LARR | LATIN AMERICAN RESEARCH REVIEW

Hale, C R. What Went Wrong? Rethinking the Sandinista Revolution, in Light of Its Second Coming. *Latin American Research Review*. 2017; 52(4), pp. 720-727. DOI: https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.269

BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

What Went Wrong? Rethinking the Sandinista Revolution, in Light of Its Second Coming

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This essay reviews the following works:

Faith and Joy: Memoirs of a Revolutionary Priest. By Fernando Cardenal, S. J. Translated and edited by Kathy McBride and Mark Lester. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015. Pp. xxvi + 288. $28.00 paper. ISBN: 9781626981423.

Nicaragua and the Politics of Utopia: Development and Culture in the Modern State. By Daniel Chávez. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2015. Pp. x + 376. $65.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780826520470.

Sandino's Nation: Ernesto Cardenal and Sergio Ramírez Writing Nicaragua, 1940–2012. By Stephen Henighan. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014. Pp. v + 776. $33.00 paper. ISBN: 9780773543157.

The Awakening Coast: An Anthology of Moravian Writing from Mosquitia and Eastern Nicaragua, 1849–1899. Edited, translated, and annotated by Karl Offen and Terry Rugeley. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014. Pp. viii + 448. $75.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780803248960.

> We are defeated soldiers of an invincible cause.
> —Bishop Pedro Casaldáliga, cited in Fernando Cardenal's memoir

Father Fernando Cardenal, "revolutionary priest" of the Jesuit order, died on February 20, 2016, at the age of eighty-two. The president of the Jesuit University, where Cardenal worked early in his career, read his will, penned six years earlier, at the funeral service. High-level figures in the Ortega government, including Bayardo Arce, attended the service, presumably to honor a man who had devoted his life to the Sandinista revolution. They could not have been pleased with what they heard. In the text Father Cardenal expresses "deep sadness" at the corruption, violation of the Constitution, and disrespect for democratic institutions, all in the name of *Sandinismo*—problems that by all accounts grew worse in the intervening years.[1] Curiously enough, this critique, with its vehement disassociation from the current Sandinista regime, closed the circle of Father Cardenal's extraordinary life. Born into an elite family, he developed a religious calling, pledged a lifelong commitment to the "preferential option for the poor," decided early on that the Sandinista revolution embodied these principles, joined the movement and never looked back until 1995, when the bare-fisted tactics of the second coming became impossible to ignore.[2] After the break, Father Cardenal lived

[1] "Testamento, de Fernando Cardenal, S. J.," Jesuitas Centroamérica, March 9, 2016, http://jesuitascam.org/p-fernando-cardenal-s-j-26-enero-1934-20-febrero-2016/.

[2] My use of the term "second coming" may be controversial, if interpreted as echoing the self-justificatory discourse that the current regime deploys. Daniel Ortega, according to this rhetoric, embodies the bridge between the Sandinista revolution of 1979, which he served as president, and the government that returned to power with Ortega's election as president in 2007. In contrast, opponents deny any resemblance between the Sandinista revolution (1979–1990) and the current regime. My usage takes a position different from both these, inspired by Marx's famous adage from the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, although elements of farce are already laced into the tragedy.

his final years in religious service to the poor, but without ties to a broader political project, a life more like the one he originally had opted to follow, before the momentous Medellin Episcopal Conference of 1968.

In those intervening decades, Fernando Cardenal and his older brother Ernesto made history. They played central roles in the fledgling Sandinista revolutionary movement, helping to articulate its collective voice and to advance its cause. After the triumph of July 1979, they both took major posts in the government, earning their place among the revolutionary government's most prominent and influential spokespeople. Even more important, they embodied one of the Sandinistas' most innovative and inspiring principles: a socialist revolution that allowed ample space for Christian belief and practice. Fernando Cardenal insists in *Faith and Joy: Memoirs of a Revolutionary Priest* that he never read Marx or Lenin: "My motivation for accepting participation in the [Sandinista] Front was profoundly religious" (43). Father Ernesto came to the same conclusion soon after visiting Cuba in 1970, expressed in a more philosophical register: "Communism cannot absorb Christianity without ceasing to be completely Communist . . . whereas Christianity can absorb Communism and continue to be Christianity . . . and even be more Christian" (SH:221). Perhaps the Sandinista *consigna* (slogan shouted in unison at public gatherings) captured the message most powerfully and succinctly: "Entre religión y revolución, no hay contradicción."

