

Introduction

Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.

—Karl Marx and Frederick Engels,
The German Ideology

In Nicaragua, as everywhere, people try to find humor and happiness in life. They do the best they can in whatever circumstances they find themselves. But Nicaragua is a tragic place today. Its people's hopes for a better world have been systematically undermined by a foreign power. This tragedy, which Nicaragua shares with most of Central America, is the tragedy of a long history of colonialism, neocolonialism, and systematic, continuing injustice.¹

Nicaragua's modern political history is a history of U.S. intervention, of political and economic dependency cultivated by Washington, and of sporadic, usually defeated rebellions against imperialism and exploitation. This history of U.S.-Nicaraguan entanglements was literally extravagant from the beginning. In 1855, playing a game of business plotting and international intrigue, a group of U.S. mercenaries led by William Walker invaded Nicaragua. Before being expelled, Walker actually ruled Nicaragua for two years: he had himself elected president, declared English the country's official language, and attempted to reinstate slavery in a country that had outlawed it in 1822. Driven out by a combination of interests, Walker attempted twice more to seize Nicaragua before he was executed in 1860 by a firing squad in Honduras. The Walker episode is bizarre, but Walker's polemical memoirs (1860; reprinted in 1985), read in the light of the Iran-Contra scandals, prefigure the sham and duplicity that would inform official U.S. foreign policy toward Nicaragua in the twentieth century.²

In 1909, jealous of its hemispheric prerogatives in a period of waxing

imperial ambitions, the U.S. government encouraged Nicaraguan Conservatives to rebel against the Liberal government of José Santos Zelaya. Zelaya was without doubt a dictator, but it was his modernizing nationalism, his dream of Central American unity, and his independence that offended Washington—especially when he sought German and Japanese financing for a Nicaraguan canal that would have competed with the U.S.-controlled Panama Canal, then still under construction. Washington instigated a rebellion, and the U.S. Marines landed to ensure a Conservative victory. Zelaya resigned, and in 1910 the Liberals turned power over to the minority Conservatives. Civil war ensued, with Liberals and some disgruntled Conservatives joining forces against the U.S.-imposed regime. Again the U.S. Marines landed. They occupied Nicaragua from 1912 to 1925, installing a series of Conservative presidents. When the Conservatives proved unable to govern without U.S. military support, the Marines returned again to occupy Nicaragua, remaining from 1926 to 1933. Obviously unable to secure a stable Conservative government, in 1927 the United States forced Liberal Party leaders and Conservatives to accept a new agreement. One Liberal general, however, refused to sign the pact; raising an irregular army of peasants and workers, Augusto César Sandino waged a patriotic guerilla war against the foreign occupiers and their collaborators.³

Unable to defeat this original Sandinista movement, the U.S. Marines withdrew a final time in 1933, having occupied Nicaragua for twenty years. They left behind a national police force, the Guardia Nacional, which had been organized, trained, and equipped by the United States, with Anastasio Somoza García as its head. On Somoza's orders, Sandino was assassinated by the Guardia Nacional after peace talks with the figurehead president Juan Sacasa. In 1936 Somoza seized power outright; with generous U.S. aid, his family maintained dictatorial control over Nicaragua for more than forty years. The corruption of the Somoza dynasty is legendary. The Somozas eventually amassed a family fortune worth more than \$500 million (Booth and Walker 1989, 31) and acquired land holdings equal in size to the state of Massachusetts, although Nicaragua itself is only the size of South Carolina. The Somoza regime was perhaps the United States' most reliable ally; under Somoza, Nicaragua became a staging ground for U.S. and U.S.-sponsored invasions of other Latin American countries. Not until the very last days of the dictatorship did U.S. support for the Somoza government waver.

By the late 1970s Nicaragua was again in civil war, and the Guardia Nacional was terrorizing the civilian population on an unprecedented scale. In early 1979, with the Sandinista triumph only months away, the U.S. government finally suspended military and economic aid to the Somoza regime (LaFeber 1984, 233). Still, the Carter administration worked—in vain—through the Organization of American States (OAS) and behind the scenes to facilitate a nonrevolutionary transfer of power to a coalition of its liking. And almost immediately after the Sandinistas came to power in 1979, the CIA began organizing remnants of the defeated Guardia Nacional into the nucleus of what was to become the *contrarevolución*. For the duration of the 1980s, either covertly or overtly, with or without congressional approval, with both state and private funds, by means both constitutional and unconstitutional, the Reagan-Bush administration continued to fund the contras, whose military operations included terrorist attacks on civilian populations, uncontrolled human rights abuses, and attacks on agricultural cooperatives, health care facilities, school buildings, electrical generators, and industrial plants.

REVOLUTION AND COUNTERREVOLUTION IN NICARAGUA

The Sandinista revolution represented an authentically Nicaraguan attempt to transcend Nicaragua's long history of colonialism, exploitation, underdevelopment, and poverty.⁴ Its struggle against the Somoza dictatorship was necessarily, too, a struggle against U.S. domination of the country. Organized in 1961 as a guerrilla insurgency, the FSLN (Frente Sandinista de la Liberación Nacional; Sandinista National Liberation Front) named itself for the radical general who a generation before had organized an "Army of Free Men" to fight for an independent Nicaragua.

