

THE NICARAGUAN REVOLUTION: A Postmortem

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- REVOLUCION Y POLITICA ALIMENTARIA: UN ANALISIS CRITICO DE NICARAGUA.* By Brizio N. Biondi-Morra. (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1990. Pp. 342.)
- SANDINISTA COMMUNISM AND RURAL NICARAGUA.* By Janusz Bugazski. (New York: Praeger, 1990. Pp. 132. \$34.95 cloth, \$12.95 paper.)
- POST-REVOLUTIONARY NICARAGUA: STATE, CLASS, AND THE DILEMMAS OF AGRARIAN POLICY.* By Forrest D. Colburn. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986. Pp. 145. \$27.50 cloth, \$8.95 paper.)
- MANAGING THE COMMANDING HEIGHTS: NICARAGUA'S STATE ENTERPRISES.* By Forrest D. Colburn. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990. Pp. 151. \$25.00.)
- HARVESTING CHANGE: LABOR AND AGRARIAN REFORM IN NICARAGUA, 1979-1990.* By Laura J. Enriquez. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991. Pp. 252. \$37.50 cloth, \$12.95 paper.)
- NICARAGUA: CUESTION AGRARIA Y PARTICIPACION CAMPESINA.* By Vera Gianotten, Ton de Wit, and Rodrigo Montoya. (Lima: DESCO, 1987. Pp. 99. \$6.00 paper.)
- NICARAGUA: A COUNTRY GUIDE.* By Kent Norsworthy. Second edition. (Albuquerque, N.M.: Inter-Hemispheric Education Resource Center, 1990. Pp. 226. \$9.95 paper.)
- STRUGGLING FOR SURVIVAL: WORKERS, WOMEN, AND CLASS ON A NICARAGUAN STATE FARM.* By Gary Ruchwarger. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1989. Pp. 128. \$19.95 paper.)
- ¿COMO VAMOS A SOBREVIVIR NOSOTROS? ASPECTOS DE LAS PEQUEÑAS ECONOMIAS Y AUTONOMIA DE LA COSTA CARIBE DE NICARAGUA.* By Ronnie Vernooy, Sandra Gómez, Virgilio Rivera, Norman Long, and Dominga Tijerino. (Managua: Centro de Investigaciones y Documentación de la Costa Atlántica de Nicaragua, 1991. Pp. 280.)
- STATE, CLASS, AND ETHNICITY IN NICARAGUA: CAPITALIST MODERNIZATION AND REVOLUTIONARY CHANGE ON THE ATLANTIC COAST.* By Carlos M. Vilas. (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1989. Pp. 221. \$30.00.)

An impressive number of publications have been written on the Nicaraguan Revolution. Those reviewed in this essay are representative of this literature in that most were written not by Nicaraguans but by North Americans, Europeans, and Latin Americans from other countries. And like the larger body of literature on this subject, they provide conflicting perspectives and conclusions on the nature and effects of the Nicaraguan Revolution and vary considerably in their empirical and theoretical contributions.

The one element these studies have in common is that all of them assess to varying degrees the major political, economic, and social developments that took place in Nicaragua while the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) presided over the country's destiny. This period began with the revolutionary regime's establishment in July 1979 and ended in April 1990, when the FSLN transferred governmental control to the conservative-dominated coalition, the Unión Nacional Opositora (UNO), that won the national elections two months earlier. Reviewing these works after the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas entails a postmortem analysis of the Nicaraguan Revolution and the Sandinista regime. Together, these books provide the basis for assessing one of the most significant epochs in Nicaraguan history and a major social revolution of the twentieth century.

The Contradictory Nature of the Sandinista Regime

Disagreement over the nature of the Sandinista regime stems from the divergent political perspectives of the authors as well as from differences in their methodologies and sources of information. From an anti-Communist perspective, Janusz Bugazski characterizes the Sandinista regime as a thinly veiled Communist regime based on political repression and totalitarian Marxist-Leninist ideology. Meanwhile, authors with more leftist perspectives, such as Gary Ruchwarger and Kent Norsworthy, regard the Sandinista regime as an anti-imperialist and popular democratic regime guided by its own homegrown ideology of Sandinismo.

The ideological perspective of the authors clearly affects their analysis of the regime. For example, in *Sandinista Communism and Rural Nicaragua*, Bugazski argues that "the first successful Communist takeover on the American mainland occurred July 1979, when the Sandinista National Liberation Front . . . seized power in Nicaragua" (p. 1). He goes on to assert that the domestic policies of the Sandinista regime provide "a case study of how a Marxist-Leninist system is imposed and adapted in a developing country."

Bugazski, a fellow in East European Studies at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington and a former research analyst for Radio Free Europe, makes a case in *Sandinista Communism* for the thesis of the U.S. Reagan-Bush administrations that the Sandinistas tried

to camouflage their efforts to impose a Communist system on Nicaragua's recalcitrant population. He also contends that the resistance to the regime's policies offered by the peasantry and the ethnic minorities of the Atlantic Coast region provided an essential base of popular support for the counterrevolutionary forces (the Contras). Bugazski argues that the Contras were justifiably armed and financed by the U.S. government to overthrow the Sandinista regime.