But of course there was. Cardinal Obando y Bravo turned viscerally anti-Sandinista just two years after the triumph of 1979 and mobilized support for this position, both in the Catholic hierarchy and among a large swath of priests and faithful. The US government capitalized on these tensions, doing everything possible to deepen them, as part of its geopolitical objective to destabilize, demoralize, and depose the Sandinista government. Eventually, the church hierarchy obliged both Cardenal brothers to leave the priesthood, in compliance with Canon 285 (which prohibits priests from working in government posts), even though the Central American Jesuit community backed their plea that service to the revolution merited an exception. One of the classic photos of the era, which epitomized these deep divisions within the church, and the backdrop of Cold War polarization, has Father Ernesto Cardenal kneeling to greet Pope John Paul II during his 1983 visit to Nicaragua, and the Pope wagging a stern finger, admonishing him to "arreglar sus asuntos con la iglesia." This episode, and countless others over the course of the decade, cast the Sandinista revolution in epic terms: an armed struggle to oust a rapacious dictator and to remake society in the service of the poor and oppressed confronts entrenched power holders, backed by the full force of US imperial power.

The books under review here memorialize the giants of this epic—from Sandino himself, to the Cardenal brothers, to Sergio Ramírez, the literary master, who served as vice president of the Sandinista government (1984–1990), and then, like the Cardenals, broke with the Sandinistas in the early phase of their second coming.[3] Through their novels, poetry, and political essays, Ernesto Cardenal and Sergio Ramírez gave voice to the utopian horizons of the revolution; all three, through their respective roles in government positions, worked to put the revolution's ideals into practice. Daniel Chávez argues that this collective utopian voice was absolutely crucial to the success of the revolution, in motivating and mobilizing its militants, and in defeating the competing utopian ideal—prosperity through state-driven capitalist development—proffered by the Somoza regime. Stephen Henighan shows, in encyclopedic detail, how their writings narrated the nation, encapsulating key political and emotional sensibilities that would galvanize the Sandinista-led insurrection and shape the revolutionary project. Although Chávez and Henighan offer some critical analysis of these contributions—the reinforcement of patriarchy in the guise of charismatic male narrators; the effacement of class inequities through premature assertions of unity—they deploy their critiques gently. Both seem most intent to document this rare historical moment, pausing periodically to marvel at a time when poets and novelists could exert such transcendental influence, not only as politicians, but also, even primarily, through their work as artists.

While sharing this admiration and mild awe, I have opted to take a different tack, using these books to engage reflexive questions of the present. What went wrong? From the inspiring revolutionary movement of the late 1970s, which legions of committed intellectuals and militants worked to forge, how did we end up with today's dystopia, which so many of these same people now bitterly decry? This is primarily a question for Nicaraguans to grapple with, working to understand the present as part of efforts to forge pathways outward from this pernicious yet effective form of corporativist rule. But it is also a question that directly concerns the United States, even if Nicaragua has long since left the geopolitical spotlight. The punishing dialectic between the vicissitudes of United States policy and successive phases of societal crisis in Central

[3] A fifth book, *Sandino: Patria y libertad*, by Alejandro Bendaña (Managua: Anamá Ediciones, 2016), arrived to me too late to do justice in this review. It is a massive tome that no doubt will become a classic revisionist history of the man and his time; it deserves separate attention as such, in any case.

https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.269 Published online by Cambridge University Press

America is a defining feature, not just of the region's twentieth-century history, but in less scrutinized ways, of the twenty-first-century problems of violence, poverty, and the "primitive" cruelty of the political-economic elites.[4] Reflections on what went wrong and what we might have learned for the future can focus mainly on endogenous factors only if that powerful dialectic frames the broader argument from the start.

