

Recent Works on the Nicaraguan Revolution

Triumph of the People: The Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua

by George Black. Zed Press, 1981.
(Available in the US through
Lawrence Hill & Co.)

Nicaragua: The Sandinist Revolution
by Henri Weber. New Left Review,
Verso, 1981.

Since the 1979 victory of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) in Nicaragua, left observers worldwide have been asking questions about the nature of the revolution and its vanguard. The national characteristics of the Nicaraguan revolution have left many onlookers, whether friendly or hostile, confused as to the direction and ultimate goal of the FSLN. The appearance of these two books on the Nicaraguan revolution is timely, then, in that together they go a long way towards answering questions asked by the left, but also (and more importantly) they provide new facts and ideas with which to combat the extensive disinformation campaign being waged by the State Department and the US media. Both books defend the new Nicaragua as a revolutionary democracy, and foresee a socialist Nicaragua.

Henri Weber, author of *Nicaragua: The Sandinist Revolution* is loosely affiliated with the Trotskyist Fourth International in France. His book is a well-written, critical account of the Sandinista revolution that will be of particular interest to those leftists who are looking for alternatives to the Soviet model of socialist society and see cause for hope in the non-dogmatic approach of the Sandinistas.

Weber assumes little knowledge about Nicaragua on the part of the reader and so begins with a brief but fairly accurate account of Nicaraguan history up through the successful insurrection in 1979. His main focus is on the development of the revolution since the FSLN took power, and he devotes the major part of this short book to an analysis of the policies of the FSLN during their first two years in power.

On the other hand, the main strength of George Black's *Triumph of the People* is a wealth of historical data gathered first-hand by Black in Nicaragua. Much information comes from interviews he conducted with participants in Nicaragua's liberation, providing an

evocative and human flavor, especially in the narrative of the war itself.

It is the sections on recent history and on the war against the dictatorship that provide unique insight into Nicaragua which is not readily available elsewhere. The sections on pre-1960s history, and on the first year after the victory, are quite valuable for historical detail as well, but Black's analysis of the Somoza regime and the story of the FSLN's twenty-year struggle for power provides an indispensable context for understanding the direction of the process today. For example, one of the most controversial aspects of the FSLN's leadership has been its alliance with sections of the bourgeoisie, both during the insurrection, and since. The traditional objection to such alliances is that working class parties which enter into them tend to subordinate the interest of their class to the project of the bourgeoisie, in order to maintain the alliance. In some cases, parties have simply abandoned the struggle for working class politics without even testing their own strength, as did the Communist Parties of France and Italy immediately after the Second World War.

The history of the cross-class alliance of Nicaragua is quite different, beginning with the FSLN's refusal to halt the armed struggle under any circumstances. Black traces the history of this remarkable alliance and its *practical* meaning in the struggle against the dictatorship, showing how factors such as the traditional weakness of the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie as a class, the deformation of the economic and political structure caused by the dominance of the Somoza family as a political dynasty, the revolutionary activity at the base of the church, and the strength of the FSLN's support, especially among the peasantry, permitted the Sandinistas to *lead* a united front that included sections of the bourgeoisie. The Nicaraguan reality is of a revolutionary vanguard strong and flexible enough to force its program on the nationalist bourgeoisie, rather than the other way around.

Of course, the struggle to make a revolutionary program stick has only just begun in Nicaragua. The FSLN's guarantee of a mixed economy is part of an ongoing attempt to preserve the alliance with the bourgeoisie. This alliance is today a harsh necessity: reconstruction of the economy will be impossible without massive international aid which would be jeopardized by a move against the private sector, which in turn is capable of holding hostage more than half the gross

domestic product. Some observers have questioned whether the Sandinistas' program of revolutionary reform will founder on this obstacle.

But the FSLN's insistence that the economy shall serve "the logic of the majority," as they call it, and no longer the interests of the few, indicates that they are firm in their radical project. Black documents many cases in which difficult economic decisions made by the Sandinistas show that the "logic of the majority" is becoming a practical reality visible in free health clinics, new schools, sewer systems and electrification projects—all this despite the desperate economic crisis.

The extent of any future compromise with the bourgeoisie, and the FSLN's ability to dictate the terms, will be determined by the bleak realities of a devastated economy, and likely military aggression from the US or its proxies. The Sandinistas have thus far ably exploited divisions within the bourgeoisie, continually splitting the so-called "patriotic" wing from the bulk of the class, either neutralizing them, or even enlisting them in efforts which serve the popular sectors. But the future success of this strategy depends largely on events and factors beyond the control of the Sandinistas.

