

# NICARAGUA: A REVOLUTION THAT FELL FROM THE GRACE OF THE PEOPLE

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for Anna

## *1. Facts and perceptions*

The Sandinista Revolution inspired an abundant literature — although its quality was uneven. Analyses employing social science research methods and aspiring to reach a balanced view, stood side by side with texts that stressed the need for solidarity with a country suffering brutal aggression from the United States. The opening of Nicaragua's frontiers to anyone who wanted to come and see things for themselves created a situation in which thousands of people paid short visits and produced innumerable articles, pamphlets and books. Even academics with no direct knowledge of the revolution assumed their right to make assertions about the Sandinista revolution, its achievements and its limitations, on the basis of general ideas and *a priori* schemes.<sup>1</sup> But quantity did not signify quality, and often the pressure of solidarity, or the desire to figure in the bibliography on the subject, inhibited a more realistic and objective analysis of an extremely complex process plagued with specific problems as all revolutionary processes are.

The coincidence in time of the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas with the collapse of state socialism in Eastern Europe and the crisis in the Soviet Union allowed some to address the Nicaraguan events in terms of the same framework of meanings or at least as part of the same universal progress towards democracy<sup>2</sup> — a view that was ultimately supported by the self-serving discourse of some Sandinista leaders. Nevertheless, any observer who has been able to rise above the waves of opportunism and crude thinking that course through the majority of analyses of the problems of the current period will see that the two situations are entirely different. Apart from attempts to establish commercial, diplomatic and cultural relations with the countries of Comecon, there is nothing in the present or the recent past of Nicaragua — whether in its socio-economic structure, its political processes, the configuration of its social classes or its popular culture — that bears any relation to "actually existing socialism". In any event, the notion that Nicaragua had embarked on a "transition to socialism" was always a questionable hypothesis.<sup>3</sup>

The reasons for the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas have been discussed by the FSLN itself<sup>4</sup> as well as by other observers and analysts.<sup>5</sup> Their documents have addressed the multiplicity of factors that affected the election results, and which derive as much from the specific features of these elections and the conditions under which they took place as from their immediate national and international socio-economic and political context and the effects of nearly a decade of counterrevolutionary aggression.

I do not intend, in this essay to rehearse those issues again; instead I want to address some broader aspects of the revolutionary process in Nicaragua, aspects which had begun to make themselves felt long before the elections of 1990, and which in fact conditioned the circumstances in which voting took place. I would stress in particular the fact that by the mid-1980s the revolution became bogged down in ways which I have discussed in earlier writings.<sup>6</sup> This was intimately connected with the war and the regional economic crisis, but also with the way in which both were dealt with by the leaders of the revolution. For they gave priority to strengthening alliances with employers' and landowners' groups at the expense of the organisational independence of the working masses, workers and peasants, and maintenance of their living standards. It was these sectors who bore the brunt of the war effort, both in terms of physical participation in the conflict, and of paying its socio-economic costs. There was not an equal distribution of effort across the whole of society — as the Sandinista leaders themselves acknowledged.<sup>7</sup>

The war and the confrontation with the United States government were taken out of their socio-political and ultimately class context, which had been explicitly recognised during the early years of the revolutionary process; Sandinista perspectives relegated social transformations and the central role of the masses to a secondary level.<sup>8</sup> In these circumstances, it became increasingly difficult for people to perceive the popular content of the political project which was the target of the counterrevolutionary assault. Even more importantly, the preference given by the government to reaching agreements with employers' groups and the international community, together with the unequal distribution of rewards and sacrifices between the elites and the masses, contributed to the dilution of many aspects of the popular democratic project that had defined the early measures of the revolutionary regime. In 1984, the FSLN won the elections despite the high intensity counterrevolutionary war, because there was a high intensity revolution under way which left no doubt as to what was at stake; in 1990 the elections were lost despite the fact that the armed conflict had diminished, for the revolution too had drawn back from the intensity of earlier years.

As the political and in particular the class content of the anti-imperialist struggle became less and less visible, that struggle was increasingly transformed into a conflict between governments sustained by the sacrifices of the masses — the dead, the wounded, the communities forced to resettle in new locations, the families divided against themselves —. Under these conditions, popular criticism of concrete aspects of government policy and of the behaviour of government bureaucrats, together with demands for an end to the war, coincided more closely with the political discourse of the opposition and were ultimately translated into votes against the Sandinistas. In the context of an increasing demobilization of the masses, the gulf between the rhetoric of the highest levels of the Sandinista government, who kept up a resounding anti-American rhetoric and continued to affirm the socialist direction of the revolution, and the content and actual achievements of government strategies and policies became an abyss.<sup>8</sup> The rhetoric reached the outside world and had an impact on the international scene, but the real character of the policies had its effect within the country. The gulf between the two helps to explain the high level of external solidarity which the Sandinista government enjoyed right up to the end, while a significant part of its internal support had been eroded. The surprise of many of the actors and the external observers at the electoral defeat of February 25th 1990 derives in large part from this divorce between reality and perception.

