Searching for the Time of Beautiful Madness: Of Ruins and Revolution in post-Sandinista Nicaragua

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“Now as many times before, I am troubled by my own experience of my feelings, by my anguish simply to be feeling something, my disquiet simply at being here, my nostalgia for something never known” (Pessoa, 1991: 5).

Introduction

I first travelled to Nicaragua in July 1996, as an anthropology graduate student searching for what the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano has evocatively described as “the time of beautiful madness” (“el tiempo de hermosa locura”). The celebrated Sandinista revolution that his expression refers to held sway in Nicaragua between 1979 and 1990, and had been an important contributing factor to the development of my political consciousness as a teenager. Although I was six years too late to experience at first hand what seemed from afar to have been an exceptional moment of social effervescence and experimentation, unlike the “revolutionary widows” that Galeano describes so well, moving from one Third World revolution to another, loving them tenderly as they unfold but leaving them when disenchantment sets in, I was determined to uncover the legacy of this particular revolution that had so influenced me, and see at first hand what changes it had wrought on Nicaraguan society. I consequently went to Nicaragua with a doctoral research project that aimed to investigate the means through which individuals and communities were creatively organising themselves socially and culturally in order to cope with the economic crisis and insecurity that were widely reported to be characteristic of post-revolutionary Nicaragua at the time, hoping – on the basis of my personal

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2 I have been unable to ascertain where Galeano first coined this phrase, but he confirms that he has used it on various occasions (personal communication, 18 February 2005).

political biases – to find that these would be founded on forms of solidarity and spontaneous cooperation deriving from the period of Sandinista revolutionary rule.

At one level, such expectations were also typical of a certain anthropological tradition, which as Chris Hann (1993: 3) points out has long fixated on collective forms of action and organisation, something that is perhaps most obvious in the discipline’s repeated attempts to document the communal property ownership structures of so-called “primitive” societies. At the same time, though, they were by no means necessarily unreasonable expectations to have in view of the wider literature on urban poverty in Latin America, much of which focuses on the emergence of reciprocal forms of solidarity among impoverished individuals and communities (see for example González de la Rocha, 1994; Lloyd, 1979; and Lomnitz, 1977). It quickly became apparent, however, that examples of such cooperative forms of collective organisation were few and far between in post-revolutionary Nicaragua, and what I found instead were circumstances overwhelmingly characterised by breakdown, apathy, disillusion, and social fragmentation. Deeply imbued with idealism as I was, my response to this “appalling face of a glimpsed truth” closely echoed Kurtz’s vision of human nature – “The horror! The horror!” – in Joseph Conrad’s famous novel *Heart of Darkness* (1990 [1902]: 64-5), which I happened to be reading at the time. Indeed, the conclusion of the doctoral dissertation I subsequently wrote ended on the last line of this same novel, offered as a dismal encapsulation of the post-revolutionary Nicaraguan social reality: “The offering was barred by a black bank of clouds, and the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth flowed somber under an overcast sky – seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness” (Conrad, 1990 [1902]: 72).

Although by and large I still stand by this pessimistic vision of Nicaragua’s predicament, both the increasing distance from my initial visit, as well as further experiences that I have acquired over the past decade, have led me to rethink some of the specifics of my interpretation. In particular, a large part of my dissertation was devoted to exploring the disappearance of a sense of identification with revolutionary ideas and practices in the previously staunchly pro-Sandinista barrio Luis Fanor Hernández, a poor urban neighbourhood in Managua, the capital city of Nicaragua. I’d concluded that “Sandinismo is to all intents and practical purposes no more than a rapidly fading memory”, but I have come to believe that this assessment needs to be nuanced. I hasten to add, however, in view of the November 2006 re-election of Daniel Ortega as President of Nicaragua, that I do not think my analysis was wrong in terms of the demise of Sandinismo as a formal political project promising progressive social change. Considering the way the upper echelons of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, or FSLN) have venally integrated the elite oligarchy that has ruled post-revolutionary Nicaragua since 1990 (see Rocha, 2002 & 2004; and Rodgers, 2006b), Ortega’s recent victory constitutes little more than a wry illustration of Karl Marx’s famous aphorism that “great historic facts and personages recur twice, …once as tragedy, and again as farce” (Marx, 2004 [1852]: 3). Seen in

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4 See Rodgers (2000). My doctorate was based on one year of fieldwork carried out in Nicaragua between July 1996 and July 1997, ten months of which in a poor neighbourhood in Managua, the capital city. I subsequently re-visited this neighbourhood in February-March 2002 and in December 2002-January 2003.

5 In no means the only Nicaraguanist anthropologist to have written from a perspective of yearning for revolution and then searching for what was left – in this respect, see the work of Les Field (1999), Florence Babb (2001), and especially Rosario Montoya (2007).

6 This name, as well as those of all the individuals mentioned in this article, is a pseudonym.
this light, there can be little doubt that Sandinismo as a political ideology is quite unequivocally “dead”, to borrow from Friedrich Nietzsche (1995 [1954]: 90).

When post-revolutionary Nicaragua is “brush[ed] against the grain” (Benjamin, 1992 [1968]: 248), however, from a perspective that looks beyond formal political praxis as the index for the revolutionary past’s permeation of the present, a potentially much more meaningful Sandinista legacy arguably emerges. This is particularly the case when attention is focused on a range of manifestations of everyday contemporary Nicaraguan social life that constitute “everyday site[s] where differing forms of historical consciousness …commingle and interact” (Harootunian, 2000: 105). These are constitute particular forms of institutionalisation of Sandinismo in the post-revolutionary context that allow us to grasp its legacy from a perspective that neither sees the past as a “foreign country” (Hartley, 1953: 17), 7 nor as something that “survives” unchanged into the current epoch, but rather in terms of a “history of the present”, to borrow from Michel Foucault (1977: 31). 8 Such an approach highlights how the past can “inhabit” the present in ways that challenge “the received fixedness and inevitability of the present” (Barry et al., 1996: 5), and is a task for which social anthropology has “a good record” according to Ernest Gellner (1993: xiv), because “its practitioners are trained to distinguish between the manifest and the latent elements in social institutions. They possess a good technique for locating the latter, and a fine sense for both the interrelatedness of things and the tensions liable to arise between various strands in the life of any one society.”