Black's book also provides the most useful and in-depth discussion of the three-way split in the FSLN in the seventies, and the reunification process just prior to the triumph. Once again, situating the political split in its historical context clarifies not only what the three lines represent, but also how the conditions of vicious repression and civil war contributed to disrupt the unity of the FSLN. The fact that the organizational split has healed into a virtually seamless unity without a sign of the former bickering and acrimony is a testimony to the destructive effects of the repression on the process of resolving political line struggle.

Finally, the military history in the section on the insurrection, besides being exciting reading, is useful towards a beginning understanding of the dynamics of guerrilla war and strategy. Given the complete lack of understanding (and even interest) on the part of Western media in the conduct of guerrilla war, news reports from Central America tend to be quite opaque when it comes to getting information on the progress of the wars underway there. Any information about what the aims and tactics of guerrilla war are can be useful in deciphering the reports we are now receiving on El Salvador and Guatemala.

Black covers all the bases in his section on the year of Sandinista power after the triumph. Unfortunately, he leaves behind his narrative, chronological approach in favor of a sector-by-sector treatment of the new Nicaragua, which robs this section of some of the dynamism of the rest of the book, and makes the changes in Nicaraguan society somewhat difficult to understand as part of a historical process. For example, he makes reference several times to the resignation of Alfonso Robelo, founder of the opposition Nicaraguan Democratic Movement, from the Junta of National Reconstruction, as a watershed in the political history of the first year, but doesn't treat this subject fully until the very last chapter, on the counter-revolutionary threat.

Another difficulty, particularly with the post-triumph section of the book, is created by the task that Black sets

himself: "My primary aim is to break the silence, to give a factual report of what is happening in the new Nicaragua. If it does so at the expense of a more theoretical exposition, this is the result of a conscious decision on my part. . ." The problem with this approach is that Black gives us a view of Sandinista policies and their effects in the short-term, but fails to provide any tools for anticipating the direction of the revolutionary process in the future. The result of choosing not to address the theoretical problems of building socialism in Nicaragua is, per force, to end up viewing the process through Sandinista-colored glasses. His treatment of the mixed economy is a good example of this. Black outlines the efforts the Sandinistas have made to ensure that the private sector continues to produce, and documents the response from the business sector, which has included resistance and sabotage. While he does show how the FSLN's strategy is made necessary by economic limitations, and gives evidence for the Sandinistas' determination that the mixed economy not translate into political power for the bourgeoisie, still his choice not to examine the place of such a policy within the broader task of building socialism leaves the reader unprepared to think about this issue. The Sandinistas maintain that the mixed economy is a permanent feature of their plan; Black believes that the Sandinistas are building socialism. But the long-term contradiction between conceding some economic power to the bourgeoisie while attempting to exclude them from a decisive role in the state receives no attention, because this issue is outside the scope of a "factual report."

This is unfortunate for two reasons. First, Black's vast background in Nicaraguan history and politics clearly qualifies him to speculate on these matters, and it's a shame that his knowledge is not brought to bear here. Secondly, the best way to equip international supporters of the Nicaraguan revolution to defend it is to provide as accurate a view as possible on the direction and development of the revolutionary process, and that can't be done without entering into the theoretical terrain of the transition to socialism. Black's attempt to avoid that leads in some cases to an unsatisfying rehash of the FSLN's own public positions on many important contradictions in Nicaraguan society, instead of a fresh independent view, which would be valuable.

For a critical analysis, we must turn to Henri Weber's book. While Weber goes into none of the important detail Black does, he goes further than Black in trying to draw out the theoretical implications of the innovations in Sandinista strategy. For example, Weber, like Black, discusses the successful alliance with the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie that the FSLN rode to power. He goes beyond Black, however, to explain the significance of that strategy as a break with the prevailing class reductionist notions of orthodox Marxism. Orthodox Marxist dogma has held that each class has unitary and immutable interests. This has tended to blind the left to opportunities to neutralize or even temporarily ally with sections of opposing classes. The Sandinistas analyzed the nature of the divisions within the weak Nicaraguan Bourgeoisie and correctly concluded that they could impose an anti-imperialist program on the entire anti-

Somoza alliance despite the contradictions that line posed for their bourgeois allies.

