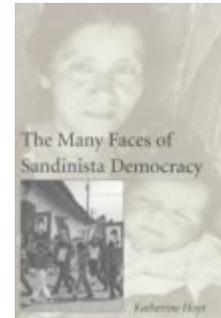


Katherine Hoyt. *The Many Faces of Sandinista Democracy.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 1997. ix + 224 pp. \$23.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-89680-197-4.



Reviewed by Steve Hobden

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Within the burgeoning literature on Latin American democracy, the example of Nicaragua provides a very special case. As Philip Williams [1] has argued, there has been a dual transition. Rather than a transition from military rule to democracy as in much of the rest of Latin America, in Nicaragua there was also an additional phase where a revolutionary vanguard party experimented with forms of popular democracy. A further unique feature of the Nicaraguan example was the peaceful transition from rule by a party that had gained power through an armed revolutionary struggle as a result of its defeat in elections.

Clearly the study of Nicaragua following the Sandinista revolution has much to tell us about democracy in Latin America and about ideas about democracy both in the region and the "South" more generally. As a long term resident of Nicaragua, Katherine Hoyt is very well placed to provide such an analysis. She first visited Nicaragua in 1966 as a clinic secretary and interpreter on the *SS Hope* Hospital Ship. She subsequently married a Nicaraguan doctor and was

resident for much of the following 18 years. During this time, she did volunteer and human rights work. Following the revolution, she worked for the Sandinista government, first as a social worker in a day care centre and then as a translator for the legislature. Following her return to the United States in 1983, she has been involved with solidarity organisations supporting Central America.

The Many Faces of Sandinista Democracy provides a very valuable history of the developments in Nicaraguan democracy during the period 1979-1996. It also supplies detailed discussions of the various strands of thinking on democracy within the Sandinista movement. Her prime source is a series of interviews with more than two dozen leading Sandinista leaders and thinkers. These were carried out during the early part of 1994. In addition, she draws upon previously published speeches, interviews and publications by Sandinista figures. Her stated aim for the book is "to give the Nicaraguans their voice as thinkers on the subject of democracy" (p. viii).

A further goal of the book is to explore the role of democracy in a revolutionary society.

Lenin posed the question of the role of democracy in a society where the working class was not in a majority. Regarding democracy as a political exercise that was easily open to manipulation by counterrevolutionary forces, Lenin's answer was that power should be located in a vanguard party which would take control, in the name of the working class, of the state bureaucracy. Such a model was, of course, adopted throughout the Soviet empire, but also in many countries in the South where socialist revolutions have occurred. In the Nicaraguan example, vanguardist elements were blended with democratic factors to provide a unique, and perhaps, depending on the viewpoint, ultimately unsuccessful, combination.

Hoyt argues that there have been three essential aspects to Sandinista thinking on democracy. First, political or representative democracy—the form of democracy in which regular elections are held, based on universal suffrage where one government can be replaced by another. This is, of course, the form of democracy that has been the cornerstone of discussions regarding democracy in Latin America. To this form of democracy, the Sandinistas attempted to add participatory democracy and economic democracy. By participatory democracy, Hoyt is referring to the inclusion of popular organisations in the decision-making processes. Economic democracy relates to attempts to equalise the distribution of wealth and in an increased capacity for society to make decisions about the use of resources and the form of the economic system operated within the country.

The book is structured around these "three legs of the stool of Nicaraguan democracy" (p. 1). After an initial historical summary, there is one chapter on political democracy, two on participatory democracy, and two on economic democracy. These are followed by chapters on the internal democracy of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), a final summary and some reflections on the FSLN's defeat in the 1996 elections.

With regard to political democracy, there have been three main views within the FSLN. The first is an outright rejection of elections. This view sees conventional democracy as "bourgeois." A second thread saw elections as a tactical necessity. A third view, associated with the social democratic wing of the party, remained committed to the aspiration for a multi-party democracy with the implication that there could be a change of ruling party. Hence there have been a wide range of ideas within the FSLN. These have extended from a view of the party as a Leninist vanguard through to support for regular elections and transfers of power. Immediately following the revolution, there was greatest support for the FSLN taking a vanguard role. By the time of the 1984 elections, the second view was more dominant, seeing the tactical advantages to be gained from holding regular and contested elections. It was not until the writing of the 1987 constitution, argues Hoyt, that the majority of the party made the commitment to a genuine multi-party democracy, and that document reflects a genuine wish to create such a system. However, a contradiction existed within the Sandinistas. Although committed to a democratic system, many within the party saw themselves as being a vanguard, representing the wishes of the working class—hence the shock of the unexpected rejection in the 1990 poll.

Turning to the organisations of mass mobilisation, Hoyt argues that they were a key part of the victory of the anti-Somoza forces. Their significance continued through the Sandinista period, and continues today. For the FSLN, the popular organisations fulfilled two key roles. Firstly, they had the role of protecting and strengthening the political project. Second, they were to act as instruments for the channeling and expression of the demands of the masses. However, as the revolution came more under threat as a result of the Contra war, it was the first of these roles that became most significant. As the government became more centralised, instead of looking to the popular organisations for the expression of demands,

they were seen as tools of the government with orders being passed down from the National Directorate. These centralising tendencies led to disillusion for many members of the popular organisations, though many have seen a revitalisation of their fortunes as a result of breaking the direct links with the FSLN after 1990.

