

# **Subaltern Studies and the Historiography of the Sandinista-Miskitu Conflict in Nicaragua, 1979–1990**

The starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is ‘knowing thyself’ as a product of the historical process to date which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory. It is important therefore to make an inventory.

Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*

In July 1979 a popular revolution led by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) overthrew the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua. During the first five years of the revolution the Sandinista government established a number of grassroots organizations in its attempt to reclaim national sovereignty, democratize political power, and improve workers’ access to land, food, education, and health. Ironically, the Sandinista government’s development model premised upon the political and economic inclusion of the popular classes led to the militant mobilization of Miskitu Indians who developed a strong critique of the FSLN and demanded regional autonomy. The “Miskitu question” was an important issue in some of the most controversial debates over political, social and economic changes introduced by the Sandinista government.

During the 1980s the Sandinista-Miskitu conflict attracted international attention and a number of social scientists, journalists, lawyers, artists, and novelists from different parts of the world traveled to Nicaragua to study, analyze, and report the situation. Individual contributions were written from a range of perspectives and ideological viewpoints that addressed specific concerns of the writers or their disciplinary fields. Debates over the Sandinista-Miskitu conflict served as markers for a wide variety of political programs, philosophies, and economic interests. This paper problematizes both marxist and liberal discourses of representation, rights, and democracy. My research explains why cultural representations were central in the efforts to create a revolutionary state and construct Miskitu collective identity. Thus, what follows is a critical evaluation of revolutionary and resistance discourses.

I think one of the best ways to understand Miskitu resistance is to develop a critique of the institutions and ideology of the revolutionary state. Scholars belonging to the South Asian and Latin American Subaltern Studies Collectives have already shown that nations are contested systems of cultural representation that limit and extend, legitimize and de-legitimize people’s access to the resources of the nation-state. To a large extent, the historiography of the Sandinista-Miskitu conflict has focused on theorizing the relationship between indigenous peoples’ rights and the power of the revolutionary state. Although several marxist scholars such as Carlos Vilas,

Héctor Díaz Polanco, Galio Gurdian, and Charles Hale attempted to contextualize and highlight the importance of indigenous peoples' struggle for self-determination in Nicaragua, their analyses failed to explain how revolutionary state created relations of hegemony and power on the Atlantic Coast.

In contrast to previous marxist analyses, my paper focuses on the epistemology of the revolutionaries in order to highlight Miskitu agency. When the Sandinista government nationalized some natural resources on the Atlantic Coast, for example, they redefined the legal relationship of Miskitus to the resources of the nation-state. I believe an analysis of revolutionary nationalism from the perspective of a subordinate group can help us understand the dynamics as well as limitations of revolutionary politics. Subaltern Studies does not provide a theoretical blueprint to resolve Nicaragua's social and economic problems, but it is a radical way of thinking about the hegemonic discourses of political and economic elites.

### **Limitations of Marxist Analyses**

Marxist scholars, such as Carlos Vilas, Héctor Díaz Polanco and Gilberto López Rivas, Galio Gurdian, and Charles Hale, and Sandinista leaders, such as Tomás Borge, Daniel Ortega, and Humberto Ortega, have provided a variety of conceptual tools to analyze questions about imperialism, revolutionary movements, nationalist resistance, and workers' struggles in Central America. Their basic argument was that Capitalism, by its very nature, systematically denies large sections of the population access to the resources necessary for self-determination. Those who are disempowered under Capitalism—workers and the unemployed who do not own the means of production—are locked in exploitative conditions because of institutionalized structures of inequality that are integral to the capitalist system. Thus a class struggle to overcome Capitalist exploitation was a necessary condition for a democratic society. Consequently, marxist analyses of the Sandinista-Miskitu conflict focused mostly on political and economic practices and institutions and suggested that the revolutionary project failed on the Atlantic Coast because *Costeños* did not fully understand the discourse of anti-imperialism and did not appreciate the revolutionary government's efforts to establish an egalitarian society. Furthermore, prior to 1979 there was very little contact between the Pacific and Atlantic regions of Nicaragua and the Sandinistas did not have adequate information about the Atlantic Coast; after 1980 counterrevolutionary activities on the Coast made it extremely difficult for the Sandinistas to negotiate with *Costeños* or implement their policies on Coast.

My argument is that it is no longer possible to study the Sandinista-Miskitu conflict within the parameters of classical marxist theories because of the following reasons: (1) Miskitu identity and collective action cut across class lines; (2) Miskitus need to be recognized as subjects of their own history rather than as people who "lacked class consciousness"; (3) There is no doubt that marxist scholars have shown the connection between Capitalism and other forms of oppression such as imperialism, sexism, racism, and homophobia, but it is important to be note that many of these forms of oppression have remained intact even after a popular revolution in Nicaragua; (4) Questions of inadequate information cannot be limited to whether the Sandinistas knew much about Amerindian cultures or the geography of the Atlantic Coast. By alluding the failure of Sandinista policies to the revolutionaries' inadequacy of information about the Atlantic Coast and its peoples, marxist scholars and Sandinista leaders avoided addressing important questions concerning state planning or the role of the FSLN's vanguard intelligentsia in the construction of Miskitu identity; and (5) By emphasizing class differences, U.S. imperialism and

military intervention these narratives presented a very sanitized account of Sandinista policies and decisions. In my opinion, narratives that focus solely on issues concerning military strategies, economic policies, and U.S. imperialism provide very little room for Miskitu agency or Sandinista responsibility. Economic interests are important, but can we really reduce the Sandinista-Miskitu conflict in Nicaragua to a struggle for land and money? It seems imperative to me that Central Americanists discuss violence in their writings because it has played an important role in the construction of indigenous peoples' identity. Sixty seven out of seventy Miskitus who filled out my survey questionnaires stressed the negative effects of war on their lives and family

In the past marxists argued that the social dislocations caused by rapid capitalist development after 1950, cross-class political alliances caused by Somoza's coercive military dictatorship, and the tenacity and acumen of the FSLN to unite all oppositional groups led to the emergence of a popular struggle (not a proletarian struggle) against Somoza. But Jeffrey Gould has already shown us that the Somozas did not use coercive measures to suppress opposition groups; in fact the Somozas adopted a populist political style, which was a combination of anti-oligarchic discourses and appeals to the working classes to remain in power. Workers and peasants accepted the Somocista populist discourse until the late 1970s when they experienced extreme poverty and saw the big gap that existed between reality and the Somoza rhetoric; subsequently, they joined other opposition groups against Somoza.<sup>1</sup> The significance of Gould's analysis of Chinandegan campesinos lies in his argument that the Sandinistas wrongly assumed that the participation of Nicaraguan peasants and workers in the struggle against Somoza emerged from their "innate" hostility toward Capitalism. Gould's work does not focus on the Atlantic Coast, but I think his argument is important to understand how and why Sandinistas wrongly assumed that they knew exactly what the Miskitus needed on the Atlantic Coast.

### **Contextualizing Anti-Revolutionary Political Narratives**

Sandinistas exercised their authority by constituting Miskitus as their inverse image. In response, Miskitus and critics of the revolution put pressure on the Sandinistas to clarify the goals of their revolution. Miskitu allegations and other anti-Sandinista narratives can be classified into two broad categories: (1) Sandinista disrespect for Miskitu cultural and land rights; (2) gross human rights violations in the Río Coco region. The central figures who made these allegations were Miskitu leaders, such as Armstrong Wiggins<sup>2</sup> and Brooklyn Rivera, and U.S. scholars, such as Bernard Nietschmann, John Norton Moore, and Joshua Muravchik. They claimed that the Sandinista government had an assimilationist policy toward Miskitus. Nietschmann, Muravchik, and Moore argued that the revolutionary government exercised control over its civilian population through coercive measures.

