

SANDINISTAS IN POWER

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- NICARAGUA: *LAND OF SANDINO*. By THOMAS W. WALKER. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1981. Pp. 137. \$20.00 cloth, \$10.95 paper.)
- THE END AND THE BEGINNING: *THE NICARAGUAN REVOLUTION*. By JOHN A. BOOTH. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1982. Pp. 279. \$25.00 cloth, \$11.50 paper.)
- NICARAGUA: *THE SANDINIST REVOLUTION*. By HENRI WEBER. (London: Verso Editions, 1981. Pp. 279.)
- THE TRIUMPH OF THE PEOPLE: *THE SANDINISTA REVOLUTION IN NICARAGUA*. By GEORGE BLACK. (London: Zed Press, 1981. Pp. 368.)
- NICARAGUA IN REVOLUTION. Edited by THOMAS W. WALKER. (New York: Praeger, 1982. Pp. 410. \$32.95 cloth, \$14.95 paper.)
- WHAT DIFFERENCE COULD A REVOLUTION MAKE? *FOOD AND FARMING IN THE NEW NICARAGUA*. By JOSEPH COLLINS. (San Francisco: Institute for Food and Development Policy, 1982. Pp. 160. \$4.95.)

The books listed above represent the first wave of scholarly literature on the Sandinista revolution. Except for the Collins work, they tend to focus on overtly political events, frequently cite journalistic sources, and were unavoidably dated the moment they were published. Most were written during the second year of the revolution (1980–81). Unfortunately for these authors, the third year brought some decisive developments, including comprehensive agrarian reform legislation, a tightening of government control of the private sector, and a sharpening of the lines dividing the Sandinistas from their domestic and foreign opponents. Nonetheless, there is much of enduring value in these books.

For readers unfamiliar with Nicaragua, John Booth's *The End and the Beginning* or Thomas Walker's *Nicaragua: The Land of Sandino* would be good starting points. The latter is substantially shorter, lighter in style, and (in keeping with the purposes of the Westview Latin Profile Series) much broader in scope. It also reflects Walker's long-standing familiarity with Nicaragua and genuine affection for its people. The first third of the book sketches the political history of Nicaragua from colonial times through 1980. Subsequent chapters are devoted to the economy, culture and society, politics, and international relations. Each of these chapters

describes the pre-1979 situation and relevant early Sandinista policies. The topics covered in this part of the book range from party systems to the ingredients of a proper *nacatamal* (a pork tamale), and inevitably, something is sacrificed when so much is covered in so little space. I was pleased to see ten pages devoted to the history of the agro-export economy (in support of the dependency theme to which Walker periodically returns). Others will be disappointed in his rudimentary treatment of the history of the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN).

John Booth's *The End and the Beginning* is an ice-cream sandwich of a book: a thick, rich filling, precariously stuffed between two thin wafers. The wafers are an introductory discussion of theories of revolution and a conclusion purporting to explain what the Nicaraguan experience teaches about such theories. These sections emphasize "relative deprivation," a concept so plastic that it can be stretched to cover any concrete set of circumstances. In fact, the theoretical discussion is only vaguely connected with the rest of the book, which proves to be a carefully researched, thoughtfully written political history of the republic that was developed from the perspective of the revolution.

Booth devotes four of his eight substantive chapters to the early republic, the Sandino era, and the Somoza dynasty. These chapters are followed by three that systematically analyze the sources of opposition to the Somoza regime and cover the history of the insurrection. A final substantive chapter deals with the institutions and policies of the Sandinista state. Throughout the book, American foreign policy is amply treated. (We learn, for example, that American intervention in the late 1920s provoked a hot debate in the United States. While administration supporters talked of the dangers of "Mexican Bolshevism" and the promise of "free elections" in Nicaragua, congressional critics fought to cut off funds for the American forces fighting Sandino. One senator suggested that the marines be sent to Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, if they really knew how to guarantee honest elections.) Booth's brief treatment of the new era is only half successful. His coverage of the policies of the Sandinista government is spotty and lifeless. Little is said about social programs; the 1981 agrarian reform—announced long before this chapter was completed—is not even mentioned. The discussion of economic policy fails to convey the critical significance of the foreign exchange shortfall. Booth does a better job describing the new political system. In a few pages, he neatly captures the structure of the government, the role of mass organizations, the nature of the opposition, and the relationship between the FSLN and other political institutions.