This essay finesses the more disciplinary or academic dialogues that the books bring to the fore in order to focus on broader questions of the revolution's legacy. Henighan, for example, promises to rescue the study of Nicaraguan culture from the "pitfalls" of cultural studies by eschewing high theory and reinstating the lost practice of "close readings," both "construction of the literary text" and "the history that produced it." I am sympathetic, though unclear whether such a dramatic rescue operation is necessary or appropriate. Chávez offers a theoretical reworking of the notion of utopia, drawing on a diverse array of authors from Marin, Bloch, and Manheim to Fredric Jameson.[5] These interventions, valuable as they may be, are crafted mainly for consumption and commentary by other literary critics. However, when Chávez and Henighan spar with alternative interpretations of Sandinista-aligned cultural production—especially that of Ileana Rodríguez—the debate takes on larger implications.[6] Rodríguez is intent on identifying structural failings of the Central American revolutions in their own terms—especially focused on patriarchy and the pitfalls of democratic centralism—and analyzing them as portents of the disillusionment that has followed. Chávez and Henighan both think she overreaches. This is a debate with broader stakes that we can all engage.

I came of age politically and intellectually with the Sandinista revolution. To this day I feel tingles of excitement when presented with images of the epic struggle to topple Somoza and to build a new society. Even if the ranks of those who share those feelings have dwindled, even if times have radically changed, I am still compelled by the argument that we can and must draw inspiration from what is noble, just, and exemplary in the Sandinista legacy. I am equally moved, both analytically and politically, by accounts of the rupture—including those of our protagonists, the Cardenal brothers and Ramírez—sometime in the mid-1990s: a time when the *consigna* "we will govern from below" lost its connection to the high principles of the revolution, including the decision to accept electoral defeat with dignity, and became a justification for dirty pool.[7] The second coming, in this rendering, embodies a betrayal of everything for which our protagonists, and so many more, lived and died. Yet, somehow, this stark "then and now" dichotomy feels a little too tidy, making the current Ortega-Murillo regime into a grand aberration rather than a product of history. It relieves us from asking how we might have contributed, however inadvertently, to the outcome that now we justifiably abhor. I use the first person pronoun here advisedly, with no pretense of being an "insider." But given that I devoted a decade to activist research aligned with the Nicaraguan revolution, it feels more appropriate to pose these reflections, at least in part, as self-criticism.

The book edited by Karl Offen and Terry Rugeley, *The Awakening Coast*, provides us with the opportunity to begin this inquiry on the Sandinista national project from a key vantage point: a space constituted in outright refusal of the Nicaraguan nation. In the late nineteenth century, black peoples (or "Creoles") and indigenous peoples (mainly Miskitu) had for two centuries enjoyed quasi-autonomous control of a large swath of what now is Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast. But storm clouds of annexation were gathering. Although these peoples clearly preferred to remain autonomous, protagonists of Nicaraguan state and nation building viewed the territory as naturally and inherently theirs. Larger political-economic interests of imperial rivals (Spain, Britain, and especially the United States) presented the only meaningful obstacles to annexation, and by the early 1880s, the geopolitical conditions for overcoming these obstacles had fallen into place. For the previous thirty years, missionaries from the Moravian Protestant Church, with home base in Germany and then Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, had been toiling among the "natives" with meagre returns in souls converted and saved. These missionaries had achieved more in institutional terms: insinuating themselves into the workings of the autonomous government (known as the Mosquito Kingdom), as teachers, advisors, health

[4] Joaquín Villalobos makes this point forcefully in a recent article, "Trump y el infierno centroamericano," *Nexos*, January 1, 2017, http://www.nexos.com.mx/?p=30956.