In *The Unknown War* Bernard Nietschmann argued that Miskitus cannot be considered to be an "ethnic group" because ethnic groups live in other peoples' territories; Miskitus live in

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey L. Gould, *To Lead as Equals: Rural Protest and Political Consciousness in Chinandega, Nicaragua, 1912-1979* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990). See Idem, *El Mito de "la Nicaragua Mestiza" y la Resistencia Indígena, 1880-1980* (Managua: Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Armstrong Wiggins was a member of the MISURASATA directorate, and he represented the organization in the Casa Gobierno, the executive branch of the Sandinista government. Wiggins was arrested at the same time as Fagoth and other MISURASATA leaders in late February 1981, but he was released after fourteen days. Soon after that he left Nicaragua and joined the staff of the Indian Law Resource Center (ILRC) in Washington, DC. In April 1982 Brooklyn Rivera joined Wiggins on the staff of the ILRC.

their homeland, the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua. His basic argument was that the concept of an ethnic group is embedded in state hegemony. An ethnic group is a sub-state population that maintains its own cultural identity but not its own sovereignty, self-government, territory and resource base. The Sandinistas defined Miskitus as an “ethnic group” in order to justify their invasion and occupation of the Miskitu nation. Without military pressure from armed Miskitu groups, the Sandinistas would never have granted Miskitus their basic rights.<sup>3</sup> According to Nietschmann, Nicaragua was the source of many regional security problems in Central America because it was a base for Soviet and Cuban subversive activities, and also because the Sandinistas supported Communist insurgencies in El Salvador. The Reagan Administration had to “maintain its long-standing commitment and policy objectives” to guarantee that: (1) there was no communist threat in Central America; (2) Nicaraguans would be liberated from the oppressive regime of the Sandinistas; (3) the possibility of a Sandinista-controlled modern inter-oceanic canal would be eliminated. According to Nietschmann, failure to do so would have been interpreted as a major foreign policy setback for the Reagan Administration, and the United States would have lost its credibility in confronting Soviet-supported repressive regimes even “in its own backyard.” Thus, the main objectives of U.S. foreign policy were threefold: (1) remove the Soviets and Cubans from Nicaragua; (2) stop Sandinista support for insurgencies in Central America; (3) replace the Sandinista regime with a pro-U.S. “democratic” regime.

Nietschmann’s argument was that the CIA was committed to assisting Amerindians in their struggle for self-determination against a Communist regime. He claimed that indigenous nations served as a territorial and cultural firebreak to the spread of Communism. Communism was established in Cuba and Granada because there were no indigenous peoples. State communism and indigenous nations were fundamentally incompatible because every indigenous nation’s economy was linked to self-determination over its own resource base. Because Amerindians lacked territorial rights as well as modern self-defense capabilities, their territories were are used by outsiders for drug production and trafficking, environmentally destructive resource extraction and wars. Nietschmann’s “Firebreak Nation Theory” was based on four assumptions: (1) nations are structurally stronger and more resistant than the state because they are rooted in history, geography, and cultural traditions; (2) nations have the ability to withstand modern war; (3) many nations occupy strategic positions in explosive world regions; (4) nations serve as potential firebreaks against the spread of totalitarian state regimes, insurgencies, drugs and environmental destruction. The Miskitu nation, for example, blocked direct Cuban and Russian access to Nicaragua and Sandinista expansion into the Caribbean.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, Joshua Muravchik, who was a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, DC, wrote a number of op-ed articles in the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* about U.S. foreign policy in Central America during the 1980s. Muravchik described Nicaragua as a country ruled by “Communists and solely by Communists, whose unanimous and unanswering goal [was] to turn it into a totalitarian state.”<sup>5</sup> His basic argument was that although the revolutionary government had allowed opposition newspapers, independent labor federations, and a human rights commission to operate in Nicaragua, the Sandinistas had already established a number of state organizations to parallel them in order to

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<sup>3</sup> Bernard Nietschmann, *The Unknown War: Miskito Nation, Nicaragua, and the United States* (Boston: Freedom House, 1989).

<sup>4</sup> *Idem*, 50-55.

<sup>5</sup> Joshua Muravchik, *Nicaragua’s Slow March to Communism* (Washington, DC: Cuban American National Foundation, 1986) 1.

undermine the importance of independent organizations. The created MISATAN, for example, a pro-Sandinista organization of Miskitus as an alternative to militant Miskitu organizations such as MISURA and MISURASATA. The Sandinistas destroyed independent institutions and maintained the illusion of a pluralism in Nicaragua.

According to Muravchik, the civil war in Nicaragua was a result of Sandinista rule, which completely ruined the Nicaraguan economy. He claimed that journalists who worked for American newspapers such as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* failed to educate the American people about the threat of Communism in Nicaragua, which reduced the Reagan Administration's chances for "more effective action to prevent Communism in Nicaragua."<sup>6</sup> He concluded his book by stating that

Although American journalists understood that the Sandinistas were Communists and this worried them, but they had no good idea what to do about it...The charge that can fairly be lodged against those journalists who misportrayed the Sandinistas is not that they "cost" America Nicaragua, but merely that they failed to give their audience as true a picture as was in their power to do. That is indictment enough.<sup>7</sup>

John Norton Moore made similar remarks about the Sandinistas in his book, *The Secret War in Central America: Sandinista Assault on World Order*. He examined some legal issues in the Nicaraguan Revolution and identified three policies (the suppression of democratic pluralism, an ideologically aligned military buildup, and repeated human rights violations) adopted by the Sandinista National Directorate as the "root cause of the world order threat in Central America." According to Moore, Cuban assistance played a crucial role in the triumph of the Sandinistas although they "also rode a wave of popular resentment in Nicaragua against Somoza."<sup>8</sup> His principal argument was that the Sandinistas violated the core principles of world order defined by the Charters of the United Nations and the Organization of American States (OAS), prohibiting aggressive attacks of one country on another. However, by supplying substantial political and military support to the Farabundo Marti National Liberation (FMLN) insurgents in El Salvador to overthrow a democratically elected government, the Sandinistas destabilized the world order.<sup>9</sup> According to Norton Moore, the Sandinistas launched an extensive political campaign in the United States featuring propaganda trips for Americans to Nicaragua, propaganda films, and even direct phone lobbying by Daniel Ortega of individual American Congressmen before key Congressional votes in order to conceal their "secret war." Moore also claimed that the Sandinistas curtailed civil liberties in Nicaragua and killed Miskitu prisoners during anti-Contra operations, which was a direct violation of human rights.

While I recognize the importance of their criticism concerning Sandinista corruption, deception, abuse of power, denial of civil liberties, military aid to "communist rebels" in El Salvador, and human rights violations on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua, I think it is equally important to point out the jarring right-wing tone in their arguments about indigenous self-determination. What is implicit in their narratives is that liberal democracy guarantees political pluralism, which protects and promotes the interest of ethnic minorities. But Ernesto Laclau and

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<sup>6</sup> Idem, *News Coverage of the Sandinista Revolution* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1988), 106-108.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>8</sup> John Norton Moore, *The Secret War in Central America: Sandinista Assault on World Order* (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1987), 22.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 45.

Chantal Mouffe, among other radical democratic theorists, have already shown that liberal democracy is inherently anti-participatory because it reduces the participation of citizens to voting in a “market-like political system,” where the voter merely chooses a candidate from existing political parties. Consequently, democracy becomes a game in which political elites compete with one another for power to govern civil society.<sup>10</sup>

Instead of analyzing individual testimonies of Miskitus I interviewed in Puerto Cabezas and Managua, I would like to discuss Miskitu demands and allegations in an expanded discussion of counterrevolutionary activities in the Río Coco region. The first clash between the revolutionary government and MISURASATA occurred in August 1980, when the Sandinistas created the BOSAWAS (Bocay, Saalaya, Waspuk) Forest Reserve on the Atlantic Coast.<sup>11</sup> The revolutionary government (in conjunction with the Mexican government) decided to invest \$56 million on a project designed to cut and process lumber on the Atlantic Coast.<sup>12</sup> However, this decision to create the BOSAWAS Forest Reserve came right after INNICA, MISURASATA, and IRENA signed an agreement on wood-cutting. According to the terms of that agreement, IRENA was to pay for all wood cut on government owned lands, and for wood cut on disputed lands IRENA agreed to pay 80% of the total value of the wood. Miskitu leaders objected to the nationalization of natural resources on the Coast because they feared government control over Indian lands. Meanwhile, the revolutionary government authorized Miskitu leaders to carry out a survey and prepare maps of communal lands on which MISURASATA’s land claims were based. Cultural Survival, a Boston-based non-governmental organization, provided MISURASATA the funds for this study. However, the survey results came as a rude shock for Miskitu leaders, such as Brooklyn Rivera, who had been promoting the idea that Miskitus, Sumus, and Ramas were “nations” with aboriginal rights to an immense territory on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua. Consider the following excerpt from Brooklyn Rivera’s speech:

Our biggest problem is that we don’t have power where we are living. Others are trying to control us. So we are still marginated by the rest of the people and the past government. We have no good living. Together with the Creoles them and the same Spanish speaking people we are trying to conquer again our land. The Government don’t support us. We want to get the power, we don’t have to wait, we ourselves, we try it. Real freedom is what we need. So we are fighting for our riches, Indian riches, not resources, riches that the Lord gave us in our own land. We live in a communal way and that is to conserve!