This chapter begins by outlining key elements of the revolutionary and post-revolutionary periods, for purposes of contextualisation, before presenting three loosely inter-connected “vignettes” that draw on research carried out in Nicaragua in 1996-97 and 2002-03. Each vignette depicts a contemporary discourse or practice associable with Sandinismo – albeit often rather tenuously or sometimes even contradictorily – that illustrates the way in which the revolutionary period can be said to have had an enduring legacy in the post-revolutionary era, although in many ways, as the last vignette explicitly emphasises, what this ultimately highlights is the existence of clear existence of a degree of institutional continuity within Nicaraguan political culture. Taken together, however, the vignettes provide a sense of the “uncanny topography” of this political culture that is always “a precipitate of the past in the present” (Bear, 2007: 347).

Sandinista Nicaragua: The Time of Beautiful Madness

As Roger Lancaster has succinctly summarised, “the Sandinista revolution represented an authentically Nicaraguan attempt to transcend Nicaragua’s long history of colonialism, exploitation, underdevelopment, and poverty” (Lancaster, 1992: 3). It began in 1961 as a guerrilla insurgency against the Somoza dynastic dictatorship that had been ruling Nicaragua since 1934. Like so many such movements of this period, the FSLN aimed not just at “national liberation” but also sought a more equitable distribution of wealth and power in society along broadly socialist lines. At the same time, unlike many such movements of the period, the Sandinistas

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7 See also Ingold (1996: 199-248).
8 I am “borrowing” from rather than “following” Foucault because my use of the notion of the “history of the present” is somewhat different from his, which focuses on the way history “can be written only on the basis of what [is] contemporaneous” (Foucault, 1970: 208), while I am concerned with the intermingling of the past and the present.
were a highly syncretic group, and constituted a blend of diverse nationalist, Leninist, Guevarist, and radical Christian influences, thereby giving them “a unique revolutionary vision” (Walker, 1985: 24). Sandinismo was not a coherent or dogmatic ideology as such, however, but more something of a way of life (see Lancaster, 1988: 127-39), encompassing in particular “new” Christianity’s “belief in the ultimate redemption of the poor and the oppressed” and the “Marxist philosophical tradition cult of a new socialist man” (Hodges, 1986: 288).

The self-avowed ultimate goal of the revolution was “the total elimination of the exploitation of man by man” (Borge, 1985: 38). A “new Nicaraguan Man” was to be created, and people were to be “empowered”. As Omar Cabezas, a prominent FSLN leader put it: “We want[ed] the people to organize for what they want to do ...to work for the things they want. We [sought] to stimulate people to resolve their own problems. We [told] the people that they [could] transform their own reality if they organize[d]” (cited in Selbin, 1993: 78). Although Sandinismo clearly stood for a radical social agenda, it did so while explicitly embracing respect for human rights, private property, and popular power in a context of political pluralism and competitive elections. When an FSLN-led mass revolution finally overthrew the Somoza dictatorship in July 1979, a multi-party junta was constituted and immediately began drafting of a new electoral law, modelled on Western European practices. While all of the Somoza family’s property was nationalized, private property was otherwise respected, and key economic portfolios were given to representatives of the private sector (Walker, 1997: 9).

Galvanized by the Sandinista discourse, a majority of Nicaraguans mobilized en masse to participate in the post-insurgency reconstruction and development of their country, most dramatically perhaps in the context of the popular education and primary health care campaigns. The 1980 education “crusade” reduced the national illiteracy rate from 52 percent to 13 percent in under a year (CIBC, 1983 [1981]: 334-337), for example, while amongst the successes of the grassroots health campaigns was the inoculation against polio of all children under the age of one in 1983 (Garfield and Williams, 1989: 51-2). Other achievements of the new regime included the delivery of electricity and drinking water to a greater proportion of the population than ever before (Vargas, 1993), and participatory ‘mutual aid’ low-income housing construction projects (Drewe, 1986; and Vance, 1985). Grassroots organizational activity grew, including in particular the nation-wide Comités de Defensa Sandinista (CDS – Sandinista Defense Committees), community action groups aimed at improving local living conditions that implemented wide-ranging local-level social and economic programmes such as the organization of community vigilance, health and vaccination campaigns, food distribution, and voluntary work brigades.

Some of the sweeping change introduced by the new regime were very clumsily executed, including in particular forcing peasants to establish of cooperatives, introducing price controls on basic foodstuffs, and initially mistrusting and repressing indigenous groups on the country’s Caribbean coast, all of which led to a significant degree of internal resistance to the revolution. Within two years the revolution, however, Sandinista Nicaragua faced an especially formidable external enemy in the form of the USA. President Ronald Reagan made his opposition to the Sandinistas clear even before taking office in January 1981, and once in place, severed all aid programmes, pressured multilateral organizations and international banks to cease lending to Nicaragua, and cut off trade links to the extent of imposing a full embargo in 1985 (Bulmer-Thomas, 1991). In November 1981, President Reagan authorized covert operations against Nicaragua, and the CIA began to organize several thousand members of Somoza’s ex-National
Guard who had escaped to Honduras in July 1979, and these became the nucleus of a counterrevolutionary military force known as la Contra, which rapidly began to launch attacks into Nicaragua (Harrisson et al., 1988; Torres-Rivas, 1991).

Although never a military threat to the regime, the well-funded and trained Contras had a devastating effect on the economy, destroying and disrupting communication and economic infrastructure, terrorizing and demoralizing the Nicaraguan population. As Lancaster has graphically illustrated, however, there was nevertheless generally a pervasive optimism and support for the revolution amongst most Nicaraguans in the early and mid 1980s (Lancaster, 1988). In spite of the war, the first few years of revolutionary rule brought sweeping improvements to the lives of the majority. The 1984 elections saw the FSLN and its Presidential candidate, Daniel Ortega, win 67 percent of the vote in elections that international observers – the US excepted – as well as the six losing parties, considered to be “transparent, free and fair” for the first time in Nicaraguan history (Walker, 1997).