By the 1970s the FSLN had moved far from what one might call, with some qualification, its Marxist-Leninist origins. Like many such movements, the Sandinistas aimed not just at "national liberation" or "national autonomy" but also at a more equitable distribution of wealth and power in a broadly socialist vein. Like most such movements, at war against a dictatorship or oligarchy imposed and supported by a foreign superpower, the Sandinistas were organized along Leninist-vanguardist lines, modified by the principles of prolonged guerrilla warfare developed by Sandino, Mao, and Guevara. As a movement, how-

ever, Sandinismo was young enough to have been influenced by the ideas of the international New Left, with its aversion to the absolutist and authoritarian precedents of the vanguardist movements.

Like the insurgencies in El Salvador and Guatemala, the Sandinista movement entertained close ties to the increasingly radical Christian base communities. Responding to the charge of the Vatican II reforms ("Go to the Poor"), these base communities carried out a systematic, grass-roots reformation of Christian practice and worship in various urban, working-class neighborhoods. In small meeting houses, Christian lay activists, radical priests, and ordinary working-class people re-read and reinterpreted the Bible from the point of view of the poor. The God they encountered in the Bible was not an abstract, remote, or severe deity, but a down-to-earth God who accompanied the suffering and acted as a partisan on behalf of the oppressed. With this vision of God in mind, base community participants reinvigorated the Catholic liturgy, emphasizing popular over elite forms and concrete experiences over escapist ideas. Ultimately, they arrived at an understanding of the gospel as a many-sided message of hope and deliverance for the poor—a conception of Christianity as a simultaneously social, political, economic, and spiritual redemption. This Nicaraguan variant of liberation theology had appeal far beyond the borders of the base communities proper. Because it grew out of widespread Christian symbols of sin and redemption, liberation theology provided both a powerful language for talking about social injustice and a moral paradigm for those who acted as revolutionaries.

By the late 1970s the FSLN had established the tone of a revolution that was to be simultaneously nationalist, socialist, and Christian. Plainly, the FSLN was the only organization in Nicaragua capable of waging an effective political and military struggle against the dictatorship. In practice, the FSLN also proved to be the only political organization capable of representing the aspirations of the popular classes for social justice and an equitable distribution of wealth, of organizing their active political involvement, and of realizing the national interests of an independent Nicaragua. The Frente itself was a blend of various tendencies: liberal, nationalist, social-democratic, Leninist, Guevarist, and radical Christian.⁵ This blend gave it a unique revolutionary vision. It championed significant social change, with broad respect for human rights; social justice, without recourse to wholesale nationalization of private property; popular power, through the FSLN and its mass organizations and in the context of political pluralism and competitive elections em-

bracing a wide political spectrum. Much of the political ferment of the revolutionary period drew on the millennial dreams of both socialism and Christianity, and the success of the revolution depended in no small measure on the collaboration of radical Christians and secular Sandinistas within the revolutionary process.

My first book, *Thanks to God and the Revolution* (1988b), which examines the roles of liberation theology and popular Christianity in consolidating Nicaragua's revolution, reflects the optimism of the mid-1980s. A brutal and corrupt dictatorship had been overthrown, a foreign-inspired war of aggression was being repelled, land and wealth were being redistributed, a new state was being built, and ordinary people could speak with great eloquence about their class position, their political practices, their sacrifices, and their hopes.

The "ethnographic present," as they call it in the jargon of anthropology, is sometimes a very fleeting thing. The broad class solidarity, the self-confident optimism, the structure of authority, the attempts at revolutionary reconstruction that I described in *Thanks to God*—all belong to history. As an anthropologist, I feel privileged to have been able to record that moment, its hopes, its conflicts. As a human being, I am saddened that it is over—or, at any rate, entering a completely different phase, fraught with new dilemmas, on a trajectory that would be very difficult to predict. On 25 February 1990, in Nicaragua's second national elections since the 1979 revolution, the voters elected the opposition candidate, Violeta Chamorro, to the presidency on the UNO (National Opposition Union) ticket, and UNO won a solid majority in the National Assembly. UNO, a crazy quilt of political parties and splinters from the Right, Center, and Left, was sewn together under the tutelage of the U.S. State Department, and so obvious was the electoral interference that George Bush could introduce Chamorro in Washington circles as "our candidate in Nicaragua."⁶

The Sandinista revolution was not defeated overnight, nor did the trajectory of local history suddenly veer to the right. Sandinismo was in decline well before the electoral debacle of 1990. In 1988, when I revisited the neighborhoods where I had conducted fieldwork, I encountered conditions very different from those I had seen in 1984, 1985, or even 1986. The contras, organized, trained, and financed by the United States, had wrought almost unimaginable havoc on Nicaragua's small, underdeveloped economy. The war's direct costs alone were staggering. By 1987 more than 60 percent of government expenditures (and nearly a

third of the gross national product) was absorbed by defense. Moreover, the U.S. economic embargo had deprived Nicaragua not only of its traditional market for agricultural products but, what is more important, of the spare parts and machinery it needed to keep its American-made farming and industrial equipment running. And Washington's vetoes deprived Managua of any relief it might have received through international lending agencies.