The Government don’t want problem with the Indians and the are real worry about the Indian land. INFONAC, INRA have problems with Miskito and Creoles. We have to defend our land with machetes and sticks. The Government has understood that: An Indian without land is not an Indian! (Emphasis mine).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1992); David Trend, ed., *Radical Democracy: Identity, Citizenship, and the State* (London: Routledge, 1996); C. Douglas Lammis, *Radical Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> This is the largest rainforest in Central America. The area between the Bocay, Waspuk, and Coco rivers is mostly inhabited by Sumu-Mayangnas, but some Miskitu communities are scattered within the limits of the reserve. Hans Petter Buvollen and Christan Scherrer, “Nicaragua: Indians and New Alliances,” *Indigenous Affairs* no. 1 (January-March 1994): 22-29.

<sup>12</sup> Theodore MacDonald, “The Moral Economy of the Miskito Indians: Local Roots of a Geopolitical Conflict,” chap. in *Ethnicities and Nations: Processes of Interethnic Relations in Latin America, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific*, ed. Remo Guidieri, Francesco Pellizzi, and Stanley Tambiah (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988), 128-147.

<sup>13</sup> Brooklyn Rivera, “An Indian Without Land Is Not An Indian,” in *National Revolution and Indigenous Identity*, ed. Klaudine Ohland and Robin Schneider (Copenhagen: IWGIA, 1983), 64-67.

As Charles Hale has pointed out, the survey revealed that, in strictly legal terms, Miskitus had rights only to community lands, a tiny portion of the Atlantic Coast's total territory. Consequently, they promoted the idea that Miskitu people were a "nation" with aboriginal rights.<sup>14</sup> The idea of a Miskitu "nation" was both convenient and feasible because a similar discourse already existed (with sophisticated historical and theoretical grounding).<sup>15</sup> Beginning in 1981, Miskitu leaders started pushing the idea of a Miskitu "kingdom" and claimed that Miskitus had owned their lands from "time immemorial." MISURASATA leaders argued that unless the issue of land rights was resolved, cultural rights could not be addressed because land was fundamental to their lifestyle and religious beliefs.<sup>16</sup>

Several Miskitu men and women I spoke with in Bilwi told me that "Before the revolution, there was harmony and prosperity in Río Coco. They were the descendants of Miskitu kings, and land, *Yapti Tasba* (Mother Earth), had been handed to them since 'time immemorial' from their ancestors" (Translation mine).<sup>17</sup>

By promoting the idea of a Miskitu "nation" and by asserting that Miskitus had "aboriginal rights" to almost one-third of Nicaragua's national territory, MISURASATA challenged the sovereignty of the revolutionary state. In August 1981, the government responded to MISURASATA's demands by issuing its own *Declaration of Principles* concerning indigenous rights and the *Declaration* promised to protect and promote indigenous peoples' rights, but Articles 5 and 6 made it explicit that the government would not grant any special rights to Miskitus. The implication was that the state had the exclusive right to exploit natural resources. The government maintained its position on this issue throughout all the peace talks and autonomy discussions. Thus, the Autonomy statute guarantees Indian rights only to "the communal lands, waters, and forests that have "traditionally belonged to the communities."

Miskitu leaders also accused the Sandinistas of human rights violations in the Río Coco region. The general line of Miskitu allegations are reflected in Armstrong Wiggins' testimony before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. The ILRC distributed this statement widely.

Several Miskitu men and women I interviewed in Bilwi and Managua had been affected by the relocation, and told me horror stories. A Miskitu woman from Waspam told me that "Sandinista soldiers raped Miskitu women, tortured and killed unarmed Miskitu men. Living conditions in Tasba Pri were terrible. They could not travel freely and did not have access basic health care...the only good Mission hospital in Río Coco had been destroyed during the war...Miskitu children suffered because there were no schools...families were separated and it was a very traumatic experience" (Translation mine).<sup>18</sup> Essentially, Miskitu allegations regarding

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<sup>14</sup> Charles Hale, "'Wan Tasbaya Dukiara': Contested Notions of Land Rights in Miskitu History," chap. in *Remapping Memory: The Politics of Time Space*, ed. Jonathan Boyarin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 86-92.

<sup>15</sup> Franke Wilmer, *The Indigenous Voice in World Politics Since Time Immemorial* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1993).

<sup>16</sup> The issue of land rights was first considered internationally from an indigenous perspective at the 1977 Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) Conference in Geneva. The areas discussed were land rights, indigenous philosophy, the impact of multinational corporations on indigenous peoples, and the impact of nuclear arms and nuclear testing. *The Indigenous Voice in World Politics*, 131-132.

<sup>17</sup> YATAMA Ex-Combatants, interview by author, August 1998, Bilwi, tape recording. A phrase that is commonly used by young YATAMA-Miskitus to describe themselves is that they are the descendants of Miskitu kings and are fighting for their "lost" rights (*Somos los hijos de los reyes de la Mosquitia...y lucharemos hasta el último momento para nuestros derechos*).

<sup>18</sup> Miskitu woman from Waspam, interview by author, July 1995, Managua, tape recording.

human rights violations by the Sandinista government emphasized three aspects: (1) they were relocated against their will; (2) the relocation was a pretext to suppress Miskitu resistance; (3) Miskitus have suffered more than any other ethnic group because of the revolution.

I also interviewed several Sandinista policymakers and leaders, who insisted repeatedly that they evacuated Miskitu communities from the Río Coco area because of Contra attacks. The Sandinistas burned down houses and entire villages to ensure that Miskitus did not return to their homes in Río Coco and that the evacuated villages could not be used by the Contras. However, all of them acknowledged that the Tasba Pri relocation “was a mistake” (*Sí, eso fue un error de la revolución*).

In the United States, the Reagan Administration used the Tasba Pri incident to discredit the Sandinistas.<sup>19</sup> Ronald Reagan depicted the Tasba Pri incident as a holocaust by saying that Miskitus “are trapped in a totalitarian dungeon.”<sup>20</sup> In 1982, U.S. Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, even showed press reporters a photograph of burning bodies as evidence of mass slaughter of Miskitus. However, this act became particularly embarrassing to Alexander Haig because reporters discovered that the photograph had already been published in a French newspaper, *Le Figaro*, during the Somoza regime.<sup>21</sup> During this period, the OAS-Inter American Commission on Human Rights (IAHCR), CIDCA, Amnesty International, and *Americas Watch* carried out separate investigations of human rights abuses after MISURASATA lodged a complaint that included charges of detentions, trials, imprisonment, disappearances, and relocation. The IACHR expressed concern about conditions of detention, lack of charges, and disappearances; but, the Commission also recognized the difficulties of the government to protect all its citizens in the context of counterrevolutionary activities. The Commission concluded that peace in Central America was absolutely necessary to improve living conditions on the Coast.

In separate reports on human rights and Miskitus, *Americas Watch* and CIDCA found no evidence of widespread disappearances or alleged torture and killing of Miskitos during the relocation. However, *Americas Watch* concluded that although the relocation itself was consistent with prerogatives of countries under military threat, Sandinistas should have informed Miskitus about their relocation plans before hand.<sup>22</sup> The relocation itself was a regrettable policy that even the Sandinistas now call an “error.” It was, however, consistent with the rights of states to defend their national integrity and was carried out with minimal violations of the human rights of the Miskitus. It occurred in a context of war during which the Sandinistas committed human rights violations. Many of them were punished and there was certainly no policy of massive abuse or genocide.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> U.S. Department of State, *Human Rights in Nicaragua Under the Sandinistas: From Revolution to Repression* (Washington, DC: Department of State Publication 9467, 1986); Idem, *Broken Promises: Sandinista Repression of Human Rights in Nicaragua* (Washington, DC: Office of Public Diplomacy for Latin America and the Caribbean, 1984); Idem, *Sandinista Prisons: A Tool of Intimidation* (Washington, DC: Department of State Publication 9492, 1986).

