

MISTRUST AND VIOLENCE IN NICARAGUA:

Ideology and Politics

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THE PATIENT IMPATIENCE. By Tomás Borge. (Willimantic, Conn.: Curbstone, 1992. Pp. 452. \$24.95 cloth.)

LA PRENSA, THE REPUBLIC OF PAPER. By Jaime Chamorro Cardenal. (New York: Freedom House, 1988. Pp. 189. \$22.95 cloth, \$9.95 paper.)

THE CIVIL WAR IN NICARAGUA: INSIDE THE SANDINISTAS. By Roger Miranda and William Ratliff. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1993. Pp. 308. \$32.95 cloth.)

LIFE IS HARD: MACHISMO, DANGER, AND THE INTIMACY OF POWER IN NICARAGUA. By Roger N. Lancaster. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992. Pp. 340. \$25.00 cloth.)

THE NEW INSURGENCIAS: ANTICOMMUNIST GUERRILLAS IN THE THIRD WORLD. By Michael Radu. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1990. Pp. 306. \$32.95 cloth.)

To read Nicaragua's labyrinthine political history is to discover that Nicaraguans have from the start lived and died constructing, disputing, and guarding their public identities. The letters written to the Spanish sovereigns by conquerors, bureaucrats, friars, and Indian communities reveal contentious men bent on proving themselves virtuous and their foes ignoble.¹ The testimonials of Nicaraguan *políticos* at the close of the twentieth century also reveal archetypal representations of good and evil battling one another.

Although this Manichean dichotomy seems antiquated, it remains central to political-ideological formation in Nicaragua. Since the early nineteenth century, Nicaraguan ideology has developed on two planes.

1. In this regard, Nicaraguans resemble other Latin Americans. They share a tradition of chronicling and corresponding with sovereigns that dates back to the beginning of the sixteenth century as well as a postcolonial tradition of pamphleteering aimed at "The Public." At the core of both practices was the contesting and defending of public identities. For illustrative documents, see *Nicaragua en los cronistas de Indias: Oviedo*, edited by Eduardo Pérez Valle (Managua: Fondo de Promoción Cultural, Banco de América, 1976); and *Letters and People of the Spanish Indies, Sixteenth Century*, edited by James Lockhart and Enrique Otte (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 1-14.

At the obvious level, Nicaraguans have been divided: first between “*los serviles*” (the servile) versus “*los fievres*” (the hotheads), then between Legitimists versus Democrats, followed by Conservatives versus Liberals, and finally Sandinistas versus their civic and military opponents in La Resistencia, also known as the Contras.² At a deeper level, however, Nicaraguans have remained ideologically united among themselves because they are still tightly connected to their colonial past.

Now, as then, Nicaraguans believe themselves to be under constant observation: a powerful judge is always watching them, assessing their character and deeds. This passive narcissism is not surprising when one recalls the bureaucratic-investigative nature of the colonial state, which was determined to stunt the emergence of local potentates in every corner of the *virreinos* and *capitanías generales*. Also, as the Spanish empire declined and its armada became less able to defend the isthmus from English pirates, cities like Granada suffered raids that traumatized major coastal settlements. The trauma carried over into the early decades of the postcolonial period, when Central American leaders felt that their República Federal was vulnerable to the expansiveness of the emergent world powers—Great Britain, the United States, and even France—whose liberal and republican philosophies they so admired.

Thus as independent Central America plunged into “anarchy,” its leaders time and again cried out: What will the civilized world think? What will become of our image abroad? For “*los notables*,” image was a matter of both pride and security. More than a century later, Carlos Fonseca, founder of the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN), composed the Sandinista oath in a similar spirit. From that day forward, every Sandinista militant swore before “the memory of all the heroes and martyrs for the liberation of Nicaragua, Latin America and all of humanity; before history itself . . . to defend our national honor and to fight for the redemption of the repressed and exploited. . . . If I betray this oath, a dishonorable death and disgrace will be my punishment” (cited in Borge’s *The Patient Impatience*, p. 242). Yet Nicaraguans also feel observed because they *are* being watched—mostly by one another. Neighborhoods, political meetings, villages, holy processions, universities all serve as Nicaraguan theaters, and what is on display is being disputed: the public identity of those onstage.