## *2. National liberation, democracy and social transformation*

The Sandinista experience is testimony to the enormous difficulties faced by democratic and national liberation revolutions in peripheral, poor and backward countries, of passing from an antidictatorial phase based on broad alliances, to a phase of deep social and political transformations. The second phase involves a redefinition in popular class terms of the direction of the revolutionary process; it is a transition in which there is a close correspondence between the popular effort that is decisive in ensuring the political victory and the maintenance of the revolution, and the content and perspectives of the policies promoted by the revolutionary regime. These difficulties arise first and foremost from the structural characteristics of such societies, but also from the way in which they are addressed by the political organisations leading the process of change.

The principal factor is the particular class structure that has arisen in the underdeveloped capitalism of Central America. The **polarisation** of bourgeoisie and proletariat occurring in developed capitalism is weak in the agrarian societies of Central America, and the social structure is dominated by a large and highly differentiated mass of

peasants, indigenous communities, seasonal labourers, and the urban petty bourgeoisie. The contradiction between the development of the productive forces and the structure of the relations of production which in **Marx's** view produced the conditions for the development of social revolutions is of little relevance to the majority of Central American societies. In any event, their revolutionary potentiality does not refer to the overcoming of capitalism, but rather to different modes of capitalist development and modernization. Furthermore, the contradiction previously referred to is articulated with others that do not necessarily arise in the sphere of production: the question of national liberation, for example, or the struggle to establish a democratic order.<sup>10</sup>

In these societies the working class is small, has little experience of organization, is still developing and continues to maintain strong links with the peasantry and the artisans; to say the very least, their capacity to lead the process of social transformation is problematic. In the context of the revolution the working class progressively gains political maturity, but this process occurs within the framework of alliances and conflicts with other groups and fractions that dispute their leadership of that process, though from an equally fragile position. The initial multiclass character of these revolutionary processes, based on the demand for democracy and national liberation, and the close articulation of democratic struggles with projects for structural transformation and a new relationship with the external world, turn the revolution into a theatre of internal tensions and confrontations between the social groups who participated in the struggle against the dictatorship.

In such conditions, the extension of democracy into the field of socio-economic relations and access to resources produces major tensions, aggravated by the vulnerability that is the result at a number of levels of backwardness and underdevelopment. The reciprocal weakness of the groups in conflict tends to generate a style of political leadership relatively separate from the direct social actors. The "vanguard" presents itself as the administrator of the interests of the popular classes until such time as they reach maturity; but in practice they take on the political role attributed to the fundamental social actors. The situation moves from one of leadership as representation to leadership as substitution. It is usually sectors of the urban petty bourgeoisie who assume that role, but in societies as backward as those of Central America, it is not uncommon to find elements of the bourgeoisie deeply embedded in organizations committed to social transformation and seeking to impose their perspectives and conceptions from within the camp of the revolution and the state.

To pass from a perspective that limits the revolution to the

substitution of one government by another by non-institutional means, to one that looks to transformations in the class relations of political and economic power means that the struggle for democracy must penetrate the very social structure, with a consequent intensification of conflict between groups and sectors that had all participated in the revolution. The alliances that made a revolutionary victory possible later conspired against its progress towards more advanced stages of political and economic change. This combination of factors imposed on the revolution a slow and generally protracted development through time."

On the other hand the global backwardness of the society, its low level of technology, the organizational inexperience of the workers and peasants, the monopoly of scientific and technical knowledge by small segments of the dominant classes, further called into question viability of alternative development strategies based on broad popular participation. You learn to participate by participating, but the process itself demands additional effort, overtime working, sleepless nights. Learning to participate is a slow business, and requires disposable time, a rare commodity given the urgent tasks imposed by increasing international tensions and above all the counter-revolutionary war. This often leads in its turn to an accelerated centralization of decision-making and a sharp separation between the leadership — where the presence of petty bourgeois and bourgeois elements may be particularly significant — and the masses, thus reproducing within the revolutionary camp a hierarchy of those who make decisions and those who carry them out.<sup>12</sup>

The second issue arises from changes in the international context of the Sandinista revolution. The victory of the FSLN in 1979 occurred in favourable external circumstances which gave the revolutionary regime broad and flexible economic and financial co-operation. As the pressures from the US government grew more intense, Nicaragua found strategic support for their programmes of social and economic transformation in the aid it received from the USSR, Cuba and other Comecon countries. Soviet military assistance provided the Sandinista army with material supplies which made a major contribution to the victory over the counterrevolution. When Mexico and Venezuela stopped supplying Nicaragua with oil, the USSR filled the gap.

The situation changed from 1987-88 onwards. The economic difficulties of the countries of Eastern Europe and the negotiations between the US and the USSR reduced the flow and the quantity of supplies, including military aid and the supply of oil. Finally the USSR decided to accept the North American strategy for a solution to the regional crisis which implied, among other things, the reentry of

the "contras" into the Nicaraguan political scene and an end to the military activities of the Salvadorean guerrillas. On his visit to Nicaragua in October 1989, the Soviet foreign minister stressed the interest of the USSR in carrying out "bilateral monitoring" of the Central American crisis jointly with the United States.<sup>13</sup> At the end of the eighties the international space for processes of radical political and economic transformation in Central America was shrinking; in such conditions it was unlikely that the Sandinistas would return to their revolutionary perspectives of a decade earlier.