In many ways, though, this was the high point of Sandinista rule, as the latter half of the 1980s saw a gradual erosion of popular optimism and support for the revolution. Although the second half of the Sandinista period saw a number of significant social achievements, the war against the Contras and a profound economic crisis created a difficult situation for the revolutionary regime. Official government statistics suggest that the death toll of the Contra war stood at over 30,000, that is to say over 0.9 percent of the population, or over 38 times the US death toll for the entire Vietnam war (Walker, 2003: 56). Compulsory military conscription of youth over the age of 16 introduced from 1983 onwards also proved extremely demoralising, and led to widespread resentment and draft dodging. Economically, by 1988 inflation was running at a Latin American record rate of 33,547.6 percent (Green, 1995: 233). Unemployment and poverty rose five-fold between 1985 and 1991 (Arana, 1997: 82), and real wages dropped to less than 10 per cent of their 1980 level (Conroy, 1990: 17). Basic goods became scarce, malnutrition reappeared, and infant mortality began to rise. Not surprisingly, the Nicaraguan people’s revolutionary enthusiasm faded, and on 25 February 1990, weary of war and economic crisis, the Nicaraguan people voted the FSLN and President Ortega out of office. With the threat of renewed Contra funding by the US and an explicit promise from President Bush to renew commercial exchanges in case of a FSLN defeat, the Unión Nacional Opositora (UNO – National Opposition Union) – an eclectic coalition of fourteen parties from the Right, Left, and Centre of the political spectrum – won 55 percent of the vote, compared to 41 percent for the FSLN.10

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9 From the Spanish word “contrarrevolución” (“counterrevolution”).
10 Also important in explaining the decline in support for the revolutionary process was that “the Sandinista [leadership] fail[ed] to guard against bureaucratism and its ensuing privileges, thus driving a wedge between themselves and their supporters ...[I]n the context of a revolution whose ethos was aggressively egalitarian, and against the backdrop of dire hardship for the masses, this failure contributed to the failure of Sandinismo as a political project” (Lancaster, 1992: 10). Active popular participation declined, also as a result of accentuated “verticalist management” by the FSLN, which was mainly a function of the war, as Dora Maria Tellez, a senior FSLN leader, explained: “every war, just, unjust, more just, or less just, all presuppose a single command, vertical action, and absolute authority. All wars. There has never been a war that did not presuppose this. ...What philosophy strengthens that idea? The philosophy of command. The philosophy of the defense mission. ...It is objective. Like it or not. It is produced as a natural and also necessary phenomenon in organizing for defense. The authoritarian mentality is strengthened. And that is when the problem begins. ...That is where we made mistakes” (cited in Hoyt, 1997: 51-2).
Post-Revolutionary Nicaragua: Economic and Ontological Insecurity

Although 1990 is clearly a landmark date in Nicaraguan history, it by no means signalled the end of the country’s “continuous rite of blood” (Rushdie, 1987: 18). Indeed, it instead arguably indicated the beginning of a new period of instability and uncertainty, as social conflicts have exploded during the subsequent decade and a half of non-Sandinista rule under Presidents Violeta Barrios de Chamorro (1990-1996), Arnold Alemán Lacayo (1997-2001), and Enrique Bolaños Geyer (2002-2006). Certainly, Katherine Isbester (1996: 455) contends that Nicaragua has been “caught in a downward spiral into chaos”, while Padre Arnaldo Zenteno, the Jesuit coordinator of the Managua Christian Base Communities unambiguously identified “violence”, “political confusion”, “hunger”, and “social breakdown” as the “new leitmotivs” of post-Sandinista Nicaragua during the course of an interview in July 1996 (see also Lancaster, 1992: 293-4; and Galeano, 1998: 322-4). To a certain extent, this dramatic predicament can be linked to the lingering legacy of revolutionary insurrection and civil war, but Nicaragua’s situation is arguably largely the result of more contemporary factors, including a general debility of state institutions – principally due to the application of Washington Consensus prescriptions – corruption and political polarisation, declining levels of international aid, the effects of a devastating hurricane in 1998, as well a profound economic crisis.

Indeed, in the latter respect, by almost any measure, Nicaragua is extremely poor. According to the Government of Nicaragua, the country is the second poorest in the Western hemisphere after Haiti on a purchasing power parity basis, and drops to poorest if per capita nominal GDP numbers are used (Government of Nicaragua, 2001: 6). The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) suggests that “approximately 70 percent of the …population lives in extreme poverty (less than US$1 per day)” (USAID, 2006: 124), while the country ranked 112th out of the 177 countries for which UNDP (2006: 285) calculates its Human Development Index (HDI) in 2006. The combined unemployment and underemployment rate is generally estimated to be “around 60-65 percent” (USAID, 124). Job creation is scarce in the context of local economic activity that is often illicit and exclusive (Rodgers, 2007a), or else ill-adapted to a global political economy in relation to which the Nicaraguan economy is arguably caught in a structural vice of “(mal)development” (Robinson, 1998). These macro trends were confirmed at a more micro-level perspective by a survey that I carried out in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández in November 1996, which tallied an open unemployment rate of over 45 percent, with a further 25 percent of the economically active population underemployed. There was little evidence of any local economic enterprise in the neighbourhood apart from theft and delinquency, and there were few opportunities outside the barrio either for a labour force that tended to be highly unskilled. Most of those who worked did so in the informal sector, and the median monthly income was around 700 córdobas (about US$85 at the time), although many earned less.

Partly as a result of these desperate economic conditions, as well as the massive rise in crime and insecurity since 1990 (Rodgers, 2006), the erosion of the social fabric has reached such dramatic proportions in Nicaragua that it is no exaggeration to talk of society having undergone a veritable process of social fragmentation (see Rodgers, 2007b). Certainly, “each to their own” – “cada uno por su mismo” in the original Spanish – was a phrase repeatedly used by informants in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández, and there was little sign of any collective economic solidarity when I was there in either 1996-97 or 2002-03. Neighbours did not trust neighbours, refusing to share
anything or oblige themselves, as Don Sergio dramatically described in an interview in 1997: “Nobody does anything for anybody anymore, nobody cares if their neighbour is robbed, nobody does anything for the common good. There’s a lack of trust, you don’t know whether somebody will return you your favours, or whether they won’t steal your belongings when your back is turned. Misery kills hope, I tell you! It’s the law of the jungle here today… We’re eating one another, as they say in the Bible…” Although an emergent drugs trade created localised networks of capital accumulation that benefited a significant minority in a number of rural communities and urban neighbourhoods from the late 1990s onwards (Dennis, 2003; Rodgers, 2007a), for the vast majority the situation is stagnant, as Doña Yolanda made clear during an interview in 2002: “Life is hard in Nicaragua, and you’ve just got to look out for yourself and try and survive by hook or by crook. It was the same five years ago; nothing has changed, except that we’re now five years on, and the future didn’t get any better…”