Pursuing time-honored methods for financing war deficits, the Nicaraguan government simply printed more money. Inflation was soaring at nearly 35,000 percent for the year 1988. Unemployment, too, ran high. Shortages of basic goods and foods were more acute than ever. In that year, the stranglehold on Nicaragua forced the Sandinistas to impose draconian economic measures not at all in keeping with either the principles of the revolution or its supporters' class interests. In an attempt to control inflation, the government issued a new currency, devised new monetary policies, eliminated most consumer subsidies, instituted austerity measures, and laid off thousands in the civil service sector. To stimulate production, the government effectively legalized the black market and allowed prices to find their own level. Each of these moves further lowered the standard of living of the poor.

The government struggled to breathe new life into the prostrate economy, but the per capita gross domestic product fell to roughly half its prerevolutionary level (Conroy 1990, 7). War, inflation, and recession ravaged confidence in the revolution. The mass organizations—which once figured prominently in Nicaragua's conception of a popular democracy—had all but disappeared from community life. Attendance at the local revolutionary Popular Church declined somewhat, as did activism in Christian base communities. And emigration out of Nicaragua's devastated economy reached the proportions of a mass exodus.

My informants still spoke in dichotomies, dividing history into "before the revolution" and "after the revolution"—implicitly, for it was not even necessary to specify "the revolution" as part of this standard construct. But once, people had spoken of *antes/ahora* (before/now) to mark positive changes: "Before, there were a lot of human rights abuses"; "Before, there was much delinquency"; "Before, poverty was more severe, and poor people could not achieve dignity"; "Now, all of that is different. . . . Things are better for the common people." In 1988, people spoke of the past in different terms: "Before, there was more food, and in greater variety—meat, fish, eggs. Now, it's just beans and rice—

and sometimes not even that.” People’s conversations with me turned increasingly away from public, political, and social issues and toward domestic, immediate, and personal concerns. The problems that most affected ordinary people were simple: how to obtain enough cash to feed oneself and one’s family; how to weather the crisis with one’s family intact.

The cost of the U.S.-sponsored contra war proved catastrophic for Nicaragua’s experimental mixed economy. Since 1980, fighting had killed more than 30,000. (Somoza’s last stand against the revolution, which included aerial bombardment of densely populated urban neighborhoods, had already cost 50,000 lives by July 1979.) War and crisis displaced more than 500,000 people. Between 200,000 and 400,000 people took up residency abroad. Indeed, the contra war has left Nicaragua’s infrastructure in a shambles from which it will not soon recover, even under the best of circumstances: the contras dynamited bridges and power stations, burned schools and clinics, and ruined farms. Direct material damages from the war inflicted between \$1.5 billion and \$4 billion in losses (Conroy 1990, 16). UNO’s economist, Francisco Mayorga, has estimated that the U.S. embargo caused an additional \$3 billion in losses (*Miami Herald*, 21 Feb. 1990)—this in an economy whose GNP never much exceeded \$3 billion, even in good times. Total economic damages from the war and the embargo were undoubtedly much greater: crops were left unplanted for fear that the contras would destroy them; labor was mobilized not to produce goods but to defend the country; skilled workers and professionals fled the country in large numbers; Nicaragua’s capital reserves were depleted, and substantial international loans were unavailable. The Sandinista government has estimated that the cumulative direct and indirect damages from the war and embargo totaled as much as \$17 billion. As a consequence, by 1988 real wages had fallen to less than 10 percent of their 1980 level.

Nicaragua’s human resources, too, were battered by war, not just in terms of the dead, the wounded, the incapacitated, and the impoverished, but also in terms of those emotionally scarred by the traumas of war, crisis, and dislocation. Against such a backdrop, revolutionary political consciousness simply could not maintain itself. A social, political, and spiritual project was consumed in the daily terrors of a precarious economic existence. The will, the dignity, the resolve, and the *faith* of a people were under attack, and Washington’s war inflicted costs that could not be borne.

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Because I frame Nicaraguan history in this manner, I will no doubt be accused of writing an apology for Sandinista misrule. The elections of 1990, some would say, prove the unpopularity of a dictatorial regime, the impossibility of its radical agenda, the futility of dogmatic intransigence, the failure of revolution. I would say, rather, that the elections prove the efficacy of Washington's war and belligerence: they demonstrate the effectiveness of low-intensity aggression, of war by proxy, and of international electoral meddling carried out by a rich, powerful country against a poor, vulnerable one. Although the Sandinistas made ample mistakes, the consequences of their errors pale before the damages caused by war and embargo.

The exercise of power inevitably motivates certain representations and represses others. No system of language is ever readily extricable from some system of power. In the United States today, what best characterizes acceptable speech on international matters is the denial of coloniality. That is, the thing that must never be said is that imperialism exists—unless, of course, one is referring to some empire, past or present, other than our own. In general terms, then, the poverty of the underdeveloped world and the affluence of industrial powers must appear as entirely unrelated developments. In the case of Nicaragua, official speech is marked by feigned amnesia regarding the entire Somoza era. Contra terror occurred within the borders of an official blind spot, and contra origins and funding remain a mystery—even to those whose job it was to organize and fund the counterrevolutionaries.