Ironically, Bugazski uses the writings of many leftists to support his characterization of the Sandinista regime. For example, he cites the work of Orlando Núñez and Roger Burbach to back up his argument that the Sandinistas were engaged in a socialist transformation of Nicaraguan society.¹ Using quotes from such works selectively, he tries to build a case that the regime was socialist and guided by Marxist-Leninist ideology.

Bugazski fails to acknowledge, however, that the revolutionary regime contained many different ideological currents and received support from Nicaraguans with diverse political perspectives. While some of these currents and supporters were socialist, many others were not. And although many Sandinistas held socialist ideals, the Sandinista leadership did not commit either the FSLN or the revolutionary regime to a socialist transformation of Nicaraguan society but rather to a political project of national unity and an economic project based on a mixed economy.²

Bugazski admits that "no extensive nationalization program or rapid socialization of the means of production was undertaken" by the Sandinistas. But he contends that this approach was a deceptive strategy pursued by the FSLN "so as not to alienate capital and labor or frighten off foreign investment and assistance" (p. 32). Bugazski cites the pro-Sandinista writings of George Black to back up his assertion that this strategy was a temporary one chosen by the Sandinistas to "buy the Revolution time and breathing space."³ Bugazski either does not understand or does not wish to admit that Black, like many other observers of the revolutionary process in Nicaragua, saw what he wanted to see in this process.

According to Bugazski, the Sandinista-controlled state ruled "the commanding heights" of the economy via its direct ownership of the country's "major national industries and about 25 percent of cultivated land for agro-exporting" (p. 33). He quotes from Forrest Colburn's *Post-Revolutionary Nicaragua* to support his view that the Sandinista regime only tolerated private businesses in order to siphon off their profits from agroexports, at-

1. Bugazski quotes on page 23 from Roger Burbach and Orlando Núñez, *Fire in the Americas: Forging a Revolutionary Agenda* (London: Verso, 1987).

2. Carlos Vilas, *The Sandinista Revolution: National Liberation and Social Transformation in Central America* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1986), 268.

3. Bugazski quotes from George Black, *Triumph of the People: The Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua* (London: Zed, 1985), 33.

tract foreign aid, and deflect international criticism of Sandinista policies (p. 13).

In fact, the Sandinistas did not transform the basic nature of Nicaragua's economic system, and the country remained capitalist despite the expansion of the state sector and implementation of what amounted to a relatively moderate agrarian reform. Although confiscating the holdings of former dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle gave the revolutionary regime control over some 40 percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP), large private producers retained control of more than half of the GDP in both agriculture and manufacturing, the two main sectors of the Nicaraguan economy.⁴ As Carlos Vilas noted in the mid-1980s, "the image spread abroad by counter-revolutionary propaganda and by the Reagan administration—and fed by the fear of the large bourgeoisie—of an omnipresent state that is overpowering and strangling private activity, is therefore false."⁵

The state sector created by the Sandinistas was actually no larger than that of countries like France, Mexico, and Peru in the 1960s and 1970s.⁶ Thus the Sandinista regime never gained control of "the commanding heights" of the economy, contrary to Bugazski's and Colburn's assertions.

In contrast to the anti-Sandinista perspectives of Bugazski and Colburn, Kent Norsworthy's more sympathetic *Nicaragua: A Country Guide* provides a more accurate perspective. Norsworthy accurately states that "the mixed economy model of the Sandinista government envisioned ownership in industry and agriculture divided between the state, small producers (including cooperatives), and a capitalist sector" (p. 65). He further notes the fact that during the first years of the Sandinista regime, some Sandinista leaders thought this mixed-economy strategy of national development would prepare the way for an eventual transition to socialism, while others "saw the mixed economy as a more permanent phenomenon" (p. 66). Norsworthy also observes that the Sandinistas were subsequently forced to give up their ambitious plans and institute a series of harsh austerity measures like those recommended by the International Monetary Fund for other debt-ridden countries of the Third World.

Norsworthy indicates that the economic stabilization and adjustment policies introduced by the Sandinista regime in the late 1980s "brought unprecedented hardships to an already poverty-stricken population" and that after analyzing their electoral defeat in 1990, "many in the FSLN came to the conclusion that the most striking thing was not that they had lost,

4. Richard Harris, *Marxism, Socialism, and Democracy in Latin America* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1992), 59–60.

5. See Vilas, *The Sandinista Revolution*, 155.

6. *Ibid.*, 154.

but that under such adverse circumstances 40 percent of the population still voted for them" (p. 69). Norsworthy also reveals that the Sandinista's efforts to promote national unity and accommodate the diverse actors in the country's mixed economy, particularly the large private producers, often led to counterproductive results. He notes in this regard that "state-provided incentives intended to coax a reluctant private sector into cooperation increased the economic burden on the popular classes" (p. 67).