The intense economic crisis and social atomisation of the post-revolutionary period clearly contrast starkly with the past experiences of the pervasive solidarity and collective support that by all accounts existed through much of Nicaragua during the 1980s (Ekern, 1987; Higgins and Coen, 1992; Lancaster, 1988; and 1992), has have led to a profound and widespread sense of collective demoralisation, as Doña Ursula explained in relation to barrio Luis Fanor Hernández in 1996: “First the war and now the economic crisis have led to people becoming disillusioned and withdrawing from the community. Daniel [Ortega] lost to Violeta [Chamorro] here in 1990, like in the rest of the country, because people were tired of hardship, but Chamorro hasn’t changed anything, things have only got worse – all there is, is more poverty, more violence, more unemployment, more insecurity than before... We’re in a critical situation, people are demoralised, and don’t mobilise anymore, and so nothing will change... No hay remedio (There’s no solution)...”

This sense of demoralisation can also be linked to the existence of a generalised feeling of what one might call – reversing Anthony Giddens’ (1991) classic formulation – “ontological insecurity” in post-revolutionary Nicaragua, whereby the reference points of social agents are felt to be extremely uncertain, largely as a result of the country’s highly surreal and fluctuating post-1990 political topography. Politicians and parties seem to split, re-invent themselves, and seek new allies at a bewildering rate in contemporary Nicaragua, generally very blatantly, with little concern for ideology, and contradictorily. The FSLN, for example, is a case in point. Following its defeat in 1990, it attempted to rally supporters with a slogan of “government from below” (“gobierno desde abajo”), but immediately undermined its possibilities for doing so by first negotiating with, and then supporting, the Chamorro government. It subsequently split in two in 1994, with most of the party’s deputies joining a new “renovating” Sandinista party, the Movimiento Renovador Sandinista (MRS – Renovating Sandinista Movement), which then lost heavily in the 1996 elections while the rump “orthodox” FSLN led by Ortega re-gained the united FSLN’s 1990 share of the vote, which it maintained through to the latest elections in November 2006, despite entering in 1999 into a formal “pact” of co-governance with Alemán’s right-wing Constitutionalist Liberal party (Partido Liberal Constitucionalista – PLC).11

11 A more superficial example of the FSLN’s rather surreal mutability was evident during the 2006 election campaign, when the party’s traditional “rojinegro” (“red and black”) flag was replaced by pink banners sporting yellow hearts (this also occurred in 2001), and revolutionary songs gave way to a Spanish version of John Lennon’s “Give peace a chance”.

Perhaps the most emblematic event that can be linked to the emergence of a sense of “ontological insecurity” in post-revolutionary Nicaragua is what is widely referred to as the “piñata”, however. A piñata is a papier-mâché figure that is filled with sweets and is an obligatory feature of Nicaraguan parties, where it is struck with a stick until its contents spill out and a scramble ensues as everybody attempts to grab as many treats as possible. The expression is used to refer to the way the FSLN’s rather blatantly transferred large amounts of state property to the party leadership ranks during a two months interregnum period after losing the elections in 1990. Corruption is of course by no means new to Nicaragua; Somoza was notorious for accumulating a personal wealth greater than the average GDP of the country, as well as directly owning over a quarter of the country, for example. Furthermore, people in Nicaragua talk not only of the “Sandinista piñata”, but also of the subsequent privatisation-linked “Conservative piñata” under the Chamorro government (1990-1996), and the “Liberal piñata” under Arnoldo Alemán’s presidency, which saw large amounts of international aid siphoned off, particularly in the wake of international mobilisation following Hurricane Mitch in 1998. The FSLN leadership’s actions were however viewed as particularly damning by rank-and-file Sandinistas, partly because most did not benefit materially from the piñata, but also because the party’s political authority was based on an “exemplary authority” linked to notions of sacrifice and egalitarianism, and “to the extent that the [Sandinista] political elite was perceived as enjoying special privileges, its authority was undermined” (Lancaster, 1992: 288-9).

Mutatis Mutandis: Excavating the Legacy of Sandinismo in post-revolutionary Nicaragua

If Eduardo Galeano’s expression “the time of beautiful madness” is the best short-hand description of Sandinista Nicaragua, the most pithily appropriate depiction of post-revolutionary Nicaragua is perhaps Salman Rushdie’s (1981: 432) term “sperectomy”, which he uses to indicate a “draining out of hope”. The obvious question that this raises is how anything of the utopian dreams of Sandinismo can remain in “sperectomied” post-revolutionary Nicaragua. In this regard, a range of contemporary discourses and practices that I observed in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández in 1996-97 and 2002-03 can arguably be directly linked to the transformations wrought by the Sandinista revolution during the decade it held sway over Nicaraguan society, in ways that are less obvious than the forms of (party) political action typically focused upon by studies of the enduring legacies of revolutionary philosophies and practices in Latin America (see for example Selbin, 1993). These more everyday manifestations of social life highlight how new discourses can be grafted onto old political practices, while new practices can become imbued with old meanings, and how individuals can oscillate between fluctuating forms of political cognition in order to remember the past and resolve the contradictions of the present. The following sub-sections attempt to delineate some of these processes, highlighting their contingent and often contradictory natures, as well as their historical roots and evolution through time. They should not necessarily be read as a seamless narrative, but rather as a series of loosely inter-linked ethnographic vignettes that together provide a view of what arguably constitutes the continued but tenuous legacy of Sandinismo in post-revolutionary Nicaragua.

