

AFTER THE FALL:  
Recent Scholarship on Nicaragua and the Revolution

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- EDUCATION AS CONTESTED TERRAIN: NICARAGUA, 1979–1993.* By Robert F. Arno. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1994. Pp. 234. \$54.95 cloth.)
- LA MISTICA DE SANDINO.* By Alejandro Bendaña. (Managua: Centro de Estudios Internacionales, 1994. Pp. 260.)
- THE BEST OF WHAT WE ARE: REFLECTIONS ON THE NICARAGUAN REVOLUTION.* By John Brentlinger. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995. Pp. 374. \$55.00 cloth, \$17.95 paper.)
- MANAGING DEMOCRACY IN CENTRAL AMERICA, A CASE STUDY: UNITED STATES ELECTION SUPERVISION IN NICARAGUA, 1927–1933.* By Thomas J. Dodd. (Coral Gables, Fla., and New Brunswick, N.J.: North-South Center at the University of Miami and Transaction, 1992. Pp. 159. \$18.95 paper.)
- REVOLUTION AND THE MULTICLASS COALITION IN NICARAGUA.* By Mark Everingham. (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996. Pp. 218. \$45.00 cloth, \$19.95 paper.)
- THE SANDINISTA LEGACY: LESSONS FROM A POLITICAL ECONOMY IN TRANSITION.* By Ilja Luciak. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995. Pp. 238. \$49.95 cloth.)
- THE UNDERMINING OF THE SANDINISTA REVOLUTION.* Edited by Gary Prevost and Harry E. Vanden. (New York: St. Martin's, 1997. Pp. 226. \$39.95 cloth, \$22.95 paper.)
- NICARAGUA: A COUNTRY STUDY.* Edited by Tim L. Merrill et al. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Army, 1994. Pp. 297.)
- THE FALL AND RISE OF THE MARKET IN SANDINISTA NICARAGUA.* By Phil Ryan. (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1995. Pp. 328. \$49.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.)
- CAPITALISTS AND REVOLUTION IN NICARAGUA: OPPOSITION AND ACCOMMODATION, 1979–1993.* By Rose Spalding. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994. Pp. 314. \$45.00 cloth, \$15.95 paper.)
- THE STATE AND DOMESTIC AGRICULTURAL MARKETS IN NICARAGUA: FROM INTERVENTIONISM TO NEO-LIBERALISM.* By Max Spoor. (New York and London: St. Martin's and Macmillan, 1995. Pp. 298. \$59.95 cloth.)

*NICARAGUA WITHOUT ILLUSIONS: REGIME TRANSITION AND STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENT.* Edited by Thomas W. Walker. (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1997. Pp. 332. \$55.00 cloth, \$21.95 paper.)

*RASCALLY SIGNS IN SACRED PLACES: THE POLITICS OF CULTURE IN NICARAGUA.* By David E. Whisnant. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995. Pp. 569. \$59.95 cloth, \$24.95 paper.)

*THEORY IN THE PRACTICE OF THE NICARAGUAN REVOLUTION.* By Bruce E. Wright. (Athens: Center for International Studies, Ohio University, 1995. Pp. 272. \$23.00 paper.)

As testimony to scholars' fascination with the drama of revolution, a flood of scholarly studies of Nicaragua is still issuing forth two decades after the Sandinistas came to power. Although the electoral demise of the Sandinista revolution in 1990 flummoxed many Nicaraguanists (including this one), it has yet to stem the flow of valuable research on the country, its politics, and its economy. To the continuing misfortune of Nicaraguans but to the abiding benefit of scholars and theoreticians, dramatic regime transformations have generated massive social, economic, and policy changes, from the despotic dynasticism of the 1970s through de facto and institutionalized revolutionary rule in the 1980s to the current neoliberal electoral democracy. Intrigued scholars and observers have pounced on this opportunity to treat Nicaragua as a lab specimen undergoing multiple treatments in the form of changes in regime and policy.

Several related themes unite this diverse literature: the revolution and the possibilities it engendered for social and political change; explanations of the revolution's failure or demise (or why so much went so wrong in particular policy areas); and comparisons of the postrevolutionary Nicaragua with Sandinista Nicaragua. In disciplinary and topical terms, one finds studies of a general nature, histories and historical-theoretical interpretations, and studies focusing on politics, public policy, and political economy.

