

CAPITALISM AND SOCIALISM AS CONFLICTING CULTURAL MODELS IN NICARAGUAN POLITICS

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In this paper, I argue that the transformation of Nicaragua from a socialist ally of the Soviet Union to a capitalist government allied with the United States was made possible by a fundamental change in the political consciousness of Nicaraguan citizens. Nicaraguans tend to justify this change of consciousness by appealing to notions of personhood and identity grounded in religious ideas. I use the approach of Katherine Verdery (1999) to argue that in Nicaragua, human bodies are used politically as representations of sacred and profane categories. I conclude that in the case of Nicaragua, religious language is employed to express secular political identity, thereby providing cultural legitimation for the capitalist political order.

I completed a total of nine months of fieldwork in the city of Masaya in central Pacific Nicaragua [January to May 1997, November 1998 to May 1999]. Through interviews, I discovered that Nicaraguans employ narrative strategies when they express their political consciousness. The collection of these narratives is the basis for my comparison of Sandinista political consciousness and anti-Sandinista political consciousness as a means to explain conflicts between the two groups.

Nicaragua: Revolution and Counterrevolution

On July 19, 1979, the people of Nicaragua celebrated in the streets because the regime of Anastasio Somoza Debayle had been overthrown. When Nicaragua rejected the Somoza regime, the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* [FSLN or *Frente Sandinista*] enjoyed unassailable popularity. The Marxist-Leninist guerilla cadre of the FSLN created a new *junta de gobierno* in 1979 that was determined to rebuild the devastated country and optimistically backed by the majority of Nicaraguans.

By 1990, this optimism had completely disappeared (Vilas 1990). The Nicaraguan economy contracted grimly under the onslaught of the Contra War, a guerilla counterrevolution produced by funding and covert intelligence support from the United States (Vilas 1991). The United States also tried to isolate Nicaragua by imposing an economic embargo, as well as isolation from the IMF and other financial institutions. For the average Nicaraguan family, life became a struggle to survive. Dreams of building a new kind of society evaporated during the *época sandinista*, the 11 years that the FSLN ruled Nicaragua. In the presidential elections of 1990, those Nicaraguans who had supported the FSLN in 1979 voted instead for Violeta Chamorro, the anti-Sandinista candidate (Gould 1990; Vilas 1991). With her financial connections to the United States, Chamorro was perceived by voters as the candidate who could bring IMF loans and foreign investment to a dying Nicaraguan economy (Saldomando 1992).

Nevertheless, the center of conflict in Nicaragua continues to be between the Marxist Sandinistas and the Liberals, who are anti-communist and anti-Sandinista. Within Nicaragua, the discourse that has been employed to describe this conflict is centered on religion. Many anti-Sandinistas claim that the Sandinistas repressed religious freedom, replacing religion with communist atheism and worship of the totalitarian state (Belli 1985; Canales 1992). The Sandinistas, on the other hand, bitterly denounce Catholic bishops who use their Sunday homilies to instruct parishioners to vote against the FSLN. Most Sandinistas view the masses as being easily manipulated by the clergy (*FSLN, Dirección Nacional* 1990). Moreover, Sandinistas believe that the revolution of 1979 rekindled the effort to create a secular state, which provided secular education and other social services that were resented by jealous members of the clergy and

the reactionary bourgeoisie (Escobar 1984; Monroy García 1997:208).

In contrast, I argue that the underlying conflict is not between a religious worldview and a secular worldview. Instead, it is a clash between persons who have incompatible ideas about the role of the state. Those who believe that the market is the basis of economic and social progress are believers in capitalism, and hence anti-Sandinistas. The pro-Sandinista viewpoint, by contrast, includes those who believe that the state should shelter and protect the people from the influence of the market economy. The Sandinistas have a statist viewpoint that portrays the state and not the market as the agent of social progress and economic growth.

Sandinista Political Consciousness and Regime Formation

During my fieldwork in Masaya, Nicaragua, I have found that people who identify themselves as Sandinistas are people who propose that the capitalist world-system is harmful to Nicaragua, and that the state should intervene to protect Nicaraguans from market forces. Reflecting on the Sandinista government that ruled from 1979-1990, one Sandinista offered a representative view: "We were all poor, but nobody went hungry. Children had shoes. Education and health care were free." The Sandinista state was actively supported by a large group of people who believed in the value of the activist state, a state that intervenes to protect its citizens from harmful market forces. This belief is the most important component of Sandinista identity.