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12 No monetary estimations exist of either the Sandinista or Chamorro piñatas, but Arnoldo Alemán is thought to have personally siphoned off an estimated US$100 million during his five years as president (Transparency International, 2004: 13).
The bitterness that many harboured against the Sandinista piñata emerged time and time again in the interviews that I carried out with inhabitants of barrio Luis Fanor Hernández – both Sandinistas and non-Sandinistas – during my stay in 1996-97. Perhaps most vociferous in her critique was Doña Yolanda, the matriarch of the Gómez household with whom I stay during bouts of fieldwork, and who over the course of a series of interviews between July and October 1996 repeatedly criticised the FSLN hierarchy for having “stolen the people’s property”, and provided me with details – both real and imagined – about what certain leaders had stolen, who was living in what expropriated house, and who owned what factory or business, and so on. At the same time, however, Doña Yolanda would simultaneously rather contradictorily also express a strong admiration – indeed almost a personal cult – for Ortega, and always concluded her interviews informing me that she was going to vote Sandinista in the October elections, that she hoped that they would win this time, and how things would be much better under Ortega than they had been under Chamorro. I always found this apparent incongruity difficult to understand, but as I went over my field notes in preparation for my return trip to Nicaragua in February 2002, one episode emerged that suddenly allowed me to see how Doña Yolanda’s inconsistency was in fact perfectly reconcilable, and indeed perhaps necessary in order for her to make sense of the cognitive uncertainty of the post-revolutionary context, as she reframed the piñata in terms that assimilated it with a past Sandinista discourse of socialist redistribution.

We had been halfway through an interview one afternoon in early October 1996 when Doña Yolanda had suddenly said to me, “Dennis, since you have pen and paper with you, I want you to write a letter for me.”

“Certainly,” I replied. “To whom are we writing?”

“We’re going to write to the Comandante Daniel Ortega,” she answered. “I need to ask him a favour.”

“You know Ortega?” I asked, somewhat ingenuously.

“A little, yes, I met him when I worked for Colonel Alvaro López. He was the officer in charge of Daniel’s security, when he was the President. I was the Colonel’s empleada [domestic worker] for seven years. Of course, Daniel probably won’t remember me, but it doesn’t matter, he was the Colonel’s chief and he’s also a friend of all the little people such as myself, so he has to help me.”

“Why don’t you ask the Colonel to help you instead? He’s sure to do so, no?”

“¡Como no! He helped me get Alberto out of prison when he was caught that time he got drunk and started shooting everybody. But the problem is that the Colonel himself is in prison right now – he was caught smuggling drugs from Corn Island to the mainland last year, and was sentenced to ten years in jail.”

“Aha – I can see how that makes things difficult! Ok, a letter to Daniel it is, then. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, I suppose...”

“Start with the date. We’re the seventh, no? Now write: “Dear Comandante Daniel Ortega... Congratulations for your recent gains in the opinion polls. I am convinced that you will win the coming elections, and that in doing so, it will also be the triumph of all the Nicaraguan common people such as myself.” – How does that seem to you?”

“Good...”

“OK, now write: “I used to work for Colonel Alvaro López, when you were President. I was one of the employees who received you every 31st of December, New Year’s Eve. I’m sorry to bother
you, but I’m writing because I would like you to help me... My father is seventy years old, and in ill health. He can’t work anymore, but he has a car, and I would like you to help me obtain a taxi license for it, so that I may drive it and earn money to support him.”

“Wait a minute, Doña Yolanda,” I interjected, “you told me the other day that your father was long dead!”

“Yes, he is. The taxi license is for Saturnino [Doña Yolanda’s boyfriend], but Daniel doesn’t have to know that. It sounds better if it’s for my ailing father, don’t you think?”

“Definitely, but what are you going to do if Daniel does answer your letter, or sends somebody to check your story? It wouldn’t look good, would it?”

‘¡Ni mierda! ¡Me vale verga! (No shit! I couldn’t give a fuck!),’ she exclaimed. “The Sandinistas owe me. I was Sandinista right from the beginning, and I didn’t even get half a córdoba as a result! The leaders all got their nice houses and acquired businesses when they left power, from the Piñata, so the least they can do now is give me a taxi license! All the Transport Cooperatives are Sandinista, so all they have to do is ask and they’ll give it to them. Saturnino can’t afford to buy one, it costs like 4000 córdobas, and in any case, those sons of whores wouldn’t give him one if he could, because he isn’t Sandinista! For fuck’s sake! They can give me the license, and I’ll give it him! They owe me, you understand, and I couldn’t care less what they think. We’re the ones living in poverty, not them. We’re the ones who are without work, without resources, not them. We’re the ones who were affected by the war, by all the suffering, not them... They always talked about socialism; well then, it would be like socialist redistribution! They owe me, and I want them to give me what they owe me, so let’s finish this fucking letter! Write: ‘My name is Doña Yolanda Aburto. My address is from where the Álvarez cinema used to be, 2 blocks towards the lake, half a block east, house number 14, Barrio Luis Fanor Hernández. I would be very grateful if you helped me, and hope to hear from you soon. From your friend who admires you and cares for you, yours sincerely,’ and now let me sign!”

Vigilant(e) Socialism

Doña Yolanda’s reinterpretation of the notion of socialist redistribution was not the only example of the “reinvention” of the meanings of Sandinismo in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández. A much more profound mutation could also be observed in what was arguably the most prominent social organisation in the neighbourhood, namely the local youth gang, or pandilla. Youth gangs are one of the most visible features of the post-revolutionary Nicaraguan social panorama, roaming the streets of the country’s cities, and robbing, beating, and frequently killing as they engage in delinquency and gang warfare. I have described the dynamics of these gangs in detail elsewhere, highlighting a number of features that can be directly linked to the revolutionary era, including in particular certain gang behaviour patterns such as the barrio Luis Fanor Hernández pandilla’s organisation into “companies” and “commandoes” during gang warfare, which can be directly related to the experience of civil war in Nicaragua during the 1980s, for example (Rodgers, 2006a; and 2007c). A much more direct link can however be made with Sandinismo in the form of the pandilleros’ self-professed “love” – literally, “querer” – for the barrio which they claimed motivated their engaging in semi-ritualised forms of gang warfare with other local gangs. These conflicts were underpinned by a range of prescribed rules, including a cardinal one that involved never attacking local barrio inhabitants but in fact doing everything possible to protect them
instead, something gang members claimed derived directly from *Sandinismo*, of which they often said they were the “last inheritors”.  

