

## The Sandinista Legacy in Nicaragua

by  
*David Brown*

**Katherine Hoyt** *The Many Faces of Sandinista Democracy*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1997. 224 pp.

**Gary Prevost and Harry E. Vanden** (eds.) *The Undermining of the Sandinista Revolution*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997 (revised with new preface 1999). 226 pp.

**Thomas W. Walker** (ed.) *Nicaragua Without Illusions: Regime Transition and Structural Adjustment in the 1990s*. Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1997. 332 pp.

In Nicaragua, 1990 was the eleventh year since the fall of Latin America's longest-running dynastic dictatorship and the eighth year of a U.S.-backed guerrilla insurgency. More significant, it was the year that the Nicaraguan people took advantage of their first-ever democracy, created by the then-incumbent government of the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (Sandinista National Liberation Front—FSLN), to vote their leaders out of office. With the end of Sandinista rule in Nicaragua came the end of the world's most recent revolutionary socialist experiment. Following the lead of its neighbors, Nicaragua jumped aboard the twin bandwagons of electoral democracy and neoliberalism, becoming, on the surface at least, little different from any other impoverished Latin American republic. The change in regimes from revolutionary to ordinary left Nicaraguans and those who study Nicaragua wondering what purpose the revolution had served. It would be easy to see Nicaragua's 11-year Sandinista experiment as a historical aberration that amounted to nothing or as a heroic but perhaps quixotic struggle against imperialism that met with almost complete failure.

However, three studies of postrevolutionary Nicaragua suggest that the revolution's legacy still shapes the lives of all Nicaraguans in important ways. The Sandinistas may be out of power, but their influence is still present in nearly every aspect of Nicaraguan society. In creating Nicaragua's first democracy, in undertaking land and social reforms that have survived, albeit in modified form, to this day, and in creating a still-living body of revolutionary thought, the Sandinista revolution is far from dead history. Katherine Hoyt's *The Many Faces of Sandinista Democracy* examines how the FSLN worked to construct its own type of democracy during the revolution and how it continues working to apply its ideas to Nicaragua and, increasingly, even to itself. Two edited volumes, *The Undermining of the Sandinista Revolution*, by Gary Prevost and Harry E. Vanden, and *Nicaragua Without Illusions*, by Thomas W. Walker, examine Nicaragua in the years following the 1990 election, seeking a better

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understanding of how government, the economy, civil society, and the general population adjusted to the swiftly changing reality of the transition period.

Previous studies of the ideology of the Sandinista revolution have tended to focus on the influences of such internationally prominent thinkers such as Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, V. I. Lenin, and José Carlos Mariátegui. Scholars have undertaken less study of the thought of the Nicaraguan revolutionaries themselves, leaving a gap in scholarly understanding of the intellectual framework of the Sandinistas that Hoyt admirably fills. Hoyt observes that, quite apart from applying revolutionary theory to building a socialist state, “the major contribution of the Sandinista revolution for Latin America was to bring together *in practice and in theory* representative, participatory, and economic aspects of democracy” (1997: 3). These elements were “the three legs of the stool” of the Sandinista revolutionary project. The first leg, representative or “political” democracy, is characterized by the popular election of governments; the second leg, participatory or “mass” democracy, incorporates massive citizen participation in the regime’s activities; and the third, economic democracy, is characterized by an equalization of the distribution of wealth and the means of producing wealth. Hoyt’s book examines the Sandinistas’ attempts to establish these elements both externally, in the Nicaraguan government, and internally, within their own party. Her chief sources are the published writings and public statements of intellectually prominent Sandinistas and interviews conducted with many of them in the early months of 1994.

After a clear and concise first chapter on Nicaraguan history, Hoyt considers the various currents of thought within the FSLN political democracy. She recognizes three phases of Sandinista thinking on representative democracy, beginning with “rejection of ‘bourgeois’ elections,” in which the FSLN saw itself as a Leninist-style vanguard party with no need to reconfirm its popular legitimacy; this was followed by an “acceptance of elections as tactical,” enabling the FSLN to incorporate the loyal opposition into the government and legitimize its rule abroad. Ultimately, with the 1984 elections and the writing of the 1987 constitution, the FSLN embraced “elections in principle,” an attitude confirmed by their peaceful cession of power after losing the 1990 elections—an event unprecedented in Nicaraguan history. Since then the Sandinistas have struggled, with only some success, to apply these same democratic principles to their own party, though they remain deeply divided as to how to adapt their vanguardist model to a multiparty electoral system. Their chief difficulties have been the splitting off of a more conciliatory group of leaders under the banner of the Movimiento Renovador Sandinista (Sandinista Renovation Movement—MRS) and the difficulty of separating the party’s ideology and electoral strategy from its powerful and charismatic leader, Daniel Ortega. Hoyt says less on this latter point and how it has contributed to the FSLN’s difficulty in presenting a convincing vision of a better Nicaragua to a majority of the electorate.