Laura Enriquez never applies a specific label to the Sandinista regime in her book, *Harvesting Change: Labor and Agrarian Reform in Nicaragua, 1979–1990*, but she observes that the Sandinistas tried to redistribute investments and income so that the needs of the majority of Nicaragua's population would be given priority over those of the country's small capitalist elite. As her basically sympathetic analysis of the regime indicates, the Sandinistas' decision to keep the country's preexisting system of dependent capitalist agroexport production largely intact necessitated continuing a system of capitalist relations of production based on cheap labor and private enterprise (pp. 16–17).

Enriquez's conclusion is consistent with Vilas's observation in the mid-1980s that under the Sandinista regime, "the growth of intermediary capital and the state stimulants to productive capital" were evidence of "the reproduction of capital within the revolutionary process."⁷ In a more recent analysis of the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in 1990, Vilas concludes that the economic stabilization and adjustment program introduced by the Sandinistas in the late 1980s was "no different from anyone else's: it favored the rich and hurt the poor."⁸

In sum, a careful postmortem of the Sandinista regime reveals that it was clearly not a socialist regime guided by Marxist-Leninist ideology. To the contrary, it was a revolutionary nationalist regime that espoused its own homegrown eclectic ideology. The regime pursued a revolutionary project that was anti-oligarchic and anti-imperialist but not anti-capitalist or socialist. Most of the works reviewed in this essay support this conclusion, with the exception of Bugazski, who consistently paints the Sandinistas "red" and falsely labels their ideology as "Marxist-Leninist."

Metamorphosis of the Sandinista Agrarian Reform

All the works reviewed in this essay acknowledge the central importance of agrarian reform in the Sandinista regime's revolutionary project. Norsworthy states that "the agricultural sector was at the heart of the revolutionary transformations undertaken by the Sandinistas" (p. 78). Yet

7. *Ibid.*, 268.

8. Carlos Vilas, "What Went Wrong," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 24, no. 1 (June 1990):13.

he also points out that “the Sandinistas’ goal of redistributing land and wealth in the countryside without alienating the large private producers proved elusive as agroexporters tended to reinvest generous state credits in speculative operations or bank accounts in Miami, effectively boycotting production.” Moreover, Norsworthy demonstrates how the regime’s political mistakes and ideological contradictions “alternately favored or ‘punished’ the state sector, urban salaried workers, *campesinos*, or big private producers . . . [and] created conditions which allowed both the Contras to build a significant social base among the peasantry and the UNO coalition to sweep broad expanses of the countryside in the 1990 elections” (p. 78).

Close examination of the Sandinistas’ agrarian reform program reveals four distinct phases of this effort. Most observers agree that the first phase of the agrarian reform began with the new revolutionary government’s confiscating the land owned by the Somoza family and their closest allies. These confiscations gave the new revolutionary government control over some two thousand farms and ranches (about one-fifth of the country’s arable land). Colburn notes in his *Managing the Commanding Heights*, “the extensive property of Somoza was almost universally held to be little more than stolen property,” and the nationalization of these extensive holdings by the revolutionary regime “alienated no one—no powerful foreign interests or national bourgeoisie” (p. 37).

As mentioned, the private sector retained control over most of the country’s important agroexport farms and agroindustries and was given assurances by the revolutionary regime that private property would be respected.⁹ In this regard, Colburn contends, “the FSLN was resigned to building a new Nicaragua with the participation of the erstwhile private sector.” This approach was necessary, he argues, because “to do otherwise would have been political and economic suicide” (p. 34). Colburn also observes that “those within the Sandinista ranks and outside who pushed for complete nationalization of the economy were dismissed as ultraleftist adventurists.” Yet Colburn refuses to acknowledge that the Sandinistas were committed to the goal of maintaining national unity and that they actively sought the support of what they called “the patriotic bourgeoisie.” To this end, they courted and maintained an alliance with some of the country’s largest private producers, such as the Pellas family, a fact that Colburn mentions without explanation in *Post-Revolutionary Nicaragua: State, Class, and the Dilemmas of Agrarian Policy* (p. 125).

