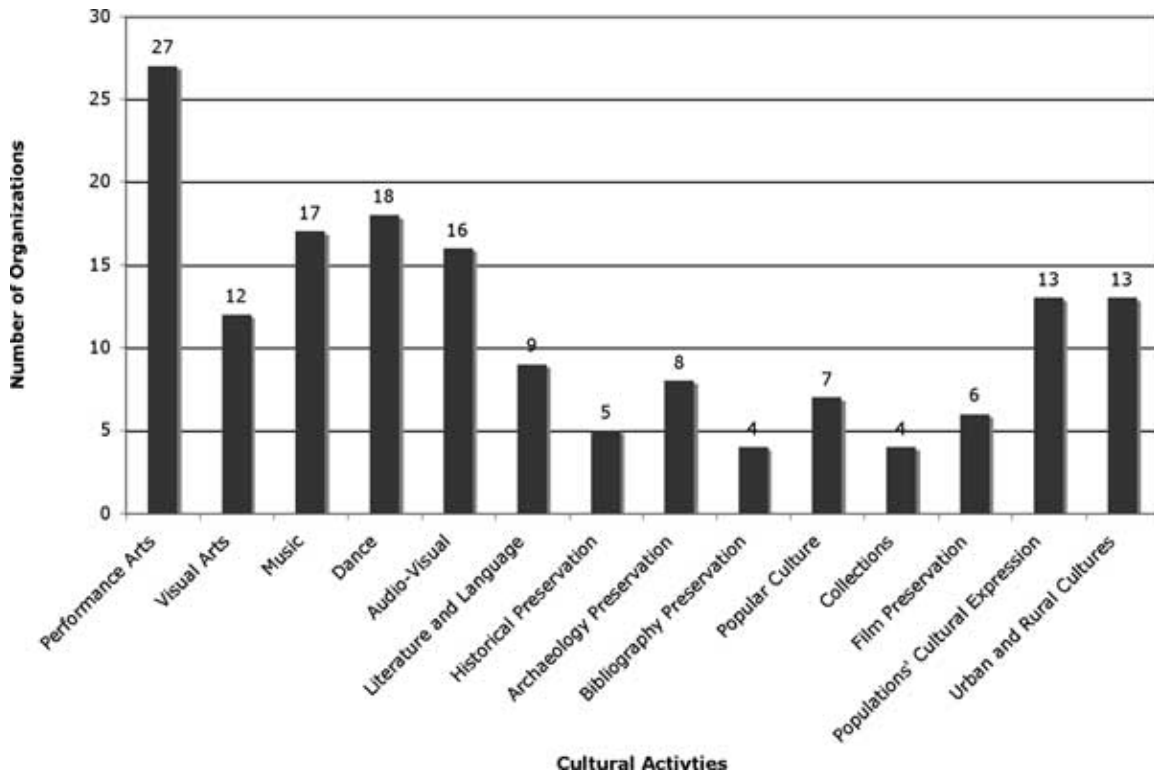

Figure 2: Cultural Activities of the 47 Cultural Nongovernmental Organizations Interviewed

In 2006, information was collected from 780 organizations classifying themselves as working in one or more of the 14 sub-categories (4) of the cultural sector. Many organizations registered themselves as working in several of the sub-categories. Among the organizations surveyed, (5) only 47 organizations were engaging in art-based programming such as puppet companies or theatre groups. Other organizations were community groups working in several fields such as human rights, micro-enterprise or health. One

organization explained that they held writing contests for youth, while another supported exercise programs for the elderly through dance. Other organizations worked in investigation and produced magazines or other publications. And some mentioned their mission was to work for artists' rights and the rights of their families. Some organizations were less obviously cultural organizations; for example, a group of students, professionals and professors working to register and compile research about caves in Colombia considered their work as part of the archaeology preservation sub-category.

Besides the Network, there are several public entities formally working in the cultural sector in Bogotá. The Ministry of Culture and Bogotá's Secretary of Culture, Recreation, and Sports (SCRS) are the two larger public entities responsible for activities and public resources in the sector. In late 2006, the Ministry of Culture had an informal list of 291 organizations working in culture in Bogotá and SCRS's informal list included 51 organizations. These lists are significantly smaller than the Network's list of 780. Their comparison highlights the fragmentation of the sector and the inconsistency of information even within public entities. When combining the three lists, omitting duplicates, there are 1037 organizations "registered" in Bogotá, however, only 1 organization was found on all three lists.

To begin to understand the fragmentation of information in the CNGS demonstrated above, the surveyed organizations were asked about their programming experience and their relationships with public entities (6). Nearly all (96%) of the cultural nongovernmental organizations interviewed have engaged in contact with such entities. Despite this contact, some organizations found that it was hard to maintain autonomy and take advantage of opportunities offered by the government. To gauge the relationship with public entities, organizations were specifically asked about their contact with the Ministry of Culture, the entity in charge of national level initiatives in the cultural sector and cultural policy, as well as the SCRS, the entity that focuses on cultural sector initiatives within the capital city. When asked about the Ministry of Culture, the percentage of contact was quite low (less than 50%). Many of the organizations criticized the Ministry of Culture's budget as inadequate. Contact was slightly higher (68%) with Bogotá's SCRS. It was common to hear that *culture is always last on the list* and frustration was sensed when many mentioned the quantity of money allocated to defense and the armed conflict in Colombia and not to culture(7).