Beginning with a general overview of postrevolutionary Nicaragua, *Nicaragua: A Country Study*, edited by Tim Merrill, is a typical Department of the Army country study. It is highly synthetic and features a useful bibliography for each chapter. Chapters are included on Nicaragua's history by Marisabel Brás, society and environment by Dennis Gilbert, the economy by Barbara Annis, government and politics by Nina Serafino, and national security by Jean Tartter. The volume focuses, especially the section on government and politics, on the new post-Sandinista regime. But because coverage ends in 1993, the book is unfortunately already out of date. It draws heavily on works of many experts on Nicaragua, but readers may find an occasionally distressing tendency to portray Nicaraguan history and politics as the U.S. government has preferred to view them. The most glaring oversight is the failure of the chapters on history and politics to

mention the massive U.S. intervention on behalf of the United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO) in the 1990 election.

John Brentlinger's *The Best of What We Are: Reflections on the Nicaraguan Revolution* offers a fascinating introduction to the Nicaraguan Revolution, despite its somewhat misleading title. The author, an academic philosopher, has produced an unusual but successful mixture of his personal journals, written during several extended visits to revolutionary Nicaragua, interspersed with his reflections on Nicaraguan politics. This strange but valuable volume is full of fascinating vignettes of life and politics, informed by enthusiasm about Nicaraguans and their revolutionary experience. The topical chapters include a biography of Sandino, reflections on sexism and poetry in Nicaraguan culture, and an analysis of the treatment of the revolution in the mainstream U.S. media.

Several explicitly historical books or historical reflections provide a mixed set of readings. David Whisnant's extraordinary *Rascally Signs in Sacred Places: The Politics of Culture in Nicaragua* surveys Nicaraguan culture and the politics of culture in Nicaragua from the conquest through the revolution. The first two chapters examine cultural development under colonial rule and into the nineteenth century. Successive paired chapters examine the Somoza era and its culture as resistance to Somozas, then the Sandinista cultural project and resistance to it. These chapters are followed by case studies of *juaqueros* (archaeological looters) in the nineteenth century, Rubén Darío, Augusto Sandino, and gender relations. Whisnant's thoughtful work provides a balanced and illuminating account of the development of Nicaraguan culture and the political struggles over its content and interpretation.

Alejandro Bendaña's *La mística de Sandino* is more of an interpretation of Sandino than a history. Bendaña, a historian and former diplomat in the Sandinista government, attempts to present a new perspective on Sandino by reevaluating him in the light of the events of the Nicaraguan Revolution. This slim volume in Spanish includes reflections informed by recent scholarship on Sandino. It interprets Sandino's life and features quotes from his letters and other documents. The novelty of the book will be more evident to those familiar with only the Spanish-language literature on Sandino. Overall, it adds little to Donald Hodges's masterful *Intellectual Foundations of the Nicaraguan Revolution* (1986).

Thomas Dodd's *Managing Democracy in Central America*, a historical monograph, scrutinizes U.S. involvement in election supervision in Nicaragua from 1927 through 1933. U.S. marines and diplomats returned to Nicaragua in 1927 to try to sort out the mess ensuing from earlier U.S. intervention staged to maintain the U.S. canal monopoly in Panama. These officials conducted elections to transfer power to the Liberals from the Conservatives, whom the United States had imposed earlier. Dodd details how the administrations of Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover imposed an

electoral law and supervised several elections between 1928 and 1932. Although the elections went smoothly, the appointment of Anastasio Somoza García to head the Guardia Nacional in 1932 undermined previous institutional progress in elections and military reform. Dodd and his publishers evidently drew on his 1966 doctoral thesis for an opportunistic publication during a period of high interest in Nicaragua.

Politics and public policy have provided a rich new vein of studies of Nicaragua. Education policy specialist Robert Arnove contributes the fascinating *Education as Contested Terrain: Nicaragua, 1979–1993*. This volume traces the development of education policy during the revolution and the transition to the administration of Violeta Chamorro. It details how education was a principal ideological battleground of the revolution and the subsequent counterrevolution. Arnove observes, “In Nicaragua, as elsewhere, the education system has been viewed by newly installed governments as an institution that can be bent toward the achievement of political and economic ends” (p. 202). The Sandinistas used education “to win youth to the revolutionary cause and a new model of economic development,” while the government of successor Violeta Chamorro espoused depoliticizing education but “simply substituted one ideological framework and concomitant set of values for another” (p. 202). Arnove provides an overview of education policy in pre-university areas as well as higher education and adult education, noting the wrenching transformations wrought in each one by the revolution, war and economic crisis, and postrevolutionary regimes. Arnove portrays the devastating impact of Nicaraguan poverty on students, teachers, and schools.