### 3. *Alliances, policies and tensions*

The FSLN believed that the struggle against the Somoza dictatorship would lead to profound transformations in property and power relations and in the articulation of new relations in the international system. Such a conception involved, among other things, a modification of the social and political alliances which had been the basis of the struggle against the dictatorship. It is clear that not all the groups and sectors who joined in that phase of the revolution were prepared to move from confrontation with the Somoza dictatorship to confrontation with the landowners and industrialists on whom the dictatorship had rested; nor did they share the FSLN's view of relations with the United States, the USSR, Europe or Cuba.

The early suspension of the revolutionary decrees providing for the nationalization of properties owned by the Somozas underlined how limited the anti-Somoza phase of the revolution had been, and how difficult it would be to pass from a simply institutional perception of the dictatorship to a socio-political one. It also demonstrated how far elements of the bourgeoisie, including many of those who had joined the struggle against the Somozas, had been involved with the dictatorship that the popular masses had just overthrown.<sup>14</sup> In this situation, a class perspective entailed high political costs, insofar as widening the confrontation with the Somoza dictatorship would threaten the social alliances that had provided the base for the final stages of the insurrectional struggle led by the Sandinistas.

The mounting conflict with the US government from 1981 onwards gave priority to the anti-imperialist, national liberation dimension of the revolution, but from a fundamentally defensive position. Without wishing to minimise the importance of the growing external articulations of the Sandinista regime with the USSR, Cuba and Comecon, and the practice of an active non-alignment, there is no doubt that defence against the counterrevolutionary war sponsored by the North American government became the central axis of an anti-imperialist project designed to ensure the survival of Nicaragua as an independent country; and this defence was to be conducted *on the basis of the*

social structure obtaining at that time, rather than by further transforming the socio-economic structure of the country in the interests of the masses, hitting the local bourgeoisie and projecting the struggle for democracy beyond the conventional political framework — as was the case, for example, with the transition to socialism in Cuba.<sup>15</sup>

From 1984 onwards the Sandinista regime responded to the intensification of economic and military aggression by seeking to widen the social alliances on which it based itself, by including in the alliance those elements of the agrarian, industrial and commercial bourgeoisie who had remained in the country, and who opposed many of the revolutionary policies aimed at achieving socio-economic transformations. One has to recognise the relative success of this strategy in terms of the ability of the Sandinista regime to sustain a wide network of international relations which enabled them to resist the assaults of the United States. Not only did it prove impossible to isolate Nicaragua from the Western hemisphere, as it once had been possible with Cuba; on the contrary, Sandinista diplomacy succeeded in isolating the United States over its aggression against Nicaragua.

Nevertheless, the specific policies that financed the broad internal alliances diluted the popular content of the revolutionary project and led many people to reduce their level of participation in the revolutionary process and in national defence. National unity with the bourgeoisie was encouraged by slow progress in agrarian reform, by an unequal distribution of incentives and bonuses, and by a pronounced bias of sacrifice towards the peasants and workers. In the context of a growing contraction of the economy, new incentives were offered to the middle sectors and the employers, and carried through at the cost of a decline in the wages and working and living conditions of the masses, a greater administrative centralization and increasing bureaucratic control over the popular organizations.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, the maintenance of a network of broad international alliances flowing from the principle of non-alignment, but based too on a redrawn internal alliance, forced the Sandinista regime, especially after 1987, to make a series of political concessions to the right wing internally — for example the wide-ranging amnesty for members of Somoza's army and of the counterrevolutionary forces who had been sentenced for acts of terrorism and violations of human rights. This contributed to a perceptible reduction in the level of military conflict, but also flew in the face of the projected socio-economic transformations and broad popular participation.

The restrictions arising from the crisis, and the policies developed by the government in response to it, together with the concessions to the right, created in their turn a difficult situation for the Sandinista mass organizations and above all for the workers and peasants

movement. The revolutionary transformations were slowed down or frozen, the possibilities for winning economic demands were dramatically reduced, centralization and the limitations placed on popular participation were increased. The space available to the opposition organizations consequently grew, not only because they had at their disposal financial resources coming from outside the country, but also because the Sandinista organizations proved incapable of asserting their relative autonomy from the political leadership of the state, while their demands and criticisms found little resonance in the Sandinista political leadership.

The new perspectives and policies of the Sandinistas were facilitated by the multiclass character of the FSLN. The Sandinista Revolution was a revolution of workers, peasants, semiproletarians, petty bourgeois youth, the poor of country and city; but it was also a revolution which, for reasons which I have dealt with *elsewhere*,<sup>17</sup> was joined shortly before 1979 by important sectors of the old conservative agrarian and commercial bourgeoisie who were opposed to Somoza. The relationship between the FSLN and the bourgeoisie, therefore, was not exclusively an external one, for sectors of the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie formed part of the FSLN even before the fall of Somoza. The weight of these sectors was consolidated by their role in the apparatus of the revolutionary state; they were particularly significant in the design and execution of agricultural and financial policies and in the mode of articulation of the mass organizations with government agencies. From 1987-88 onwards their influence grew in almost all areas of state administration and government political discourse.