Those who monopolize power and public speech in the United States are fond of mocking Sandinista politics (and exculpating themselves from Nicaragua's travails) by exaggerating Sandinista claims to the effect that "the United States is to blame for *all* of Nicaragua's problems." This hyperbolic construction satirizes the very simple (and self-evident) proposition that North American colonialism has shaped and constrained modern Nicaraguan history, and that U.S. interference has either created or exacerbated many of Nicaragua's pressing problems. With barbed words and an injured tone, the power establishment thus ridicules anyone opposed to colonialism—and tries to make the facts disappear. Hiding behind the caricature of a proposition that they are loath to state accurately, the architects of modern imperialism thus deny the scope of their own power and obscure the litany of U.S. military and mercenarial interventions that have shaped Nicaraguan history since William Walker sought to impose slavery on a country that had already

abolished it. It is as though to offer an alibi, in the literal sense of the term: we were not present when the crimes were being committed.

The tragic fate of Central America today, convulsed with violence and agonized by dilemmas with no end in sight, cannot be meaningfully separated from U.S. hegemony in the region: its history of blocking meaningful social reforms; its intervention against independent, nationalist governments; its support for corrupt military dictatorships; its unwillingness to recognize as “democratic” or “legitimate” any government not to its liking; its perpetual siding with the region’s rich and powerful against the poor and disenfranchised. Such U.S. policies have defined Central American history at its critical junctures and continue to do so.

Obviously, my experience in Nicaragua, especially in 1984–85, made a deep impression on me. I came away from my fieldwork having reformulated most of my thinking about class consciousness and religion. And I can say—like George Orwell writing of Catalonia—that for the first time in my life, I really believed in socialism.⁷ Not that I hadn’t always believed that some form of public control over the economy was preferable to private control. Since I first became politically conscious, I have realized that economic Darwinism is no way to vouchsafe the social good. However, I suspected that an alternative vision of society lay with a disaffected (and largely impotent) intellectual minority. And I feared that constructing socialism might require such suppression and repression that its early phases would prove universally unpleasant. What I never quite believed was that the people themselves were capable of taking their fate into their own hands, of acting collectively for the social good, of constructing a workable, democratic socialism—in short, of participating, as willing actors, in the making of their own history. For a time, Nicaraguans en masse struggled heroically, armed only with class solidarity and collective will, to build the sort of society that would reflect popular interests.

This is not to say that I ever experienced revolutionary Nicaragua as a utopia. It was never that, not even in its finest moments. But the collective mobilizations of the revolution’s early years did suggest the possibility—and, for a time, the reality—of a more just society, engineered by the people themselves and resting ultimately on their eternal vigilance and popular participation. That is what my experience taught me. And that is why I struggle in my writing to avoid the alibis and just-so

stories that are the preferred forms of the language of power. The Sandinista revolution really did occur. It was neither a transfer of power nor a ruse, but a true revolution, and for the bulk of its duration, it enjoyed not simply broad popular support but the *active* support of a population willing to mobilize and make sacrifices for various projects.

At the same time, however, many things “went wrong,” and we need a serious accounting of exactly “what went wrong” (Gonzalez 1990) and why. In power, did the Sandinistas fail to guard against bureaucratism and its ensuing privileges, thus driving a wedge between themselves and their own supporters? To some extent, yes—and in the context of a revolution whose ethos was aggressively egalitarian, and against the backdrop of dire hardship for the masses, this failure contributed to the erosion of Sandinismo as a political project. Did the Sandinista leadership, as years of war and crisis passed, develop a siege mentality and an arrogant style of leadership that increasingly estranged them from the less political and less revolutionary sectors of the popular classes? Most certainly they did. Notably, neither of these failures is the exclusive property of vanguardist party organizations. Both self-interested bureaucratism and political arrogance can develop wherever a government exercises power over a long term or wherever a movement feels encircled and besieged. Were the Sandinistas inept at the nitty-gritty work of economic management? Again, undoubtedly—although it would be hard to weigh their blame given the absorption of Nicaragua’s resources by war. Although the source of *most* of the problems laid at the Sandinistas’ door seems clear, any complete account of the late 1980s has to consider these possibilities and draw them into its explanation. Such factors were present, and they were particularly debilitating given the egalitarian spirit of Nicaragua’s highly politicized working class, the utopian expectations of the popular classes, and the nature of revolutionary discourse itself, with its ideal of exemplary leadership and shared sacrifices. But I would argue that those were not the real or ultimate causes of the revolutionary government’s downfall—although in the context of the economy’s downward spiral, they clearly contributed grist for the mill of people’s complaints.

SANDINISTA POLITICAL ECONOMY: A RETROSPECTIVE

In a state of war, the Sandinistas censored the press; for a time, faced with an unpopular and divided bourgeois opposition, they exercised, in

effect, one-party rule; and amid war and economic crisis, they intimidated political opponents—those to the left as well as to the right of the regime. Opposition leaders were sometimes even jailed or driven into exile. On occasion, human rights abuses were committed by agents of the state, both the police and the army, working in remote, war-torn provinces. If this is to say that the Sandinistas were not the saints depicted by revolutionary hagiography, neither were they the devils portrayed by Reagan's demonology. It should be pointed out that press censorship, political intimidation, and human rights abuses did not show up in either pre- or postelection polls as significant factors in the Sandinista electoral defeat. One has to conclude that the vast bulk of the population was not greatly affected by these abuses.