Participatory democracy, enshrined in mass organizations that represent corporate bodies such as women (in the Asociación de Mujeres Nicaragüenses Luisa Amanda Espinosa [the Luisa Amanda Espinosa Association of Nicaraguan Women—AMNLAE]) and neighborhoods (the Comités de Defensa Sandinista [Sandinista Defense Committees—CDS]) within the government, became a victim of the FSLN’s

centralist and verticalist tendencies and its increasing need to devote all of its resources to fighting the Contras. As the war dragged on, these organizations became almost unable to act independently of the orders they received down the chain of command from the FSLN's National Directorate. However, since the FSLN's electoral defeat in 1990, many of these organizations have begun to be reinvigorated as independent voices for their constituents. Hoyt devotes a chapter titled "New Radical Thought on Participatory Democracy" to interviews with past and present heads of many formerly FSLN mass organizations in which they discuss their views of the future of the FSLN and the Nicaraguan polity. Their thoughts are a welcome relief for anyone who fears that radical thought has atrophied or is accustomed to descriptions of contemporary Latin America's present and future as being firmly in the grip of right-wing neoliberal elites. They also admirably fulfill Hoyt's purpose of showing theory being put into practice.

Inequality is still a pervasive problem in Nicaragua, and the divisiveness and controversy that surrounded the FSLN's economic plan are a legacy that it is often at pains to overcome. Hoyt reprints significant excerpts from her interviews with Jaime Wheelock, one of the FSLN's most important economic planners in his capacity as minister of agriculture, allowing him to describe in his own words the conflict between his "modernistic vision" for the peasantry—informed largely by Leninist ideas of the peasantry as lacking sufficient class consciousness and in need of modernization—with the expressed desires of many peasants to own their own small farms and market their surplus in exchange for a reasonable profit. Hoyt then contrasts Wheelock's views with those of the Sandinistas who are now struggling to blunt the edges of Nicaragua's economic restructuring. These current thinkers are often visionary but hard-pressed to construct alternatives to what many of them admit is probably inevitable and unavoidable economic dislocation.

The greatest strength of Hoyt's book is its looking behind the unified front that the FSLN has tried to present to the world, revealing the diversity of opinions and currents of thought that have been present both before and since the 1990 elections. She shows that it is impossible, no matter what one's political leaning, to paint the FSLN with broad strokes. The Sandinista party emerges as a diverse set of individuals dedicated to revolutionary social change whose intellectual opinions sometimes—perhaps often—clashed. FSLN governance can be seen to have created a legacy of political and, to a lesser extent, participatory democracy that continues even though the party itself no longer governs. The Sandinistas have fostered an important body of revolutionary theory and practice that continues to be applied with important implications for Nicaragua and the rest of the Third World.

The two remaining books are collections of essays examining the impact of the FSLN's fall from power on varied areas of Nicaragua's society. Of the two, *Nicaragua Without Illusions*, edited by Thomas W. Walker, is the more rigorous. Although it comes to a less firm conclusion than Gary Prevost and Harry E. Vanden's *The Undermining of the Sandinista Revolution*, its coverage of a wider range of topics and social groupings gives the reader deeper analytical insight into contemporary Nicaragua.

From the start, *The Undermining of the Sandinista Revolution* adopts a combative attitude, describing Nicaraguan supporters of Violeta Chamorro's opposition

presidential candidacy as “quislings” (Prevost and Vanden, 1997: 3) and asserting that in ending FSLN rule Nicaragua was stepping away from its place in history. The opening essay, written by Prevost, is an excellent analysis of the many Sandinista accomplishments, but because it overlooks their failures it makes it difficult to look at the Chamorro administration in any other light than that of merely undoing Sandinista accomplishments—no discussion of how the detrimental side of pre-1990 Sandinista policies affected post-1990 Nicaragua or of the positive aspects of life in Nicaragua since 1990 is possible. While there are good descriptions of how life has gotten worse, especially in such key areas as the quality of health care and education, the autonomy of the Atlantic region, and Nicaraguan sovereignty, there is no discussion of areas in which life has gotten better, including continued increases in literacy, life expectancy, food consumption, and other measures of how well people live. Vanden’s essay, “Democracy Derailed,” similarly focuses on the post-1990 shortcomings of Nicaragua’s fledgling democracy, including conflict over the balance of power among the various branches of government and a significant cession of sovereignty to U.S. interests. In the same vein, Richard Stahler-Sholk’s “Structural Adjustment and Resistance” focuses on the ills caused by structural adjustment, especially those that impact the poor. While both show the detrimental effects of the end of Nicaragua’s revolution, neither sufficiently engages the NGOs, neighborhood organizations, small political parties, and other elements of civil society that are struggling to resist a dismantling of the gains won in the revolution and to expand upon them.