State Intervention in the Cultural Sector

How can Colombia's State intervention be re-articulated? Greffe (2002) described the two polar sides of the issue of State intervention in the cultural sector as *cultural pessimism* and *cultural optimism*. In the former, State intervention of the cultural sector is necessary because the market can never guarantee low prices that allow greater participation nor can it promise adequate revenue that will sustain its production. Arts organizations must aim for two goals: 1) having the most spectators or participants as possible, and 2) providing the highest quality of production, services, or goods (Greffe, 2002). This can only be guaranteed by the State's intervention, according to cultural pessimists. In the latter, cultural optimism, State intervention is neither necessary nor useful. Under cultural optimism, Greffe (2002) explained that State intervention is "far from producing the expected results, it gives rise to the State's control of the arts with an assured income for some officially recognized artists based on their resourcefulness instead of their creativity" (p. 216). Cultural optimists believe that the market will and can incite stronger forms of creativity than the State can. As a State, Colombia has opted for direct intervention, taking the stance of the cultural pessimism argument. I assert that a third realm, *cultural synthesizism*, lies somewhere in between the pessimism and optimism. Shifts seen throughout Latin America and Colombia as a result of constitution revisions and encouraged political participation of diverse groups suggest the need for a clearer articulation of State intervention within the cultural sector. I argue that a more middle range intervention is needed.

Perez de Cuellar (1995) stated:

> Formulating and carrying out concrete measures to promote access is the task of both the state and civil society. Only the broader involvement of all levels of society in cultural life assures the full democratic life. (p. 241)

This 'broader involvement' is essential in Colombia's cultural sector as it introduces the State's maturing role from direct intervention to *cultural synthesizism*. It suggests that the State should not be employing a top-down approach, rather that all players in Bogotá's cultural life should be involved in determining the scope and route of the cultural sector. *Cultural synthesizism* would allow the State and the CNGS to be equal players and share information. It would continue to promote initiatives such as monitoring the spending of and fair distribution of public funds in culture. But more, it would suggest that the State and the CNGS have common goals such as providing access to information about and experiences with high quality arts and cultural productions to all Colombians.

In conclusion, I offer a 3-step recommendation to lead the State closer to the *synthesizer* role.

1. Re-define or re-articulate the State's role to account for the needs of the cultural nongovernmental sector. This first step is basic and must simply acknowledge that there is a need to re-define or re-articulate the State's role according to and recognizing the diversity of the Colombian population and its cultural sector.

2. The State needs to collect and standardize information of cultural nongovernmental organizations -- meaning that all public entities have the same list of nongovernmental organizations. This list should be updated frequently and made publicly available. This process may be completed in collaboration with one or more NGOs.

3. Using the above-mentioned list, the State must contact all listed organizations (as of now at least 1037) to reconnect and reintroduce them to governmental entities working in the cultural sector. A provided informational packet or organizational table could include the public entities' names, purposes and initiatives, scope and contact information.

Avenues for Future Research

Despite the recommendations of this short paper, much work remains to be done. The following suggests avenues for future research about the cultural sector in Bogotá, Colombia, as well as in other communities:

- Investigate communication models to be implemented for Bogotá's cultural sector.

- Elaborate case studies of Local Cultural Councils in Bogotá to compare what is working and how information can be distributed fairly and comprehensively.

- Consider comparative studies of the CNGS in other major cities of Colombia and within the Andean Region.

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1. Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, Retrieved July 24, 2007, from http://mw1.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/synthesis

2. This pillar recognizes the need for dialogue and participation among all the cultures of Colombia.

3. Patricia Navas is the coordinator of the Network of Cooperation for Development of the Bogotá Mayor's Office's mapping project and directly provided me with the Network's list of cultural nongovernmental organizations in Bogotá.

4. The fourteen sub-categories of culture are: Performing Arts, Visual Arts, Music, Dance, Audio-Visual, Literature and Language, Historical Preservation, Archaeology Preservation, Bibliography Preservation, Popular Culture, Collections, Film Preservation, Populations' Cultural Expression, Urban and Rural Cultures (Bogotá Mayor Office, 2006). These fourteen sub-categories illustrate the diversity of the cultural nongovernmental sector in Bogotá.

5. All 47 organizations surveyed registered themselves as working in one or more of the 14 sub-categories of culture.

6. Public entity is defined as a subdivision of State government..

7. In 2005 the Ministry of Culture received .11% of the National Government's budget (Retrieved July 24, 2007 from http://www.mincultura.gov.co/).

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