By comparison, other governments facing far less compelling emergencies have appropriated and systematized far more sweeping powers of coercion. There were no Sandinista death squads, nor was the civilian population subject to napalm, aerial bombardment, or mass detention. And for the duration of its rule, the Sandinista government was the only Central American government in a state of war to prosecute human rights violations carried out by its own partisans. Most serious human rights offenders in the military were given the maximum thirty-five-year prison sentence. (To establish the humane tone of their revolution, the Sandinistas abolished capital punishment as one of their first acts in power.)

Nicaragua's experimental revolution never planned to make Sandinista rule permanent, neither by means of a formal one-party monopoly on political power nor by means of a command economy. Sandinista strategy, drawing on lessons from abroad and from its own historical conditions, aimed at developing a more egalitarian society in the context of a mixed economy, political pluralism, and international non-alignment.⁸ The three-legged strategy, hobbled by dilemmas from the beginning, might best be described in terms of mixture, compromise, and pragmatism. The nature and scope of these compromises were complex. International experience in revolution and subsequent development suggested that a "command economy" might be the best way to achieve greater equality in the short term, but it would not provide the best route for developing the forces of production in the long term. Clearly, the Eastern bloc countries could not be counted on for the levels of economic assistance that might make rapid economic development possible. Not the least of the "limits of the economically pos-

sible” were the limits imposed by the United States, with its propensity to intervene militarily in the region.

Nicaragua’s unique history and social conditions, its agrarian status, its large class of independent small and medium farmers, the absence of large-scale industry, and the dispersal of production among a class of urban artisans: all these factors pointed to a mixed economy as the most effective strategy for developing the nation’s underdeveloped economy. The Sandinistas saw small, medium, and even some large private producers as indispensable elements of national development policy—as sources of what their economic planners, perhaps somewhat hopefully, called “social accumulation.” Rather than “liquidating the bourgeoisie as a class” (which was Stalin’s favored approach), they attempted to curb its speculating, reckless side and channel its dynamism into projects for the social good. They attempted to reconcile private ownership with social development, entrepreneurship with a significant state role in economic planning. In effect, the capitalist class was guaranteed its right to exist and to generate reasonable profits, but it was denied the power to rule society at large: a modest socialism, Nicaraguan style. The FSLN saw itself as the vanguard of this complex reshaping of Nicaraguan society, and although its members no doubt hoped to govern in perpetuity, the Frente never attempted to impose itself as the sole organized political option.

Critics on the Right ignore these features of Nicaragua’s revolutionary polity and misrepresent Sandinista rule as “totalitarian.” I never experienced Nicaraguan society as totalitarian or even very strictly “controlled” in the usual sense of the words. During my fieldwork, I lived in an ordinary working-class barrio, traveled wherever I wished, and spoke with whomever I pleased about whatever topics we both found agreeable, whether our conversations validated or questioned official discourse. All these practices would have been impossible in what conservatives call the “democratic” states of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. Critics on the Left might more justifiably charge that the Sandinistas failed in their efforts to construct a more egalitarian society and to forge a substantial national consensus. As an assessment of reality, these points have merit, especially in regard to the late 1980s. But as policy criticisms, such charges ignore Nicaraguan history and reality as well as the revolution’s real accomplishments, made before the country was overwhelmed by war and engulfed in the ensuing crisis.

The early years of the revolution both constructed a more egalitarian society and forged a workable national consensus. Before the revo-

lution, Nicaragua's most pressing social problems were the distribution of land, economic distribution in general (especially the distribution of food), health care, and underdevelopment. Revolutionary policies forcefully addressed each of these issues. A policy of agrarian reform redistributed idle lands to Nicaragua's burgeoning class of desperate, landless peasants, on a mixed basis. The huge, well-equipped, efficient farms belonging to the Somoza family became state farms; other lands were distributed to peasants in a variety of forms: cooperatives, collectives, and small to medium family farms. Some 120,000 peasants received title to land under the agrarian reform. Government banks pumped credit into the countryside to encourage production and modernization and provided incentives for various forms of cooperative farming. By tinkering with the pricing structure, the government sought to stimulate production, especially in beans, rice, and corn. And indeed, in the early years of the revolution agricultural production climbed, especially in the staple foods needed to feed a hungry country (Collins et al. 1982). On the consumption side of the equation, state subsidies held out the prospect that for the first time in recent history, the poorest two-fifths of the population might be able to consume the minimum daily calories recommended by the United Nations for a healthy diet. The establishment of free medical care and the inoculation campaigns rectified decades of neglect under the old regime. In the years immediately following the revolution, such programs greatly reduced infant mortality rates and virtually eliminated early death by preventable infectious diseases. In its foreign trade, economic planners actively sought what they called a "comparative advantage"—higher prices on the international markets for coffee, cotton, beef, and bananas—to generate profits that might be reinvested in industrial development projects making the best use of Nicaragua's resources.

All of these practices naturally involved entanglements and compromises. Fostering private production in a revolutionary state can put both planning and equality in jeopardy. Low levels of inflation set in early on. It is difficult to specify the cause of such inflation: Was it the same burden of foreign debt that afflicted other Latin American countries in the 1980s? Or was it the cost of consumer subsidies? Profiteering by speculation proved a problem from the beginning, and the bourgeoisie—which had a very different version of the good life, resented its loss of power, and never trusted the Sandinistas—resorted to widespread decapitalization rather than participation in the economy.