Nicaraguans tend to construct their identities from a set of core

2. Central Americans borrowed the appellations *serviles* and *fievres* from the political debate going on in Spain during the first decades of the nineteenth century between advocates of a constitutional monarchy and champions of unfettered kingly power. These terms were applied subsequently to participants in the Central American “debate” over annexation of the isthmus to Agustín de Iturbide’s ephemeral Mexican empire. Finally, in postcolonial Central America, the labels survived from earlier debates, as families and localities split into camps based on their memory of one another’s past stances.

virtues. Thus every major political movement in Nicaraguan history, including the FSLN, has expected its members to embody loyalty and self-abnegation, the quintessential attributes of the exemplary conqueror and colonist. Conversely, Nicaraguans have continued to see in their rivals—whether in business, love, or politics—the embodiment of “perfidy” and “egoism.” To “prove” to the world one’s own goodness and a rival’s wickedness is simultaneously to confirm the authenticity of one’s identity and to unmask the impostor. In short, it is the best way to succeed in competition. Such is the underlying worldview of Nicaraguans.

At first glance, Tomás Borge’s narrative of Nicaragua’s liberation, *The Patient Impatience*, does not seem to conform to this Manichean representation of the world because Borge writes the way Nicaraguans speak: exuberantly and irreverently. When killing time with idle talk, Nicaraguans claim to “especular sobre la inmortalidad del cangrejo” (speculate about the immortality of crabs). If they run to catch the bus, they will later recount their “marathon.” When reporting on a small-town scandal, they will attest to its “immense repercussions.” And being devotees of U.S. cinema, keen observers of inanimate objects, and experts on the national flora and fauna, Nicaraguans frequently strip individuals of their “Christian” names and call them instead by the names of matinee idols, villains, and monsters, or turn them into walking commodities, or even reduce them to parodies of animals and plants. Thus hapless Nicaraguans have found themselves stuck for life with nicknames like “Johnny Weissmuller” (for sporting an athletic build), “Whistle Face” (for having a long face), and “Coconut Tree” (for being unusually tall), to the point that acquaintances do not even know their actual names.

If Nicaraguan speech is replete with hyperbole and caricature, it is because Nicaraguans seek to depict their reality ever more precisely. This is no easy task. Reality, Nicaraguans believe, is a simple, immutable truth obfuscated by the elaborate schemes of their malicious rivals. So when it comes to the serious things in life—politics and history—Nicaraguans are passionately stark. For example, throughout the nineteenth century, caudillos routinely issued blazing manifestos and broadsides addressed to “El Público” in an effort to dispel the evil ploys thwarting their own righteous projects. Newspapers too dedicated themselves to this medieval proposition.³ And as Nicaragua entered the electronic age, the process of self-revelation and unmasking took to the airwaves.

During the first three-quarters of the twentieth century, Nicara-

3. Again, Nicaragua shares this tradition with other Latin American countries. In Argentina, for example, the tradition was exemplified by the pamphlets and newspapers put out by the “brutal tyrant” Juan Manuel de Rosas and by his foes, the “savage Unitarians.” For samples of Nicaraguan journalism in the nineteenth century, see *Catálogo de la Exposición Treinta Años de Periodismo en Nicaragua, 1830–1860* (Managua: Instituto Centroamericano de Historia, Universidad Centroamericana, n.d.).

guan “notables”—from the intellectuals of the Conservative and Liberal parties to their military caudillos—remained bent on settling past accounts. To this end, they authored political biographies and autobiographies intended to reveal and unmask definitively antagonists long dead. Harking back to colonial narrative tradition, these detailed and often convoluted historical accounts set out to refute “slanderous accusations” and to replace them with “The Truth.”⁴

As the twenty-first century looms ahead, the genre remains alive and well. Although the plots of contemporary autobiographies are more stylized and their contextual descriptions richer, the narratives retain the central intent of the classics: to show the public the “true character” of the antagonists in a national conflict and thus illuminate the clash between good and evil. In Borge’s narrative, the tropical heat and foliage and the colorful urban characters are almost palpable, but Nicaragua remains the stage for a barren morality play.