<sup>20</sup> Ronald Reagan, quoted in “New Effort to Aid Nicaraguan Rebels,” *New York Times*, 19 July 1984, quoted in *Americas Watch*, *Human Rights in Nicaragua: Reagan, Rhetoric and Reality* (New York: Americas Watch, 1985), 1.

<sup>21</sup> *The New York Times*, 2 March 1982, 23:1; Ibid., 3 March 1982, 5:2.

<sup>22</sup> *Americas Watch*, *Human Rights in Nicaragua: Reagan, Rhetoric and Reality* (New York: Americas Watch Committee, 1985); Idem, *The Miskitos in Nicaragua* (Washington, DC: Americas Watch Committee, 1984).

<sup>23</sup> Idem, *Violations of the Laws of War by Both Sides in Nicaragua, 1981-1985* (New York: Americas Watch, 1985); Idem, *With the Miskitos in Honduras* (New York: Americas Watch, 1986).



## Understanding Revolutionary Nationalism and Narratives of the Revolution

In this paper nationalist narratives are taken to mean writing concerned with revolutionary perceptions and experiences, written mainly by Sandinista leaders and policy makers. Most nationalist narratives of the revolution in Nicaragua and the Miskitu demand for regional autonomy on the Atlantic Coast represent an assumed unity called the “Nicaraguan people” that is always split into two—the modernizing Sandinistas and the yet-to-be-modernized Amerindians. Furthermore, they speak from within a metanarrative whose theoretical subjects are U.S. imperialism and revolutionary nationalism. During the 1980s, nationalist narratives became very prominent in the consciousness of Sandinista supporters; in some cases, recurrent versions of these authoritative narratives not only empowered the storytellers, but also enabled them to fix meanings. However, my interest is not limited to deconstructing master narratives; rather the purpose of this paper is to show how the discourse of revolutionary nationalism drowned Miskitu voices that challenged the hegemony of the revolutionary state. Similar topics have been discussed widely by several postcolonial theorists, and I have taken their ideas about language and writing and applied them to narratives of the revolution to highlight the ensemble of assumptions of Sandinista storytellers. The wider significance of such an analysis lies in the awareness that the epistemological limits of revolutionary discourses were also the enunciative boundaries of a range of dissident histories and voices—women, ethnic and religious minority groups, peasants, and workers—in Nicaragua.

Immediately after the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) took power in July 1979, the revolutionary government implemented land reform and tried to extend education and health care to all workers, peasants, and women. In the early years of the revolution Sandinista narratives focused on reconstituting the nation from the position of oppressed peoples, and developed a vocabulary that was recognizably Marxist in the context of revolutionary movements in Central America. In addition, they dramatized selected moments of the revolutionary struggle because these narratives were fundamental in the process of nationalist self-imagining because every stage in the revolutionary process required the nation to be reconstructed in the collective imagination.<sup>24</sup> This paper provides an analytical framework in which the ideological history of Sandinismo can be studied. My goal is to locate, within a historical context of the revolution, Sandinista nationalist thought as a discourse of power.<sup>25</sup>

Sandinista revolutionary ideology developed over an extended period of time. Instead of tracing the constitution of Sandinismo in chronological stages, I focus on the writings and speeches of Augusto César Sandino, and prominent Sandinista leaders, such as, Carlos Fonseca, Tomás Borge, Ricardo Morales Avilés, Jaime Wheelock, and Daniel Ortega to show how each discourse constituted a logical step toward the formation of the ideological history of the revolutionary state.

### Sandino’s Patriotism

Augusto César Sandino’s political philosophy was an essential part of Sandinista revolutionary discourse. During the 1980s, Sandinistas constantly reinforced his memory through Sandino’s

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<sup>24</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

<sup>25</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

images on flags, Córdoba bills, billboards, posters, fences, walls, murals, etc. Sandino was portrayed as Nicaragua's most revered political and cultural hero.<sup>26</sup> Sandino wrote a great deal on Nicaragua's social and political questions. I will focus on some of his writings dealing directly with the issues of U.S. imperialism and Nicaraguan patriotism in order to fix the location of Sandino's political philosophy within my frame of analysis of the Sandinista government's ideology during the 1980s. My aim is to show how Sandinista leaders later used Sandino's ideas to articulate their own ideas of revolutionary nationalism and establish their hegemony in Nicaraguan politics. Such an approach to the ideological history of Sandinismo can help us look at the ways in which Sandinista nationalist thought associated culture with power in the particular context of the revolution in Nicaragua.

Although Anastasio Somoza García discredited Sandino by describing him as a bandit surrounded by criminal elements, Sandino tried to portray himself as a folk hero, a defender of law, justice, and morality, or a new Bolívar.<sup>27</sup> Sandino believed in constitutional government, the rule of law, and government by the consent of the governed through a freely elected legislative body.<sup>28</sup> The concept of patriotism is central to understanding Sandino's mass appeal. He equated patriotism with nationalism or defense of "national honor."<sup>29</sup> According to Sandino, a nation's right to sovereignty or independence was a sacred right. In other words, it meant defending Nicaragua against domestic and foreign usurpers. His first political manifesto of July 1, 1927 stated "The man who does not (even) ask his country for even a handful of earth for his grave deserves to be heard, and not only to be heard but also to be believed. I am a Nicaraguan and I feel proud that the blood of the Indian race flows in my veins, which by some atavism envelops the mystery of being a loyal and sincere patriot."<sup>30</sup>

Like Flores Magón, leader of the Mexican Liberal Party, Sandino also defined patriotism as love for one's homeland rather than loyalty to the state. His political slogans, "Homeland and Liberty!" (*patria y libertad*) was a minor variation of Flores Magón's "Land and Liberty!" Sandino's 1927 Manifesto called for a Liberal revolution and Nicaragua's industrial development with Latin American capital. However, it also contained allusions to the eventual political unification of the Indo-Hispanic peoples, and its class symbolism aimed at mobilizing workers and peasants in their struggle against poverty and exploitation:

My greatest honor is that I come from the lap of the oppressed, the soul and spirit of our race, those who have lived, ignored, and forgotten at the mercy of the shameless hired assassins

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<sup>26</sup> David Whisnant, *Rascally Signs in Scared Places: The Politics of Culture in Nicaragua* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 346-347.

<sup>27</sup> Augusto C. Sandino, "Conversations With Ramón de Belausteguigoitia (February 1933)," in *Sandino: The Testimony of a Nicaraguan Patriot*, comp. and ed. Robert Edgar Conrad (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 451-462; Idem, "Plan de Realización del Supremo Sueño de Bolívar," (20 March 1929), in *El Sandinismo: Documentos Básicos*, comp. Instituto de Estudio del Sandinismo (Managua: Editorial Nueva Nicaragua, 1983), 85-98.

<sup>28</sup> Augusto C. Sandino, "Timid Nicaragua: A Message," 10 June 1933, in *Sandino: Testimony of a Nicaraguan Patriot*, 477-479.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 95-97.