In perhaps the volume’s most original essay, Cynthia Chávez Metoyer uses two different methodologies to examine Nicaragua’s transition to state power from a feminist viewpoint. Using quantitative data, she makes clear the differences in the effects of the transition on the two genders. Using “feminist lenses,” she qualitatively evaluates the impact of the end of the revolution on Nicaraguan women, showing that women’s descriptions of their experiences in their own words can be an analytical tool just as powerful as the use of quantitative data. Her essay would have been improved by a broadening of the sample beyond the peasant women working in one FSLN-founded farming cooperative in the Sandinista stronghold of Masaya Department. The final essay, Pierre LaRamée and Erica Polakoff’s “The Evolution of Popular Organizations in Nicaragua,” focuses on the evolution of the FSLN’s mass organizations from parastatal organizations with mandates from the Council of State into genuinely independent organizations that have had some success at community organizing and are now seeking ways to improve the lives of their constituents, even if this sometimes means going against the wishes of the Sandinista party. This essay comes to similar conclusions as Hoyt’s chapter on the same subject: the success of Sandinista democracy may depend largely on whether these organizations can be strengthened so as to reconnect the FSLN with its grassroots.

The conclusion of Prevost and Vanden’s volume is that a combination of U.S. and Nicaraguan elite interests, in toppling the revolution, rolled back many successful reforms and eliminated many opportunities for improvement of the lives of ordinary Nicaraguans. Unfortunately, while quite plausible, this conclusion is only weakly supported by the evidence. With the exception of LaRamée and Polakoff, the authors do not look at a broad enough spectrum of Nicaraguan society and polity to convince

the reader that their findings are applicable to the country as a whole. Rather, their data and observations seem to have been selected to support the conclusion, and observations that could have both challenged and enriched the thrust of their argument are often absent. The volume only sometimes answers Peter Smith's "appeal for rigorous attention to empirical reality and to the analytical (rather than ideological) properties of alternative [research] frameworks" (1995: 24) that many Latin America scholars have been incorporating into their research in recent years.

*Nicaragua Without Illusions: Regime Transition and Structural Adjustment in the 1990s*, edited by Thomas W. Walker (1997), is, as it claims to be, a clear picture of Nicaragua's transition to post-Sandinista rule. The 19 essays are divided into three groups: Nicaragua's historical and international setting, new government policies, and the status of groups and institutions such as political parties, social classes, grassroots organizations, the former Contras, the church, indigenous peoples, and the media. Walker's own "Historical Setting and Important Issues," which is both an introduction and a summary of the volume, focuses on the long and tortuous relationship of Nicaragua with the United States, the composition of the Sandinista revolution, and the major political and economic issues that face Nicaragua today. The most important legacy of the revolution, Walker argues, is that Nicaragua's citizens remain empowered and able to organize to defend their interests—limiting the government's power to act arbitrarily and making civil society into a stronger force than in the other young democracies of Latin America.

Highlights from the second section include Shelly A. McConnell's "Institutional Development," "General Economic Policy," by Mario Arana, "Agrarian Policy," by Jon Jonakin, and "Social Policy" by Karen Kampwirth. McConnell shows that the Constitution of 1987 had major loopholes, including a poorly defined supreme court and no clear method for making amendments. The result was that by 1995 the legislature was operating under a reformed constitution of its own making that the president called illegitimate and refused to uphold. A complete collapse of democracy was avoided at the last minute under pressure from popular strikes, the church, and the U.S. embassy. The result has been a constitutional compromise that is promising to guarantee Nicaragua's democratic institutions but is still incomplete. Arana's lucid economic analysis focuses on the ways in which Nicaragua's transition to greater market autonomy is the same as and different from that of other Latin American countries. Too much focus on the ends rather than the means of establishing a market economy, combined with overly sanguine expectations of future U.S. aid, resulted in an austerity plan that was among the harshest in Latin America, plunging Nicaragua into a recession lasting through most of Chamorro's regime and creating innumerable social costs. However, he notes that "since it is true that the costs would have been even greater had there been no adjustment, the question is not whether there should have been adjustment but rather what type could have served the country better." This is a departure from many views of Chamorro's regime (such as Prevost and Vanden's) as undertaking stabilization only to benefit the economic elite and one that better explains the right's continued electoral success.