At the same time, it was increasingly obvious that a kind of Sandinista new bourgeoisie was emerging, embracing bureaucrats and leaders who, as a result of their long exercise of public office and in the absence of any institutional controls, were able to accumulate and rapidly enrich themselves. The issue was addressed from a moral point of view and under the heading of corruption. But independently of the ethical issues, what was happening was the formation of sectors of the bourgeoisie who are found everywhere in Latin America and indeed throughout the capitalist world at certain stages of its development — a patrimonial exercise of political power whose explanation gains more from Max Weber than from Karl Marx. The Sandinistas were not responsible for the restrictions on access to information and resources, nor for the persistence of clientilistic styles of exercising power — they were deeply rooted in Nicaraguan political traditions and culture — but they did contribute to reproducing them, opening the way to the formation of capitals and enterprises and to a rapid social mobility which was in stark contrast to the austerity and

probity of many other activists, leaders and functionaries, and above all to the hard life of the masses.

After the elections of November 1984 and as soon as the Presidency of Daniel Ortega was under way, the Sandinista government decided to confront the increasing economic decline by recourse to a conventional programme of monetary adjustment (9th February 1985). The attempt was frustrated by a recognition of the negative impact that a programme of this type would have on the mass base of the revolution at a time when the war was intensifying and it was the masses who had to bear the direct and indirect costs of defence. Nevertheless the strategy of broad alliances blocked any possibility of carrying through any economic adjustment which might impose burdens on the most backward sectors of the bourgeoisie. The result of these reciprocal tensions and blockages, in the context of a dramatic increase in the intensity of military conflict, was a sudden collapse of the economy, and the beginning of a traumatic phase in which it moved beyond all control.

At the same time the need to develop a political strategy that coincided with the military effort, produced in mid-1985 a new direction in government policies, adapting them to the actual contours of the Nicaraguan social map and to the demands of the rural masses. The insistence of the FSLN cadres on these changes, in defiance of the rigid technocrats of the state, made possible this shift in government policy. The agrarian reform was redrafted to correspond more closely to the demands of the peasantry; land distribution was speeded up. On the Atlantic Coast, populated by ethnic minorities who had confronted the revolutionary regime at an early stage, a plan for regional autonomy was set in motion, creating an atmosphere conducive to peace and encouraging the armed groups to lay down their weapons.<sup>18</sup> The redirection and acceleration of agrarian reform emphasised the popular character of the political project which the counter-revolution had set out to destroy, and in whose defence the peasants and rural workers had been the first to be mobilized. This introduced tensions into the alliance with the big landowners and middle farmers, but it was a risk that the government took in order to consolidate the internal front in the war against the counterrevolution.

This change of direction in the conceptions and strategies for development and defence bore fruit. The defeat of the counter-revolution on the battlefronts was the result both of the military effort and of these redrawn government policies. Nonetheless, it was a tactical turn and it was **abandoned** as soon as the war ended with the ceasefire agreements of March 1988. A few months later the Sandinista government decided to confront the crisis with a crude programme of monetary adjustment which produced its usual effects

— unemployment, reduction of basic consumption, recession, deterioration of living standards etc. — effects which were borne by the very people who had sacrificed themselves for the war effort throughout the decade.<sup>11</sup>

Real wages, which were already falling, now plummeted; peasant debts to the financial system grew exponentially; basic supplies fell and the redistribution of land was suspended. Simultaneously with these developments, the government redoubled its efforts to reach agreement with the employers within the framework of regional negotiations to resolve the Central American crisis. The Sandinistas put their hopes in agreements with private enterprise to reactivate private investment and win favour with the international economic community. Through generous concessions over incentives, prices, credits, supplies and subsidies, the Sandinistas hoped to win the goodwill of the capitalist groups and, with an eye to the Presidential elections, to compete with the opposition parties for the votes of these groups. The alliance of the FSLN with the peasants and the rural workers, as well as with the urban masses, which they had attempted to reconstitute through the measures adopted from mid-1985 onwards, now underwent dramatic erosion.

To an extent the Sandinistas were trying to rebuild the broad alliance that had fought the Somoza dictatorship ten years earlier. But the conditions were completely different and the resources available dramatically limited. The original version of the alliance had been built on a widespread hegemony and a high level of popular mobilization, on open support from the international community and economic regeneration fuelled by broad external cooperation. Now there was a general demobilization of the people, the international community was exercising pressure from the right, the absence of external finance served to aggravate the prolonged economic recession and the masses were on the defensive.

The bourgeoisie understood that the attempt was proof of the weakness of a regime desperately in need of investments and convertible currency, and seeking international encouragement. As a consequence, it accepted the incentives of economic policy, but it kept a low profile and did not change its political inclinations towards the opposition — if not directly to the counterrevolution. The popular masses, for their part, heavily affected by the policies of economic readjustment, reduced even further their level of participation and mobilization; they were disorientated by a Sandinista rhetoric which was trying to revive the climate of mobilization of the war years when it was clear to everyone that the war was now a thing of the past; the government itself was freeing ex-members of Somoza's National Guard and offering an amnesty to the counterrevolutionaries.