[5] Louis Marin, *Utopiques: Jeux d'espaces* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1973); Ernest Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, translated by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986); Karl Manheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1985); Fredric Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory, Essays 1971–1986* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

[6] Ileana Rodríguez, *Women, Guerrillas, and Love: Understanding War in Central America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

[7] The first indications of serious problems came in the absence of internal democratic process in Sandinista party decisions in the late 1990s. By the election of Ortega and his partner Rosario Murillo as president and vice president in 2016, the litany of critiques had grown too long to summarize here. See, for example, Dora María Téllez, "Lo del domingo fue una chanchada," *La Prensa*, November 11, 2016, http://www.laprensa.com.ni/2016/11/13/suplemento/la-prensa-domingo/2133746-dora-maria-tellez-lo-del-domingo-fue-una-chanchada.

https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.269 Published online by Cambridge University Press

care providers, and spiritual council of the government's inner circle. Then in 1881, their proselytizing fortunes took a dramatic turn: Creole and Miskitu townspeople started coming to the missionaries in droves, seeking conversion. By the early 1890s, the Moravian Church had achieved ascendancy throughout the vast Atlantic Coast region, sinking deep roots in every community, reshaping the contours of coastal culture and identity. But this did not deter the Nicaraguan state's annexation plans; indeed, it may even have accelerated them. In 1894, President Zelaya sent troops to Bluefields, announced the coast's "reincorporation" into Nicaraguan national territory, and put an end to black and indigenous self-rule.

Offen and Rugeley's book—principally a compilation of original documents written by the missionaries, some translated for the first time from the German—will help us immensely to understand this crucial, still enigmatic, two decades (1880–1900) that the missionaries called "The Great Awakening." Well selected and usefully annotated, these documents, read against the grain, portray a time of profound anxiety when community members confronted political and economic change beyond their capacity to fully comprehend, much less control. In a superb introductory essay, Offen posits community members' astute analysis of their own predicament as the core explanation for the "Awakening," pushing back against existing interpretations by academics and missionaries alike. Moravian missionaries had cultural-political capital that the *costeños* sorely needed, Offen contends; Creoles and Miskitu came to see the missionaries as "'poison masters' of a superior order" (31). The reference to "poison masters" goes to the heart of his argument, at least for the Miskitu. In the previous decades of barren returns, missionaries had waged a losing battle with Miskitu spiritual authorities (called *sukias*) and their belief system, which included an elaborate cast of supernatural beings and dangerous entanglements with poisons of various sorts that only the *sukias* could understand and control. Under conditions of rapid socioeconomic transformation in the 1880s, Offen concludes, the missionaries "became more effective than the *sukias* at managing the supernatural worlds that influenced Miskito lives" (29).

While generally convincing, some details in Offen's argument give reason for pause, especially in light of the broader questions that this essay aims to raise. When Offen notes, in reference to the first years of the twentieth century, that "[the Nicaraguan state's] understandable but clumsy effort to impose Hispanic culture through the Mosquitia eventually created stronger bond between the Moravians and [the *costeños*]" (8), he inadvertently channels our latter-day Sandinista protagonists and their academic interlocutors. The cornerstone of state and nation building in racially and culturally diverse territories is to make incorporation into the national project appear inevitable, and only afterward to confront the collateral damage of structured racial inequality. The Great Awakening provides an opportunity to turn this logic on its head, making cultural-racial autonomy appear inevitable, which then allows us to denaturalize the nation. This inversion of the dominant logic would also engender mild dissent from Offen's interpretation of the Awakening, especially in regard to Miskitu relations with the Moravians. We can heartily agree that mass conversion helped "strengthen a common Miskito Indian identity" (18), while still asking for a little more scrutiny of the racial-cultural repercussions, when the Miskitu subordinated their *sukias* to the white missionaries' "superior order" of things. Offen prefers to emphasize the wisdom of the Miskitu collective impulse to convert, with a resulting affirmation of Miskitu agency. It is always uncomfortable to question this "indigenous wisdom trope." But if for no other reason, keeping track of the premises of Anglo affinity in Miskitu consciousness after the "Awakening" is crucial for understanding the veritable panic in Sandinista readings of Miskitu demands for autonomy a century later. Premises of institutionalized racism, embedded in the Sandinista national project, grew more intense and visceral with their perception that the Miskitu had deep affinities with the Anglo world, and by extension, with US imperialism. The title of the book—*The Awakening Coast*—deepens this critical engagement with Offen's argument. Luis Enrique Mejia Godoy, another revolutionary icon, wrote a song that played daily on the radio in the early 1980s. Although meant to celebrate Atlantic Coast diversity, for many costeños this song encapsulated the most recent "understandable but clumsy" effort to liberate them from their own backwardness, this time in the name of the new Sandinista nation. It was titled "Un gigante que despierta."

