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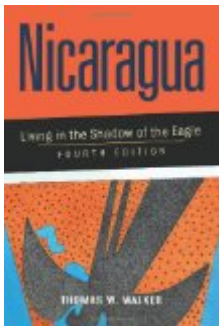
Thomas W. Walker. *Nicaragua: Living in the Shadow of the Eagle.* Boulder: Westview Press, 2003. xvi + 238 pp. $30.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8133-3882-8.



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For this fourth edition of his popular introductory textbook on Nicaraguan history, society, and politics, Thomas W. Walker changed the subtitle from *Land of Sandino*, as it had been in previous editions, to *Living in the Shadow of the Eagle*. While concerned the new title did not "stress some outstanding characteristic inherent in Nicaragua," he decided, through recourse to the analogy of the bonsai tree, it was "better to emphasize the external factors affecting the morphology of [an] organism--indeed, that affect the nature of all bonsai trees regardless of species" (p. vii).

In effect, Nicaragua's relationship with the United States is the overriding theme of this book. And, although Walker plays the theme well in places--for example doing an excellent job illuminating specific ways U.S. interference in Nicaragua distorted and deformed the country's social revolution of the 1980s--his insistence that the United States was solely and completely responsible for the Sandinista fall from power leads him to underplay more domestic processes of political development.

The most disturbing aspect of the book is Walker's uncritical--at times bordering on hagiographic--treatment of the FSLN governments of the 1980s. On at least two occasions, he conflates the Sandinistas with "the people" (pp. 7, 39), and, in his telling, the FSLN committed very few mistakes throughout their eleven years in power. Rather, they governed in a "pragmatic and, indeed, moderate fashion [and] succeeded in carrying out innovative and highly successful social programs without inordinately straining the national budget" (p. 43). The severe political and economic crises of the late 1980s, which led directly to the Sandinista defeat at the polls in 1990, were "brought on primarily by the Contra War and other U.S.-orchestrated programs of destabilization" (pp. 45, 55-56).

This kind of argument, a faithful echo of the solidarity movement's defense of Nicaragua against Reagan administration aggression and disinformation, we now know to be only partially true. Since the 1990 electoral defeat, several accounts (such as those by Vilas and Colburn) have managed both to maintain sympathy towards the

revolution and its leadership while at the same time criticizing specific economic policies and methods of political organization during the revolutionary period.[1] As was apparent to those of us who spent time in the country during the mid-1980s, the Sandinista regime was characterized by high degrees of bureaucratic inefficiency, and its mass organizations (in particular the CDS, JS-19, and AMNLAE) often functioned more as top-down transmission belts for a centralized Leninist party than as an experiment in new-style democracy. Would a more efficient, more democratic Sandinista government have been able to withstand U.S. military and economic aggression? While the question is clearly relevant--especially in terms of understanding what happened to revolutionary institutions after the FSLN's defeat at the polls--Walker's formulation of the issue makes it a hard one even to pose.

Although Walker does cover much of the development of the Sandinista movement, including its ideology, internal divisions, and devolution into a corrupt clique after the fall from power in 1990, he does not assign these developments much analytic weight in explaining Nicaraguan history. For example, Sergio Ramirez, the former Sandinista vice-president whose defection (over corruption and autocracy within the FSLN) undoubtedly contributed to the right-wing Liberal Party victory in the 1996 elections is identified merely as "the presidential candidate who finished third" (p. 62). Not until a subsequent section of the chapter does Walker acknowledge that Sandinista corruption and the departure of Ramirez's Renovating Sandinista Movement "facilitated" the 1996 Liberal victory. Even worse, at no point does Walker delve seriously into the political issues that underlay the 1995 schism.

The underlying problem is Walker's uncritical use of an outdated version of dependency theory to frame his discussion of the relationship between Nicaragua and the United States. Basing himself on Chilcote and Edelstein's 1974 edited volume, Walker defines dependency as "a specific situation in which the economy of a weak country is externally oriented and the government is controlled by national and/or international elites or classes that benefit from this economic relationship" (p. 3).[2] This interpretation fits within what Thomas Holloway has identified as a "neo-Leninist critique of imperialisms both formal and informal," one whose "policy prescriptions ... 'pointed toward' a transition to [socialism]" as the only way out of the dependency trap.[3] In Walker's version of dependency, agency appears to exist only for the hegemon--except for those exceptional circumstances when "a revolutionary government representing the aspirations of countless generations of Nicaraguans ... finally [comes] to power" (p. 7).