During the first year or so of the revolutionary regime, most of the

9. Joseph Collins, *What Difference Could a Revolution Make? Food and Farming in the New Nicaragua* (New York: Grove, 1986), 39–50; and Richard Harris, “The Economic Transformation and Industrial Development of Nicaragua,” in *Nicaragua: A Revolution under Siege*, edited by Richard Harris and Carlos Vilas (London: Zed Press, 1985), 41–46.

confiscated properties were transformed into state farms and placed in the new state sector of the economy, called the Area de Propiedad del Pueblo (APP). The remaining properties were handed over to cooperatives organized by the revolutionary regime among agricultural workers and peasants. Vera Gianotten, Ton de Wit, and Rodrigo Montoya indicate in their small but insightful monograph, *Nicaragua: cuestión agraria y participación campesina*, that the formation of the APP in the first phase “permitted the state to compete in the different regions of Nicaragua with the private sector” (p. 36). But they also point out that many peasants who had seized farms during and immediately after the insurrection resented and opposed the new government’s policy of placing most of these farms under state management. Adopting a pro-peasant perspective, Gianotten, de Wit, and Montoya criticize the “proletarian bias” of the initial phase of the Sandinistas’ agrarian policies, which they claim were founded on the assumption that state farms and producer cooperatives would advance the “proletarianization” of the rural work force and contribute to Nicaragua’s agricultural modernization.

Laura Enriquez argues in *Harvesting Change* that two contending perspectives existed within the revolutionary government’s Ministerio de Desarrollo Agropecuario y Reforma Agraria. She claims the “proletarianistas” were led by Jaime Wheelock, the head of the ministry, who believed that land redistribution would undermine the agroexport sector by diminishing its labor force. The proletarianistas argued that an agrarian reform program based largely on converting confiscated land into state farms would redress many of the social and economic problems of the countryside without promoting the “peasantization” of the rural population or reducing the supply of labor for the agroexport harvests. On the other side, according to Enriquez, were those within the ministry who argued for land redistribution. They contended that this approach would not affect the supply of labor for the agroexport harvests and that the government should create a large cooperative sector through the redistribution of confiscated lands to the rural poor (pp. 107–8).

In this regard, it is interesting to note that the second stage of the Sandinistas’ agrarian policies, which began with the enactment of the official Ley de Reforma Agraria in July 1981, marked a shift in the government’s emphasis from state farms to cooperatives. Norsworthy interprets this law as reflecting the Sandinistas’ decision to pursue an agrarian reform strategy that would meet the demands of the rural poor for land while also increasing the production of agroexports and food crops (p. 79). Enriquez states that the agrarian reform program was aimed at accomplishing three basic objectives: “to raise the standard of living of the rural population, to guarantee the nation’s food self-sufficiency, and increase the generation of foreign exchange earnings by strengthening the country’s agroindustrial base” (p. 84).

In contrast, Gianotten, de Wit, and Montoya contend that enactment of this official agrarian reform program two years after the Sandinistas came to power reflected their initial strategy of turning the APP state enterprises into the leading sector of the country's agricultural development, even though this move laid the foundation for creating a greatly expanded cooperative sector via the expropriation of idle, underutilized, and abandoned lands from the private sector. These authors note that the regime's plans at the time envisaged a future land-tenure system in which the APP would control 20 percent of the cultivable land in the country, producer cooperatives would control another 20 percent, service and credit cooperatives would control a third 20 percent, large and medium private producers would control about 35 percent, and peasants not organized into cooperatives would own only 5 percent of the land (p. 37).

At the time when the Agrarian Reform Law was enacted, Sandinista officials estimated that as much as 30 percent of the country's arable land was eligible for expropriation because it had been abandoned or was idle or underutilized by the owners.¹⁰ Yet it is important to note that this law was criticized within Nicaragua for being too conservative in that (unlike most other agrarian reforms in Latin America) it did not restrict the size of properties that could be owned by private landowners and emphatically guaranteed the right of private property. Moreover, the law set up a legal process that enabled landowners threatened with expropriation to appeal and reverse the government's decisions to expropriate their lands. The law also placed greater emphasis on productivity (economic considerations) than on social equity in deciding whether land should be expropriated and redistributed.¹¹

This second stage of the agrarian reform process was aimed primarily at expropriating the property of members of the traditional agrarian elite who were not performing an entrepreneurial role.¹² This approach contrasted with most other cases of agrarian reform in Latin America, which have involved either the expropriation of all large landholdings over a certain maximum size (as in Chile and Peru) or the seizure of large landholdings by the peasantry and subsequent redistribution of these holdings under a government-sanctioned agrarian reform program (as in Mexico and Bolivia).¹³

Most of the works reviewed in this essay agree that the implementation of the Sandinista agrarian reform program during the early 1980s failed both to satisfy the demands of the rural poor for land and to pressure

10. Collins, *What Difference*.

11. *Ibid.*, 89.

12. *Ibid.*, 89-96.

13. Richard Harris, "Evaluating Nicaragua's Agrarian Reform: Conflicting Perspectives on the Difference a Revolution Can Make," *Latin American Perspectives* 14, no. 1 (Winter 1987):101-4.

recalcitrant private producers into cooperating with the regime's efforts to increase the production of agroexports and food crops. Norsworthy points out that the reform program benefited thousands of rural families and that the production of most major crops climbed steadily until 1984, when the Contra attacks in the countryside began to take their toll on the economy. But he also argues that "Contra advances in their efforts to create a social base among the peasantry in the northern war zones pointed to a glaring weakness in the character and pace of the agrarian reform process: . . . important sectors of the landless peasantry, a key portion of the revolution's historic support base, had benefited little or not at all" (p. 79).