This process of neutralizing and gaining hegemony over the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie was largely a matter, as Weber aptly states, of turning "the formidable weapon of patriotism against the whole of the bourgeoisie." They did this by basing their anti-imperialist policies on the rich legacy of General Augusto Cesar Sandino, the martyred leader of the guerrilla war against the US Marine occupation from 1929-1933.

The Sandinistas' success in appropriating the legacy of Sandino was, in itself, a significant break with the revolutionary Marxism of the time. As Weber says, "The FSLN could easily have followed the sectarian trend of the epoch, consigning General Sandino and his nationalism to the limbo of countless other figures of Latin American populism." But by declaring itself the follower of the immensely popular Sandino, "the FSLN rooted itself in a living Nicaraguan tradition, emerging as the unswerving champion of national independence and identity against US domination and its local agents." The appropriation of Sandino's legacy, combined with the irreconcilable differences within the ruling class, the combativity of the Nicaraguan people, and military preparedness of the FSLN guerrillas, ensured Sandinista hegemony over the revolutionary process.

That hegemonic position has mystified some Marxist critics, for, as Weber points out, the Government of National Reconstruction formed in July, 1979 "seemed to hold out every guarantee to the Nicaraguan Bourgeoisie and its international allies." Weber takes to task James Petras for accusing the FSLN at that time of selling out the workers and peasants of Nicaragua. (*Monthly Review*, Oct., 1979. Petras has since taken a more optimistic outlook on the revolution.)

Weber argues that while the Sandinistas were capable of imposing a "Maximum programme" of nationalization, cancellation of the national debt, etc., they opted not to for the tactical reason that they needed time to consolidate their positions and, more importantly, for the strategic reason that they wanted "to determine the rhythm of the revolution according to the real level of consciousness of the broad masses, and not only of the most radicalized sections." In fact, the workers and peasants of Nicaragua did not see their interests as irreconcilable with those of the bourgeoisie due to the oppositional role played by the bourgeoisie in the struggle against Somoza. "One key function of the FSLN alliance policy was precisely to enable the working masses to grasp this conflict through their own experience." Weber's analysis of this approach correctly highlights the positive significance of such a non-commandist, consensual approach to the political consciousness of the masses.

The real meat of this book, however, is the chapter on "Sandinism and Democracy." Here Weber uses the Nicaraguan revolution as the jumping off point for his analysis of democracy and the transition to socialism, posing two questions: One "How can the working people . . . be protected against a power that, while it rules in their name, does so through the mediation of a more or less independent bureaucratic apparatus endowed with interests of its own?"; and two, "how can workers . . .

genuinely participate in power by appointing, mandating and controlling their leaders?"

The questions are good ones. And it is his answers to these difficult questions that provide the reader with particularly provocative insights. The project that Weber has set for himself with this book is to argue, using the concrete example of the Nicaraguan revolution, for the appropriateness of institutional mechanisms designed to ensure the ultimate responsiveness of the revolutionary state and the vanguard to the actual interests of the working class.

Weber begins by explaining some of the ways in which the Nicaraguan people have input into the running of society—their mass organizations' representatives on the Councils of State; the local "discussion meetings" of workers attended by those representatives; the worker-management meetings to discuss production and grievances; and a call-in radio show featuring leading government figures. He criticizes these structures as insufficient, characterizing the Sandinista approach to socialist democracy as derivative of the Cuban model. That model, he argues, sees "democracy defined as 'government for the people' " through its vanguard; "direct mass participation in the exercise of power, through representatives appointed by, and responsible to, the top organs of power; elections conceived as 'a selection of the best from the good' with no clash of political lines."

The above-mentioned channels for popular participation in Nicaragua, he says, "make it possible to inform and consult the most active workers about the making of decisions. But none of them directly enables the workers to appoint, mandate, control, or revoke their representatives and rulers. Whereas the workers are deemed to participate directly in the exercise of executive and legislative power, the process actually involves the intermediation of mainly non-elected representatives, who are thus independent of the rank-and-file and highly dependent on those who appoint them."

This critique, of the Cuban model and the Sandinista tendencies, is essentially a correct one. And Weber gives convincing proof that at least some sections of the FSLN leadership are guided by an economist understanding of democracy. He cites this statement by Minister of Defense and FSLN leader Humberto Ortega:

Democracy first appears in the economic order, when social inequalities begin to diminish and when workers and peasants improve their conditions of life. That is when true democracy begins, not before.

Once these goals are attained, democracy immediately spreads to other areas: the field of government is broadened; the people exerts influence over its government. . .

