

## Nicaragua Readings

Bayard de Volo, Lorraine. *Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs: Gender Identity Politics in Nicaragua*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. 87-101

[Contents: Second, as far as women are concerned, there has been a tendency, as Bayard de Volo (2003) recently noted, to overlook women's political action that does not explicitly seek to change gender power relations or adopt feminist ideologies. It is likely that counter-revolutionary women were seen by many feminist scholars as lacking in any progressive political potential. Third, it could possibly be argued that revolutionary women were more numerous than counter-revolutionary women. It is estimated that between 25 and 30 per cent of FSLN combatants were women (Molyneux, 1986; Collinson, 1990), but that only seven per cent of the counter-revolutionary soldiers were women (Brown, 2001).

In Nicaragua during the 1980s, revolutionary discourses of women as heroic warriors competed with more deeply established Catholic discourses of women as self-sacrificial mothers. Women's experiences of conflict, revolution and counter-revolution are not therefore built upon a single discourse (see Moser and Clark 2001); although at some times political and gender identities might intersect, at others they might be more divergent or even in conflict. (87)

While the difference between the personal and the ideological cannot be neatly demarcated, most of these women became counter-revolutionaries because of the men in their lives and the political decisions taken by their husbands, sons and employers. (87)

As stated, Sandinista discourses of gender and nationalism constructed women as either heroic warriors or self-sacrificial mothers. It is possible that women who were opposed to the FSLN and the revolution were less affected by these discourses. The illegal status of the Contra and the dangers of admitting one's involvement in the counter-revolution meant there was more silence surrounding both political activity of this kind and the sacrifice made by mothers who lost sons and daughters who had joined the counter-revolution. (92)

Regardless of positioning with respect to the revolution, dominant understandings of masculinity and femininity are used to make sense of the deaths of children, especially sons, in combat, and their significance is augmented by the way in which they are imbued with politics. (95)

It is possible that maternal discourses were ultimately more powerful within Contra communities than notions of women as heroic and combative warriors, which circulated within Sandinista communities alongside and within the maternal ones, leading Contra women to value sons over daughters just as the Contra leaders placed greater value on male combatants. (96)

In Nicaragua, the struggle for feminism has been highly complex. The FSLN leadership, like the traditional left elsewhere in Latin America, dismissed feminism as a bourgeois and imperialist concern of little interest to the popular classes in Nicaragua (Chinchilla, 1994; Randall, 1999). Feminism was viewed as something which would divide rather

than strengthen and democratise the revolution. The Sandinista mass women's organisation AMNLAE remained subordinate to the party during the revolution and consequently failed to articulate a coherent feminist identity (Molyneux, 1986; Chinchilla, 1992, 1994). However, since 1990 and the electoral defeat of the revolution, Nicaragua's feminist movement has become a proliferation of autonomous NGOs, networks, political movements, pressure groups and women's collectives and is clearly one of the most vibrant and influential in Central America (Isbester, 2001). (97)

Women in Waslala became Contra supporters or combatants not out of a coherent objection to Marxism-Leninism but because of their gendered roles, relations and identities. The narratives of counter-revolutionary women demonstrate not only how political identities intersect with and diverge from gender identities in complex ways, but also the extent to which political identities are no more fixed than gender identities. These fluid and multiple intersections can therefore create a feminist political practice which is surprising and unanticipated. To understand the position of women in counter-revolutionary politics in Nicaragua, we need to explore the complex and contested ways in which Somocista, Sandinista and post-Sandinista legacies and gender regimes intersect with both feminist politics and deeply entrenched understandings of masculinity and femininity. (100-101)]

Booth, John A. "Through Revolution and Beyond: Mobilization, Demobilization, and Adjustment in Central America." *Latin American Research Review* 40, no. 1 (2005): 202-06. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1555371>.

Chinchilla, Norma Stoltz. "Revolutionary Popular Feminism in Nicaragua: Articulating Class, Gender, and National Sovereignty." *Gender and Society* 4, no. 3 (1990): 370-97. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/189649>.

[Contents: Among the advances for women since the revolution highlighted in the 1987 declaration were women's historically unprecedented level of political participation in the new government and political organizations-31.4 percent of government leadership positions, 67 percent of Sandinista Defense Committees, and 26.8 percent of FSLN membership. These reflections of participation in the revolutionary process, while unprecedented, were declared insufficient, and organizations and individuals were called upon to help create conditions that would make women equal participants in decision making in the revolution (Barricada Internacional 1987; FSLN 1987). (371)

It implicitly accepted the argument that, at each stage of the revolutionary process, some form of gender-specific or feminist struggle can and should be waged, even when the economic conditions do not exist to solve many of the problems that women face. (372)

renner 1980; Molyneux 1982). While some elements of the "new Marxism" in Latin America are shared by the Cuban revolution, the emphasis on political pluralism and popular democracy has been much greater in the Nicaraguan case, in part because it came

to power through a prolonged grass-roots struggle against the dictatorship that required high levels of mass organization and in part because of lessons learned from the Cuban experience (372)