Determined to improve their image abroad, the Sandinistas made a series of significant turns in international policy, the most far-reaching of which took place at the Central American Presidential Summit at San Isidro Coronado, Costa Rica, on December 12th 1989. There Daniel Ortega supported his colleagues in backing the Salvadorean President Alfredo Cristiani and condemning the FMLN and its recent military offensive. The *quid pro quo* was that the other presidents joined in the demand that the "contras" complete their demobilization by the 5th of February 1990 at the latest. It is well known that the demand met no response either from the contras or from the US government, but the repudiation of the FMLN linked Nicaragua with the most conservative positions on the Salvadorean question. Broad sectors of the Nicaraguan population were left disconcerted by Ortega's signature on the San Isidro document. Solidarity with the Salvadorean revolution had been one of the best known positions of Sandinista diplomacy and one of the points of conflict with the United States government. The FMLN rejected the document "with indignation", while the Guatemalan URNG evinced its "dissatisfaction, concern and surprise"; the USSR, by contrast, expressed its satisfaction.<sup>30</sup>

The failure to reconstitute the alliances that had emerged at other stages of the revolutionary process added to the tensions and contradictions arising from the timetable of the shift to the right in the economy and the timetable of the rightward move in the political arena. In June 1988 the Sandinista government launched its first programme of economic adjustment since its failed attempt of February 1985. The absolute lack of short term external financial assistance ensured that its impact on the masses was savage. But the Sandinistas were confident that the initial blow would be followed by beneficial effects, and that from the beginning of 1989 there would be a stage of reactivation of the economy which would consolidate their prospects for the Presidential elections of 1990.

Hurricane Joan, in October 1988, whose effects were disastrous in many areas of the country, obliged the government to alter its financial objectives and to relax its controls over the economy. At the end of January 1989 the government insisted once again on its programme of adjustment; there were still two years left before the elections in which to cure the country's ills, put the economy back on its feet and assuage the negative effects on the masses of the economic programme. But in February of that year, Sandinista diplomacy gave way to international pressure and decided to bring forward the election date to February 1990, cutting the room for manoeuvre for the economists. The FSLN thus came to the elections in the middle of the worst economic situation the country had ever

known, whose ultimate effect was to reverse many of the gains of the early years which had brought with them real improvements in the living standards of the masses: the education system was on the edge of collapse, there was a major crisis in the public health service, unemployment and underemployment were reaching levels of nearly 30%, real wages were worth almost nothing, and there was a major contraction in production. The adjustment programme was very successful in a technical sense; hyperinflation was reduced, the fiscal deficit was drastically cut, exports grew slightly. But the social cost for the masses was enormous.

From this point of view, the fundamental error made by the Sandinistas was to have embarked on a policy of economic adjustment in the latter part of a presidential term. It is not by chance that this type of policy is always carried through in Latin America at the beginning of a period of government, in the hope that after the initial negative impact the situation will improve and the party in government may then aspire to reelection. The Sandinistas on the other hand turned to policies of economic adjustment virtually on the eve of the elections; yet they still hoped for an electoral victory, not just for the FSLN, but for the very Presidential team — Daniel Ortega and Sergio Ramirez — which had introduced the antipopular measures of the previous two years.

These miscalculations had their origin in the wider **problem** of a revolution bogged down in its own tensions and **contradictions**, and operating in an international context of increasing conflict. The project of national liberation and anti-imperialist struggle was reduced in the end to a military confrontation and a defensive struggle with no class basis or correlation. The strategy of national unity and broad alliances was financed by the sacrifices of the masses, yet did not succeed in winning the active support of the bourgeoisie or the better part of the middle classes. In these conditions, the regime's limitations and the extravagance of many of its functionaries became all the more disgraceful in the eyes of the masses, who were themselves increasingly impoverished and disorientated.

The insistence on a type of alliance for which the space no longer existed not only stopped the revolution from advancing in its project for socio-economic and political transformation — it also violated those which had already been achieved. Towards the beginning of 1990, for a significant proportion of those Nicaraguans who had supported or sympathised with the Sandinistas in previous years, there was little left of the revolution.

The incapacity of the Sandinistas to advance beyond the limits of the initial broad alliance of groups and social classes, despite the obvious defection of elements of the bourgeoisie and a major part of

the middle classes, made all the more visible its later compromises with the right and with the international community, the reinforcement of traditional clientilistic and bureaucratic styles of politics, and the increasing influence over government and FSLN decisions of people closely linked to middle and employers sectors. All these factors served to demobilize the masses, without winning the loyalty of the elites or the benevolence of the government of the United States. In fact the weaknesses of the **revolutionary** regime underlined the effectiveness of the White House's policy of aggression and destabilization.

For those who once dreamed of a Red October in Masaya or Esteli, this was Thermidor; for others, it was one more example of Sandinista pragmatism. Some said that the Sandinistas were dismantling the gains of the early part of the revolution; others argued that they were rebuilding at this late stage what they had previously destroyed. These comings and goings, all of which took place out of sight of the masses or above their heads, fuelled the opposition vote of the 25th February. It is not the first time in the history of the Sandinista **Revolution** that the people have expressed their **rejection** of what they regard as the retreats or errors of the government, turning to their enemies or even collaborating with the contras. The peasants of Jinotega and Matagalpa did it in the mid-eighties, and before them it was the Indians and Creoles of the Atlantic Coast. In both these instances, the Sandinistas understood the message and changed their policies in response to popular demands.

In **1990** the contras were militarily defeated and their political leaders had entered the electoral contest; everyone was sick of war and violence and the great mass mobilizations were now a thing of the past. In the **1984** elections, Nicaraguans had a choice between the revolution and the counterrevolution. In **1990** the choice was between the continuation of a regime entangled in its own indecision and whose revolutionary credentials belonged almost entirely to the past, and the promise of peace and prosperity coming from the allies of the White House.