History according to Borge proceeds in uncluttered stages, with each stage a battle between two archetypal forces and each battle untainted by unholy alliances and internal betrayal. For example, according to Borge, U.S. *filibustero* William Walker came to Nicaragua in the mid-nineteenth century without any prompting from Nicaraguans (p. 62). Borge simply omits the historical fact that the Liberals of León (known then as Democrats) imported Walker in an effort to gain military advantage over the Conservatives (Legitimists) of Granada.⁵ In the twentieth century, the battle against the Somozas begins and ends for Borge with the FSLN. No mention is made of the series of “bourgeois uprisings” against the Somoza dictatorship from the 1940s to the 1960s, which led to imprisonment and death for many scions of distinguished families. As for the many “bourgeois” participants in the student movement and the FSLN itself, their names appear here and there, but Borge says little about their class background, even though class is crucial to his analytical dichotomization. Finally, he presents the United States as so evil that it actually designed the Alliance for Progress as a “clever conspiracy” (p. 171) and transformed Nicaragua into a “combination cemetery and whorehouse” (p. 64). No credit is given to U.S. labor unions for helping

4. Illustrative of the Liberal variant is the biography of nineteenth-century Liberal caudillo Máximo Jerez by Sofonías Salvatierra, *Máximo Jerez inmortal: comentario polémico* (Managua: Tipografía Progreso, 1950). For a Conservative treatment of the same caudillo (and his foe, Conservative caudillo Fruto Chamorro), see Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, *Máximo Jerez y sus contemporáneos* (Managua: Editorial La Prensa, 1937). Again, this phenomenon extends throughout Latin America. For a fascinating overview of the Argentine manifestation, see Nicolás Shumway, *The Invention of Argentina* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993).

5. The Liberals (or Democrats) were not the first to import foreign soldiers but were merely following an established tradition dating back to the first war after independence. For a succinct commentary on this point, see Salvatierra, *Máximo Jerez*, 70.

organize and fortify independent labor associations in Nicaragua, nor is credit given to the Nicaraguan people, many of whom stand accused of prostituting themselves for a handful of dollars and thus forcing the "righteous and valiant" to fight and die defending the country's virtue.

The journalistic variant of this kind of narrative is typified by *La Prensa, the Republic of Paper* by Jaime Chamorro Cardenal. This account of Nicaraguan politics centers on the Chamorro family and their newspaper. The clan is presented as the champion of an "authentic democracy" conceived along broad familial lines, while *La Prensa* is presented as the "voice of the national family." Thus the newspaper is presented as speaking out on behalf of the national family's "oppressed members" by "imploring" the literate to help their less fortunate "brothers and sisters" and publicizing the wheelings and dealings of the corrupt and cruel Somozas (pp. 6–7).

Because the Chamorros and *La Prensa* are the champions of authenticity in *The Republic of Paper*, the FSLN is the impostor that downplayed its Marxist-Leninist ideology from the start in order to "dupe" authentic revolutionaries. The dichotomy in thinking is classic but once again problematic. As Chamorro Cardenal himself states, Pedro Joaquín Chamorro "had no illusions" about the FSLN but still entered into an "uneasy alliance" with some of its leading members (p. 9). Moreover, after his assassination, the Chamorros "loaned" fifty thousand dollars to the FSLN for a "revolutionary operation" left "unspecified" (p. 11). By mid-1978, revolutionary operations were almost invariably violent, and the Chamorros must have known that their loan would likely finance bloodshed. Finally, after the Sandinista Revolution triumphed, the Chamorros' *La Prensa* (the recipient of generous assistance from abroad) actively helped the FSLN transform the Somocista official paper into a revolutionary publication, *Barricada* (p. 15). To this day, *Barricada* is edited by Pedro Joaquín Chamorro's youngest son, Carlos Fernando Chamorro Barrios, who is struggling to gain political autonomy for the newspaper and to endow it with a professional code of journalistic ethics.

Readers will find other examples of alliances between camps. They abound, in fact, because behind the façade of obdurate identities, Nicaraguan antagonists are constantly forging and breaking alliances. These differ from "pacts," which are viewed as disgraceful precisely because they brazenly bring together "inherently inimical" identities and thus affront the Nicaraguan worldview. The most notorious pact in recent history was the ruling triumvirate put together by Anastasio Somoza DeBayle on completing his presidential term in the early 1970s, with the cooperation of Fernando Aguero, a charismatic Conservative opponent of the regime.⁶ At that point, the Nicaraguan economy was prospering,

6. The triumvirate was composed of Fernando Aguero, a Conservative, and two Liberals beholden to Somoza, General Roberto Martínez and Alfonso Lobo Cordero. The triumvirate

and precisely because Aguero was an orator capable of attracting Conservative crowds as large as those amassed by the Somoza branch of the Liberal machine, the collective identities of the antagonists were highly visible. In this signal miscalculation, Aguero, emboldened by popular support, tried to reform the system from within. His followers, however, viewed his participation in the pact as a shameful betrayal.