Returning to Walker's opening metaphor, a real bonsai tree is the product of much more than an overwhelming external force. In fact, if a bonsai artist were to attempt to shape a living tree into a miniature representation of an actual tree in nature (which is, after all, the real practice of the art of bonsai) based only on his ability to clip branches and roots, he would fail completely in the endeavor. Bonsai is a meditative art, in which the artist contemplates both the tree he seeks to represent and the tree through which he seeks to represent it. By attaining oneness with both trees--by understanding, that is, the internal and external processes that shape both of them--he is able to intervene in the bonsai tree, and coax it into taking on a form it would not otherwise have. Walker's heavy-handed treatment of U.S. domination over Nicaraguan society is about as far from such a quiet, reflective process as one could get.

Walker also does not seem to have assimilated post-revolutionary Nicaraguan historiography. His periodization of Nicaraguan economic development, for example, appears to follow a 1975 treatise by the Sandinista leader Jaime Wheelock Roman. And while his annotated bibliography calls Jeffrey Gould's ***To Lead As Equals*** a "very sol-

id piece of research into the history of the peasant movement" (p. 207), the analysis in the text of the Somoza Garcia period has no relationship whatsoever to one of Gould's principal findings, that "Somoza's consolidation of power can only be comprehended in the light of the support of broad sectors of the working classes." For Walker, Somoza achieved dictatorial control over Nicaragua by consolidating power over the National Guard, which he then used as a "Mafia in uniform" to clamp down on any possibility of dissent (p. 27). And while he acknowledges that part of Somoza's formula for control was "coopt[ing] domestic power contenders" (p. 26), there is no hint anywhere in the book that such contenders could be labor leaders or even the radical *obreristas* whose support for Somoza Gould documented extensively.[4]

This is all the more troubling because Walker is in fact a sensitive and observant student of Nicaraguan society. In a series of strong thematic chapters in the second half of the book, he demonstrates the profound changes the Sandinista Revolution had on social relations, and shows how the social leveling elements of the revolution sparked a reactionary defense of class privilege. He properly emphasizes, for example, the role of the National Literacy Crusade of 1980 in not just reducing illiteracy from 50 percent to 13 percent of the adult population, but also as a way of "liberat[ing] the largely middle-class volunteers ... from their prejudices and stereotypes about Nicaragua's impoverished majority" (pp. 125-128). He notes as well "the relatively privileged parents ... who ... demonstrated their willingness to cooperate with the revolution by giving their children the required permission to join the crusade," and contrasts this with "a lawyer friend" of his who asked for help getting "his teenaged children into an English language program in the United States so they ... would not 'waste' the months that school would be out during the literacy campaign" (pp. 117-118). The discussion of relations between the revolutionary governments of the 1980s and the minority populations on the Miskito Coast is balanced and informative (pp. 113-114), and a chapter on political structures argues convincingly that the Sandinista Revolution appears to have led to the development of a two-party system in Nicaragua (see especially pp. 167-169).

Even the book's relative weaker first half has much of real value. His sections on the Luis and Anastasio Somoza Debayle regimes, for example, draw out the significant differences between the two brothers, and in a concise, economical fashion show how Anastasio's kleptocracy led almost immediately to an ongoing political crisis that eventually culminated in the Sandinista Revolution (pp. 29-34). Walker also usefully deploys the concept of neopopulism to explain Arnoldo Aleman's rise to power in the mid-1990s (pp. 63-65), and he has an effective, first-hand account of the stresses of hyperinflation (pp. 95-96).

The book is relatively short (less than two hundred pages of text), quite readable, and amply illustrated with photographs that do an excellent job of evoking Nicaraguan society and its people. It is also an excellent example of both the advantages and disadvantages of a "committed," or "activist," scholarship. Used in conjunction with an article like Vilas's or Colburn's short and humorous *My Car in Managua*, it could both provide a reasonable introduction to the last fifty years of Nicaraguan history and a useful starting point for a discussion of the theoretical boundaries of hegemony, of coercion and cooptation, and popular class agency in history. Its many weaknesses, however, require that some corrective text be employed alongside.

Notes

[1]. Carlos Vilas, "What Went Wrong," *NACLA Report on the Americas* 24, no. 1 (June 1990), pp. 10-19; and Forrest Colburn, *My Car in Managua* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991).

[2]. Ronald H. Chilcote and Joel C. Edelstein, *Latin America: The Struggle with Dependency and Beyond* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1974).

[3]. Thomas Holloway, "The Persistence of 'Dependency' as a Useful Framework for Understanding Latin America," http://www.h-net.org/%7Elatam/essays/dependency.pdf, pp. 5 and 15, cited with the author's permission.

[4]. Jeffrey L. Gould, *To Lead As Equals: Rural Protest and Political Consciousness in Chinandega, Nicaragua, 1912-1979* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), quotation on p. 15. Somoza's complex relationship with the working-class movement in Chinandega is discussed in depth on pp. 21-82.