The combination of internal contradictions and external pressures, and their reciprocal articulation provided fertile ground for the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas. It underlines the specific difficulties faced in the current world situation by anti-imperialist and national liberation revolutions in small, underdeveloped societies located in zones under the direct military or political influence of the United States. For reasons I have discussed elsewhere, and which have to do with the mode of constitution of peripheral capitalism and its class structure, rather than with ideological **interpretations**,<sup>21</sup> anti-imperialism and national liberation are essential ingredients of social

revolutions in this type of society.

The experience of 20th century revolutions, with the exceptions of the Russian and the Chinese, are that they were consolidated thanks to the cooperation they received from the socialist bloc. Now that bloc no longer exists, and that cooperation can no longer be called upon. The events in Eastern Europe and the growing understanding between the USA and the USSR on how to manage the Central American crisis hit the Sandinistas at a moment when the revolution was undergoing serious deterioration. It is obvious that the reduction of economic assistance from the beginning of 1989, and the new direction of Soviet diplomacy reduced the FSLN's margin for manoeuvre or at the very least strengthened the arguments of those within the FSLN who were advocating a strategy of less revolution and more negotiation.

The strategy of international negotiation to survive the war and its effects by calling for a low intensity revolution, together with the reconstitution of internal alliances and the projection of an image more acceptable to external interlocutors, had a price — the winding down of the revolution, the inversion of its economic policies and the reversal of many of its social and political advances. The situation was all the more serious because the way that the Sandinistas had chosen to deal with the crisis was already having serious effects on the living standards of the masses. The weakening of the social base of the Sandinistas also restricted the room for movement at their disposal in the face of external pressures, and thus affected the viability of the project for national sovereignty.

The national liberation component of the Sandinista revolution was now more than ever reduced to a rhetoric with no actual correlation in internal or external policies. The discourse of war, which continued beyond the ceasefire agreements and was sustained at the same intensity despite the visible reduction in the level of armed conflict, lost credibility among the masses.

During the final phase of the electoral campaign, the competition for the votes of the middle sectors and the properties classes, gave rise among the masses to an image of the Sandinistas as promising all sorts of concessions to the right and to the outside world in order to hold on to power, yet unable to guarantee, in exchange for these concessions, that the contras would lay down their arms or that the economy would improve. Having defeated the contras militarily, yet unable to dismantle their organization, the Sandinistas opted to confront the US government through a strategy of less revolution; this brought them the raucous applause and the democratic blessing of their enemies, but also ensured their loss of power, as a significant section of the people rejected them at the ballot box.

#### 4. *Transition to counterrevolution, or to popular autonomy?*

The elections of February 25th 1990 placed the government of Nicaragua in the hands of a heterogenous coalition united by a common denominator — their opposition to the Sandinistas. The new government is determined to overturn the institutions and gains of the revolution that were able to survive the doubts and ambiguities of the Sandinistas and the policies they adopted to confront the crisis. The object is to put Nicaragua in the sociopolitical position which it would have occupied in 1978 if Anastasio Somoza had accepted United States pressure and abandoned power in time: a "Somocismo without Somoza" in its most restricted sense. Although there has not been an invasion as there was in Guatemala in 1954 or Grenada in 1983, nor a *coup d'état* as in Chile in 1973, the new government is a counter-revolutionary one, in the literal sense that it is opposed to what the revolution had built. They will dismantle everything that was a product or a consequence of the revolutionary overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship. The substantial difference between the counter-revolutionary project in Nicaragua, and the other cases to which I have referred, does not have to do with the civilian method that was employed, but rather as Fred Halliday so perceptively pointed out, with the fact that unlike Chile, Guatemala or Grenada, in Nicaragua the counterrevolution carried out its **masacres** before rather than after the fall of the popular government.<sup>22</sup>

In these conditions, what then remains of the Sandinista revolution? If we think of it as a socialist revolution, or at least one that had embarked on a transition to socialism, then the reply can only be devastating. If, as I do, we think of the Sandinista revolution as a popular, democratic, anti-imperialist revolution, the response is much more hopeful.

There was an almost universal consensus after the 25th of February in emphasising the democratization of the political process as a great contribution of the Sandinistas in a country where for the first time in its history the opposition came to power by institutional means. The FSLN also shares in this consensus view; indeed it is curious to note the contrast between the insistence of the international sympathisers of the revolution on the extent to which the elections were conditioned by the war, the crisis, the "votes with arms in the air", the "blackmail from Washington" etc., with the often self-satisfied discourse of many Sandinista leaders.<sup>23</sup> If we are to speak sensibly of democratization, we should look at what is actually happening in Nicaragua, where the revenge of the bosses and the (ex?)supporters of Somoza is the first item on the agenda, and where the peasants, the workers, the rural and urban poor (and their numbers are constantly increasing) are being beaten by right wing

gangs, expelled from their land, dismissed from their jobs, left hungry by the economic policies, and subjected to a climate of daily violence which degrades their lives and revives old hatreds. What has this to do with democracy?

Before we can speak of democracy, we shall have to wait until **1996** and see whether, if the FSLN win the elections, the present government does agree democratically to yield power and acknowledge that victory. Doubts persist, however, in a region where the forces of the Right have always violated the rules of the game of institutional politics whenever the popular masses, accepting those institutions, have threatened to increase their social and political influence.

