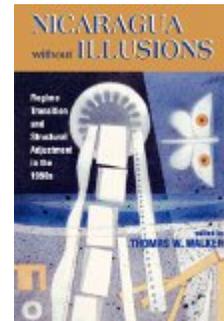


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Thomas W. Walker, ed. *Nicaragua Without Illusions: Regime Transition and Structural Adjustment in the 1990s*. Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 1997. viii + 352 pp. \$72.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8420-2578-2; \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8420-2579-9.

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Throughout the 1980s, events in Nicaragua were a central focus of the media, and of U.S. foreign policy. The attempt to make a transition to socialism was also the subject of much attention in academia. For ten years this small country on the Central American isthmus received a disproportionate amount of the analysis of Latin America in general. In many ways this attention was deserved. Nicaragua was different. In 1979, when the Sandinistas came to power, much of the region remained under the control of military governments. The Sandinistas offered a participatory democracy, land reform and human centered development. In the early years of their rule, they appeared to deliver on many of these promises: a land reform programme was initiated, a literacy campaign was launched which had tremendous success, a nation-wide health service was introduced which reduced child mortality dramatically, and, in 1984, the first free elections that the country had known were held. It is not possible to know what direction the country would have taken if the civil war had not arisen. Perhaps it would have become the totalitarian hell hole as depicted by the Reagan Government. What we do know is that the positive social policies of the early Sandinista years were halted and reversed as more and more of the country's resources were deployed against the contra forces. As in any country at war, power became more centralised, and freedoms restricted. The Sandinista Government started to become remote from the population. A structural adjustment programme launched to stabilise the economy alienated many of their supporters.

With the defeat of the Sandinistas in the elections of 1990, much of the attention that the country had been receiving dissipated. Media attention declined rapidly, and U.S. foreign policy concerns became directed at other

parts of the region. But history in Nicaragua did not end in 1990. It entered a new and in many ways more complex phase. Fortunately not all academic interest in the country disappeared.

*Nicaragua Without Illusions* provides an analysis of developments in the country in the immediate post-Sandinista period. Thomas Walker, the editor, has been an analyst of Nicaragua since 1967. He has been an author and co-editor of several books on the country concentrating on the Sandinista period. These books include *Nicaragua: The Land of Sandino*, and *Reagan versus the Sandinistas: The Undeclared War on Nicaragua*. His position has been as a sympathetic critic of Sandinista policies and opponent of U.S. foreign policy.

The purpose of this volume is to provide an analysis of Nicaragua in the 1990s, or more precisely the early 1990s. The chapters originated as papers presented at a three-session panel on "Nicaragua in the 1990s" held at the 1995 LASA conference. Most of the contributors extend their analyses to 1995, though a brief epilogue written by Walker provides a discussion of the 1996 elections and the implications of the victory of Liberal Alliance party candidate Arnoldo Aleman.

The book is wide ranging with chapters from sixteen contributors. It can be divided into five sections. The Introduction provides a brief history of the country dating back to the arrival of the Spaniards, though focused on the Sandinista period. Walker points to three main themes of the book: First, the book aims to provide an analysis of a country that has been the subject of a hegemonic intervention. Along with several other countries in the region the development of Nicaragua's political processes were decisively affected by manipulation from

the United States. How are political cultures affected by such interference? The book aims to address this question with relation to Nicaragua. Second, the book adds to the growing literature on regime transition and democratisation. Here Nicaragua provides a special case. In the other instances of democratisation in Latin America, regime transition was from military dictatorship to liberal democracies. In Nicaragua (as Philip Williams[1] has argued), there was the additional stage of a revolutionary regime which at first promoted a different kind of democracy through mass participation in grass roots organisations. This has resulted in a very different kind of civil society where the population is highly mobilised and as a result “civilian rule in Nicaragua in the 1990s would be much more difficult than in other countries” (p. 15). Third, Nicaragua provides a further example of the impacts of the pursuit of structural adjustment programmes. Hence the intention is to have three themes running through the chapters: the aftereffects of intervention, transition to democracy, and the impacts of neoliberal economic policies.

The second section of the book discusses the international context. This section is only one chapter long, with the discussion provided by William Robinson. Robinson continues his analysis begun elsewhere[2] detailing the role of the US in influencing the political system in Nicaragua to create a polyarchy: “a system in which a small group actually rules and mass participation in decision making is confined to leadership choice in elections carefully managed by competing elites” (p. 23). Robinson outlines various ways in which the United States has continued to meddle in Nicaraguan domestic politics particularly through the activities of the US Agency for International Development.