Together with important changes in the social structure of Nicaragua (a high proportion of female-headed families and changes in the gendered division of labor associated with the anti-Contra war), the conditions are more favorable in Nicaragua, than in any previous Third World revolution, for defining a version of feminism that is both consistent with the revolutionary process and supported by a wide variety of women, including the majority who are poor. (372-373)

in revolutionary transformation such as that being attempted in Nicaragua. While the material conditions of women's lives will continue to be an obstacle to women's political participation as long as the resources do not exist to alleviate poverty and domestic labor, material investments are not the only investments a revolutionary movement can make in the construction of a future society in which women achieve equality and self-realization as autonomous human beings. Political empowerment of women not only may serve to increase the likelihood of material improvement for women, but may unleash women's power and creativity to solve material problems in ways not previously contemplated. (373)

AMPRONAC was the most successful women's organization linked to a left revolutionary party in Latin America up to that time. A key factor that made it successful was its ability to take up a general issue—human rights—that affected women in a particular way and pursue it with tactics and organizational forms that came out of women's particular experiences. It was not based on the assumption that women's political consciousness was a derivative of men's, that is, the hand-me-down consciousness concept that feminists have rightly criticized (Hartmann 1981; Rowbotham 1974; Rowbotham, Segal, and Wainwright 1979) but on the assumption that women have gender-specific experiences, some of which are class-specific, but others of which are shared across social classes. (374)

In practice, however, many, perhaps most, of the women who responded to AMPRONAC's call to mobilize for human rights and against the dictatorship did so, at least originally, more out of a strong identification with their roles as mothers, grandmothers, and spouses than out of any critique of the gendered division of labor or their circumstances as women (Maier 1980; Randall 1981). (375)

AMNLAE “Throughout 1980, its membership grew among housewives, market women, mothers of the combatants or Sandinist skilled in the insurrection, and health and education workers who had been drawn in as a result of specific campaigns. It drew only lukewarm support from Sandinist women professionals, government employees, and members of the party apparatus. Women agricultural and industrial wage workers, young women, and women in the army were noticeably absent from its ranks (Murguialday Martinez 1987).

(377)

Legalized abortion is available in most socialist countries, and it has not been a major point of controversy in Cuba. In the Nicaraguan context, however, where the Catholic church has historically been much stronger as an institution and more influential as a shaper of secular laws and popular culture, the issue of abortion rights for women has been highly divisive, including among women themselves. (381)

Mobilization for the war effort and feminism could and should be combined: Women would be much more willing to sacrifice for the revolution if they could be assured that the importance of their contributions to defense were recognized and the gains they had made in transcending traditional gender roles would not be reversed once the soldiers came home (384)

If this analysis is correct, the unexpected vote of a significant segment of "undecided" voters for the UNO opposition should be seen more as reaction to "war weariness," economic hardship, and pessimism about any major improvement on the horizon rather than an ideological defection from the goals and principles of the Sandinista Revolution (391)

Women who worked outside the home, however, indicated the highest level of support for the Sandinista candidate of any of the three groups: 59 percent. Correspondingly, housewives expressed the highest level of open support for Chamorro (28 percent compared to 22 percent for men and working women) and the highest level of "undecided voters" (20 percent compared to 16 percent for men and 12 percent for working women). (391-392)]

Hurtig, Janise, and Rosario Montoya. "Women's Political Lives in Latin America: Reconfiguring Terrains of Theory, History, and Practice." *Latin American Research Review* 40, no. 1 (2005): 187-201. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1555370>.

[Contents: While feminist researchers have addressed the limitations of this dichotomy primarily by acknowledging the fluidity between these spheres, the assumption persists that women have to leave the private sphere to engage in meaningful or socially transformative political activity. Increasingly, scholars have questioned the usefulness of this U.S.-European socio-spatial distinction in the analysis of Latin American women's lives. Nonetheless, as Rosario Montoya points out, most research on women and politics in contemporary Latin America continues to be framed in terms of this dichotomy, resulting in an almost exclusive focus on women's activity in the public domain.<sup>5</sup> (4)

The authors argue that existing evidence on Latin America, while incipient, points to gender equality in property as fundamental to ending women's subordination (9, 11). (7)  
In *Mujeres, genero e historia* Victoria Gonzalez discusses

Somocista women's role in shaping Nicaraguan political culture, arguing that women's understanding of and support for Somocismo was grounded in interests shaped by their biographies as classed and gendered subjects. (10)]

Kampwirth, Karen. "Abortion, Antifeminism, and the Return of Daniel Ortega: In Nicaragua, Leftist Politics?" *Latin American Perspectives* 35, no. 6 (2008): 122-36.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/27648142>.