Sandinismo is a type of dependency theory. Dependency theory and world-systems theory both portray the nation-state as an organization that carries out functions of labor control and connects local populations to global circuits of unequal resource exchange (Cardoso 1982:114; Brenner 1982:56; Wallerstein 1975). According to David Lehmann (1990), dependency theory synthesizes nationalism and Marxism and so bridges the long-standing opposition between the two perspectives. In Latin America more generally, dependency theory identifies the world-economy as the mechanism of oppression, whereas traditional Marxism in Latin America portrays a ruling class or foreign power as the oppressor (Lehmann 1990).

The conceptual model of oppression had an enormous impact on the type of state that

developed when the FSLN came to power in 1979. The Sandinistas' goal was not to create a socialist economy, which was regarded as "impossible" in a situation of Third World underdevelopment (Harris 1985:41; Monroy García 1997: 208). Instead, the Sandinista government attempted to improve Nicaragua's insertion into the capitalist world-economy through capital-intensive and technology-intensive investment (Biondi-Morra 1993; Enríquez 1991; Ryan 1995; Spalding 1994). Specific groups of producers were targeted to receive special credit packages, expedited access to foreign exchange, and other incentives (Spalding 1994). The structuralist approach associated with Raúl Prebisch (Prebisch 1984) is closer to the economic model used by the Sandinista government than any socialist model. Nevertheless, the Sandinista government also stipulated production quotas and guaranteed prices for products, thereby insulating both state and private enterprises from market signals (Ryan 1995; Spalding 1994). Workers were protected from market forces by subsidies for basic foodstuffs, health care, and education (Ryan 1995).

Transition: Statist "Socialism" to Post-Socialist Capitalism

The electoral defeats of the FSLN in 1990, 1996, and in 2001, indicated that most Nicaraguans rejected the Sandinista model of how the world economy operates. The idea that the government is the intermediary between the community and the world economy has been replaced by a widespread belief that individuals enter markets directly to compete freely with each other for employment or commodities. In this conceptual universe, state intervention in market mechanisms is unnecessary and undesirable.

The transition from the socialist period to the post-socialist period in Nicaragua was made possible by a shift in the popular imagination away from a state-centered view of the relationship between society and economy and toward a market-centered view. Many people who voted for anti-Sandinista president Arnoldo Alemán did not like or trust him but nonetheless believed that his free-market economics would be less harmful to Nicaragua than would a returning Sandinista government (Barnes 1996). This stance reflects the normal ideology of a capitalist government, which is that market economies are self-regulating and should

not be subject to political interference (Hamilton 1982; Held 1990:33).

Anti-Sandinistas portray the government as “evil” and the market as “good.” What is powerful about this discourse is its ability to use religious terminologies of morality, although it is in fact a discourse about state and market. The discourse of the “free market” draws upon religious representations of the human body, and of the relationship between body and soul, to construct a sense of personhood and identity that is explicitly anti-socialist. Hence the post-1990 capitalist order is not legitimated by explicit ideology as much as it is by what Bourdieu has called “doxa”—that is, subconscious ideas and attitudes of which the individual is only partially aware (Bourdieu 1985).

Such unconsciously held ideas can profoundly influence people who do not adhere to any systematic or self-conscious system of religious beliefs (Spiro 1982). This is illustrated by the case of Chico Prado. Chico is a typical anti-Sandinista who portrays his political identity in religious terms, although at the time that I interviewed him, he neither participated in regular religious practice nor supported the anti-Sandinista Liberal party [*Partido Liberal Constitucionalista*].

Consciousness of an Anti-Sandinista Proletarian

Chico Prado offered the following testimony to illustrate why he and many other Masayans became anti-Sandinistas. Chico spends every day working in his native city of Masaya. He works for a cable television company by walking door-to-door to collect payments from customers and soliciting new clients. Chico claims that although he does not support Liberal president Arnoldo Alemán, he is also opposed to the Frente Sandinista. He traces his stance back to the 1980s, when the Sandinistas ruled the country and all able-bodied men were drafted into the Sandinista Popular Army. The poorly trained, poorly equipped conscripts were sent into the jungles of the Atlantic region to fight against the U.S.-backed Contra forces. Chico was assigned to a combat unit that was commanded by a Cuban army officer who vowed to show his men that it was foolish to believe in God. Chico recalled that the commander once said to the men, “Ask God for bread.” When one man obliged, the commander laughed and said, “God can’t give you anything. Now ask ME for bread.” Another man then