Pro-Sandinista informants often averred that the bourgeoisie was in-

deed reactionary, but that it was nevertheless controllable. I doubted then, as I do now, that the bourgeoisie can be even minimally socialized, but perhaps it might have been under more favorable circumstances. Indeed, the revolutionary program called for both the preservation of private property in a socialist mixed economy and the elimination of the exploitation of man by man. Were these two goals compatible? Activists and politicized supporters of the Sandinistas argued that a groundwork could be established wherein both goals could be realized, but they recognized the problematic nature of such a program. (Interestingly, among my informants, rank-and-file Christian base community activists were most opposed to private property and large-scale private business; following biblical texts, they equated capitalist commerce with sin. Among Sandinista party members proper, those whose affiliation had been with the classically Marxist Proletarian Tendency were the least skeptical about the role of private entrepreneurship.) Playing the international market, too, is risky, even with nominal state control over foreign trade: the market gives, and the market also takes away. Into the 1980s, a drop in the world market prices for Nicaragua's principal exports exacerbated that country's economic plight (as it would have under any political system).

It would be difficult to gauge the successes and failures of Sandinismo in Nicaragua or to speculate on the viability of its program. Some sectors of the economy were overcentralized; others suffered from a lack of planning. Some policies worked, others did not. All along, the FSLN was flexible, pragmatic, experimental, and willing to learn from its mistakes. In the end, however, the war and its dislocations overwhelmed even the greatest of the revolution's accomplishments. There was simply no cash and no hard currency for running the economy. What good is a farm without seeds and fertilizer? What good is a school if there is no money for textbooks? What good is a clinic without medicine? Infant mortality crept back up, and although health care was free, hospitals ran short of the supplies and medicines they needed to save lives. By 1988 children living in the poorer barrios showed not just the bulging stomachs that indicate infestation by tropical parasites but also the signs of malnutrition, visible even to an anthropologist who knows relatively little about health and nutrition.

The Sandinistas might have equalized the sufferings of the war more effectively, but not in the context of a mixed economy that included private property. They might have pursued an ideal of greater equality, but not in the context of political pluralism. They might have ensured

the position of the party in various ways, but not without sacrificing “popular” power. They might have guarded more effectively against the familiar mechanisms of political privilege, party patronage, and governmental corruption—political spoils constitute a major transfer point for the upward redistribution of wealth in countries across Latin America—but not without imposing a regimen of party purges. Like Castro, they might have more effectively forged a national consensus, but not without sacrificing human rights.

Those who see the revolution as an example of “totalitarianism” or “radical extremism” are trafficking in stereotypes, not facts. Those who see the revolution’s vision of a more just society as hopeless from the beginning are simply extrapolating from a universalist theory of human nature as inherently “sinful,” necessarily exploitive. For those who argue that, in effect, the revolution was not “radical” enough, their burden of proof would be to show the greater social benefits against the costs of more draconian measures. And it seems clear to me that had the revolution been any more “radical,” it would have provided the pretext for direct U.S. military intervention. “We are not stupid,” the most radical activists would sometimes tell me. Under ideal conditions, they would have favored an accelerated revolutionary program. “If we confiscated the properties of the rich, for instance, or shut down the counterrevolutionary political opposition, the Yankees would invade.”

Because the Nicaraguan revolution was often treated as a Soviet or Cuban beachhead in Central America, and because this was the favorite fairy tale of the conservative ideologues who organized, financed, and directed the war against the revolution, I should observe here that there were never any Soviet or Cuban military bases in Nicaragua. Eastern bloc and Cuban technicians and advisors, including military advisors, were indeed present in Nicaragua; a great many liberal, social-democratic, and socialist *internacionalistas* from Western Europe and North America were also working there. A revolutionary government in a capitalist world, the Sandinistas naturally maintained friendly ties with the USSR and Cuba; at the same time, they maintained good relations with many Western European and Latin American nations and with leftist social-democratic parties in various countries. And although many Sandinista militants favored an accelerated program of popular power, very few visualized their ideals in terms of existing socialist models. Nicaragua’s was a nationalist revolution with a broadly socialist goal whose spirit was in many ways radically Christian. The political discourses—of activists and nonactivists alike—typically began by locating

the problems “here, in Nicaragua.” The political agenda, too, was set “here, in Nicaragua”: in compromise with the obvious constraints (international conditions, local history) and in the light of the real aspirations of Nicaraguans themselves. So, although existing examples of socialist development were seen as positive to various degrees, Soviet or Cuban models were never seen as models to be mechanically emulated. Experimentally, and in the face of steep odds, people groped for an authentically Nicaraguan revolution.