Certainly, all the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilleros* were discursively staunchly pro-*Sandinista*, and furthermore, many of the practices of *pandilleros*, both between themselves and with regards to their vigilante-style protection of the wider *barrio* community, can be conceived as reflecting a strong sense of solidarity and cooperation that is readily associative with *Sandinismo*. At the same time, however, this clear sense of political affiliation puzzled me, as it was obvious from conversations with the *pandilleros* that few of them had clear or precise memories of the *Sandinista* era. Most had been born after the revolution, or just before. Their enthusiasm was obviously for things they had heard about, rather than experienced, such as the literacy or primary health care campaigns of the early 1980s, as well as standing up to the USA and being “strong”, while their lived memories, more often than not very vague, were of the last years of *Sandinismo*, when the war and the economic crisis were at their peak. Furthermore, the independent development of the *pandilleros’* political consciousness had occurred in the politically confused context of 1990s Nicaragua, characterized by a generalized disillusion with much of the revolutionary process in general and the *Sandinista* party in particular, not least due to the large discrepancy which existed between its rhetoric and its action.

There also existed a telling discrepancy between gang members’ political rhetoric and the concrete reality of their political practices. Although the *pandilleros* all actively volunteered to help with Daniel Ortega’s campaign for the October 1996 elections, putting up banners and distributing flyers in the *barrio*, for example, this support remained exclusively local in scope. None of the *pandilleros* volunteered to help outside the *barrio*, even when Ortega’s campaign tour stopped at the nearby Roberto Huembes market, where they often spent much of their time. Moreover, nor did any of the *pandilleros* make any efforts to go to the FSLN’s campaign closing rally in downtown Managua on 16 October 1996, despite it being widely publicised, and free buses being laid on by the FSLN in order to boost attendance. In many ways, it seemed as if the *pandilleros’* *Sandinista* sympathies were more a result of the historical associations of *Sandinismo* with the *barrio* – insofar as it had been a hotbed of anti-Somoza activity during the insurrection, as well as the pilot neighbourhood for the new revolutionary government’s urban reconstruction plan in the early 1980s – rather than *Sandinismo* proper, and thus tied in with notions of *barrio* history.  

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13 A parallel can thus conceivably be made with the “love” that Ernesto “Che” Guevara saw as the mark of “the true revolutionary” (Guevara, 1969: 398). He was of course referring to an abstract “love of the people”, while the *pandilleros* were motivated by a more narrow form of affection grounded at the local *barrio* level, but the analogy is nevertheless intriguing, particularly considering the strong associations between *Sandinismo* and the “Cult of Che” (see Lancaster, 1988: 132 & 185).

14 This idea is implicitly further supported by the fact that not all Managuans *pandillas* are pro-*Sandinista*. The increased political polarisation that followed the 1990 elections led to a spatial re-organization of the city’s population. New *barrios* emerged and coalesced, some pro- *Sandinista* and others pro-*Contra* – the post-electoral return migration of refugees also greatly contributed to the formation of the latter – and the *pandilleros* in *barrio* Enrique Bermúdez - who was the commander of the *Contra* Northern Military Front during the war in the 1980s – are in no way sympathetic to *Sandinismo*, for example. Instead, this particular gang’s solidarity ways are grounded in identification with the historical experiences of the *barrio* Enrique Bermúdez population’s opposition to the *Sandinista* regime, just as the *barrio* Luis Fanor Hernández *pandilleros* can be said to be discursively pro-*Sandinista* as a result of the neighbourhood’s historical association with *Sandinismo*. 
This was very clearly reflected in an episode that occurred one morning in early October 1996, when I chanced across a pandillero called Julio cleaning up a pre-1990 barrio graffito extolling the virtues of the Juventud Sandinista – 19 de Julio (or JS-19 – the Sandinista youth organization), which a person or persons unknown had crudely painted it over in bright red – the colours of Arnoldo Alemán’s Constitutionalist Liberal party – the night before. As Julio began to angrily berate the “Somocista sons of bitches” who had done this, I initially assumed that this was just one more exemplification of his overt Sandinista sympathies, but it quickly became apparent that he was less angry at this act of vandalism as an attack on Sandinismo and more annoyed at what he perceived as the desecration of a historical material manifestation of local Sandinismo. “Those jodidos (fuckers) don’t respect anything in the barrio, Dennis,” he vociferated, “nothing! OK, so they don’t like the Sandinistas, that’s how it is, but this is more than just a Sandinista pinta (graffiti), it’s a part of the barrio history. Our history! It’s something that belongs to the community, to all of us; it shows us who we are, where we come from, how the FSLN made us into a community. It shows what the barrio is, and people should therefore respect it, whatever their political opinions.”

It is especially significant that Julio saw the despoiled graffito as a symbol of “community”, and maintained that this was “what the barrio is”. As I have described above, the barrio was patently not a “community”, but rather caught in a vice of breakdown and social fragmentation, and to this extent, the pandillero “love” for the barrio can be conceived as an affinity with an ideal of what they felt the barrio should have been, which drew its inspiration from the Sandinista past, and indeed from what was arguably an idealized vision of the past, for although Sandinismo undoubtedly wrought profound changes in the barrio, whether these included making it a “community” is debatable (see Rodgers, 2000; and also Montoya, 2007 for a similar experience elsewhere in Nicaragua). In many ways, though, it is less the reality of the image that was important, and more the contrast it obviously constituted in relation to the atomized conditions of social life in contemporary urban Nicaragua. The pandilleros’ “loving the barrio” in such circumstances can be interpreted as an expression of desire for an absent sense of “communitas” (Turner, 1969), that real or imagined, was thought to have existed during the Sandinista era.