Two complementary studies by political scientists explore the roles played by Nicaragua’s capitalists in the insurrection and revolution. Mark Everingham’s *Revolution and the Multiclass Coalition in Nicaragua* asks why important segments of Nicaragua’s economic elites collaborated with the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) against the Somoza regime. This question is a critical one—El Salvador’s bourgeoisie made no such alliance under similar circumstances, nor did Guatemala’s middle class. Everingham begins by reviewing theories about revolution and the behavior of states and classes in them, but he finds these explanations lacking regarding the Nicaraguan case. Drawing on interviews with Nicaraguan capitalists, Everingham examines the two decades prior to the revolution. He explores how economic change affected the development of capitalist factions and their relations with the Somoza regime. Everingham demonstrates persuasively that the formation of the coalition of the FSLN with various capitalist groups occurred because of disunity within the bourgeoisie and the weakness of both capitalists and the FSLN-led groups. No single faction could succeed without the help of others, making the cross-class coalition necessary for victory.

In her elaborately researched *Capitalists and Revolution in Nicaragua*:

*Opposition and Accommodation, 1979–1993*, Rose Spalding outlines insightfully the further development and evolution of the complex relationships between Nicaraguan capitalists and the revolution in progress. The study opens with a review of theories about class cohesion of business elites and finds that most of them overemphasize bourgeois unity. Drawing on in-depth interviews with ninety-one private-sector leaders, Spalding traces the ideologically and practically diverse links of Nicaraguan capitalists with the revolutionary government. She also examines the Nicaraguan capitalist elite's structure from the Somoza era through the revolution and into the neoliberal Chamorro era. Spalding concludes with a valuable comparative analysis of the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie vis-à-vis others under revolutionary circumstances.

From the studies by Everingham and Spalding, one can trace the evolution of the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie, especially its weakness and divisions during the Somoza era and the revolution. Future studies may reveal the evolution of Nicaragua's capitalist class in the postrevolutionary era of neoliberal economics, which presents special challenges to monied interests in an era of sharply curtailed state spending and resources. Loud complaints have been voiced by some political and economic sectors in Nicaragua that the Liberals—now back in power for the first time since 1979—view the administration of Arnoldo Alemán as an opportunity to recoup, by hook or by crook, the economic ground lost during the era when many were in exile or subjected to confiscation. (I heard this comment attributed to Liberal leaders several times during interviews with Nicaraguan political elites in late June and early July 1998.) Whether this alleged trend constitutes an effort to reconstitute what Jaime Wheelock has called "the loaded-dice capitalist sector" of the Somoza era remains to be seen.

Gary Prevost and Harry Vanden's excellent edited volume, *The Undermining of the Sandinista Revolution*, reviews revolutionary political, socioeconomic, and policy goals to explain how they have been undermined. The big culprits cited by the contributors are U.S. behavior and the Contra war, but they also detail how problems with revolutionary policy had begun to erode the support of mass organizations well before the election in 1990. Prevost reviews the revolutionary project, and Vanden the 1990 election and the ensuing struggle between the retrenching FSLN and the Chamorro government. Contrary to evidence from considerable polling done at the time, Vanden affirms, "What the majority who voted for UNO did not realize was that Violeta Chamorro had been chosen as an electoral tool to unseat the Sandinistas" (p. 61). Richard Stahler-Sholk explicates the economy and structural adjustment policies. Cynthia Chávez Metoyer details the post-1990 politico-economic transition and its effect on women, providing data and many quotes from *campesinas*. Pierre La Ramée and Erica Polakoff describe initial revolutionary goals for popular organizations and their evolution. The end of the revolution hurt most such

groups, but prior policy changes or omissions had already frustrated some (for example, inadequate attention to women's issues and switching from corporatist to geographical legislative representation in 1984).

Covering the same general turf as Prevost and Vanden's anthology but half again as long is Thomas Walker's *Nicaragua without Illusions: Regime Transition and Structural Adjustment*. As another in his fine series of overview anthologies on the nation's politics, economics, and social movement from the inception of the revolution, this volume focuses on the new regime emerging since 1990 and its impact. An essay by Bill Robinson on Nicaragua and world globalization is followed by six essays examining public institutions and policy. Mario Arana and Jon Jonakin make particularly useful contributions on the general economy and agrarian policy, respectively. Nine essays follow on the FSLN, other parties, grassroots organizations, former Contras, Atlantic coast peoples, the Catholic Church, economic elites, the informal sector, and mass media. Walker's balanced epilogue on the 1996 election resists the tendency shown by some observers to describe the Liberals' return to power as the rebirth of Somocismo.