While *The Awakening Coast* provokes us to reflect on the race question in the Sandinista revolution, Henighan's *Sandino's Nation* does the same for the question of class. Most renditions of the anti-Somoza struggle in the 1970s, including that of Fernando Cardenal, have emphasized the three guerrilla "tendencies" (the proletarians, the prolonged popular war, and the *terceristas*), who jostled among themselves for dominance, even while sharing ample common ground in opposition to the dictatorship, and in imaginings of the new society in the making. Although formally aligned with the *terceristas*, the Cardenal brothers and Ramírez played an influential role in weaving the strands of that common ground, from the ethical revulsion and political alienation caused by the Somoza dictatorship, expressed in Cardenal's iconic "Zero

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Hour" and, more obliquely, in Ramírez's *To Bury Our Fathers*; to the utopian principles of the new society, embodied in Solentiname, the contemplative community that Ernesto Cardenal founded, which acquired mythical status after Somoza's army destroyed it in 1977 (Henighan, 224). Henighan perceptively reminds us of this vision's queasy underside: a portrayal of the nation-in-the-making as a single unified class, even though class divisions remained very much alive and well. In reference to Cardenal he observes how the "stunning class snobberies of Granada Conservatives" could be exonerated by joining the struggle against *Somocismo* (592); in Sergio Ramírez's essays he finds the same theme, which evokes a "moment when all who define themselves as Nicaraguans are grouped in common opposition to an alien force" (327). Or, as the insurrectionary *consigna* simply put it, "Todos contra la dictadura."

Henighan's critical reading opens the way for deeper reflections on this class question in the Sandinista revolution, even if he steps back from its full implications. His rationale for peddling softly, I assume, is the infectious charisma, towering stature, and inspiring self-sacrifice of his protagonists. Yes, the assertion of class unity is preemptive and reductive, but who could resist the allure of a revolution narrated by such a stellar convergence of literary talent? In any case, the sheer novelty of this convergence ultimately wins the day: a revolution that, according to Sergio Ramírez, could not be "explained or understood without Ernesto's poetry"; a revolution that had a world-class novelist as senior statesman.[8] Still, Henighan's analysis does suggest an alternative reading. Drawing on the historical research of Michel Gobat,[9] he probes the roots of Conservatives' alienation from Somoza, expressed at first in a familiar Conservative idiom but gradually turning more radical, embracing *Sandinismo* as the only hope for ousting the dictator. Liberal dissenters, who under normal circumstances would have been the Conservatives' political rivals, also radicalize, claiming a direct line of ideological descent from Sandino himself. This reading leads Henighan to at least partly displace the standard genealogy of the three guerrilla tendencies with a parallel account: Sandinismo could trace one line of its intellectual-political roots through radicalized Liberals, another through radicalized Conservatives, and a third through the plebeian foot soldiers who had few affinities with either. This revisionist frame makes the premise of Henighan's study especially fascinating—an oscillation between emblematic figures of the first two traditions, who converge in their thinking, become stalwart Sandinistas and fast friends, and eventually, allies in their defection from the second coming. Taken to its logical conclusion, however, his reading also contains a provocative commentary on contemporary politics: by the end of the 1990s, nearly every Sandinista intellectual of middle- or upper-class origins, the vast majority of whom identified with one or the other of the first two traditions, had defected from the Sandinista party, leaving the plebeian foot soldiers as the political ballast for the second coming.[10] Gone is the unified nation that erases class distinctions. The omnipresent Sandinista-era *consigna*—"Solo los obreros y campesinos llegarán al fin"—starts to sound disturbingly prophetic.[11]