Unlike pacts, "alliances" are tacit and are forged at moments of plasticity, when political agents with different agendas have not yet publicly defined their identities, or when members of well-defined groups have begun to struggle internally and to reassess from within who is "authentic" and who is "an impostor." In the late 1970s, for example, the Ortega brothers Humberto and Daniel forged an alliance with representatives of the aristocracy and the wealthy bourgeoisie on the basis of their shared anti-Somocismo, leaving all other defining attributes vague. In other words, they united simply as "authentically virtuous" Nicaraguans to battle an immoral regime.

After the FSLN assumed power, however, its broad alliance began to erode internally at the elite level but not on the basis of social class. The Chamorro family, for instance, began to split internally between Sandinistas and non-Sandinistas as individual members of the clan fought to fill the vacuum of preeminence left behind by Pedro Joaquín, Sr. The anti-Sandinista Chamorros retained control of *La Prensa*, while the others joined the officialist FSLN media.

Once out in the open, the battle between the FSLN and the Chamorros of *La Prensa* proved conventional on two counts. First, each camp sought to unmask the other. *La Prensa* challenged the *comandantes'* "revolutionary mystique" by pointing out their new lavish lifestyle. The *comandantes* in turn labeled the Chamorros as "traitors" and "counterrevolutionaries" (p. 30), leading to immediate mutual rancor. After all, the identity of the FSLN "militant" was supposed to be that of a self-abnegating soldier willing to die for his "brothers," particularly the poor ones. The Chamorros viewed themselves as selfless notables waging a prolonged war against the tyrannical dynasty that had oppressed the "national family" for so long. Predictably, both camps perceived the accusations leveled at them as "slander" and "character assassination," and more important, as confirmation of the other side's perversity.

Second, the FSLN unleashed its *turbas divinas* ("divine mobs") on *La Prensa*. As Jaime Chamorro Cardenal complains, in deploying plain-

constituted the formal government at the time of the Managua earthquake, a national tragedy that Somoza treated as a business opportunity. Aguero objected vehemently to Somoza's interference in the management and finances of the reconstruction process. Somoza responded by entering into a tacit alliance with the dominant leaders of the Conservative party to remove Aguero from the government. Thus Aguero's last stand was also his first step into anonymity.

clothes groups armed with machetes and stones, the Sandinistas were refining the Somoza practice of sending thugs after the opposition (p. 39). Nicolasa Sevilla, the most notorious of the mob leaders in the days of the Somozas, has now become a prominent character in Nicaraguan folklore. If a woman is called "a Nicolasa," she stands accused by that single name of being mercenary, loud, vulgar, and rough.

This kind of violent mobilization goes back even further than the Somozas. In colonial times, during the transition to independence and in the remainder of the nineteenth century, notables agitated from behind the scenes, encouraging "the crowd" to "demonstrate its indignation" through riots.⁷ This practice, which survives to this day, was crucial during the public burial of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, as Sandinista organizers (working clandestinely) seized the opportunity to stage "spontaneous expressions" of popular anger. As his coffin was carried to the cemetery, the "mourners" burned and looted. The Chamorro clan did not object then and still perceives the funereal upheaval as a genuine expression of popular grief and rage over the martyrdom of the standard-bearer of the family, defined in their minds as the Chamorros and the nation.

If neither *The Patient Impatience* nor *La Prensa, the Republic of Paper* can be taken at face value, both are nevertheless rich material for interpretation.⁸ They represent important records of lived politics but are also textual expressions of a worldview and political culture that can be properly understood only in historical perspective. The same thing is true to a lesser degree of *The Civil War in Nicaragua: Inside the Sandinistas*. This account was coauthored by Roger Miranda, a former Sandinista who once operated at the highest levels of the party and the military as a close assistant to General Humberto Ortega. Miranda was thus a minor notable, an important insider but not a "personage." Traditionally, such minor notables (usually intellectuals) are the ones who report on the internal contradictions within their camps. They are often disillusioned by the disparity between the personages' avowed ideals and their actual conduct and disgruntled about having been asked to walk in the shadow of leaders who have lost their "mystique."