It certainly does not bode well for the Nicaraguan workers that one of their leading figures defines their participation in determining the direction of Nicaraguan society as a mere superstructural question that will resolve itself when the productive forces are more developed and the standard of living has risen. Weber correctly argues that real mass proletarian democracy must be struggled for and institutionalized in the period of socialist transition.



Indigenous World

Weber's prescription for such a process of democratization comes in answer to the two questions he posed. How to limit the power of the state? By recognizing and codifying into law the rights of individuals vis-a-vis the state; and by maintaining and developing genuine pluralism: of the press, of mass organizations, and of political parties, as "counter-powers" to keep the revolutionary state honest and responsive.

How can workers participate in power in a more direct way? Weber urges a system of "council democracy" in which collectives based in the workplace, neighborhood, etc., would freely elect their representatives to the governing body. Recall rights would prevent the development of a caste of professional politicians. And key in such a system would be a decisive break with the historical view of the mass organization as the mere "transmission belt" for the party line; the mass organizations would have to have real autonomy from the state and the party.

There is much to recommend Weber's schema as a long-term goal for the revolutionary state to seek to attain. In fact, there exists in Nicaragua the potential beginnings of just such a system: the Council of State. That council is made up of representatives from all major organized forces in Nicaraguan society, including the bourgeois parties and the employers' association, COSEP. Representation is proportional to the relative size and importance of the organization's constituency as determined by the FSLN. The Sandinista-led organizations currently hold 24 of the 47 seats, with the bourgeoisie consigned to an unhappy minority. Indeed, one of the advantages of such an electoral system is that the only way the bourgeoisie could increase its relative weight in government would be to gain control of workers' organizations, a highly unlikely prospect.

Two things would have to change for the Nicaraguan Council of State to become the type of democratic system Weber envisions. First, it would have to have real

decision-making power as the supreme state body. At present, the Junta of National Reconstruction, and through it the FSLN Directorate, has that authority.

Secondly, real autonomy would have to be granted to the mass organizations to allow an actual competition of political lines within them. Indeed, one doesn't have to agree with Weber's particular conception of a revolutionary democracy to recognize the importance of such autonomy in the period of socialist transition. The traditional Marxist-Leninist conception of the mass organization as the "transmission belt" from the party to the masses must be broken with if meaningful worker participation is to be achieved.

This incorrect approach, Weber argues, comes from a "vanguardist" conception of the relation between the vanguard party and the masses:

The 'vanguard' quality is conceived as an essence. By single-handedly leading the people to victory, the FSLN is said to have proven that it is 'the indisputable vanguard of Nicaraguans', the expression of a people alive to its historic interests. As such, the FSLN knows better than the workers themselves where their true interests lie and how they can be attained. It may therefore substitute itself for the people, if the latter ever yield to demagoguery or lassitude.

Weber offers convincing proof that such a mistaken notion does, indeed, underlie the Sandinistas' conception of mass-party relations. He details the battle for control of the building workers' union, SCAAS, whose leadership is affiliated with the Moscow-aligned Nicaraguan Socialist Party (PSN). Despite the closeness of the PSN to FSLN policy, the Sandinistas tried to take over the union with its newly formed Sandinista Workers Federation (CST). The effort was met with strong resistance by the rank-and-file, and FSLN was forced to recognize the PSN-led SCAAS.

In several other cases, workers initially voted to affiliate with the CST and then withdrew their affiliation when the FSLN appointed union representatives who were more interested in implementing the Sandinista austerity program than they were in defending the workers. James Petras describes one such case in great detail (*Latin American Perspectives* No. 29, Spring, 1981), pointing out that these workers are by no means Somocistas; as some Sandinista militants accused them of being. Rather, they are committed to the revolutionary transformation of Nicaragua, but have yet to be won over to the full FSLN program.

Disaffection will inevitably result if the union functions simply as the channel by which the FSLN tells the workers what they're supposed to do. We can expect these workers to be receptive to the FSLN's policies in the long run if their union is allowed now to function as the representative of their legitimate concerns on the job. If it is not, they will come to regard the CST, and by association the FSLN, as nothing more than the state's representative at the workplace, a workplace in which the state also functions as the management. This is the breeding ground for counter-revolution.

One of the several questions raised by the type of pluralistic, council democracy that Weber suggests is the freedom given the bourgeoisie to organize for its own

class interests. It would be incorrect to defend the "democratic rights of all citizens" in the abstract; one must go further to ask "Democracy for whom, and at what price?" If rights for the bourgeoisie pose a real threat to the power of the workers and the peasants, then the price is counter-revolution and is too high.