‘Honest Turncoat’ vs. ‘Dishonest Defector’

A similar search for community organisation was also evident in my interactions with Don Sergio, an elderly neighbourhood inhabitant with whom I would go and chat, have a coffee, and share a few cigarettes in the Alcoholics Anonymous locale that he ran every Wednesday afternoon during my stay in 1996-97. Don Sergio would often begin our chats telling me that he in fact found the whole idea of Alcoholics Anonymous rather preposterous, particularly as he made his living by collecting abandoned empty beer and rum bottles in barrio Luis Fanor Hernández in order to return them to corner stores and collect their deposit, and also because his weekly meetings to educate the neighbourhood drunks about the evils of alcohol rarely involved more than four or five people, at least three quarters of whom were invariably in a drunken stupor. He would however justify his running the local chapter of the organisation by saying that it reminded him – in an almost a sympathetically magical manner, one might say – of when he had been one of the barrio leaders during the Sandinista period, running the neighbourhood Comité de Defensa Sandinista (CDS – Sandinista Defence Committee). This had especially involved mobilising and educating people, and there were obvious parallels with his activities for
Alcoholics Anonymous, even if he did not believe in their aims in the same way that he believed in Sandinismo, which he would often proclaim was “in his blood”.

Certainly, Don Sergio repeated complained that political organisation both in the barrio and in the country more generally had gone “cold”. He blamed this on the economic situation, arguing that the dramatic impoverishment of the population and spiralling unemployment meant that people could no longer mobilise but had to devote their attention to seeking a means to survive. He would tell me how it had been much better under the Sandinistas, how nobody had starved because the government took care of everybody, and gave everybody who needed them special subsidised food rations. Indeed, during one of our discussions in the run-up to the October 1996 elections, he gleefully poked fun at a short-lived anti-Sandinista electoral advert run by the pro-Liberal Asociación de Confiscados “Arges Sequeira Mangas” (“Arges Sequeira Mangas” Association of Confiscated Individuals – i.e. who had had some property nationalised by the Sandinistas during the revolutionary period), which tried to persuade people not to vote for the Sandinista party by reminding them of the rationing that had been in operation in the late 1980s, enumerating what each household had been permitted to buy from state-subsidised shops: “They’ve really screwed up with this advert, Dennis. I mean, how many of us can afford even half of the rations that we could buy in the 1980s? This has to be the stupidest way of trying to get people to believe that things will be worse if Daniel [Ortega] gets back into power, people are now going to vote for us because they can see that if the Frente comes to power again at least nobody will starve like they do now.”

But while Sandinismo may well have been in Don Sergio’s blood in view of his fiery pro-Sandinista rhetoric – which did not decline in intensity following the Sandinista party’s electoral defeat in the October 1996 elections – from a more personal and practical point of view he arguably seemed to undergo what might be described as something of a ‘blood-letting’ after the elections. During an interview in April 1997, he told me: “I did a lot for the revolution in this barrio. I helped mobilize people, and educated them about Sandinismo, about how it would change our lives for the better. I attended many FSLN workshops where they told us how to do this, how to make them understand what the revolution was about... I still have all the certificates I was awarded for my efforts... The revolution was something special, it worked, and I’m proud of all I did, of my involvement, but the question is what’s left of it all now? The war and the crisis destroyed everything, and all that I have left to show for the revolution are these certificates... From the perspective of today, I’d have preferred that the FSLN had given me money for my labours instead, that at least would be useful to me in trying to survive... These certificates are worthless now; there won’t be a second coming... Esa época ya pasó (that time has passed)...”

Don Sergio’s changed perspective troubled me, because of all my informants he was the most steadfast in his commitment to Sandinismo, most optimistic about the future of its legacy in Nicaragua, and proudest of his revolutionary activities. If he was wavering, I thought, what chance was there for those who were already in a state of flux and confusion? I never resolved this quandary, and it contributed greatly to the extremely pessimistic outlook I gradually developed concerning Nicaragua and the legacy of the Sandinista revolution. It therefore came as something of a shock to find out in February 2002 that Don Sergio had not only been a barrio leader during the revolutionary period, but also under Somoza’s dictatorship. Don Sergio having died two years previously at the ripe old age of 81 years, I made this discovery sifting through the
photographic archives of Don Baltasár, the barrio photographer. Don Baltasár had refused to talk to me in 1996-97, due my habit of taking photos of people and giving them away for free, something that was obviously bad for his business. I however managed to befriend him during my visit in 2002 by offering to buy several hundred photographs from his archives, which went back to the mid 1960s. As we went through his stock of yellowed negatives and dusty old photographs, I came across a slightly stained, grainy black and white picture of a group of some thirty men, women, and children lined up behind a banner proclaiming them to be the “Comité Liberal Nacionalista Pro-René Castellon E., 1963, barrio Santa Esperanza”.

[Photo]

[NB/ This photograph has been modified to protect the anonymity of the neighbourhood.]

The Partido Liberal Nacionalista (PLN – Nationalist Liberal Party), which was banned after the revolution, had been Somoza’s political party, with René Castellon a puppet figurehead in the early 1960s, and “Santa Esperanza” had been the pre-revolutionary name of barrio Luis Fanor Hernández. As I examined the photograph more closely, to see if I could identify anybody, I suddenly noticed a familiar figure, and asked Don Baltasár, “that’s not Don Sergio, is it?”

“Yes it is! He looks much younger than when you knew him, doesn’t he?”

“But… but what is he doing in this photo? I mean, he was Sandinista, why is he with all these PLN people?”

“You mean you don’t know? He was one of the major PLN organisers in the barrio before the revolution! If you ever wanted something from the government, or you had problems, you’d always go to him.”
“What? I can’t believe it, this is... it doesn’t make sense, he was perhaps the staunchest Sandinista I knew in the barrio…”

“Of course, he had to in order to continue to be a barrio dirigente [leader]. I mean, he knew how to get things done because he’d been doing it for so long, and so when he became a Sandinista after the revolution, well, nobody said anything. Don Sergio was always fair and always did his best for everybody, whether you were for Somoza or not, and everybody knew that he would continue the same way, so some of the muchachos [Sandinista guerrillas] vouched for him and that was that, he was elected to the CDS and things continued as before.”

“Just like that, then, it didn’t bother anybody that he’d been connected to Somoza’s regime?”

“No, Don Sergio was honest, he never snitched on anybody, and he didn’t get rich from his activities, not like some of the other supposed Sandinistas on the CDS. You’ve heard about René Mendoza, no, the CDS treasurer who ran away to Miami with all the money collected for Hurricane Juana?”

“Yes, but I thought he was an isolated case.”