Jonakin addresses the confusion and hypocrisy of Nicaragua's post-1990 land reform, noting that land was often taken away from peasants (in a cooperative) to be

given to other peasants (often former *Contras*). Corruption in the national development bank and the resulting credit squeeze forced many peasants, especially those who had recently received land, to sell at reduced prices, increasing poverty and inequality. Furthermore, large landowners have an interest in keeping credit tight and the future of land reform in doubt in order to be able to purchase more land at distressed prices, and thus they will continue to be implacable in their political demands. Kampwirth notes that post-1990 changes in social services were due mostly to the fact that political convictions colored the way in which the heads of the social service ministries chose to fight for or abandon the gains of the Sandinistas in the context of now-tighter budgets. Thus, the minister of social welfare Simeón Rizo, who saw social welfare as a tool of a “totalitarian” welfare state, eliminated his ministry entirely and replaced it with an agency designed to channel funds only to NGOs that worked with children. In contrast, the Health Ministry incorporated the views of many FSLN community health workers, avoided mass or ideologically motivated layoffs, received input from former health ministers (including Dora María Téllez, a chief subject of Katherine Hoyt’s interviews), and generally avoided making major changes in Nicaragua’s most popular and effective social service ministry.

Highlights from the third part include “The Other Parties,” by Kenneth Coleman and Stuart H. Douglas, “The Former *Contras*,” by Ariel Armony, “The Church,” by Andrew Stein, “The Economic Elite,” by Rose Spalding, and “The Urban Informal Sector,” by John Speer. Coleman and Stuart focus on the five principal “families of parties” that compose most of Nicaragua’s 28 (as of 1995) political parties. The biggest players include the historically rightist (and moving farther rightward) Partido Liberal Constitucionalista (Liberal Constitutionalist party—PLC), which has grown into Nicaragua’s largest party and sent Arnoldo Alemán and now Enrique Bolaños Geyer into the Casa Presidencial; the Partido Conservador (Conservative party—PC) and the Partido de Conservatismo Social (Social Conservatism party—SCP), now split because of personal differences among its leaders, some of whom fled the Sandinistas and some of whom stayed; and the FSLN and its more centrist splinter the MRS. Armony points out that, in contrast to the wars of El Salvador and Guatemala, Nicaragua’s civil war ended not with a negotiated settlement but with an election won by the political party supported by the armed opposition. The Chamorro government therefore had no formal obligations to militants on either side to ensure demobilization. By 1992, conditions were bad enough that many of the *Contras* rearmed themselves, but the government was able to pacify these *recontras* primarily through land distributions and weapons repurchases. This had a negative effect on the development of civil society, as it showed that armed extortion was much more effective in getting the government’s attention than either peaceful protest or political pressure.

Stein shows that the church moved from an early position of support for the FSLN revolution into a more complicated arrangement in which the church hierarchy generally opposed Sandinista policy while the views of individual clergy varied widely. The church was often torn between its opposition to Sandinista policies aimed at reducing its power and its efforts to relieve poverty and increase human dignity. In a unique study, Stein surveyed 170 Nicaraguan priests in 1993–1994 and found them mostly skeptical of Chamorro’s regime for giving too much power to unelected ministerial

officials and for social policies that deepened poverty and were at odds with the church's idea of universal respect for humanity. Priests tended to be more supportive of Chamorro's educational policies, which stressed returning "Christian morality" to the curriculum. Spalding combines economic and political analysis for his study of economic elites, a very appropriate approach for a country in which a small number of men wield disproportionate power over the national political economy. He describes the elite as being a more heterogeneous group than many other Nicaragua scholars have concluded and examines the divisions between those who joined the Chamorro administration and those who joined the Consejo Superior de Empresa Privada (Superior Council for Private Enterprise—COSEP) and went into intransigent opposition. Many business leaders were skeptical of the administration because of its widespread corruption, the ineptness of its orthodox stabilization plan, and a legacy of private-enterprise opposition to Nicaragua's governments dating back to the later years of the Somoza dynasty. Speer sees the urban informal sector's poor relations with political parties as a result of their being squeezed between two ideologies neither of which has a place for them. The FSLN saw the informal sector as nonrevolutionary and tried to regulate or dismantle it, while the chief opposition parties' neoliberal program threatens to remove all of the sector's remaining social safety nets. Speer's survey of informal workplaces shows that people's views can vary greatly with which part of that sector employs them and suggests the possibility of violent protest if the informal sector continues to be underrepresented in political centers of power.

The three books reviewed here show that Nicaraguan society after the Sandinistas remains unique. Despite neoliberal restructuring, economic hardship, and corruption, Nicaragua's young democracy is still in transition, and different groups are experimenting with new ways to use it as a tool to press for their interests. Revolutionary thought is still alive and being put into practice every day. Hoyt's excellent study shows how Sandinista democracy made this possible and also how it contributed to some of Nicaragua's—and the FSLN's—present difficulties in deepening democracy. Walker's and Prevost and Vanden's compilations of the challenges of economic crisis and widespread popular discontent and disarticulation facing Nicaragua after Sandinista rule are both informative and compelling. Of the two, Walker's is not only the more rigorous but also the more hopeful.

## REFERENCE

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