In the wake of the 1990 defeat and the breaking of direct links with the FSLN, there has been a flowering of the analysis of popular organisation. Hoyt outlines the thinking of several writers, including Sofia Montenegro and Orlando Nunez Soto. For Montenegro, the Western ideas of socialism and liberalism have been imposed on the developing world without a consideration of the different conditions that exist. In Nicaragua, the Sandinistas attempted to analyse society using Marxist tools. However, this did not incorporate an analysis of ethnicity. This, she notes, is ironic as Sandino did incorporate an examination of race in his writings. Montenegro seeks to revive this tradition. Hoyt argues that wherever the Sandinistas did enter into dialogue with indigenous populations, they were successful in the 1990 elections. However, "wherever policies were imposed vertically by those who 'knew' what was right, the revolution was not successful and the FSLN lost in the 1990 elections" (p. 86). The role of the popular organisations, for Montenegro, is to provide a voice for the different sectors of society and to put pressure on the FSLN to incorporate an analysis of the diversity of sectors within Nicaraguan society. Nunez Soto also seeks to expand Marxist analysis to encompass the Nicaraguan situation. He argues that there is a need for an inclusionary project, which incorporates not only the workers and peasants, but also other sectors of society, such as the Middle Classes, ethnic groups, and intellectuals, into societal change. He argues that it is the role of popular organisations to carry through the revolution in local neighbourhoods, on farms, and in factories. In this sense, they have replaced the FSLN as the democratic vanguard.

The final "leg" of Nicaraguan democracy considered by Hoyt is economic democracy. A cornerstone of Sandinista policy was an equalisation of wealth, however the issue of individuals in decision-making regarding economic policy was considerably more controversial. For some within the party, in particular Jaime Wheelock, economic development was best encouraged through the promotion of large-scale government organised enterprises. For others, the policy of the party should have been to respond more to the wishes of peasant farmers rather than imposing large governmental schemes onto the agricultural sectors. In post-1990 election, much of the analysis has been directed to an analysis of the alternatives to neo-liberal policies, introduced first by the Sandinistas in the late 1980s, to stabilise the economy, and then continued by the Chamorro government.

The final element considered by Hoyt is internal FSLN democracy. Since its 1990 defeat, the FSLN has been rocked by internal debates about its organisation and the role of the party. These return to the very heart of the question of whether it is a political party like any other or whether it is in any sense a vanguard party. The extent of these discussions was such that they led to a split within the party with Sergio Ramirez (who had run for vice president in the 1990 elections) leaving to create the Sandinista Renovation Movement. For Ramirez, the best way forward was to run as a social democratic party, whilst others argued that the FSLN should retain a loyalty to its position as a revolutionary vanguard party.

There are three reasons why this book should receive a wide readership and why it should be included on reading lists for classes on Latin America, democracy, and, in particular, democracy in the South. First, it provides a voice for non-western writers. The overwhelming majority of analyses of democracy and democratisation are by academics from the developed world. The writ-

ers that Hoyt summarises present a view from the South and a different perspective from traditional writing on democracy. Second, it helps to dispel the notion of a monolithic Sandinista position as implied by much U.S. government propaganda. The book demonstrates the variety of views within the FSLN and shows that there were very real debates over policy issues. Although there were centralising and anti-democratic views held by some within the party, these did not have a majority and Hoyt's analysis suggests that through the 1980s, particularly after the writing of the 1987 constitution, there was a definite commitment to electoral democracy. This is confirmed by the FSLN's readiness to relinquish power after the 1990 elections. Finally, the book opens up the possibility of a wider discussion of the characteristics of democracy. Much contemporary analysis of democracy has concentrated exclusively on political democracy. The benchmark for the definition of countries as democratic has been the holding of elections. Hoyt suggests that we should think about democracy in a much wider sense, including notions of popular participation and economic democracy.

There is much to applaud in this text. It is also possible to suggest ways in which it could have been useful. The focus is very narrow. It would have been useful to widen the context, both within Nicaragua and internationally. The author concentrates on writers who are members of the FSLN or who are sympathetic to its project. The reasons for the choice of thinkers are not made clear. Which other writers could have been included? What grounds were used for including some writers and not others? Where do the selected writers fit within the wider framework of political analysis within Nicaragua? It would also have been useful to incorporate some writers from across the political spectrum. Which writers have been directing their views towards the Chamorro and Aleman governments? How influential have they been?

Events in Nicaragua could also have been discussed within a wider context of moves towards democracy internationally. Democratisation in Nicaragua is not occurring in a vacuum, but in a wider context of events both in Latin America and throughout the world. Hoyt also mentions at several points that the transition in Nicaragua could have wider implications. The lessons of the Nicaraguan model for other countries in transition could have been made more explicit.

These are only minor quibbles, however, which reflect the particular agenda and interests of the reviewer. The tight focus of the book is one of its strengths and it certainly fulfills its aim of giving a voice to Nicaraguan writers on democracy. It deserves to be widely read and used.

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

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