Disillusioned and disgruntled, Miranda set out to "unmask" his own FSLN, and it is from this perspective that *The Civil War in Nicaragua* must be read. For example, it is no accident that Miranda devotes major attention to the construction of the Sandinista mystique, the virtuous

7. See Consuelo Cruz Sequeira, "The Political Culture of Order and Anarchy: Remembrance and Imaginative Power In Central America," Ph.D. Dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1994.

8. *Interpretation* is meant here simply as "close reading" based on the incorporation of history and political culture, as opposed to a broader poststructuralist blurring of genres and disciplines. For a parsimonious discussion of the latter, see Jean Franco, "Remapping Culture," in *Americas: New Interpretative Essays*, edited by Alfred Stepan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

identity of the movement and its members. Miranda reveals that the leaders of the FSLN expected every militant to display “humility, modesty, honesty, discipline, devotion to duty, and submission to the National Directorate” (p. 11). He also reports that “womanizing” and excessive drinking were frowned upon. While still in hiding, Borge himself was severely reprimanded by the directorate for his liaison with a comrade’s mate (p. 12). Borge had committed a dual infraction because a true Sandinista was supposed to be a man without vices and the Sandinista family was sacrosanct. He was not the only sinner, however. Humberto Ortega profoundly disappointed his admirers when, once in power, he too began to infringe on the marital turf of his closest revolutionary “brothers.”

These infractions are the stuff of gossip, but they are far from inconsequential. While seemingly random, gossip reveals the normative dictates and injunctions that govern the gossipers. Nicaraguans (particularly middle-class young men like the Ortegas, who were educated by the Christian Brothers and the Jesuits) grow up in the culture of the catechism and the ten commandments. That is, they grow up believing in sacred duties and grave sins. Even if they discard religious practice as adults, they retain its core organizing principle of good versus evil. And one of the greatest evils is to “pose” as a virtuous self. This belief gave rise to the resentments that accumulated against the victorious comandantes among the Sandinista rank and file.

Miranda reports on other violations by the comandantes of their own code of virtues—violations that Nicaraguans have now denounced and ridiculed for years. For example, although the FSLN was supposed to be a brotherhood (and the Salvadoran guerrillas were called “cousins”), the comandantes vied fiercely with one another for titles, rank, and power (pp. 26–27, 45–47). They also mistrusted one another deeply and feared comrades who could display verbal prowess before the masses, especially Borge (p. 24). Moreover, while materialism was supposedly a horrendous vice, the comandantes came to value highly the ability to afford “gifts” for subordinates and followers (pp. 39, 55). And although caudillismo was supposed to yield to collegial decision-making, the Ortega brothers, like the Somoza brothers, emerged clearly as joint *primi inter pares* (pp. 19–43).

Once again, these facts need to be placed in historical perspective lest readers conclude wrongly that the FSLN is somehow uniquely perverse—perverse enough to carry out a revolution only to end up replicating the Somoza regime. The earlier regime too needs to be put in historical perspective in order to assess more accurately what represents continuity and what is rupture in the institutional and cultural development of Nicaraguan politics. A review article cannot undertake either task adequately, but a few points should be made here. To begin with, intra-elite suspicion and jealousy have always been intractable problems among

Central American politicians. In an atmosphere of cutthroat competition, elites have looked among their closest relatives for “natural allies.” The Somozas and the Ortegas are merely the best-known examples of a tradition that dates back to the first Jefe and Vice Jefe de Estado in independent Nicaragua, Manuel Antonio de La Cerda and Juan Arguello, who were chosen for those high posts partly because of their family ties. The hope was that family ties would keep them from turning on one another. In that instance, the formula worked only briefly until the relatives eventually became divided among themselves and plunged the country into civil war.⁹

Similarly, intra-elite fear of dazzling orators also goes back to the postcolonial era. Since then, elites (including the FSLN) have operated on the premise that the uneducated are “innocents” who can be led astray or transformed by potent speakers (recalling the notion of “the word” as a source of transformative power, which was central to the Christianizing mission).¹⁰ Elites have dreaded eloquence in others particularly because it has often been an attribute of caudillos.