<sup>30</sup> Idem, "Contra la Explotación, la Oposición y la Humillación," in *Ideario Político*, comp. Carlos Fonseca Amador (Managua: Privately Printed, 1979), 38-39. The original text in Spanish is as follows: "El hombre que de su patria (ni siquiera) exige un palmo de tierra para su sepultura, merece ser oído, y no sólo oído, sino también creído. Soy nicaragüense y me siento orgulloso de que en mis venas circule, más que otra cualquiera, la sangre india americana, que por atavismo encierra el misterio de ser patriota leal y sincera." Augusto C. Sandino, "Manifiesto, July 1, 1927," in *Sandino: The Testimony of a Nicaraguan Patriot*, 74-77.

who have committed the crime of high treason forgetful of the pain and misery of the Liberal cause that they pitilessly persecuted as if we did not belong to some nation.<sup>31</sup>

From this passage it is evident that Sandino was very proud of his Indian heritage and his past occupation as a mechanic; The two symbols were closely connected. In February 1928 Sandino declared that his immediate objective was to expel the U.S. Marines from Nicaragua.<sup>32</sup> His final objective was to make a social revolution and his 1927 Manifesto was a call to begin fighting against the Marines.<sup>33</sup> However, Sandino realized that the expulsion of the Marines and the abrogation of the Bryan-Chamorro Treaty could restore his country's political sovereignty, but that alone would not change Nicaragua's economic dependence on the United States.<sup>34</sup>

Sandino's solution to the social and economic evils of imperialism in Nicaragua was a social revolution. He demanded that the peasants be free to cultivate and export tobacco for their own as well as their country's benefit, that workers be paid cash instead of coupons redeemable at company stores, and that the government take steps toward establishing a Union of Central American Republics.<sup>35</sup> A change in his political views also meant a change in his public image from that of a defender of the Liberal party to that of a champion of the people's right to well being.<sup>36</sup>

Sandino did not find any viable political means to actualize his desire, but it became a dream for the Sandinistas: to build a utopian political community against the coercive structures of imperialism. It was within this framework of Marxist theoretical discourse that Sandinistas mobilized popular elements of Nicaragua and articulated their discourse of revolutionary nationalism.

### From Sandino to Sandinismo

During the 1970s, the FSLN's guerrilla warfare was guided by a set of theoretical guidelines—the principles of scientific socialism—for interpreting what was happening in Nicaragua. Initially the FSLN relied on Carlos Fonseca's efforts to update Sandino's account of war in Nicaragua, but Fonseca's interpretation was based on Che Guevara's version of neocolonialism as the final stage of imperialism. Subsequently Ricardo Morales Avilés developed an alternative assessment based on Antonio Gramsci's concept of political hegemony. However, this interpretation too was challenged by Jaime Wheelock's application of neo-Marxist dependency theory to Nicaragua. Finally, Daniel Ortega and Tomás Borge presented a composite picture of Nicaraguan reality influenced by Fidel Castro's perception of the revolutionary process in Latin America.<sup>37</sup>

Carlos Fonseca, one of the founders of the FSLN, was probably the first systematic expounder of Sandino's thoughts. Sandino's sketch of U.S. interventions in Nicaragua covered the period from Nicaragua's independence from Spain in 1821 to the final withdrawal of the U.S. Marines in 1933. In *Nicaragua: hora cero* Fonseca took up the story where Sandino left off, and

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<sup>31</sup> Augusto C. Sandino, "Manifesto, July 1, 1927," *Sandino: Testimony of a Nicaraguan Patriot*, 74-75.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, "Message to Senator William E. Borah," February 1928, 184.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, "Carta al Congreso Anti-Imperialista Reunido en Francfort," in *El Sandinismo: Documentos Básicos*, 34-38; Augusto C. Sandino, *Sandino: Testimony of a Nicaraguan Patriot*, 268.

<sup>34</sup> Augusto C. Sandino, "Communiqué: January 9, 1930," in *Sandino: Testimony of a Nicaraguan Patriot*, 290.

<sup>35</sup> Augusto C. Sandino, *Ideario Político*, comp. Carlos Fonseca (Managua: Privately Printed, 1979), 48-61.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 309.

<sup>37</sup> Donald Hodges, *Intellectual Foundations*, 197.

combined Sandino's ideas with Marxist-Leninist thought.<sup>38</sup> As early as 1957, Fonseca was selected as a delegate to the Fourth World Congress of Democratic Youth in Kiev and to the Sixth World Youth Festival in Moscow. He arrived in the Soviet Union during the first week in August and remained there as a guest until November, and traveled to some other socialist countries. He recorded his impressions of life under socialism in a pamphlet entitled *Un nicaragüense en Moscú*.<sup>39</sup> Fonseca identified the Marxist component of Sandinismo with Marx's and Lenin's guidelines to revolution.<sup>40</sup> In a proclamation broadcast on a Nicaraguan radio station in 1970, he declared that the Sandinista popular revolution had a dual objective: to overthrow the Somoza dictatorship, and then establish socialism. In November that year, he declared "we recognize that socialism is the people's only hope of achieving a profound change in their conditions of life...the fundamental guide must be the principles of scientific socialism."<sup>41</sup>

Fonseca located the source of Nicaragua's political and economic problems since Sandino's death in the country's neocolonial status in relation to the United States. The withdrawal of the Marines in 1933 did not substantially change Nicaragua's exploitation by U.S. multinational companies. From having directly occupied and dominated Nicaragua for more than two decades, the United States entered a new phase in which its intervention in Nicaragua's affairs took place indirectly through economic concessions.<sup>42</sup> In return, Somoza collaborated with U.S. designs for suppressing popular resistance movements in Nicaragua and national liberation movements in Central America and the Caribbean region. According to Fonseca, the Somozas betrayed national interests by transforming Nicaragua into a base for U.S. military aggression in Central America. In 1948 Anastasio Somoza García intervened in Costa Rica's civil war. The war culminated in the repression of the labor movement in that country. In 1954, his government helped the CIA to overthrow Jacob Arbenz's democratic government in Guatemala. In 1961 Luis Somoza offered Nicaragua as a base for training the anti-Castro forces that embarked from Puerto Cabezas, but were defeated at the Bay of Pigs. In 1965 troops of the National Guard captained by U.S. Marines occupied Santo Domingo and crushed the Constitutionalist movement in the Dominican Republic, and in 1967 Anastasio Somoza Debayle announced his decision to send contingents of the National Guard to support U.S. forces in Vietnam.<sup>43</sup>

Carlos Fonseca's methods, concepts, and modes of reasoning about Nicaragua's economic "underdevelopment" and the role of the "national bourgeoisie" can be located within the framework of Che Guevarian thought.<sup>44</sup> For Sandino, the United States was both the fundamental and immediate enemy of the Nicaraguan people. According to Fonseca, with the transformation of old-style imperialism into neo-imperialism, Nicaragua's immediate enemy was

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<sup>38</sup> Carlos Fonseca Amador, *Nicaragua: Hora Cero* (Managua: Secretaría Nacional de Propaganda y Educación Política del FSLN, 1980).

<sup>39</sup> Idem, *Un nicaragüense en Moscú* (Managua: Secretaría Nacional de Propaganda y Educación Política del FSLN, 1980).

<sup>40</sup> Tomás Borge, *Carlos, The Dawn is No Longer Beyond Our Reach: The Prison Journals of Tomás Borge Remembering Carlos Fonseca, Founder of the FSLN* (Vancouver: New Star Books, 1984), 24-25.

<sup>41</sup> Carlos Fonseca, "Entrevista 1970," in *Bajo la Bandera del Sandinismo: Textos Políticos*, comp. Instituto de Estudios del Sandinismo (Managua: Editorial Nueva Nicaragua, 1981), 219; Idem, "¡Con La Revolución Siempre!," in *Nicaragua: la Estrategia de la Victoria*, ed. Fernando Carmona (Mexico City: Nuestro Tiempo), 139.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., "Reseña de la Secular Intervención Norteamericana en Nicaragua," 231-239.

<sup>43</sup> Donald Hodges, *Intellectual Foundations, 198-199*; Carlos Fonseca, *Nicaragua: Hora Cero*, 178-179.