asked him for bread, and he handed out bread and said, “So, you had better forget about ‘God,’ because only I can give you bread!” The commander further told the men, “If your parents are against the Revolution, then you must be ready to kill your own parents.” Chico reportedly informed the commander that he was an evil man who could never make Chico kill his parents: “If my parents gave me life, then how could I kill them for your meaningless revolution?” In response, the commander labeled Chico a “counterrevolutionary” and had him imprisoned in a metal tube that was submerged in the soil. Because the tube was narrow, Chico could not move around in it; nor was he allowed to come out of the tube, not even to defecate. Chico nearly died. After six months in the tube, however, Chico was taken to a military hospital where he was revived with food and vitamins. When he finally returned to his army unit, he confronted the Cuban commander. Chico remembered that he told the other man, “I survived because of He who is in heaven!” The commander dismissed his assertion and claimed that Chico survived only because his army buddies had surreptitiously given him food and water.

Although I questioned Chico as to the accuracy of his story, he insisted that his story was completely true. This story certainly offers the truest portrayal of those moral categories that make Chico anti-socialist in his convictions. Drawing on the religious imagery of Christ’s burial and resurrection, Chico intends his powerful story of suffering to demonstrate that the Sandinistas and their Cuban allies are totalitarian atheists whose purpose is to desecrate the sacred. According to Katherine Verdery (1999), the interment and treatment of human bodies, whether living or dead, is a way of projecting cosmic categories of sacred and profane onto the political order.

The confrontation between Chico and the Cuban commander begins with a conflict over the origin of bread. Clearly, the conflict as it is represented is a clash between a materialist, Marxist worldview, and a religious idea about the source of bread. Nevertheless, it is also a discourse about the nature of the state. This aspect of the story is most evident when the focus moves from the origin of bread to the nature of the family. Chico’s story portrays Cubans and Sandinistas as persons who fetishize the state, thereby violating the sacred familial relationship between parents and children. What is the connection between bread and the family?

In Chico's mind, food comes from God. However, human beings receive God's bread through the mechanism of the market. Chico's story presents an argument through analogy, that just as the family is sacred and must be kept inviolate from state interference, so should the market also be kept inviolate. Chico's narrative portrays the state as a profanity that must not be allowed to intervene in either family or market, because God's bounty is naturally and normally distributed to each family unit by the market. In contrast, for the Cuban commander, the revolutionary state apparatus is indispensable for integrating both the mode of production and the family unit.

In reality, Chico and the commander were not fighting about God or religion but about the nature of the state. In a given social encounter, Chico may need to position himself by way of an imagined relationship to the state. The relationship with the state is one of many factors that can determine how social actors envision their locations in social space (Bourdieu 1985; Brubaker and Cooper 2000). In my conversation with Chico, he communicated his understanding of the social space in which he lived and defined his present identity through his remembrance of a Marxist government that ceased to exist more than a decade ago.

Disappearing Corpses and the Fall of Sandinismo

The *época sandinista* from 1979 to 1990 produced a situation in which Nicaraguans were forced to define their identity as either for or against the Sandinista state. Verdery's perspective on the use of dead bodies to symbolize the political order can be used to understand the stories through which people in the barrio of Monimbó describe their anti-Sandinista identity formation. During the Contra War of the 1980s, the military conscription program caused terrible anti-Sandinista bitterness. Young sons were dying in a war that few people wanted. The narrators of these stories maintain that the Sandinista government did not even return the bodies of the fallen soldiers to their parents, which would have made Christian burials for the deceased possible. Instead, coffins were delivered to the bereaved parents who were given strict orders not to open the coffins before burial. In these narratives, the parents disobey, prying open the lids to reveal that they do not contain bodies, but only stones or wooden logs.

These stories are normally told about "a friend of a friend" and are not generally first-

hand accounts. The narrators are making a statement about the Sandinista government, which is portrayed as violating the most basic tenets of the Christian religion. The treatment of the conscripted soldier's body is described in a manner that portrays Sandinismo as a repugnant form of Marxist materialism that can only recognize the human body either as a source of labor power or as cannon fodder (*Conferencia Episcopal Nicaragüense* 2001 [1983]).

Conclusion

The capitalist political order that has predominated in Nicaragua since 1990 is bolstered by a variety of symbolic representations, many of which are religious in nature. These religious representations are used to denote a secular social relationship between the individual and the state. The key term, "individual," is represented as a subunit of the social categories "market" and "family," which are employed to denote the category of "sacred" as that which should not be profaned by "the state." Hence, the ideology of the capitalist political order is constructed on a separation between state and market that is naturalized by religious imagery.

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