Alongside class comes patriarchy, a problem that many authors—including the major female literary figures of the Sandinista revolution, such as Michelle Najlis, Vidaluz Meneses, Daisy Zamora, and Gioconda Belli—already have brought to our attention. Margaret Randall wrote of a "gathering rage" over the failure of all Latin American revolutions, including the Sandinista, to incorporate a robust and effective politics of gender equality.[12] In a more self-reflexive and sardonic tone, a group of feminist Sandinistas (and leftists from other Central American countries) proposed the formation of a new political party—*el partido de la izquierda erótica*—dedicated to a much-needed radical rethinking of the political. Both Chávez and Henighan echo these critiques in their reflections on the narrated nation and the utopian horizons that our protagonists helped to produce. Although at times lapsing into armchair psychology (e.g., "one of the greatest gifts that the Nicaraguan Revolution bestowed on Ernesto Cardenal . . . was a secure masculine identity," 563), Henighan's argument is persuasive at a structural level: the imagery in iconic poetic and literary narrations emphasized male protagonists and featured conventional heterosexual story lines, leaving familiar gender hierarchies intact. Yet by the end of Henighan's tome, and even more so in Chávez's analysis of Sandinista

[8] Sergio Ramírez, "Palabras sobre mi vecino," speech presented at LLILAS Benson Latin American Studies and Collections, University of Texas at Austin, November 15, 2016; later published in *La jornada*, December 2016.

[9] Michel Gobat, *Confronting the American Dream: Nicaragua under U.S. Imperial Rule* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

[10] This argument has echoes in the analysis of Carlos M. Vilas ("Class, Lineage and Politics in Contemporary Nicaragua," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 24, no. 2 (1992): 309–341), and is developed more completely in Gobat's insightful epilogue, which probes the ideological roots of elite Conservative support for the Sandinista revolution, and the contradictions that this Conservative-Sandinista fusion spawned. "These oligarchs gravely undermined the revolution's emancipatory impulses," Gobat concludes, "seeking to impose a modern-day version of the . . . myth of rural sanctity on a peasantry fighting for a very different social order" (*Confronting the American Dream*, 278).

[11] The origins of this slogan, of course, was Sandino himself.

[12] See Margaret Randall, *Gathering Rage: The Failure of Twentieth Century Revolutions to Develop a Feminist Agenda* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1999).

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utopian discourse, the patriarchy question fades to a secondary plane of importance, or perhaps comes to embrace the soothing reassurance that problems of gender inequality could have been worked out as the revolution advanced. In this assurance they follow a well-established Sandinista political practice. It is as if one could not dwell too long on patriarchy without undermining the momentous achievements of the protagonists, and indeed, of the revolution itself. But this logic leaves in place an awkwardly clear line between the patriarchy problem of the Sandinista revolution and the calamitous gender politics of the second coming, from Ortega's alleged abuse of his stepdaughter, Zoilamérica, to government complicity with the "gender agenda" of a deeply conservative Catholic Church. To be clear, this is not a critique of what the revolution could or could not accomplish in a mere decade, but rather of the tendency—evident in academic analysis as well as political practice—to acknowledge a serious problem of social inequality only to minimize it as secondary, or to represent it as on the way to being resolved.