<sup>44</sup> See Ernesto "Che" Guevara, "Planning and Consciousness," in *Che Guevara and the Cuban Revolution* (Sydney: Pathfinder, 1987), 205-230; Idem, "Cuba: Exception or Vanguard?," in *Che Guevara: A New Society*, ed. David Deutschmann (Melbourne: Ocean Press, 1991), 89-97.

the Somoza dictatorship representing U.S. interests. Influenced by Che Guevara's ideas concerning the national bourgeoisie in Latin America, Fonseca argued that the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie was not part of the masses because the bourgeoisie feared popular revolution even more than imperialist exploitation. Che Guevara characterized Latin American governments as "oligarchic dictatorships" because the bourgeoisie violated the constitution when it was in their interest. By collaborating with foreign capitalists, the bourgeoisie betrayed national interests:

The national bourgeoisies have, in the majority, banded together with U.S. imperialism; thus their fate and that of imperialism will be the same in each country. Even when a contradiction develops with U.S. imperialism, this occurs within the boundaries of a more fundamental conflict...[involving] *all the exploited* and *all the exploiters*. This polarization of classes into antagonistic forces has so far been more rapid than the development of contradictions over the division of spoils.<sup>45</sup>

Drawing on the ideas of Che Guevara, Carlos Fonseca explained the subjection of Nicaragua in economic terms. The theoretical position that recurred in much of his writing focused on two issues: (1) the economy of Central American countries was controlled by U.S. multinationals; (2) the main purpose of regional integration was to reduce the status of Central American countries to political satellites of the U.S. government. Fonseca's work provided the foundation for Sandinista studies of Nicaragua's socioeconomic and political conditions, and addressed two central issues: the nature and causes of the political crisis under the Somozas, as well as, the class character of the Somoza dictatorship.

One of the earliest studies of this kind was by Ricardo Morales Avilés, who viewed the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie as puppets in the hands of U.S. imperialists who exploited Nicaraguan workers. Given this fundamental premise, Ricardo Morales tried to explain the crisis of hegemony of the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie. He argued that with the development of cotton production during the 1950s and the accompanying industrialization process, Nicaragua managed to bypass a Mexican-type confrontation with the traditional landowners. The result was an interlocking of the interests of the old Conservative cattle and coffee oligarchy with those of the Liberal modernizing bourgeoisie. The capitalization of agricultural production impeded agrarian reform, and prevented small and medium enterprises from sharing profits from the new agro-businesses. Since the dynamic sector of the economy was the export sector penetrated by foreign capital, the structure of native bourgeois domination was inextricably linked to the structure of imperialist domination. In other words, the crisis of hegemony for the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie emerged from this new structure of domination, and this caused a crisis of legitimacy because the working class, the peasantry, and the middle sectors rejected the values that the bourgeoisie wanted to impose on the nation.<sup>46</sup>

Ricardo Morales argued that unlike some other Latin American countries, where the traditional landed oligarchy had been replaced by a new national bourgeoisie producing for the local market, the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie depended heavily on foreign investment, as well as, commercial profits from the marketing of foreign products in Nicaragua. According to Morales, the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie consisted of three groups: a Liberal sector consisting of political and military bureaucrats who had used the state power to modernize the economy and to transform

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<sup>45</sup> Ernesto "Che" Guevara, *Obras: 1957-1967* (Havana: Casa de las Américas, 1970), 165-166.

<sup>46</sup> Ricardo Avilés Morales, *La Dominación Imperialista en Nicaragua* (Managua: Secretaría Nacional de Propaganda y Educación Política del FSLN, 1980).

themselves into big capitalists, a Conservative sector consisting of the established landholding families who had adapted to the process of modernization, and a third sector of small and medium capitalist excluded from a privileged share of the spoils.

The issue of legitimacy arose whenever the differences between the state bourgeoisie and the opposition bourgeoisie came to a head. The structure of domination collapsed whenever the Conservative sector of the oligarchy supported the bourgeois opposition in order to defend the interests of the capitalist class against the destabilizing effects of the dictatorship and the threat posed by the popular forces. This polarization of the bourgeoisie into two camps created a national political crisis. Morales characterized the political crisis of domination as a crisis within the ruling class resulting from its monopolization of the economic surplus. As perceived by the bourgeois opposition, these so-called inequities were the fault of the bourgeoisie and of the Somoza clique in particular. Through its privileged access to the flow of U.S. capital, credit, and government aid, the Somoza family not only made huge profits, but also provided privileges for other big capitalists in their role as associates of American business. At the same time, there were rifts within the bourgeoisie because the Somoza clique had access to most of the foreign credit and shared in the economic surplus disproportionately to its assets. Through its control of the national bank and its role as the political representative of American business interests in Nicaragua, it collaborated with foreign banks in regulating the flow of credit to the comparative disadvantage of some big and most medium and small capitalists.<sup>47</sup>

This analysis led Morales to characterize the Somoza regime as a bourgeois military dictatorship whose political hegemony was the fundamental source of its economic privileges. The dictatorship was not the armed power of the bourgeoisie, but rather “the armed bourgeoisie in power.” In other words, the state was not simply an executive organ for managing the common affairs of the bourgeoisie, but rather a monopoly of bureaucrats who had become capitalists through their abuse of political power. Since most of the bourgeoisie was excluded from this Liberal party monopoly controlled by the state bourgeoisie, the Somoza regime was basically unstable. Morales concluded that intra-bourgeois antagonisms were more important than the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the popular forces in explaining the crisis of a political hegemony. Consequently, socialism could not be on the immediate agenda because the objective conditions of revolution had yet to mature in Nicaragua.<sup>48</sup>

Jaime Wheelock joined the FSLN in 1969, when Morales became a member of its National Directorate. Wheelock’s analysis was based on the premises of Latin American dependency theory. Unlike Morales, Wheelock argued that Nicaragua’s economic dependence had resulted in a weakening of the bourgeoisie. Morales played down the unity of the bourgeoisie vis-à-vis the proletariat by emphasizing their respective internal contradictions, but Wheelock stressed the internal unity of both classes as well as their fundamental opposition. What united the various sectors of the business class was their lack of independence, political power, or even a government they could call their own. Because the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie had to serve American interests to advance its own, Wheelock defined it as a “consular bourgeoisie.” Since the Somoza regime represented mainly the interests of the U.S. State Department and U.S.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

multinationals, Wheelock characterized it as a “military dictatorship.” However, neither the Somozas nor the bourgeoisie held political hegemony.<sup>49</sup>

Wheelock located the crisis within the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie in the impediments to economic development resulting from the dependent character of Nicaraguan capitalism.<sup>50</sup> Besides the fetters on economic growth imposed by the structure of dependency, two contradictions with U.S. imperialism undermined the local hegemony of Nicaragua’s bourgeoisie. First, financial resources were under tight control by the U.S. banks and their local branches; and native enterprises could not compete with the subsidiaries of the multinationals that were making inroads into the domestic market. Second, there was no feasible alternative to imperialist hegemony because the native bourgeoisie depended on the Somoza regime to maintain political stability that would guarantee foreign investment in Nicaragua.<sup>51</sup> However, Wheelock argued that this problem of economic dependency could be resolved if the struggle against imperialism took on the character of a confrontation with the Somoza military dictatorship.<sup>52</sup>

### Ideology of the Revolutionary State

The most mature ideological form of Sandinismo was clearly demonstrated in the writings of Tomás Borge, the only surviving founder of the FSLN and Sandinista Minister of the Interior during the 1980s, as well as Daniel Ortega, Coordinator of the JGRN and President of Nicaragua from 1984 to 1990. Tomás Borge’s main argument regarding Nicaragua’s economic and social problems was that social justice for all Nicaraguans could not be provided under the Somoza regime because it was corrupt, oppressive, and decadent. To achieve social justice in Nicaragua, it was necessary to create a new framework of institutions, which would stand above the narrow interests of classes in society, and plan and direct the economic resources in order to ensure welfare and justice for all. This argument was the main constitutive principle of the ideology of the Sandinista regime during the 1980s. It was an ideology in which the central organizing principle was the revolutionary state, and its legitimizing principle was a conception of social justice.<sup>53</sup> Consider the following excerpt from Tomás Borge’s speech:

This revolution was made, not to reform the old society, but to create a new society. [Applause] Well, now this struggle, which is fundamentally a task of the working class, has special characteristics stemming from the economic, historical, and cultural conditions in Nicaragua. When imperialism emerged as the highest stage of capitalism, a struggle for world markets was initiated by the large capitalist countries, and during that first division of the world,

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<sup>49</sup> Jaime Wheelock, “¿Quién Tiene el Poder?,” interview by Marta Harnecker, in *Nicaragua: El Gran Desafío* (Managua: Editorial Nueva Nicaragua, 1983), 20-22; Idem, *Imperialismo y Dictadura: Crisis de Una Formación Social* (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1980).