FAMILY, GENDER, AND REVOLUTION

A significant front for activist efforts during the revolution involved the family and gender relations. Nicaraguan society has a long history of machismo. Its traditional family structure is both patriarchal and brittle, and under such conditions, women and children suffer the brunt of economic inequalities.⁹ At the same time, however, and despite the constraints of machismo, there was a long and substantial history of women’s involvement in popular political struggles leading up to the Sandinista revolution (Gould 1990, 225–41; Lancaster 1988b, 65). By the close of the guerrilla period, women constituted some 30 percent of the FSLN combatants (Molyneux 1985, 227). In 1977 AMPRONAC (Asociación de Mujeres ante la Problemática Nacional, Association of Women Confronting the National Problem) organized as a specifically feminist voice in the revolutionary struggles (AMNLAE 1983). Renamed AMNLAE (Asociación de Mujeres Nicaragüenses “Luisa Amanda Espinosa,” Association of Nicaraguan Women “Luisa Amanda Espinosa”) after the Sandinista triumph of 1979, the organization steered its feminist and Sandinista course under the slogan “No revolution without women’s emancipation; no emancipation without revolution.”¹⁰ AMNLAE’s charter was to advance the cause of women within a revolutionary process that—unlike most other revolutions of the twentieth century—did not define feminism as a diversionary tactic (Molyneux 1986a, 288, 287).

AMNLAE achieved a number of legal and social successes early in the revolution. AMNLAE’s membership swelled, and the organization achieved a high degree of visibility and effectiveness. According to some estimates, women were a majority of the participants in the early literacy (60 percent) and health care (75 percent) campaigns (Collinson 1990, 97, 124). And, although still a decided minority in the political leadership of the revolution, women constituted a quarter of party member-

ship in the FSLN, were prominent members of the Frente Sandinista, and held nearly a third of government leadership posts (Dirección Nacional, FSLN 1987, 25).

To promote greater gender equality, new laws were passed immediately after the revolution. The 1979 Provisional Media Law prohibited commercial exploitation of women's bodies in advertising as well as degrading or debasing depictions of women in the media. The Fundamental Statute of Rights and Guarantees (whose language is now codified in the 1987 constitution) outlawed sex discrimination, declared legal equality for women, established equal legal rights for illegitimate children, and specified procedures for establishing paternity. In the interests of children's health, a 1980 law promoted breast-feeding and banned advertisements for powdered milk.

AMNLAE-initiated legislation on the family took as its goal the revitalization and reformulation of the family as an institution not of machismo and patriarchy but of equality, responsibility, and reciprocity.¹¹ At the time of the revolution, some 34 percent of Nicaraguan families were headed by women, with a much higher percentage of such households in the cities, especially Managua. These families were a socially and economically disadvantaged segment of society (Dirección de Orientación y Protección Familiar 1983; IHCA 1984). Indeed, according to data from the National Institute of Statistics and Census, women made up some 60 percent of the poorest stratum in Nicaragua and in Managua were three and a half times more likely than men to fall below the poverty line (Molyneux 1986a, 298). The strategy of a diverse package of laws, sometimes collectively referred to as "the new family laws," was (1) to enhance the legal, social, and economic position of women and children, (2) to secure the protection, rearing, and overall well-being of children, and (3) to stabilize the Nicaraguan family, seen by many as being "in crisis."

Nicaragua's 1904 Family Code had enshrined patriarchal and classist principles as law. Old laws established the father or husband as the family's absolute authority and made it much easier for men than for women to obtain divorce. Moreover, the old statutes recognized only those marriages cemented by a civil or religious ceremony, not the *uniones de hecho* (unions of fact) or *estados de acompañado* (states of companionship, informal unions) which have long been the primary form of marriage for Nicaragua's poor majority. The 1981 law regulating relations between mothers, fathers, and children systematically revised legal definitions of the family: the father or husband was no longer defined

as the “head of the household,” and both parents were granted rights over their children. This law also reiterated the principle codified in the Fundamental Statute of Rights and Guarantees: that paternity—in or out of wedlock, within or without an informal union—entails economic and social responsibility for one’s children. New laws recognized unions that had the characteristics of stability and permanence as a civil state of *acompañado* (companionship) or common-law marriage. The same year, the cooperatives law granted women the right to hold title to land under the agrarian reform.

All along, there was resistance—from the conservative church, from *La prensa*, and from conservative elites in general—to such reforms. An oft-repeated complaint from conservative quarters was that the Sandinistas and AMNLAE were mounting a communistic attack on the sanctity of the family. On the contrary, such reform efforts simply recognized the Nicaraguan family—in its diversity and as it really existed—as an important basis of society and encouraged a more just and stable family structure. In the spirit of the broad reforms under way, AMNLAE initiated the Law on Nurture (Ley de Alimentos), which specified the obligations of parents and other relatives to children. Parents, siblings, and grandparents—in that order—were responsible for the economic, social, and cultural well-being of children under the age of twenty-one, and children were expected to reciprocate care and nurture in their parents’, siblings’, and grandparents’ old age. The Law on Nurture went further than previous reform laws that barred discrimination against illegitimate children; it eroded any remaining legal distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate children. Finally, the new law stated that in cases where both parents worked, household maintenance and family care—including housework—was the responsibility of both parents.

AMNLAE had marked successes in its legislative efforts. The organization was successful in abolishing legal discrimination against women and establishing equal rights as the law of the land. The legal redefinition of the family dissolved decades of elite and governmental hypocrisy about family matters; these new laws recognized the way most people lived and vastly improved the legal standing of poor and working-class women and children. The 1988 liberalization of divorce laws, too, eliminated patriarchal precedent and equalized the grounds for divorce. But there were failures in AMNLAE’s record as well. The Sandinista leadership proved divided on the most ambitious and the most sensitive feminist reforms. The sweeping Law on Nurture passed the legislature, but it was not ratified by the executive branch. AMNLAE’s various

efforts at legalizing abortion also failed. (However, under the Sandinistas, existing laws banning abortion were not enforced.) Plainly, reforms did not go as far as many activists had hoped. Nevertheless, AMNLAE and the Sandinistas put into effect a broad package of new laws that, on paper, were both radical and far-reaching.