Caudillismo itself has been perceived as dangerous in two ways: it alters the balance of power and is itself a highly coveted attribute. The rank of caudillo is inherently desirable as the most exalted role for a public personage. Even in the context of the FSLN’s National Directorate, the uncharismatic Ortegas strove mightily to establish themselves as caudillos. Humberto Ortega astutely chose the title of general because of its cultural connotations. And both he and brother Daniel became proficient “gift-givers,” thus establishing the subtle ties that entangle superiors and subordinates in a complex web of power, mutual interests, and emotional relations.¹¹ Today the brothers remain preeminent among the FSLN, even though their fraternal alliance is not free of conflict and their preeminence is contested within the party.

Keen contestation goes on everywhere in Nicaraguan society, as is shown in Roger Lancaster’s *Life is Hard: Machismo, Danger, and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua*. Starting from the premise that power also takes “mundane forms,” Lancaster sets out to “deconstruct systems of power” in a Managua working-class neighborhood (p. xviii). An anthropologist, Lancaster zeroes in on the proverbs on people’s lips, which carry social knowledge that should not be ignored. He wisely treats peo-

9. For a history in English of the civil war unleashed by these two notables, see Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of Central America*, vol. 3, 1801–1887 (San Francisco, Calif.: The History Company, 1887); reprinted in *The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft*, vol. 8 (New York: Arno and McGraw-Hill, 1960).

10. For collected primary documents in which this fear of rhetorical potency is articulated by Central Americans time and again, see various issues of *Anales de la Sociedad de Geografía e Historia de Guatemala* and *Revista de la Academia de Geografía e Historia de Nicaragua*.

11. Liberal caudillos have been some of the most accomplished gift-givers, most notably José Santos Zelaya (around the turn of the century) and all the Somozas.

ple as inhabitants not of a one-dimensional world but of many realms—family, community, race, gender, and sexuality. Lancaster’s analytical intuition pays off, at least to the extent that readers must confront the political significance of the discourse and practices of popular culture.

Such discourse and practices are both conventional and transformative. Gossip and gift-giving, *compadrazgo* (the reciprocal ties of god-parenting), and the violence of machismo are the weapons individuals choose to dominate and challenge one another. But these means are also the threads woven by Nicaraguans to construct and repair communal nets. Making this duality of culture and its relevance to politics explicit is Lancaster’s significant accomplishment.

Ultimately, however, Lancaster is constrained by his ahistorical perspective and by the attempt to encase his important and complex findings about gender, sexuality, community, race, and family within the boundaries of class.¹² Consider the following statement: “The power [a gift] carries is the power to compel reciprocity: that is, it bears a moral and ethical imperative. It establishes something like a long conversation carried out between persons engaged in its friendly network: words, favors, warmth, and goods circulate in an ongoing reciprocal fashion.” This is an insightful application of Pierre Bourdieu’s “dialectic of strategies” to the Nicaraguan gift culture.¹³ But Lancaster then proceeds to reduce that culture in scope and complexity in the next sentence. “In the sense that these transactions [gift-giving] are ‘economic,’ they represent a simultaneously friendly and moral economy of the poor, against and within a larger hostile economy marked by scarcity and exploitation” (p. 57). Both the “long conversation” and the “friendly and moral economy” that Lancaster found in his Managua working-class neighborhood actually pervade all socioeconomic levels, in prosperous as well as trying times. Poor and rich alike routinely use gifts to provide and exact support from relatives, neighbors, and friends. They also use gifts to prove their own generosity and dispute someone else’s or to boast and humiliate. The notables and the faceless, the caudillos and their foot soldiers, the matrons and their servants all deploy gifts, a subject that indirectly leads back to that of gossip.

As Lancaster asserts, gossip is “not a trivial matter,” especially if the topic is the kind of corruption at the apex of government that often attends “gift-giving” (p. 71). As Lancaster suspects, the popular bitterness

12. In contrast to Lancaster’s nuanced view of Nicaraguan popular culture, his view of Nicaragua’s political history is rather simplistic. The little he has to say about it merely reiterates the leftist variant of the Manichean interpretations discussed in this essay. For example, Lancaster asserts, “Nicaragua’s modern political history is a history of U.S. intervention, of political and economic dependency cultivated by Washington, and of sporadic, usually defeated rebellions against imperialism and exploitation” (p. 1).

13. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 3–9.

that such gossip nurtures and spreads probably had much to do with the FSLN's electoral defeat (p. 71). Gossip has other functions as well. In the neighborhood analyzed by Lancaster, as elsewhere in Nicaragua, it carries "information" and serves "strategic" purposes. He also points out that gossip can be "defensive" or "offensive" (p. 74).