<sup>50</sup> Idem, “Logros y Perspectivas de la Economía Sandinista,” in *Sandinistas: Key Documents/Documentos Claves*, ed. Dennis Gilbert and David Block (Ithaca: Latin American Studies Center, Cornell University, 1990), 281-291.

<sup>51</sup> Jaime Wheelock and Luis Carrión, *Apuntes Sobre el Desarrollo Económico y Social de Nicaragua* (Managua: Secretaría Nacional de Propaganda y Educación Política del FSLN), 86-101.

<sup>52</sup> Jaime Wheelock, “Discurso de Inauguración del Encuentro Continental de Reforma Agraria y Movimientos Campesinos,” in *La Mosquitia en la Revolución*, ed. CIERA (Managua: Colección Blas Real Espinales, 1981), 9-24.

<sup>53</sup> Tomás Borge, “Una Sociología al Servicio de la Sociedad,” Inaugural Lecture at the Latin American Sociology Congress, March 1986, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, [photocopy], CIDCA Archives in Managua.

Nicaragua, together with other Latin American countries, suffered the terrible fate of falling into the hands of the U.S. imperialists. Our economy, therefore, developed as a dependent economy. This forced our people to struggle for their national liberation, and this struggle took on a specific form, which is nationalism.

This also explains why our country, ferociously subjected to the United States, never produced a true national bourgeoisie. The dominant force in our country was never the local bourgeoisie: it was imperialism, through its brutal local instruments. The development of Nicaragua took place through investments and loans administered by an overseer named Anastasio Somoza, as in the past there had been, to mention only a couple of names, Chamorro and Moncada.

When Sandino's army of peasants and workers kicked the Yankee invaders out of our homeland, the astute invaders established a docile army which had the characteristics of an army of occupation, and which was the foundation not only of the Somoza dynasty but of the power of the oligarchy as a whole. That is why the struggle of our people took the form of a struggle against the *Somocista* dictatorship, which was, in its essence, a struggle against imperialism. And through this dialectical link between national liberation and the anti-Somoza struggle, victory was reached, a victory that took the *form* of the overthrow of the *Somocista* tyranny, but whose *content* was a victory of national liberation.

Who was capable of deciphering this historical synthesis? It was the Sandinista National Liberation Front, it was *Sandinismo* that knew how to apply the theory of revolution to the concrete reality of Nicaragua. Therefore, the Sandinista Front was the living instrument for the conquest of power by the workers, and the living instrument for the consolidation of the power of the workers.

What does this mean? Just like the human body needs vitamins and proteins to nourish itself and develop, the Sandinista Front needs to draw its sustenance from the working class. The vitamins and proteins of the Sandinista Front are the Nicaraguan workers and peasants. The intellectuals, professionals, and other sectors of society who want to identify with the Sandinista people's revolution must identify with the interests of workers and peasants. And the capitalists, regardless of their ideological conceptions of the Nicaraguan workers and peasants, have to identify with the patriotism of the peasants and workers if they are to remain in Nicaragua.

The Sandinista Front is the vanguard of the revolution.

The Sandinista Front is the vanguard of all Nicaraguan patriots.

The Sandinista Front is the vanguard of national liberation.

The Sandinista Front is the vanguard of the workers and peasants, and is the vanguard of these social sectors.

The Sandinista Front is the living instrument of the revolutionary classes, the guide leading toward a new society. [*Applause*]<sup>54</sup>

Sandinista leaders claimed that their main aim was to reorganize the political and economic order of the country. They tried to demonstrate the falsity of the argument that agro-exports would actually bring "development" to Central America. Tomás Borge claimed that the revolution had created, for the first time in the country's history, necessary conditions for a successful struggle against economic dependency and racism. The revolutionary government was committed to the development of policy on various levels—economic, political, cultural, and ideological—in order to establish an egalitarian society. Economic development was one of the principal ways to combat social inequalities because if every Nicaraguan had access to a decent living standard,

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<sup>54</sup> Tomás Borge, "This Revolution Was Made to Create a New Society," May Day Speech (1 May 1982), in *Nicaragua, the Sandinista People's Revolution: Speeches by Sandinista Leaders*, ed. Bruce Marcus (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1985), 13-27.



the material basis for racism could be destroyed.<sup>55</sup> In working toward this goal, the revolutionary state had adopted a policy of anti-imperialism. Sandinista ideas of independent economic development, free from the imposition of foreign interests, were exemplified by government measures, such as the nationalization of the mines and natural resources on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua. The government implemented agrarian reform on the Pacific Coast and extended credit to small scale producers, nationalized the banking system, and oriented the economy toward workers' needs. In the political realm, the revolutionary government tried to project Sandinismo as something going beyond the interests of the revolutionary state by giving it the form of a "national" struggle. Consequently, Sandinista leaders resorted to a "war of position," and convinced the masses, especially peasants, that their political program was designed to improve their living conditions. Sandinistas intertwined political and ideological questions with cultural issues by associating the structural "underdevelopment" of the agrarian economy with the cultural "backwardness" of the peasantry—its localism, immobility, resistance to change, and subjection to a variety of capitalist forms of domination.<sup>56</sup>

Daniel Ortega and Tomás Borge argued that the Somoza regime was illegitimate because it stood for a form of economic exploitation of the nation. The revolutionary government was legitimate because it represented the legitimate form of exercise of power, and was a necessary condition for national development.<sup>57</sup> In other words, the economic critique of imperialism and a developmental ideology became constituent parts of the self-definition of the revolutionary state.<sup>58</sup> Thus, by claiming to represent the "national-popular" and directly entering the domain of production as a manager of economic resources, the revolutionary state tried to establish its hegemony. In this way, the economic dimension of marxist analyses emerged as the master narrative of the revolutionary state.

It was "accountability" that determined the attitude of the new revolutionary state's leadership towards the masses. This feeling of responsibility was mediated by a whole series of concepts, scientific, and theoretical, about politics and the state, about principles of political organization, about relations between leaders and the masses in political movements, about strategies and tactics. The masses had to be "represented," and the leaders "acted on their behalf and in their true interests." Thus Sandinismo constituted itself into a state ideology by transforming the life of the nation into the life of the state.

Sandinistas argued that the revolutionary state, unlike the Somoza government, connected the sovereign powers of the state directly with the economic welfare of the people. Under the Somoza regime, people were able to choose their political representatives, but this did not guarantee their economic welfare because the state did not act in the interests of the people. Such an argument concerning representativeness and legitimacy later produced contradictory implications for Sandinista state policy. The contradiction stemmed from the very manner in

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<sup>55</sup> Tomás Borge, "Te Cumplimos Carlos: Aquí Está Tu Clase Obrera," May Day Speech, 1 May 1982, in *Sandinistas: Key Documents/Documentos Claves*, ed. Dennis Gilbert and David Block (Ithaca: Latin American Studies Center, Cornell University, 1990), 314-322.

<sup>56</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

<sup>57</sup> Tomás Borge, "The New Education in the New Nicaragua," speech given at the 1983 meeting of the National Association of Nicaraguan Educators (ANDEN) in February 1983, in *Nicaragua, the Sandinista People's Revolution: Speeches by Sandinista Leaders*, ed. Bruce Marcus (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1985), 70-85.

<sup>58</sup> Tomás Borge, *Los Primeros Pasos: La Revolución Popular Sandinista* (Mexico: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1981), 236-243.

which the Sandinistas envisioned their state as the principal vehicle for the national development. For the revolutionary government, “development” implied a linear path, directed toward a series of goals. It implied the fixing of priorities between long-term and short-term goals and conscious choices between alternative paths. As a process affecting the whole of society, it was understood particular interests needed to be made consistent with the revolutionary interest. Thus, it was within this ideological framework that the Sandinistas created MISURASATA as a grassroots organization to represent the concerns and demands of ethnic groups on the Atlantic Coast.