In the end, things went badly indeed. Women no doubt enjoyed increased educational and job opportunities after the revolution, but they did so in a context where real wages declined precipitously, especially after 1985. Early on, women and children—who were disproportionately poor—enjoyed the benefits of consumer subsidies and saw their standard of living rise. But in the late 1980s those subsidies largely disappeared as women and children bore the brunt of hardship in the economic crisis. Despite women's increased political participation and the new laws at their disposal, one of their principal aims was never realized: that is, a more stable family life. Families were in no sense stabilized after the revolution, and it is difficult to see how they might have been, given the disruptions and dislocations of the 1980s. My own census of neighborhoods in two barrios indicates that family structures continued to be fluid and fragile.¹² The war and economic crisis worsened a familiar Nicaraguan dilemma: economic conditions drove many men to leave their families in search of jobs. Now, though, men migrated in large numbers not to another Nicaraguan city or province but abroad: to the United States or Canada, where they were far beyond the reach of new family laws and child-support claims.

The revolution's plans for more stable, egalitarian, and responsible families—like its plans for a more productive, just economy—failed. The transformations envisioned by revolutionaries would have been difficult to achieve even under the best of circumstances. Even in the absence of outside military intervention, transforming an exploitive, underdeveloped, and dependent economy into a more equitable system would be difficult in a world already structured by colonialism, and in a world where the international capitalist market economy has already distributed wealth, allotted values, created deficits and surpluses, and preset the terms to the advantage of some and the disadvantage of others. Machismo, no less than capitalism, is a system. Like racism, homophobia, and other forms of arbitrary power, arbitrary stigma, machismo is resilient because it constitutes not simply a form of “consciousness,” not “ideology” in the classical understanding of the concept, but a field of productive relations.

Forms of consciousness are precisely what machismo, as a “field of productive relations,” produces. In other words, under machismo, relations between men, women, and children are structured in certain standard ways. Moreover, what it is to properly be a man, or a woman, or a child, is also defined relationally, within the logic of the system. These relations themselves—not their idealized representation or coarse expression—constitute the system of machismo. These relations, which both occupy and define the institution of the family, are always “power relations” in that they structure inequality and differential prerogatives, but they are also “productive relations”: appropriating and refining the raw material of the human body, machismo systematically produces values that are realized both “ideologically” (as certain manifest notions about the nature of sex and gender) and “materially” (in the most intimate experience of gender, sexuality, and the body). Machismo’s “finished product” is not only an array of gendered bodies but also a world built around its definition of gender and its allotment of power. Above all else, the operation of this system appears “natural,” “normal,” even “necessary,” and the human products of machismo confront the consciousness prepared by it as inevitable.

Because systems function as *systems*, operating by and reproducing their own logic—no less in the personalities of people than in the realm of international commerce—the relations they engender are not easily redefined, even by deliberate, self-conscious efforts. The power of capital is difficult to challenge today because all economic value is set by its products, commodities. The logic of the system overwhelms even those who attempt to change the system, for they have few options other than to try to translate cheap agricultural commodities into more expensive manufactured ones. In a parallel sense, the power of machismo, too, is difficult to contest, for the system has already created products that define, embody, and measure value. Genders, sexualities, and bodies thus produced also silently, imperceptibly *reproduce* the logic of the system—even when its obvious inequalities are under challenge.

I am not convinced that the Sandinista experiment, by mobilizing the political will of the working class, the demands of women, and the euphoric energy of its activists, would have naturally glided along to a blissful state of affairs. The demise of the Eastern bloc as a source of funds and support for revolutionary movements has had and will continue to have significant consequences for movements of national liberation and social reconstruction, whatever their ideological orientation. Restructuring any economy is an expensive proposition. Revolutions

in impoverished and underdeveloped countries can scarcely succeed in implementing their agendas without subsidy from some more affluent source. (See Colburn 1986; Vilas 1987; Vickers 1990; Landau 1991).¹³ The material necessity for such revolutions is more present than ever; the material and international conditions under which they might succeed are less present than they have ever been in this century.

In an uncontested global market economy, and given Nicaragua's meager resources, the class and development agenda of the Sandinista revolution would have eventually confronted a serious dilemma even without the war of aggression: how to balance development against redistribution—and, indeed, how to achieve either in the actual rather than the abstract. Moreover, in certain areas—especially in the realm of gender and sexuality—the revolutionary vision was sometimes quite myopic; elements of the Sandinista bloc were in serious disagreement over some feminist goals. However, I do believe that, given a chance, the revolution would have improved the lives of most people—especially the most disadvantaged and oppressed people. These efforts failed not so much because failure was inevitable but because U.S. foreign policy would not permit the revolution to make and rectify its own mistakes. That is the tragedy of Nicaragua today, and that tragedy will continue to define Nicaragua's history and struggles until the cycle of colonial power and popular resistance is decided.