Lancaster fails, however, to link gift-giving and gossip to the politics of public identity, a serious flaw that runs through his analysis of machismo and violence as well. For example, he does not notice that because Nicaraguan neighborhoods are inward-looking theaters in which everyone knows everyone else, women try to "strike back" at their machista male partners by gossiping with their female friends, who impugn the aggressor's behavior in a circle that ripples outward over time. Eventually, one of two things is likely to happen: either the encircling whispers of public censure will force the offending man to "come out" into the "street" and "punish" the woman for her "slander campaign" before onlookers; or the woman, calculating that gossip has finally shaped public opinion in her favor, will take the conflict to the "street," where she can "expose" her victimizer. Either way, violence often erupts as man and woman act out their "righteous anger" before their audience.¹⁴

It is puzzling that Lancaster, despite his theoretical sophistication, fails to make the connection between the contestation and affirmation of public identity on the one hand and cultural representations on the other. He argues perceptively, for instance, that "speech is first and foremost a form of practice" and that "only an impoverished and ultimately impractical conception of speech (and text) follows from a premature separation of signification from practice" (p. 101). Yet Lancaster believes that a Managua neighbor who had the flu was astounded to learn from him that chicken soup is endowed with remedial properties. Lancaster double-checked with other neighbors to see if the ailing woman's astonishment had been genuine and reports that they too were quite surprised about the soup's medicinal powers (p. 78). But in fact, Central Americans (and Caribeños in general) have always been great believers in the "magic of soups." Lancaster's neighbors were simply helping him save face by "dissimulating" his imperfect grasp of local knowledge (used here in the sense defined by Clifford Geertz). The women of the barrio may well have thought that such dissimulation was the least they owed a foreign man who had been kind enough to go into the kitchen and cook for a woman. At any rate, some time later, when Lancaster himself succumbed to the flu, another neighbor fed him chicken soup, claiming that it was a traditional Nicaraguan remedy (p. 89). Lancaster concluded from this

14. Their anger is not feigned. Because men and women in Nicaragua cannot rely on a well-institutionalized, impartial judicial system to adjudicate their disputes and because they also lack the resources to take these disputes to court, they turn to the informal institutions available. These institutions are, *a fortiori*, culturally shaped.

apparent about-face that through the “route of gossip and small talk” and “within the space of three years, chicken soup had not only become institutionalized . . . but had also become ensconced in ‘tradition,’ mustering all the authority of a timeless remedy” (p. 89). Clearly not. The folk prescription had been around long before the anthropologist arrived on the scene, along with the custom of polite dissimulation.

Such interpretative errors are potentially serious. For example, the chicken soup incident is used by Lancaster to buttress the theoretical argument that tradition is a “form of discourse” that is “not to be confused with its ever-shifting contents,” even though it invariably “appeals to the self-evident, to the perpetual world of common sense” (p. 89). But if tradition is as substantively fluid as this claim suggests, then one is left to wonder why even advanced industrialized societies have such difficulty “modernizing” themselves out of, say, sexism, or why Latin American elites have so often failed to assimilate the democratic values they have touted since independence.

A more plausible claim would have ascribed a supple tenacity to tradition (much in evidence in the way the Nicaraguans dealt with Lancaster himself). In the relationship between the locals and the U.S. anthropologist, readers can perceive that tradition accommodates enduring views and habits as individuals experience the jolts of surprise, and tradition also conciliates norms and tactics in the face of power shifts. For example, when Lancaster nursed the ailing woman, the latter received his comfort graciously and turned a blind eye to his imperfect grasp of Nicaraguan ways. Predictably, word soon got around that kindness had been repaid in the coin of dissimulation. Then Lancaster himself fell ill. Now it was the locals who fed him soup. But this time, they felt entitled not to dissimulate. The woman who fed him soup labeled it as a Nicaraguan remedy and in doing so repaid kindness with kindness but also reclaimed from the foreigner the local knowledge that had belonged to Nicaraguans all along. In this circuitous way, the locals attained two seemingly contradictory objectives: they obeyed their own rules of decorum by showing gratitude to the considerate anthropologist, and they vindicated their cultural patrimony, which that same anthropologist had unwittingly diminished.