Nowhere is this tendency more prominent than in relation to the race question of Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast. In this realm, all three of the contemporary books are disappointing. Fernando Cardenal devotes a mere page (167–168) to the deeply consequential question of how the national literacy campaign would play out amid already significant cultural and racial conflict on the Atlantic Coast. Daniel Ortega promised *costeños* that they would be taught in their own language, Cardenal reports; and he agrees, despite logistical and budgetary challenges. Cardenal's memoirs are oblivious to the preceding year of deep contention with costeños (black and indigenous inhabitants of the Atlantic Coast), which prompted Ortega's corrective action, and to the underlying issues of racism, which the literacy campaign came to highlight and which soon thereafter would spark a prolonged armed conflict. Chávez also has little time for critical scrutiny of the Sandinista utopia's awkward fit with costeño realities. He cites statutory dispositions (in the Constitution, the Autonomy Law, etc.) as if they fully described reality on the ground (e.g., 208), and offers a mildly triumphal portrayal of the Autonomy Law as proof of Sandinista "adaptability" in the face of an indigenous uprising (217). The possibility that a utopia fashioned by black and indigenous costeños might present a fundamental challenge to the dominant Sandinista narrative appears not to enter his mind.

Henighan's treatment of the race-culture problem is more nuanced, at least in part because his protagonists demand it. Ernesto Cardenal, since his days of mentorship by Thomas Merton, is fascinated by indigenous America as embodying the essence of spiritual liberation. He devotes an entire tome of poetry to this theme, and in general displays great sensitivity to issues of cultural diversity. Yet as Henighan notes, following the analysis of historian Jeffrey Gould,[13] Cardenal's frame for thinking "*lo indígena*" remains abstract and distanced from indigenous communities in Nicaragua (Henighan, 389). We might add that Cardenal's renditions of blackness remained stereotypically eroticized, as Alice Walker's poem of 1980 painfully drives home.[14] Sergio Ramírez, especially in his post-Sandinista literary production, explores the cultural-racial diversity of Nicaragua extensively and reflectively; yet at this point the stakes are lower, since he has moved away from the epic task of narrating the nation. Disappointment, then, is not with these protagonists, nor with the revolutionary government's failure, in a few short years, to rectify the cumulative effects of the previous century of racial inequality, but rather with the ready ability of a well-narrated national project, complete with utopian horizons, to sweep that inequality so neatly under the rug. Predictably, this problem also has continued to fester in the dystopia of the second coming.

There are many fruitful scholarly questions that these books raise and address, which fall beyond the scope of this essay. Henighan provokes us to ask: What was it about the Sandinista epic that thrust men and women of letters into the forefront? Chávez's central query is equally compelling: What is the role of utopian thought in motivating revolutionary commitment, and what is the relationship between these utopian ideals, and the pragmatic politics that guided the actual process of social change?[15] Yet the three contemporary books do also focus specifically on the question that I have highlighted here. For Fernando Cardenal, the second coming constitutes a colossal ethical collapse and betrayal. Men and women (two in particular) who once embodied Sandinista ideals have succumbed to the lust for power. For Henighan, globalization is the major culprit: neoliberal capitalism, introduced in a flurry after the Sandinista electoral defeat of 1990, deepened social inequalities and deprived contemporary Nicaragua of the minimal conditions necessary to reimagine

[13] Jeffrey Gould, *To Die in This Way: Nicaraguan Indians and the Myth of Mestizaje, 1880–1965* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998).

[14] Cited in Edmund T. Gordon, *Disparate Diasporas: Identity and Politics in an African Nicaraguan Community* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 2.

[15] A complementary set of questions about the revolutionary epoch in Central American follow political-economic themes, which become especially important to view regionally. For a review of this recent literature, see Charles Brockett, "Violence, Peacebuilding, and Democratic Struggles in Central America," *Latin American Research Review* 52, no. 2 (2017).

https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.269 Published online by Cambridge University Press

any national project, not to mention a revolutionary one. Ernesto Cardenal turned to themes of the cosmos; Sergio Ramírez "took refuge in local culture, and in the self" (Henighan, 476). No one stepped up to carry on their efforts. Chávez elaborates on a similar theme: utopias remain crucial to the political imagination, but they currently are in short supply, especially those that might help us to "imagine a place where nature and humanity can meet on better terms, a place where individuals, minorities, societies, nations, and continents can find a way to subsist without threatening the extinction of humanity and the environment" (Chávez, 316). Ultimately, all three authors remain deeply invested in the then-versus-now dichotomy and the trope of the revolution betrayed, rather than critical analysis of how the Sandinista revolution's own failings might have helped open the way for its unraveling in the Ortega-Murillo years.