“Well, nobody else did anything like that, but plenty of others did all sorts of shit. Ligia Martinez, for example, she was one of the most vocal Sandinistas in the barrio, and had actively supported the muchachos during the insurrection and all that. She was also one of the first to be voted onto the CDS when it was formed, and stayed on it right up until the end of the 1980s, when it fell apart. The thing is that she was always trying to make people fall into her debt, doing favours for them but then saying that they owed her this or that, or had to support her when she did this or whatever. In that way, she was exactly like Mercedes Zúñiga and Raquel Herrera, who were Somocista barrio dirigentes like Don Sergio before the revolution, except that Don Sergio was always honest with you, while they’d always try to put you in their debt and then make you do things for them, like go to a Somoza rally or clean and repair roads before a foreign dignitary visited Managua. After the Sandinista defeat, Ligia became like the Frente representative here in the barrio, promising all sorts of things and all, like organising people to vote Sandinista. Although the Frente lost in 1996, she was elected as a Sandinista councillor to the district municipality, but straight after being elected, she went over to the Liberal party. The Frente expelled her, of course, but they couldn’t get her off the council, so the Liberals controlled it.”

“Do you know why she switched party?”

“She says she did it because she knew that the Frente wouldn’t win the next time and wanted to be with the winners because it’s only with the winners that you can change things in the barrio. If she had been a bit more like Don Sergio, I might believe it, but I think that she did it for the money. She really played the Liberals over her switch, and she now owns like three houses in the barrio, two cars, and has several taxi licences that she rents out to people. Even when she was in the CDS there were rumours of her illegally keeping some of the state-subsidised food for herself, that kind of thing. After switching to the Liberals she didn’t even pretend to want to help people, although she said it was because they wouldn’t let her. Instead she just spent her time partying and drinking…”

“Did she get re-elected in 2000?”

“No, because not only did she get it wrong and the Liberals lost, but they also didn’t let her run as one of their candidates.”

“So what is she doing now?”

“I don’t know exactly, she’s involved in some kind of organisation, what do they call them... an N-G-O, something to do with women, but knowing her it’s probably just another scheme to make money on other people’s backs…”
Conclusion

The “vignettes” that I have presented in this chapter clearly highlight the extreme fluidity of Nicaraguan political before, during, and after the revolution. Drawing on specific political practices, including the reinterpretation of revolutionary discourse by individuals and groups and the changeable nature of local political figures, I have explored the complex ways different political cultures are linked, focusing particularly on the contemporary legacy of Sandinismo, which in many cases was itself built on continuities from the past. In doing so, the ethnographic material presented highlights how past, present, and future are intricately interlinked, and how these backward and forward linkages can account for an enduring resilience of a particular political culture, even if often rather tenuously and almost always somewhat contradictorily. In adopting this particular focus, I have explicitly placed myself within the tradition of Walter Benjamin’s iconoclastic historiography. Benjamin considered that true “historical understanding” could only be “grasped” through “the refuse of History” (1999a: 460-1), or in other words a focus on everyday social life and “the tradition of the oppressed” rather than “universal history” and the logic of hegemony (Benjamin, 1992: 248 & 254). He was positioning himself against what he called “vulgar historical naturalism” (Benjamin, 1999a: 461), and promoting an alternative approach to historical inquiry that went against linear constructions of experience driven by “presumptions of continuity and the conviction …that the present constitutes no problem other than supplying a platform from which the historian can look back on the past” (Harootunian, 2000: 15).

Susan Buck-Morss (1989: 57) has suggested that this approach is perhaps best captured in “the image of the ruin”. Ruins, according to Benjamin (1998: 177-8), were “highly significant fragment[s]” that in “the realm of things” were equivalent to “allegories in the realm of thoughts”. Their allegorical significance derived from the fact that a ruin is “at once shattered and preserved” (Benjamin, 1999b: 329), and therefore bears “the imprint of the progression of history” (Benjamin, 1998: 180), yet at the same time provides “evidence of counter lives” (Fritzsche, 2004: 104), which means that it “explodes the continuity of universalizing conceptions of history” (Hanssen, 1998: 66). The ruin is something from the past, which exists as something different in the present, and will become something else in the future, while inherently embodying alternative potential trajectories. In other words, the contingent temporality of transience that imbues a ruin raises critical questions about “the givenness of here and now, and the possibility of contrary movement in the flow of history” (Fritzsche, 2001; see also Simmel, 1959). As Peter Fritzsche (2004: 105) explains: “The fragmentary nature of the ruin, the accidents and particularities of its broken profile, become the marks of its individuality and therefore autonomy. …Rather than signs of death and decay …the fragments of the past [are] still partially alive. They possess a sort of half-life, the power to inspire and frighten.”

From this perspective, the significance of a ruin is not that it represents something from the past that casts a light on the present, nor that it is a remnant of the past that is reinterpreted by present, but rather that it constitutes “that wherein what has been comes together …with the now” (Benjamin, 1999a: 462), in a dialectical relationship that gives both past and present “a meaning they did not have originally” (Buck-Morss, 1989: 220). Even if this relationship is frequently extremely tenuous and often highly contradictory, as has been shown to be the case of the cultural practices that constitute the legacy of Sandinismo in post-revolutionary Nicaragua, the existence of fragile “antinomies” and “counter-working tendencies” is precisely what constitutes the
dialectical connection between past and present as a meaningful “historical frame” (Fritzsche, 2004: 104), and allows us to understand “the possibilities deposited from the past” (Harootunian, 2000: 101). Sandinismo from this perspective is viewed less in terms of what it achieved during the 1980s and more through the lens of what these achievements have come to mean in the present, with the “ruins” that I have “excavated” a means through which to grasp and understand the legacy of Sandinismo as it is “actualized in a different configuration” in the present (Harootunian, 2000: 20). This is a legacy that can clearly be said to have endured, but has done so in a way that is not only unexpected but also tenuous, embodying the ambiguities of a Nicaraguan present that ultimately does not seem to imply any clear form of progress. At the same time, however, this ambiguity is perhaps also the best means through which to understand Nicaraguan Sandinismo, not only in the present, but also the past, and in particular the way in which, in the words of Sergio Ramirez (1999: 17), noted Nicaraguan author and vice-President of Nicaragua between 1984 and 1990 (himsel citing Charles Dickens’ 1859 novel *A Tale of Two Cities*): “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.”

References