Misreading and diminishing of Nicaraguan culture due to scant historical background is also a problem in Michael Radu’s *The New Insurgencies: Anticommunist Guerrillas in the Third World*. In this collection of essays on guerrillas fighting “Marxist-Leninist” regimes from Eritrea and Mozambique to Afghanistan and Nicaragua, Radu provides the introduction plus the chapters on Angola and the Nicaraguan resistance movement. I can judge only the contribution on Nicaragua, which suffers from typical flaws but has one unusual merit: Radu is very well informed on such topics as the socioeconomic composition of the FSLN and the

Contras, from the leadership levels down to the rank and file and foot soldiers. He also demonstrates detailed knowledge of the organizational, logistical, and military challenges facing the resistance movement in its struggle against the FSLN. Radu comments astutely on the relationship between the economy and the FSLN's political fate, and at a time when the FSLN had not yet been voted out of power. Finally, he makes the subtle observation that the resistance movement has been misunderstood by foreign advocates and opponents alike (p. 259).

Yet even though Radu himself cannot be said to have misunderstood the resistance movement (whose rank and file he seems to sympathize with and respect), he has not understood it either. Human beings engaged in an existential struggle cannot be captured on paper by description alone. And in the end, Radu's accomplishment is a descriptive one. For example, he states that in Nicaragua, political violence is an "accepted means of political change" but he says nothing about the reasons (p. 10). Radu also notes that war has been a fixture of politics in Nicaraguan history, yet he explains the emergence of anticommunist guerrillas as a reaction that takes place in societies where Marxist-Leninist regimes seek to harden a previously "soft state" (in Gunnar Myrdal's sense) (p. 5). The contradiction is plain, however: Nicaraguan governments have faced armed opposition time and again, long before even the softest of states existed.¹⁵

Not surprisingly, Radu unwittingly abandons the broad "hardening state" explanation and relies increasingly on the specifics of the Nicaraguan case. Accordingly, he argues that the resistance movement arose in reaction to the FSLN's "performance" in power, particularly its catastrophic management and restructuring of the economy (pp. 259, 264). This explanation is partially true. But as Radu also indicates, the impetus of the Contras—a complex amalgam of former Guardias Civiles, former Sandinistas, *campesinos*, professionals, and intellectuals—was ideological in nature. According to Radu, this ideological component can be seen as an expression of democratic ideas (p. 15). Again, this assertion is only partially accurate. The internal struggles among the Contras were often propelled by bitter clashes in which the antagonists perceived themselves as "democrats" and "antidemocrats." More important, beneath these labels were passions and interests (to borrow from Albert Hirschman) that have been at play for decades in Nicaraguan politics. These passions and interests, as in the case of the FSLN comandantes, had to do

15. Throughout most of the turbulent nineteenth century, no national state existed in Nicaragua, only fragile city-states that broke down every time a government collapsed. Governments fell when they proved unable to withstand armed opposition, leaving behind no structural or institutional legacy that might serve as the basis for ongoing state-building. In short, truncated governance was a consequence of sociopolitical instability and violent politics. Attempts at state development did not cause such instability and violence.

with power conceived of as the ability to command authority on the basis of honor and status within the bounds of a zero-sum game. Honor and status—crucial to public identity—were viewed as the rewards accruing to the virtuous. Thus Contra combatants and elites alike strove to prove themselves superior to their fellow Nicaraguans in La Resistencia. The combatants relied on their military valor and prowess, while the elites resorted to intrigue. Hence the high rate of alliance formation and dissolution among the leaders, to the neglect of their avowed purpose of political representation of the combatants.

For foreign analysts to take at face value the “democratic” utterances of the resistance movement is as imprudent as accepting the “liberationist” talk of the FSLN. Neither rhetoric can be ignored, but both must be “interpreted” in the context of their shared cultural and historical background. To do otherwise is to be lured into the realm where images and rhetoric seem to be divorced from practice. Worse yet, it is to accept the erroneous notion that sociopolitical conflict necessarily emanates from deep ideological and structural contradictions. Nicaraguans seek to vindicate their respective interests, to be sure. But they routinely do so by violent means because, regardless of class or party affiliation, they share a passionate view of life as a clash between good and evil. Thus beneath dictatorship and civil war lies a structural uniformity: a deeply rooted ordered view of the world. Perhaps systemic transformation requires that Nicaraguans challenge and dismantle the ordered Manichean beliefs and attendant practices that continue to alienate us from one another.