Perhaps this analysis is too delicate, with too many pitfalls, to be worth striving for. Thrust into the cauldron of intense Cold War polarization, the Sandinista revolution suffered intense imperialist aggression, not only military, but also an endless flow of groundless partisan attacks, often bolstered by systematic disinformation and psychological warfare. These tactics, still very much with us today, make principled critique much more difficult. Another pitfall is a resurgent cultural-geographic determinism: Nicaragua's collective revolutionary spirit is cast as a brief interlude, amid the natural proclivity for strongmen, or in Henighan's unfortunate phrase, the "inexorable return" to caudillo politics and family dictatorship (439). My aspiration is to avoid these pitfalls and try to strike this balance: affirming all that was just and worth fighting for in the Sandinista revolution, while calling out the contradictions with equal vigor; exploring how such contradictions may have enabled the second coming, and highlighting the implications of these troubling continuities.

Here self-criticism comes into play. I gained my own political education in the Sandinista revolution: among other ideas, the central notion that we fight oppression with counter-hegemony, seizing power if necessary in order to assure that justice could be done. I did not ignore the contradictions, but I developed deep commitments to this modernist mode of left politics that, in Nicaragua and the world over, has been not working out all that well. Moreover, a sense of self-importance, or even historical inevitability, could lead us to avoid hard questions about this mode of politics. One reason the Sandinista revolution was inspiring to so many, and the second coming is so troubling, is that intellectuals of all stripes played such a crucial role the first time around and now have lost prominence nearly to the point of irrelevance. Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo do continue to narrate the nation, but in a manner that makes most intellectuals (including nearly all the former Sandinistas) turn away in disgust. Perhaps we should take more time to analyze the stark incommensurability of these distinct modes of narration and the reception of each among their respective intended audiences. The contrast is encapsulated nicely in the two pieces of public art, side by side, overlooking the Tiscapa crater in Managua (see **Figure 1**).

Figure 1: The Sandino sculpture was created by Ernesto Cardenal; the "tree of life" has become a ubiquitous symbol of the second coming, adorning roadways throughout the country, "curated" by Rosario Murillo. Photo by Charles R. Hale.

https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.269 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Fernando Cardenal's will ends by invoking a time, in the not too distant future, when youth will take to the streets again in rebellion. All they need, he attests, is a cause and "ethical" leadership. We can share in his hopeful imaginings, while adding a crucial proviso: a cause, good leadership, *and* critical insights from the past. The monsters of the twenty-first century, brought forth by the contradictions of the twentieth, will be resisted with the seasoned wisdom of "ethical leadership" in combination with an audacious militancy whose strategies and styles veterans of twentieth-century struggles cannot begin to fathom. But armed with critical reflections on these past experiences, we can hope that certain problems will not repeat themselves: that there will be no universal subject, narrated mainly by relatively privileged intellectuals who have converted to the cause. Future revolutions will be narrated by a diversity of voices, encompassing multiple axes of inequality, guided by a lexicon of liberation that vigorously affirms democratic process alongside the quest for victorious ends. The young Sandinista *guerrilleros*, after all, did not succeed in overthrowing Somoza without breaking at least some of the existing orthodoxies of revolutionary practice, in their impatience and exuberance. Perhaps this alchemy of seasoned wisdom and audacious militancy is one legacy of the Sandinista revolution that we can all affirm, making peace with its flaws without submitting to them, doing what we can to help unleash once again its transformative energies, which we need now more than ever.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Galio Gurdian, Fernanda Soto, and Jeffrey Gould for their critical commentary on, and corrections of, an earlier draft of this essay.

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How to cite this article: Hale, C R. What Went Wrong? Rethinking the Sandinista Revolution, in Light of Its Second Coming. *Latin American Research Review*. 2017; 52(4), pp. 720-727. DOI: https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.269

Submitted: 25 January 2017 **Accepted:** 11 May 2017 **Published:** 23 October 2017