As the U.S.-backed Contra forces increased their operations in areas of the country dominated by poor peasants, the Sandinistas decided to increase the distribution of land in general as well as the distribution of land to individual title holders. As a result, by the end of the Sandinista regime, some one hundred and twenty thousand families had received land through the agrarian reform program.¹⁴

The third phase of the Sandinistas agrarian reform program began in 1985. During the latter part of the year, the revolutionary government critically reappraised its agrarian policies as well as its broader economic strategy.¹⁵ As a result, the government decided to increase distribution of land to the rural population. Enriquez notes that in reorienting the agrarian reform program in this manner, "the government hoped to fortify its political base by increasing the population of agrarian reform beneficiaries" (p. 90). But Gianotten, de Wit, and Montoya demonstrate that the Sandinista government's new model of "integrated rural development" was still based on paternalistic and statist assumptions that clouded its relations with the peasantry. They argue convincingly that the government's changing price and marketing controls, particularly for basic grains, were intensely resented by the peasantry (pp. 47–48). Most of the other authors indicate that these controls were largely ineffective and drove many peasant producers of food crops to sell their crops on the black market or to produce them only for family consumption.

Enriquez's *Harvesting Change* also reveals how the distribution of land to a significant portion of the rural population helped to undermine the system of agroexport production, the basis of Nicaragua's agricultural economy. According to Enriquez, "the labor shortages that Nicaragua experienced in the agroexport harvests . . . worsened as the various programs that composed the agrarian reform advanced" (p. 2). Her study reveals one of the crucial contradictions that vexed the Sandinistas' strat-

14. René Escoto and Freddy Amador, "El contexto macroeconómico de la reforma agraria," *Revista de Economía Agrícola*, no. 1 (Feb. 1991):11.

15. See Harris, "Evaluating Nicaragua's Agrarian Reform," 104.

egy of agrarian transformation: the competition for labor and government support between the peasant-based food-crop sector and the agroexport sector. As Enriquez correctly points out, Nicaragua's production of agro-exports for the international capitalist market required not only "the maintenance of an exploitative system of labor relations" but an abundant supply of low-paid seasonal laborers for annual harvests (p. 3).

The studies undertaken by Enriquez, Colburn, and Brizio Biondi-Morra reveal that the Sandinistas' various reform policies weakened the country's critical agroexport sector and also hampered the performance of other economic sectors as well. For example, labor productivity dropped drastically in both agriculture and industry as a result of the introduction of less authoritarian management-labor relations, the adverse effect of government wage and subsidy policies ("social wages") on the incentives that management could use to motivate workers, and the radical decline in purchasing power of wages and salaries caused by the government's inflationary monetary policies. These studies also show how the government's attempts to regulate the economy and control inflation led to a massive exodus of wage earners from agricultural and industrial production into the country's informal economy, which was based largely on petty commercial activities and subsistence farming.

Colburn's monographs focus on the deleterious effects of the Sandinista regime's agrarian policies on the rural population. The intent of his analysis clearly is to validate his thesis that revolutionary regimes in Third World countries like Nicaragua are incapable of improving the general welfare of the population by nationalizing the major means of production and turning management of the economy over to the state. His first book, *Post-Revolutionary Nicaragua: State, Class, and the Dilemmas of Agrarian Policy*, covers the early 1980s and the negative impact of the Sandinistas' policies on peasants and rural wage earners as well as private producers (p. 85). Colburn's second book, *Managing the Commanding Heights: Nicaragua's State Enterprises*, also focuses on the role of the state in what he refers to as "post-revolutionary regimes" (a confusing term that implies erroneously that revolutions stop with the formation of a revolutionary regime). It is based on his analysis of three state farms during the period preceding 1986. According to Colburn, "these three case studies offer a rich interpretative setting for adumbrating the multitude of factors shaping the capacity of a post-revolutionary state" (p. 6). His analysis leads him to argue that the inefficient management and financial losses of Nicaragua's state enterprises generated distortions throughout the entire economy and squandered much of the country's scarce resources in the state sector (p. 132).

In contrast to Colburn's condemnation of the Sandinista state enterprises, Gary Ruchwarger's critical case study of the Oscar Turcios Chavarría state farm (one of the three state farms also studied by Colburn) reveals

the effects of the Nicaraguan Revolution at the micro-level. Ruchwarger shows how the achievements, contradictions, and failures of the Sandinista regime affected working conditions, class relations, and gender relations in the Nicaraguan countryside. Appropriately entitled *Struggling for Survival: Workers, Women, and Class on a Nicaraguan State Farm*, this study reveals the hard-won improvements in everyday working and social conditions that workers on the state farms were able to obtain under the Sandinista regime, despite its shortcomings and contradictions.