In *Nicaragua: The Sandinista Revolution*, French intellectual Henri Weber presents a tightly argued class analysis of the Nicaraguan experience. A solid sense of the social context of Nicaraguan politics and a lucid prose style (which holds up well in translation) allow Weber to move

deftly through the history of the old regime from the arrival of the Spanish to the departure of Somoza in sixty coherent pages. The remainder of the book is devoted to the new order.

With regard to the disintegration of Somocismo, Weber joins those who emphasize the uniqueness of the role played by the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie. "In Third World countries, as is well known, occasional bourgeois impulses toward modernization normally undergo paralysis, as fear of popular movements drives the possessing classes back to the protection of a strong and preferably army-based regime. *There can be no doubt, however, that in Nicaragua the bourgeois opposition itself opened up the crisis of the Somoza regime and actually led the first phase of the revolution. It was only at the end of the process, with the help of Somoza's intransigence, that the FSLA captured the leadership of the struggle*" (p. 35, emphasis in the original). Weber explains the audacity of the national bourgeoisie in terms of its economic strength, the weakness of the urban and rural proletariats, the support of a sizeable petty bourgeoisie, the marginal position of foreign capital in the Nicaraguan economy, and finally, misplaced faith in the Carter administration. Ultimately, the Sandinistas triumphed where the bourgeoisie failed. The key to their success, Weber contends, was their use of a powerful "founding myth," the tradition of Sandino's nationalist struggle. The Sandinista leadership had learned the lesson of the Cuban, Vietnamese, and Chinese struggles: "a socialist revolution can triumph in the Third World only if it mobilizes the nationalist sentiments of the masses as well as their ideals of liberty and equality" (p. 35).

The most intriguing sections of the latter part of the book deal with the struggle of the bourgeoisie to regain political control and the practice of "popular democracy" under Sandinista rule. Analyzing the statements of Sandinista leaders on popular democracy, Weber contends that they leaped from a specific critique of bourgeois democracy based on its class bias to a rejection of formal democratic institutions in general. In practice, the institutions of popular democracy, such as the *cabildos abiertos* or the Council of State, fall short of true democracy because they give the masses no real power over the leaders, although they may permit an upward flow of information about the sentiments of mobilized sectors of the population. In the emergent institutions of popular democracy and their ideological underpinnings Weber sees the outlines of "the Cuban model of socialist democracy, not the best aspect of the Fidelist experience" (p. 119).

Weber is far from urging that the revolution inaugurate a parliamentary system tomorrow. Such a step would only provide an opening for the revolution's bourgeois and imperialist enemies. But the FSLN would do well to portray the current restrictions on democracy as temporary and regrettable, rather than idealizing them. This approach, Weber

suggests, would prepare workers to demand the extension of democracy as circumstances permit. Moreover, the revolution can begin to create genuinely democratic institutions in those places where it will be least susceptible to bourgeois manipulation—in the workplace, the mass organizations, and the FSLN itself. To fail to do so is to invite the creation of a system of “bureaucratic paternalism,” which is neither politically appealing nor economically efficient; Weber envisions the result as a nation of negligent, arrogant officials and cynical, disaffected citizens (p. 133).

Like Weber, George Black writes from a socialist perspective for a leftist audience, but his *Triumph of the People* reads like an authorized account of recent history. It is almost entirely based on Sandinista sources. The FSLN and its affiliates are consistently center stage, while the historical roles of other actors are obscured. Black adopts a tone toward the FSLN and its top leaders that is nearly reverential. Ironically, he has little to say about the personalities and biographies of the *comandantes* or the martyred founders of the Sandinista Front. Although he devotes a long chapter to the political institutions of the new regime, the powerful National Directorate of the FSLN is mentioned only in passing. The reader can only guess how the National Directorate relates to other political institutions and whether there is any division of labor, stratification of power, or ideological distinctions among its nine members. Despite its flaws, this book may prove useful occasionally to students of the revolution. There is a great deal of information between its covers. Although the author does not appear to have had privileged access to the leadership, he does cite FSLN manifestos and internal documents from the 1970s to support his account of the struggle against Somoza.