Bruce Wright traces how theory about socialist revolution changed with Nicaraguan praxis. His *Theory in the Practice of the Nicaraguan Revolution* reviews the evolving political ideas of the Nicaraguan Revolution from FSLN founder Carlos Fonseca's synthesis of Sandino's tactics with the strategies of the Cuban Revolution to divisions within the FSLN and Sandinista principles of government. Wright carefully illuminates the dialectical relationship between the FSLN version of Marxist theory and the difficult realities of government and economic management in crisis. He devotes two chapters to the development of electoral democracy and politico-economic pluralism out of the original revolutionary corporatism, then individual chapters to participation through the 1984 election, the extended crises of the period from 1985 to 1990, and Sandinista conceptions and praxis on class, state, and party. For readers well-versed in the history of Nicaragua since 1960, Wright offers rich insight into the Sandinistas' conceptualization and reconceptualization of the revolution.

Ilija Luciak's *The Sandinista Legacy: Lessons from a Political Economy in Transition* also grapples with the theory that guided the FSLN revolution. Updating and extensively revising a study that apparently began as a dissertation, Luciak relies heavily on Nicaraguan sources. Topics addressed include democracy and the electoral system, the rural proletariat, agricultural producers, peasant stores, and women. He concludes, "Many observers have argued that the Nicaraguan revolution failed since the Sandinista Front was voted out of power. I, on the other hand, would maintain the opposite" (p. 183). Indeed, as Philip Williams, Thomas Walker, and others have correctly argued, the main legacy of the Sandinista revolution was democratization (toppling Somoza and creating electoral institutions). Yet the virtual implosion of the FSLN leadership in the middle and late 1990s,



the development of *caudillismo* within the party, the dismantling of social programs, and the devastation of working-class living standards under postrevolutionary governments detailed in the Prevost and Vanden and the Walker collections give Luciak's claim for a greater Sandinista legacy an increasingly hollow ring.

Turning to political economy, two complementary studies of revolutionary economic policy pointedly illustrate Sandinista contributions to the revolution's economic debacle. In *The Fall and Rise of the Market in Sandinista Nicaragua*, Phil Ryan reexamines Nicaraguan revolutionary ideology and concludes that it was guided much more by orthodox Marxism than is usually recognized (Wright concurs). While conceding the negative impact of the Contra war on the Nicaraguan economy, Ryan demonstrates—from the sympathetic perspective of one who worked in Nicaragua for five years during the revolution—that evaluations from a leftist ideological perspective have often overlooked the detrimental effects of certain revolutionary economic policies. In his view, “the Sandinistas’ project of social transformation contributed to the severe economic crisis . . . from the mid-1980s on” (p. 7). Ryan examines the organization and role of state sector, price policies, relations with the bourgeoisie, and agrarian reform. He finds that in the end, socialist theories provided an inadequate policy blueprint and thus saddled decision makers repeatedly with intractable dilemmas.

In *The State and Domestic Agricultural Markets in Nicaragua*, Max Spoor reaches a conclusion similar to Ryan's. A development economist, Spoor examines the state's role in agricultural markets, especially its intervention in less-developed countries. The grain-market policies of the Sandinista and Chamorro governments provide his case study. Spoor reviews traditional economic theories (of the Right, the Center, and the Left) about agrarian markets and argues that they all idealize markets, ignore local contexts, and thus generate unanticipated consequences when applied. Spoor illustrates this opinion with Sandinista policies on grain markets, agrarian prices, agricultural inputs, and production credit, and he presents a case study of northern grain-producing regions. Spoor concludes by comparing revolutionary market intervention with neoliberal deregulation and privatization by the Chamorro government after 1990. He finds both wanting.

Much has changed since 1979, when no more than a handful of scholarly books in English had been published on Nicaraguan politics and economics. In a quick review of bibliographies from the early 1990s, I easily discovered seventy English-language book titles on Nicaraguan politics, economics, and society (not including the ones reviewed here). That count excluded what must be a greater number in Spanish on similar topics, not to mention numerous English-language comparative studies of Central America and U.S. policy in the region that incorporate treatments of Nicaragua.

In two decades, scholars have converted Nicaragua from one of the

least-studied countries in Latin America in the mid-1970s to arguably the best-studied. Scholarly research on Nicaragua has become an embarrassment of riches. Most of these fourteen monographs and anthologies further deepen our understanding of Nicaragua, its revolution, and its postrevolutionary era. Bravo to all who have contributed to this impressive array of scholarship.