Clearly, many of the socio-economic achievements of the revolution, which had been considered irreversible, are now being turned back by the new government: job security, basic levels of consumption, which had been considered irreversible, are now being turned back by the new government: job security, basic levels of **consump-** were already in reverse for reasons that I have discussed earlier.

What remains intact, however, is what in my view is the most important contribution of the Sandinista revolution — the popular organizations. The great achievements of the revolution rested on those organizations: the awareness of the political effectiveness of direct popular participation, the reconstruction of the economy, the social development of the early years, the defence of the peasantry against the counterrevolution, overcoming the difficulties created by the lack of spare parts and the embargo on supplies, the militant anti-imperialism without which there can be neither revolution nor democracy nor development nor homeland. These popular organizations, reborn out of the fall of the Sandinista government, in the midst of the vengeance and the wild desire to restore everything to the way it was before on the part of the bosses and the landlords, the bankers and the oligarchs, is the richest inheritance of a traumatic decade of revolution, crisis and war. Those popular organizations are the guarantee that the hope for a life of dignity will remain alive at the enduring heart of Nicaragua, and that that hope will flower again with the same strength and certainty with which the barricades and trenches reappeared during the strikes of July **1990**. Those organizations above all are the guarantee of the authentic autonomy of the popular forces in the struggle for national dignity and social transformation.

Notwithstanding their predominantly defensive character, the combativity of the popular organizations and in particular of the workers today contrasts with their passivity of previous years and contradicts the strategy of negotiation and compromise with the new government to which the highest level of political leadership of the Sandinistas remains devoted. At a time of deep tensions and internal

confrontations within the FSLN, the mass organizations and above all the trade union movement have assumed the leadership of the popular opposition and the defence of what remains of the revolution. If the policies of agrarian counter-reform and the dismantling of the social area of the economy have not been allowed to progress at the pace envisaged by the new government, that is above all due to the combativity of those organizations.

The popular demonstrations and the contending strategies for relating to the new government point to the unfolding of a process of progressive differentiation between the popular and trade union organizations and the FSLN as a political party. It is as if the fall of the government of Daniel Ortega had detonated an explosion of energies and initiatives of social struggle hitherto suffocated by its strategic shift to the right and by its bureaucratization. The same situation is occurring in intellectual circles and within the mass media, with a profusion of newspapers, radio stations, weekly magazines, information bulletins, debates and circulation of news and ideas that contrasts with the general experience of previous years. The reactivation of the popular movement can also be seen reflected within the party structures of the FSLN itself, in a process of renewal of leaders from below in which few of yesterday's leaders have escaped the sanction of the people's criticisms and the people's vote.

The contrast between the negotiating posture of the highest leaders of the FSLN and the combativity of the masses and the trade union leaders points ahead to a developing differentiation between the FSLN as a political party and the popular and working class movement. This does not mean, for the moment or in the near future, that the movement will lose its Sandinista character; but it does mean a growing autonomy from the party's political leadership and thus a change in the relationship that has existed in the past between the party and the movement. The top-down character of many aspects of the relationship FSLN/mass organizations up to February 1990 is now being rejected and replaced by a politics of negotiation between the Sandinista political leadership and the popular movement in the context of conflicts in which the terms of agreement are defined above all by the struggles of the masses.

It is difficult to imagine that this combativity will be able to substantially modify the dominant tendencies within the highest levels of leadership of the FSLN until that leadership also feels the winds of change upon it; the shift to the right of the Sandinistas has been going on for a long time and it has an inertia which makes it unlikely that it will change in any significant way in the immediate future. The lack of an alternative strategy with which to face the crisis, in particular, encourages caution among the political leadership of the FSLN and

further underlines their ambivalence towards the popular protests. The Sandinistas need to preserve the political leadership of the popular movements if they are to keep their base and their role as chief interlocutor with the government; but they also need to control the intensity and spread of the mass protests in order to guarantee a minimum stability for the government. For if it fell, the threat of direct US intervention would again arise; at the very least it would force the leadership of the FSLN to take the risk of offering some concrete proposals in response to a chaotic socio-economic situation.

It is still unclear how the current conflicts and tensions will unfold. What is clear is that Nicaragua after the elections of February 25th 1990 is quite unlike Nicaragua prior to the Sandinista assumption of power on July 19th 1979. The difference is above all the consequence of popular struggles and the demands they have pursued. It is this which constitutes the sharp difference from the events of Eastern Europe.

One could say of revolutions what young Adso, the protagonist of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* said of his ephemeral and anonymous lover, who was "as beautiful and terrible as an army prepared for battle". Revolutions are beautiful and seductive, because they express what is best and most noble in human beings; the limitless capacity for solidarity and sacrifice to build a life more worth living. But they are also terrible because together with these heights of altruism and generosity, there are moments of incredible meanness and small-mindedness, and the great achievements mingle with the most monstrous errors.

But when they are real, revolutions are not ephemeral. Even if they fail, or experience reverses, nothing returns to the way it was. And they are not anonymous; they have the face of the people and they bear the name of their aspirations.