Ruchwarger's careful analysis of this state-owned tobacco farm in northwest Nicaragua provides a unique and fine-grained examination of a microcosm of the revolutionary process during the late 1980s. Through his analysis, the reader can perceive the important gains at the micro-level that the farm workers achieved through their union, the Asociación de Trabajadores del Campo (ATC), which is never mentioned in Colburn's study. Ruchwarger's *Struggling for Survival* reveals that via constant bargaining with the management of the state farm, the workers were able to obtain "a package of social benefits that was out of reach under the Somoza dictatorship and unobtainable in the private sector" (p. 67).

Ruchwarger notes that although the workers' wage gains failed to keep pace with inflation, the social benefits obtained by the ATC in collective bargaining agreements with the state-farm management included work-site canteens that provided free food, commissaries that sold basic goods at low prices, childcare centers, occupational health and safety measures, free medical attention and medicines, free transportation to and from work, the construction of low-cost housing, and a portion of the beans and corn grown on state-farm land during the dead season when tobacco was not under cultivation. Ruchwarger also takes Colburn to task for asserting in his earlier book (p. 118) that the workers in Nicaragua were uninterested in participating in the management of their workplaces. Ruchwarger's analysis reveals that most workers at the Oscar Turcios Chavarría state farm were committed to participating in its management and that their participation in setting work norms and making other lower-level decisions was particularly important (pp. 62–67).

Struggling for Survival also reveals that the hierarchical wage system established by the Sandinista regime engendered class conflict among the workers, *técnicos*, and managers within state enterprises. Ruchwarger also found a decline in labor productivity and worker discipline due to elimination of the authoritarian management practices that characterized the Somoza period, disruptions caused by frequent Contra attacks, and the mobilization of the work force into the military. In his conclusion, Ruchwarger argues cogently that labor productivity and discipline in revolutionary Nicaragua could have been improved by expanding and upgrading workers' participation in decision making (p. 100).

Struggling for Survival also focuses on feminization of the rural work

force and the struggle against sexism and patriarchal oppression that took place during the Sandinista regime. On the Oscar Turcios Chavarría state farm, Ruchwarger found that by the late 1980s some 60 percent of the permanent workers and 74 percent of the temporary workers were women. Most of these women, however, were working in low-paying subordinate jobs, while higher-level positions were still being monopolized by men. Ruchwarger also found that as a result of pressure from the large numbers of women within the ATC, women gained more than half of the union leadership positions and women's demands became an important element in the union's bargaining with management. According to Ruchwarger, active participation by women in the rural work force and their increasing weight in the ATC significantly affected gender relations within the workplace. Yet he also notes that further advancement toward gender equality was constrained by the fact that Nicaragua's agroexport economy was based in part on "women's subordination in low-paid jobs." He therefore concluded that "without more education, technical training, and substantial pressure against traditional sexist attitudes," women would "remain concentrated at the bottom of the job hierarchy" (p. 96).

The constraints and contradictions arising from the Sandinista regime's dependence on Nicaragua's agroexport economy is a theme threading through nearly all the works reviewed here. In the postscript to her study, Enriquez speculates that "an expansion of the agrarian reform into the export sector of agriculture" through establishment of agroexport cooperatives might have "offered a means of both fulfilling the goals of the agrarian reform and contributing to the success of production in this vital sector of Nicaragua's economy" (p. 173). This possibility seems unlikely, however, given the evidence supplied by Enriquez and the other authors (Biondi-Morra, Colburn, de Wit, Gianotten, Montoya, Norsworthy, and Ruchwarger), who reveal that a host of other factors also undermined the Sandinistas' agrarian reform program.

For example, Brizio Biondi-Morra's study, *Revolución y política alimentaria*, shows how the Sandinista agrarian reform was undermined by the revolutionary government's often contradictory and ill-conceived macro-level economic policies on currency exchange rates, interest rates, government credits and loans, wages, subsidies, prices, the money supply, and other areas. Another factor was the regime's often ineffective and unsuccessful micro-level efforts at policy implementation. Biondi-Morra argues that organizational fragmentation and "institutional feudalism" in the state sector under the Sandinista regime impeded coordination of government policies and integration of macro- and micro-level decisions (p. 322). He also concludes that the poor performance of the state enterprises was due not to the fact that they were state property but to the contradictory macro-economic policies pursued by the government and their adverse effects on the plans and activities of the state enterprises.

Enriquez notes in her conclusion that revolutionary Third World states like the Sandinista regime have found it difficult to transform the prerevolutionary economic system in their countries because they are hindered by “lack of information about the concrete reality to be transformed, the still unconsolidated nature of the revolutionary state, and the limited supply of human resources capable of carrying out the planning process” (pp. 151–52). Enriquez argues further that facilitating the access of the popular classes to the planning process for national development must become part of the more general democratization that revolutionary regimes need to set in motion if they want to succeed.