Weber's argument for pluralism is based on the understanding that suppressed grievances will only surface later as sharper contradictions. Therefore, he argues, the political process should be as free as possible to allow open struggle over conflicting political lines.

While he is correct to make these points, it leads him to underestimate the real threat to state power posed by the class enemies of the Nicaraguan revolution. At present, the Sandinistas face a counter-revolutionary arsenal consisting of established, well-armed Somocistas operating in the sparsely-populated border areas; the combined economic might of the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie and international capital; a respected newspaper, *La Prensa*, that has devoted itself fully to the destabilization effort; hostile neighbors on all sides; and of course, the reported \$19 million CIA destabilization slush fund. And all this in a country trying to rebuild from the devastation of the war of liberation while at the same time repaying the huge national debt inherited from Somoza. The threat of counter-revolution is not simply the backdrop for a discussion of contemporary Nicaragua, as Weber might lead us to believe; it is the starting point for such a discussion, and the central fact of life in Nicaragua today. It is not for nothing that the Sandinistas have dubbed 1982 the year of "unity in the face of aggression."

Pluralism can only extend to the rights of the bourgeoisie when the bourgeois and imperialist threats to the revolution are fully under control. This is clearly not the case in Nicaragua today, and Weber's staunch defense of the rights of such counter-revolutionary vehicles as *La Prensa* is seriously misguided.

The most significant shortcoming of the book, however, is its failure to provide us with what should be central to any Marxist work: a class analysis. Weber is correct in saying that the "people-dictatorship" contradiction was primary during the insurrection. Unfortunately, he remains so caught up in the euphoria of that era of relative popular harmony that he fails to realize the obvious: with the defeat of the Somoza dictatorship the contradictions that are now shaping Nicaraguan society are among "the people" themselves. The principal contradiction is, of course, the counter-revolutionary role of large sections of the national bourgeoisie. But also key to the deepening of the revolution are solutions to other difficult questions: how to collectivize agriculture; how to fulfill the economic expectations of the workers and peasants despite the constraints of the continuing prevalence of capitalist ownership within the mixed economy; what to do about the serious unemployment problem in the cities; how to maintain their support among the majority of small and medium farmers; and how to effectively integrate the indigenous peoples of the Atlantic Coast region into the revolutionary process.

Weber gives us very little insight into these issues, and by so doing he downplays the importance of the class

dynamics that are shaping the revolutionary alliance itself, leaving us instead with the mistaken notion that "the people" are now uniting to confront the national bourgeoisie just as "the people" united to confront the dictatorship; as one.

The problem here is that as Marxists we can only emphasize a classless concept such as "the people" in specific circumstances like the struggle against Somoza. What is needed to understand Nicaragua today is more than that: a thorough analysis of the classes, class fractions, and multi-class forces (e.g., the Church) that make up Nicaraguan society and their relationships to one another and to the revolutionary project.

Indeed, there seems to be a good dose of unfounded leftist optimism in much of what passes for class analysis in Weber. Perhaps the most glaring example of this is his confident characterization of the FSLN as "a revolutionary organization of the Nicaraguan proletariat" in spite of the Sandinistas' own insistence that they are no such thing. The Sandinistas are still trying to project themselves as representative of that broader popular alliance, not as any sort of vanguard of one particular class. And in fact the FSLN is still relatively weak among the industrial proletariat compared with the truly deep roots they have among the Nicaraguan peasantry. Weber may be hampered here by the Trotskyist tendency to glorify as "proletarian" any political organization they happen to support.

Nicaragua: The Sandinist Revolution does have its share of Trotskyist baggage. This review has not focused on that aspect of the book for one reason. One shouldn't ignore the many valuable contributions of Weber's analysis simply because one doesn't agree with the overall framework of that analysis. We may balk at his framing of the question of the "bureaucratic deformation of the workers' state," but we should recognize that while we might phrase the question differently, we're looking for a similar answer: a more democratic socialism than history has provided us with up to now.

George Black's *The Triumph of the People* and Henri Weber's *Nicaragua: The Sandinist Revolution*, taken together, succeed in putting the Nicaraguan revolution in its correct historical and national context, and effectively counter the charges of "totalitarianism" coming from the White House. They will be invaluable to anyone with an interest in revolutionary Nicaragua, as well as those who want to draw out the implications of the Nicaraguan revolutionary process for a deeper understanding of the transition to socialism.

Laura Barnes and Timothy Austin