Thomas Walker's fat collection, *Nicaragua in Revolution*, contains twenty-one pieces that examine such disparate topics as agrarian reform, housing policy, Atlantic coast minorities, and sports in the revolution. Their authors are U.S. academics and Nicaraguans or foreigners who have worked for the Sandinista government. The papers generally treat the prerevolutionary situation and the first year of Sandinista rule. In many cases, it is the earlier coverage that retains its value. Despite its range, this compilation has significant gaps. In particular, there is nothing on the central political institutions (the Junta, the National Directorate, and the Council of State) and nothing on the bourgeoisie.

The more valuable contributions include William LeoGrande on the United States and the revolution, Stephen Gorman on the armed forces, Michael Dodson and T. S. Montgomery on the church, John Spicer Nichols on the news media, and E. V. K. FitzGerald on the economy. LeoGrande confirms both right- and left-wing criticism of Carter policy, demonstrating that this administration's inconsistent performance managed to undermine both Somoza and his moderate opposition, while alienating the triumphant Sandinistas. Employing rich illus-

trative material, Dodson and Montgomery trace the origins of Christian radicalism and relate the experiences of both conservative and radicalized sectors of the church. Gorman examines the organization, ideology, and early history of the Sandinista army, police, and militia. Nichols places the Managua media, both before and after the insurrection, in the context of Latin American politicized (“collaborative”) journalism. He also presents a sophisticated analysis of the relationship between *La Prensa*’s international position and its domestic role. FitzGerald’s contribution includes a useful description of the economy that the Sandinistas inherited, an account of the drafting of the 1980 plan, and a summary evaluation of economic performance under the plan.

Joseph Collin’s *What Difference Could a Revolution Make? Food and Farming in the New Nicaragua* defies the generalizations made at the beginning of this essay. Collins focuses on the revolution’s efforts to transform the very foundations of Nicaraguan society—the agro-export economy and the socioeconomic relationships that grow out of it—from the perspective of a consultant to the Sandinista government. A leading light of the Institute for Food and Development Policy and coauthor of *Food First*, which popularized arguments on food self-sufficiency, Collins made ten separate trips to Nicaragua between 1979 and 1982 to advise on food and agriculture policy.

This book is a deceptively simple one because it is written in the easy style of *Food First* and does not attempt a systematic analysis of policies or programs. The book actually contains a great deal of information about the agricultural economy, rural class structure, agrarian reform, state farms, rural credit, food marketing, and other topics. Collins has also included a useful statistical appendix. But the real value of the book is the sense of revolutionary policy making that emerges from the quoted comments of peasants, technocrats, and leaders, from the accounts of program trial and error, and from tales of intramural debate.

Collin’s overarching theme is that Sandinista efforts to impose the “logic of the majority” on the agricultural economy have been plagued by a series of exceedingly difficult trade-offs. Among them are the conflicts between land distribution and maintenance of agro-export income, food production and export-crop production, land redistribution and harvest labor needs, empowering workers and sustaining productivity, improving general nutrition and maintaining food production and distribution, as well as the conflict between maintaining investor confidence and changing the status quo. The net impression from this book is that Sandinista responses to these dilemmas have been pragmatic, alternately floundering and successful, and frequently shifting. Collins leaves one expecting more debate and further change.

Young revolutions are moving targets—they refuse to stand still for considered analysis. Perhaps the relevant standard for current writ-

ing on Nicaragua is the early work on the Cuban revolution. The literature reviewed here compares well with the equivalent Cuban bibliography: C. Wright Mill's *Listen Yankee* (1960), Leo Huberman's and Paul Sweezy's *Anatomy of a Revolution* (1960), and Theodore Draper's *Cuban Revolution: Myths and Realities* (1962). A full decade of revolution on the island transpired before the appearance of Richard Fagen's *The Transformation of Political Culture in Cuba* (1969), James O'Connor's *The Origins of Socialism in Cuba* (1970), or Carmelo Mesa-Lago's collection, *Revolutionary Change in Cuba* (1971). Such mature works are distinguished by a perspective that can only be gained with time. They are less political in style and more specific in focus, but most significantly, they move beyond revolutionary events to seek an understanding of the revolutionary transformation. No such work could be written about the Sandinista revolution today. For the moment, we are lucky to have these fruits of early scholarship.