The evidence presented in all ten of these studies indicates very little popular participation in national planning and policy-making under the Sandinista regime. Ruchwarger’s *Struggling for Survival*, for example, reveals that the degree of worker participation in decision making at the state-enterprise level was confined to workplace issues. He concluded that the workers’ continued support for the revolution required “a share in the fundamental decisions facing the country.” He predicted accurately that without greater participation, their productivity would decline (which it did) and their disinterest and resistance would imperil the revolution (p. 100).

The fourth and final stage of the Sandinista agrarian reform is not adequately analyzed in the books under review here. In the last phase, the agrarian reform program was affected by the economic stabilization and adjustment measures that the regime introduced in the first half of 1988.¹⁶ Aimed at arresting the country’s worsening economic crisis, these measures were officially described as “anti-inflationary and pro-export.” The measures were attacked by some critics for not conforming to a coherent strategy and by others for reflecting an implicitly liberal capitalist strategy of development that favored export production at the expense of small producers and peasants producing for the internal market.¹⁷ Due to their general unpopularity, most of the Sandinista government’s stabilization measures were suspended during the electoral campaign leading up to the February 1990 elections. After taking office, the UNO government introduced similar measures favoring the large private agroexport producers over the “reformed” sector of cooperatives and small producers of food crops for the internal market.¹⁸

The Sandinista Regime and the Atlantic Coast

If the economic policies of the Sandinista regime were what Norsworthy identifies as its Achilles’ heel (p. 65), then the regime’s troubled

16. See Escoto and Amador, “El contexto macroeconómico,” 10–12.

17. *Ibid.*, 11.

18. *Ibid.*, 14–20.

relations with the indigenous and creole peoples of the Atlantic Coast region of Nicaragua were its weak flank. This problem undermined the regime's political position almost as much as its economic policies. The traditional animosities between the Spanish-speaking mestizo population (the vast majority of Nicaragua's inhabitants) and the country's ethnic minorities (the Miskitos, Creoles, Sumus, Ramas, and Garifunas) who live in the Atlantic Coast region were greatly aggravated by the Sandinista regime's initial approach to these communities. Subsequent regime efforts to reverse its initial mistakes by granting the Costeños a form of regional political autonomy succeeded only partially in overcoming their opposition to the regime, as evidenced by the fact that the Sandinistas failed to win a majority of the seats in the two new regional assemblies elected in February 1990.¹⁹

Carlos Vilas's *State, Class, and Ethnicity in Nicaragua: Capitalist Modernization and Revolutionary Change on the Atlantic Coast* provides a masterful analysis of the conflicts that developed between the revolutionary Sandinista regime installed in Managua and the Costeños. In his introduction, Vilas acknowledges that he made "not even a passing reference to the Coast and Costeños" in his earlier work and that this omission reflected "an implicit reduction of the Sandinista Revolution, and of Nicaragua, to the Pacific and the central-northern areas of the country" (p. xii).

Vilas's analysis of state, class, and ethnic relations in the Atlantic Coast region makes up for this omission. His study of the region reveals how the unequal development of capitalism in Nicaragua produced "two strongly different socioeconomic formations" in the Atlantic and the Pacific-central-northern regions (p. xiii). Vilas also demonstrates how the Sandinistas mistakenly conceptualized the Atlantic Coast as simply "a regional version of the [country's] general problem of external dependency and economic backwardness" and why they initially "failed to take account of its ethnic specificities" (p. 96).

According to Vilas, because of the Sandinistas' revolutionary nationalist and anti-imperialist ideology and their failure to analyze carefully the specific socioeconomic and cultural characteristics of the Costeños, the regime adopted what he describes as a "reductionist" and ethnocentric perspective. Consequently, the Sandinistas did not place sufficient importance on the specific interests and problems of the different ethnic and racial communities of the Atlantic Coast. Rather, they treated these interests and problems as if they were merely local manifestations of the general interests and problems that the Sandinistas assumed to be shared by all exploited and oppressed groups in the country.

Vilas examines the ways in which this perspective led to policies

19. Charles Hale, "Miskitu: Revolution in the Revolution," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 25, no. 3 (Dec. 1991):25.

that created tensions and conflicts between the revolutionary government and the various ethnic communities in the region. He also shows how most of the leaders of these communities went from being tentative supporters to hostile opponents of the government. Finally, Vilas analyzes how the conflicts between the revolutionary government and the population were manipulated by agencies of the U.S. government and the domestic opponents of the revolutionary regime. His analysis also reveals the conditions that gave rise to the outbreak of war on the Atlantic Coast, the government's forced resettlement of thousands of villagers, the Sandinistas' subsequent reorientation of their perspective and policies, and the process of negotiations and agreements that ended the fighting and laid the institutional foundations for regional autonomy.