### Locating and Problematizing Nationalist Narratives

In narratives, as in politics, one of the most significant aspects of Sandinista self-projection was its representation of the peoples of the Atlantic Coast, especially Miskitus who did not participate in the overthrow of the Somoza regime. Miskitu actions too were interpreted from the perspective of revolutionary nationalism, and nationalist vocabulary marked the differences between Miskitus of the Atlantic Coast and Mestizos of the Pacific region. Postcolonial and Postmodern theorists offer some useful starting points to situate nationalist narratives by examining their historical location and the importance of cultural representations. To understand more fully what lay behind revolutionary perceptions of Miskitus, we need to place those representations in historical perspective because Sandinista classifications of difference and cultural superiority lead back to classical Marxist theory. Consider the following excerpt from Tomás Borge’s speech:

It is very difficult to fight against backwardness, and this is an extremely backward zone. The Revolution is making extraordinary efforts: for the first time in history, and in less than two years, they have made them a road, which communicated them with the rest of the country. If you look at a map, you will notice that practically-speaking, it is another country, another geography, other customs. They don’t speak Spanish there, but Miskito or English. They were always marginated. They were always a kind of colony of the Pacific region. We are decolonizing them. So we are taking roads to them, telephones, medical care, literacy, television, but two years is a very short time in which to overcome the prejudices, the religious fanaticism, the ignorance, the apathy of centuries. They feel as though they have lived within a separate civilization. So, the Revolution arrives and they believe that is attacking their civilization; they are afraid that we will put an end to their national traditions. Of course, the Revolution has no intention of doing this, rather the contrary: in conserving their language and also incorporating Spanish, certainly; to preserve their songs, their dances, their traditions. It is logical that the Revolution seeks to preserve it as a cultural wealth for the country. But they are fearful that the Revolution attacks their own backward civil life and they adopt a defensive attitude. But it has advanced a lot; and things have changed, have improved; and the problems are not so acute, because we have been very careful and generous, because they have murdered our people, and we have pardoned those same assassins, having kept in mind the origin of the whole situation, of the whole problem.<sup>59</sup>

What is being dramatized in Tomás Borge’s speech is a separation—between races, cultures, and histories—a separation between “before” and “after” the revolution. My intention is not to undermine the importance of economic factors or the revolutionary government’s argument about imperialist exploitation of the masses. Rather, my principal aim is to show how economic

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<sup>59</sup> Tomás Borge, “It is Very Difficult to Fight Backwardness,” in *National Revolution and Indigenous Identity: The Conflict Between Sandinistas and Miskito Indians on Nicaragua’s Atlantic Coast*, ed. Klaudine Ohland and Robin Schneider (Copenhagen: IWGIA, 1983), 189-192.

planning became an instrument of Sandinista politics.<sup>60</sup> My argument is that this discourse of separation and difference, which denied Miskitus the capacity of self-government or revolutionary modes of civility, eventually helped the revolutionaries to establish their hegemony on the Atlantic Coast. The construction of Miskitus as a population of degenerate types on the basis of cultural traditions seemed to justify the revolutionary government's systems of administration. Therefore, despite the populist goals of the revolution, which was crucial to its existence of power, revolutionary discourse represented the Atlantic Coast as a social reality which was at once an "other" and yet entirely knowable and visible.

It is ironical that Sandinismo produced a discourse in which, even as it challenged U.S. imperialism and economic domination, the revolutionary government created and used economic and cultural dichotomies to establish their hegemony on the Atlantic Coast. For example, Sandinista narratives of modern medicine, public health, and personal hygiene claimed that control of disease was carried out entirely for the benefit of Amerindians on the Atlantic Coast. But it was through the establishment of health care centers and educational institutions that the culture of the revolutionaries was celebrated as superior. In this way, those who participated in the revolutionary project were named "integrated," while those who resisted were named "marginal" or "backward."<sup>61</sup>

In this context, Edward Said's analysis of European discourses, which constituted the "Orient" as a unified racial, geographical, political, and cultural zone, is relevant to my analysis of Sandinista revolutionary discourse:

I myself believe that Orientalism is more particularly valuable as a sign of European-Atlantic power over the Orient than it is as a veridic discourse about the Orient (which is what, in its academic or scholarly form, it claims to be). Nevertheless, what we must respect and try to grasp is the sheer knitted-together strength of Orientalist discourse, its very close ties to the enabling socio-economic and political institutions, and its redoubtable durability. After all, any system of ideas that can remain unchanged as teachable wisdom (in academies, books, congresses, universities, foreign-service institutes) from the period of Ernest Renan in the late 1840s until the present in the United States must be something more formidable than a mere collection of lies. Orientalism, therefore, is not an airy European fantasy about the Orient, but a created body of theory and practice in which, for many generations, there has been a considerable material investment. Continued investment made Orientalism, as a system of knowledge about the Orient, an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness, just as that same investment multiplied—indeed, made truly productive—the statements proliferating out from Orientalism into the general culture.<sup>62</sup>

My main point is that racist stereotypical representations of Miskitus in nationalist discourses inscribed a form of "governmentality" in which "ideological" space functioned in collaborative ways with political and economic exigencies.<sup>63</sup> Sandinistas viewed Miskitu culture as the cause and the effect of British colonialism and U.S. imperialism. The Sandinista discourse of economic development portrayed Miskitus as "backward" peoples, and they claimed that this "problem" could be resolved through their economic development programs, such as literacy campaigns, birth control, basic needs, and rural development projects. By redefining the legal relationship of

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<sup>60</sup> Chapter four discusses why it was necessary for the Sandinistas to devise such a modality of power that could operate both inside and outside the political structure constructed by the revolutionary state.

<sup>61</sup> See Ranajit Guha, "The Small Voice of History," *Subaltern Studies* 9 (1996): 1-12.

<sup>62</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 6.

<sup>63</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

Miskitus and the nation-state to natural resources and land, Sandinistas institutionalized of a set of dualities: men's hegemony over women, and Mestizos over Amerindians.<sup>64</sup>

In *The Wretched of the Earth* Frantz Fanon discussed the problems of subaltern representation in nationalist narratives.<sup>65</sup> Instead of historicizing events, he focused on the time of cultural representation by exploring the space of the nation without immediately identifying it with the history of nationalist movements. Fanon's critique of the fixed and stable forms of the nationalist narrative makes it imperative to question theories of "national" cultures. Fanon's critique forces us to rethink the question of community and stereotypes of minority groups. In *Black Skins, White Masks* he despairs, "the Negro remains a Negro... For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man."<sup>66</sup> In other words, the Negro's race becomes the ineradicable sign of "negative difference" in colonial discourses because the stereotype impedes the articulation of the signifier of "race" as anything other than its fixity as racism. This explains why a number of ethnocentric Europeans believe all Negroes are licentious or all Asians are duplicitous. In keeping with Fanon's argument, I would argue that Miskitu stereotypes in revolutionary discourses were also points of subjectification. The Miskitu stereotype was a fixated form of representation because it denied Miskitus agency and cultural identity.

### Concluding Remarks

A study of nationalist ideologies and narratives of the revolution from a subaltern perspective shows that there is a great disjuncture between the Sandinista history of the revolution and the Miskitu history of the Atlantic Coast. Although, both Sandinistas and Miskitus reconstructed their histories in the form of a collage made up of fragments of cultural memory, Miskitu narratives of never assumed the sovereignty of a single state. In fact, they raised doubts about the singularity of a history of Nicaragua and questioned the concept of a national identity.<sup>67</sup>

Sandinistas and Miskitus presented conflicting definitions of land rights, which rested on two irreconcilable historical narratives. On the one hand, MISURTASATA leaders claimed that Indian "nations" had existed "from time immemorial" and that Miskitus had maintained enduring spiritual and economic ties to their land. On the other hand, Sandinista narratives revolved around a sovereign nation-state. The question is: can these two competing forms of history—one, a history of the revolution revolving around Sandino and revolutionary nationalism, and the other of Amerindian rights—coexist? And, if we find many such challenging histories for the different regions of Nicaragua, then should the center of the revolution in Nicaragua remain confined to Sandino and the Sandinistas? The question is not one of "national" and "regional" histories, but about the nature of the relation between parts and the whole.

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<sup>64</sup> Ileana Rodríguez, *House/Garden/Nation: Space, Gender, and Ethnicity in Postcolonial Latin American Literatures by Women* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 15.

<sup>65</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963).

<sup>66</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, 110.

<sup>67</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 113-115.