[Contents: Thus Nicaragua joined a regional trend to the left, what has sometimes been called Latin America's "pink tide" (e.g., Castañeda, 2006;

Cleary, 2006; NACLA, 2007; Panizza, 2005 [QQ: 2004?]; but see Zovatto, 2007 [QQ: 2006?]: 24–26). In some Latin American countries, the pink tide has brought with it a limited expansion of reproductive freedom (Lehman, 2007; McKinley, 2007), but not in Nicaragua. Quite the opposite, the 2006 election illustrated another regional trend: the rise of politically sophisticated antifeminist movements in response to feminism's second wave (Buss and Herman, 2002; Druelle, 2000; González Ruiz, 2005, 2001; Htun, 2003: 143, 151–156; Kampwirth, 2006). In the Nicaraguan case, these two trends are related. (122-123)

In 2006 the FSLN seemed to reimagine the legacy of the revolution, and the new vision of what it meant to be a revolutionary was traditional Catholic rather than liberation theology Catholic, antifeminist rather than feminist. (124)

Yet despite all the important work it did, AMNLAE's role as support for the male-dominated FSLN impeded its ability to challenge sexual inequality. (125)

The PIE was a lobbying group that succeeded in promoting gender equality as a constitutional principle. In the 1987 Constitution, at least 10 articles make specific mention of women's rights (compared with none in the 1974 Constitution). Couples in common-law marriages (which are more common than legal marriages among Nicaragua's poor majority) were protected from discrimination, and no-fault divorce was permitted. The PIE did not last into the 1990s, but it left its mark on the constitution and on the women's movement. (126)

Seen from the perspective of Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo, it may be a left-wing project drained of principle or, to put it more kindly, a flexible left-wing project. This is something that arguably has happened to the left across the region (Panizza, 2005 [QQ: 2004?]: 717). But whether flexible or cynical, the return to the left in Nicaragua does not look very left-wing, at least not from a feminist perspective. (131)]

— "The Mother of the Nicaraguans: Dona Violeta and the UNO's Gender Agenda." *Latin American Perspectives* 23, no. 1 (1996): 67-86. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2633938>.

[Contents: Ever since President Chamorro as candidate Chamorro, the image of the tradition made the run taint by political experience has been clear. The symbol of tradition and manhood is a multifaceted one. Principally, he facets involved here were (1) loyal wife and widow, (2) reconciler, and (3) Virgin Mary. (68)

During the campaign, the emphasis was placed not only on the fact that she was the widow of Pedro Joaquín Bernal soon the type of wife she had been. As Donia Violeta made clear, she was a good traditional wife. In an interview early in the campaign, he told a reporter, 'I am not a feminist to do I wish to be one. I am a woman dedicated to my home as Pedro taught me. 'Later she would claim' to be marked with the branding iron of the Chamorro's' (Cuadra, 1990). (69)

The direction in which the UNO promised to take families was not forward towards a new egalitarian family but backward, to "reconvert" the "traditional nucleus" of the family. (70)

At first this focus on women's suffering may seem strange, in case women as a group had benefited from revolutionary changes. New economic opportunities for women were opened by reform in labor law, by social services such as childcare centers that freed women from some of the burden of their traditional role, and by expanded educational opportunities. New opportunities for reform in gender relations were created by innovations such as no-fault divorce and by the establishment of government agencies to help women put their new rights into practice. These opportunities were open, theoretically, to all women. But certain women, particularly older women, did not greatly benefit from them. These women, however, were not mobilized to the extent that young women were and were not in a position to take advantage of the opportunities. The Sandinistas offered to women, often experienced only a erosion of the limited privilege that age had given them within traditional family life. (71)

Secondly, like the Virgin, she could only plead the case of human abuse for God the Father. Donia Violeta was unable to act without a divine direction. (71)

I have described Donia Violeta as an alternative symbol of wife, widow, mother, and Virgin. All the facets of the symbol recharacterize by disservice to males—a subservient role that, in theory at least, is rewarded with respect and security. The symbol implies that women are basically incompetent, except within their traditional roles. (72)

Many women, especially poor women, are seeing the gender gains of the past decade eroded away. (73)

The mass entrance of women into the paid workforce is a trend with roots that go well beyond state policy but one that the previous administration did not encourage. To the extent that it can, the current administration ought to curtail this trend. After all, the UNO ran a platform of motherhood and, like Donia Violetas, should be dedicated to their homes (74)

Although it is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to recognize that for every antifeminist of the executive, the women's movement grows increasingly feminist and diverse. (75)

Since about 1988, the women's movement in Nicaragua has been in a process of diversifying, expanding, and becoming more radical. Part of that new radicalism (in the case of some branches of the movement) includes vocal support for gay rights. Perhaps the inclusion of gay rights on the women's movement's agenda influenced the FSLN's unanimous vote against 204.15. No doubt that vote was also (perhaps mainly) because they believed that 204 is unconstitutional. (80)]

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## Nicaragua Interviewees

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