In the final pages of *State, Class, and Ethnicity in Nicaragua*, Vilas reaches a series of important conclusions about the Sandinista regime's relations with the ethnic communities of the Atlantic Coast. He concludes that in order for the Costeños to exercise genuine regional self-government, the central government in Managua would have had to decentralize its functions and resources to the regional level of government and "accept broad popular participation in the design of policies and strategies of development" (p. 183). He also concludes that this kind of democratic political change had only barely begun to occur during the last years of the Sandinista regime.

Vilas also concludes that one of the main reasons for the failure of the Sandinista government's economic strategy in the Atlantic Coast region was "the isolation of government strategy from people's modes of social organization and their work experiences" (p. 183). This problem is also analyzed in rich detail by Ronnie Vernooy, Sandra Gómez, Virgilio Rivera, Norman Long, and Dominga Tijerino in *¿Cómo vamos a sobrevivir nosotros? Aspectos de las pequeñas economías y autonomía de la Costa Caribe de Nicaragua*. Their book complements Vilas's general analysis of state, class, and ethnic relations in the Atlantic Coast region by providing a series of detailed case studies on the extent of articulation (and disarticulation) between local socioeconomic activities and regional and national activities. Moreover, they give particular attention to the effects of the "interventions" at the local level of governmental and nongovernmental organizations.

This series of case studies convincingly demonstrates the minimal presence of governmental agencies at the local level throughout the Atlantic Coast region during the late 1980s (p. 252). Vernooy et al. attribute this situation to the inaccessibility of many areas, the government's lack of resources (transportation and gasoline), the war, and the ineffective manner in which policies were implemented by the regional administrative centers in Puerto Cabezas and Bluefields. The authors also conclude that the Sandinista government failed to give enough attention to implementing its project of regional autonomy during the last years of the regime.

They cite two main reasons: the government found that implementing this project would take more time than originally anticipated; and the widespread destruction caused by Hurricane Joan on 21 October 1988 forced the government to devote most of its attention and scarce resources to meeting the basic survival needs of the population (p. 254).

Vernooy et al. praise the fact that the February 1990 elections established the first locally elected regional governments in the Atlantic Coast's history. In their view, this development, more than any other, could lead to popular self-government in the region. Yet the authors also argue that genuine self-government in the Atlantic Coast region requires that political leaders and government agencies break with past practices and go to the countryside to listen to the people, comprehend their specific problems and expectations, and help them develop short-term and long-term solutions that are consistent with their capacities and interests (p. 255). In this regard, it is important to note that recent reports indicate that the development of regional self-government on the Atlantic Coast has been obstructed by the UNO government, which according to one source has been "formulating major, long-term development plans for the coast without notifying autonomous government officials, or consulting the region's inhabitants."²⁰

Conclusion

The studies reviewed here offer numerous conclusions about the nature, effects, and shortcomings of the Sandinista regime. The most important conclusion is that the Sandinista government was not a socialist regime and did not transform the basic nature of Nicaragua's agroexport-dependent capitalist economy. The regime attempted instead to pursue a mixed-economy model of national development, but this strategy failed due to basic contradictions in the strategy itself, the opposition of most of the country's private producers, and the efforts of the Contras and the U.S. government to destabilize the regime.

A key element in the Sandinista's revolutionary project was the agrarian reform program. By the end of the regime, the Sandinistas had redistributed land to some one hundred and twenty thousand families. But because of contradictions and shortcomings in this program, the Sandinistas failed to modernize Nicaraguan agriculture and to maintain the political support of the majority of the peasantry.

Moreover, the state enterprises set up by the Sandinistas not only failed to generate funds for the country's development but also placed a major burden on the government's financial resources and contributed to

20. *Ibid.*, 26.

the failure of the Sandinistas' economic strategy. Finally, the Sandinistas' ethnocentric and reductionist perspective led them to make serious errors in their relations with the peoples of the Atlantic Coast. The regime partially made up for these errors by changing its perspective and laying the foundations for regional self-government. But the failure to integrate the specific interests of the minority ethnic and racial communities in the region into the Sandinista revolutionary project gave opponents a key political and ideological lever to use against the Sandinistas.

Underlying these conclusions, a fundamental contradiction can be perceived in the nature of the Sandinista regime: even though the Sandinistas were committed to serving the interests of the "popular majority," they did not involve the general citizenry to any significant degree in government policy-making and planning. This contradiction was reflected in the regime's troubled relations with the indigenous and Creole communities of the Atlantic Coast, its failure to maintain the political support of the peasantry despite distributing land to a large number of peasant families, and the harsh effects of Sandinista economic policies on the popular classes during the late 1980s. Yet the regime's shortcomings in this regard do not support the conclusion that it was totalitarian or that it pursued a disguised plan to establish an authoritarian system of state socialism in Nicaragua. Even a cursory postmortem of the Sandinista regime reveals that it administered fair elections in 1990 and pursued a rather orthodox neoliberal economic strategy during its last years in power. In fact, the harsh effects of this strategy on the general population helped defeat the Sandinistas in the February 1990 elections, the final blow that felled the ailing revolutionary regime.