## NOTES

1. See for example James Petras, "La derrota electoral de los sandinistas: reflexiones críticas" in *El Gallo Ilustrado*, Mexico, April 8th 1990.
2. See for example Jorge Castaneda, "Latin America and the end of cold war" in *World Policy Journal*, Summer, 1990.
3. Carlos M. Vilas: *The Sandinista revolution*: Monthly Review Press, New York, 1986; (hereafter Vilas 1986).
4. See *Resoluciones de la Asamblea Nacional de Militantes del FSLN en El Crucero, Departamento de Managua*, Managua, 17th June 1990.
5. See C. M. Vilas, "La contribución de la política económica a la caída del sandinismo" in *Crítica*, Managua, no. 2, July 1990, pp. 34-42; and "Nicaragua, what went wrong?" in *NACLA Report on the Americas*, XXIV (1), July 1990, pp. 10-18.
6. For example in "Unidad nacional y contradicciones sociales en una economía mixta: Nicaragua 1979-84" in R. Harris and Carlos M. Vilas (eds.): *La*

- revolución en Nicaragua*: ERA, Medico, 1985, pp. 17-50. "Nicaragua: the fifth year. Contradictions and tensions in the economy" in *Capital and Class*, 28, Spring 1986, pp. 105-138; *Transición desde el subdesarrollo*; Nueva Sociedad, Caracas, 1989; (hereafter Vilas 1989), chapters III, IV and VI.
7. See for example the speech by President Daniel Ortega published in *Barricada*, February 1st 1989.
  8. On the increasing rundown of mass participation and their progressive subordination to the state apparatus see Marvin Ortega: "Workers' participation in the management of the agro-enterprises of the APP", in *Latin American Perspectives*, 45, Spring 1985, pp. 69-81; C. M. Vilas: "The mass organizations in Nicaragua: the current problematic and perspectives for the future" in *Monthly Review*, 38 (6), November 1986, pp. 20-31; Luis Serra, "Limitada por la guerra, pendiente al futuro: La participación y organizacibn popular en Nicaragua" in *Nueva Sociedad*, 104, Nov.-Dec. 1989.
  9. See for example the speeches by Daniel Ortega published in *Barricada* on June 15th and 20th July 1988 and 1st February 1989.
  10. C. M. Vilas, "Revolution and Democracy in Latin America" in R. Miliband et al (eds.), *Socialist Register 1989*, Merlin Press, London, 1989, pp. 30-36.
  11. The rapid pace of the transition in Cuba reflected the specificities of capitalism on the island; among them, the high level of centralization and concentration of capital, the level of organization of the rural and urban working class, the comparatively advanced level of development of the productive forces. The worst part is that these tendencies often develop spontaneously and at all levels. Consider the following case: In mid-1982, when the tensions in the economy began to bring pressure to bear on the supplies of basic goods, the FSLN called meetings of the CDS (Sandinista Defence Committees, organizations in urban areas) so that popular debate might produce criteria for rationing and distribution. In the section of my own district (Monsenor Lezcano in Managua) where there were 450 CDS activists for 5-6,000 people, barely 200 of us attended the meeting. We decided that, since it was important to have the broadest possible discussion and take our decisions in the most democratic way possible, we should call a second meeting and guarantee the real participation of as many people as possible. There were less than 100 of us at this second meeting, and since we could not go on postponing the drawing up of a plan of supply, less than 100 of us present at the meeting made decisions in the name of 500 which affected the diet of 6,000.
  13. *Barricada*, 5th October 1989, p. 4; also Michael Kramer, "Anger, bluff and cooperation" in *Time*, June 4th 1990, pp. 38-45.
  14. See Vilas 1986, Ch. IV.
  15. See Vilas 1989, pp. 93 ff.
  16. See for example Peter Utting, *The peasant question and development policy in Nicaragua*, UNRISD, Geneva, 1988. On the progressive transformation of the trade union organizations into organs of the state, see Vilas, "The mass organisations in Nicaragua. . ." in *Monthly Review*, 38 (6), November 1986, pp. 20-31 and Vilas 1986, Ch. V.
  17. See Vilas 1986, Chs. II and IV; Vilas 1989, Ch. I.
  18. See C. M. Vilas, "War and revolution in Nicaragua" in R. Miliband et al (eds.), *Socialist Register 1988*, Merlin Press, London, 1988, pp. 182-219; and *Class, state and ethnicity in Nicaragua*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder and London, 1989, Ch. V.
  19. See Asociacibn de Profesionales de la Economía (APEN), *Breve evaluación de las políticas de 1988 y propuesta para 1989*, Managua, December 1988; Rene Pilarte et al, "Reforma económica: hacia nuevas contradicciones" in *Boletín socioeconómico de INIES*, Managua, 9, Sept.-Oct. 1988, pp. 3-12.

20. See respectively *Crónica*, Managua, no. 57, 14th-20th December 1989, *El nuevo Diario*, 30th December 1989, and *Barricada*, 14th December 1989.
21. Vilas 1986, Ch. I.
22. Fred Halliday, "The Ends of Cold War", in *New Left Review*, 180, March-April 1990, pp. 5-23.
23. See for example Sergio Ramirez, "Nicaragua, la democracia a prueba" in *La Jornada*, Mexico, 14th and 15th August 1990, and "Nicaragua, confesión de amor" in *Nexos*, Mexico, 152, August 1990, pp. 29-48; Comandante Victor Tirado Lopez, "Hacia nuevas estrategias revolucionarias" in *El Día Latinoamericano*, 18, 24th September 1990.