The third section of the book turns to the domestic situation, specifically the ‘new order,’ the compromises between different political groups and the policy directions taken by the Chamorro regime. In this section, there are chapters describing institutional evolution during the 1990s, the compromises over the control of the armed forces, and policy regarding the economy, agrarian reform, welfare and the environment. The key issue in the transition period between the Sandinista period and the Chamorro Government was the control of the army. By allowing Daniel Ortega’s brother, Humberto, to retain his position of commander of the army the new government allayed Sandinista fears of a Guatemala-style use of the armed forces to repress and bring a violent reversal of the Sandinista revolution. However, this policy brought problems for the new Government, both from within its

own ranks and from the United States, which proceeded to withhold aid until Humberto Ortega stood down. Despite these problems the retention of Sandinista control of the army was probably crucial to the peaceful change of Government. The other chapters tell a less successful story: deadlock in terms of institutional development; continuing economic hardship for the vast majority of the population with little of the anticipated renewal in investment; and declining levels of health care and educational standards.

The fourth section turns to look at developments within the different groups and organisations in Nicaraguan society. Here there are chapters on the FSLN, the other political parties, the grass roots organisations, the former contras, the peoples of the Atlantic coast, the Church, the economic elite, the informal sector, and the media. Each of these chapters describes how these groups have been affected by the change of regime, how they have developed through the early 1990s and how they have played a part in the changing Nicaraguan situation.

The conclusion returns to the central themes of the book:

–To what extent can Nicaragua be regarded as a sovereign country?

–What are the legacies of intervention for civic and political culture?

–What have been the impacts of the Neoliberal policies pursued by the Chamorro Government?

–What does the process in Nicaragua have to tell us about transitions to democracy in general?

–Did the Sandinista revolution die in 1990?

Given the levels of civic conflict in the country and the continuing economic crisis, the conclusions are surprisingly up beat and there is some optimism expressed about the future of democracy in the country. A key feature of the transition in Nicaragua, and a source of optimism for the future of its fragile democracy, is the Sandinista legacy of popular mobilisation. In other examples of transitions to democracy in Latin America, power has passed directly from the military to economic and political elites leaving the vast majority of the populations remote from political processes. “Nicaraguan politics in the 1990s” Walker argues “-with its strikes, demonstrations, takeovers, grass roots participation in major bargaining concerning privatisation, and so forth -was ‘messier,’ but

in some senses more democratic, than post-transition politics in those other countries” (p. 301). This then, perhaps, is the positive legacy of the Sandinista revolution—a politically aware and sophisticated population with the institutions to express their political options.

Furthermore, in the past decade Nicaragua has seen two peaceful transitions of power (from the Sandinistas to the Conservatives, and from the Conservatives to the Liberals). Such transitions had never occurred before in Nicaraguan history, let alone twice. Despite problems with the 1996 election (discussed in the epilogue), Nicaraguan democracy, Walker argues, appears to be working. He suggests that the problems were mainly procedural and technical rather than fraudulent. As he notes, the Liberals, isolated since the late 1970s, were due their “chance at bat.”

This book has much to recommend it. It is clearly essential reading for all students of Nicaragua and of Central America. There is also a lot that would be of interest to Latin Americanists in general, even if only because the transition to democracy in Nicaragua is a ‘special case’. There is a wealth of information provided for anyone who is undertaking comparative studies. The coverage is comprehensive. It is hard to think of what else might have been usefully included—though there is nothing on popular culture, which was enthusiastically encouraged by the Sandinistas.

The criticisms that can be made are largely editorial. There is quite a diversity of styles and quality between the chapters. One or two are very descriptive and lacking in analysis. Few address directly the issues that Walker raises in the introduction. This gives each chapter a stand alone feeling rather than as part of a greater whole. Each

chapter is very good at summarising developments under the Sandinistas before discussing the early 1990s. However, a section in the introduction covering the main features of the Chamorro period might have helped put each chapter in context and provided more of an overall framework for the book.

There is also an issue of ‘shelf life’ for this book. Although it is an excellent source of material covering the early 1990s, with the election of Aleman to the presidency, Nicaraguan politics have entered a new phase. On the face of it, Aleman appears less willing to compromise with the popular sectors of society and more enthusiastic about removing the remaining vestiges of the Sandinista revolution than was his predecessor. His first year in his office has been marked by an increase in tensions within Nicaraguan society. Hopefully Thomas Walker is working on a new book to cover the current period of Nicaraguan politics.

[N.B. The book was reviewed from uncorrected galley proofs. Page references may have changed.]

#### Notes:

[1]. Philip Williams, 1994, ‘Dual Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Popular and Electoral Democracy in Nicaragua’, *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 26 No. 2, pp. 169-185.

[2]. William Robinson, 1996, *Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization and U.S. Intervention and Hegemony*, Cambridge Eng.: Cambridge University Press.

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