

## SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND REVOLUTION: THE CASE OF NICARAGUA

José Luis Coraggio\*

### I. Theorizing about social movements and social struggle.

The decade of the 1960's witnessed the emergence of new ideas about social struggle. These ideas were inspired by the new organizational practices and forms of development which social forces in Europe and the United States were adopting. These forces or 'social movements' as they are usually referred to, are organized around specific demands (housing, urban services, the liberation of women, environmental conservation, the anti-nuclear struggle, etc.).

In many cases, these movements are engaged in a struggle with State institutions; sometimes however, their actions are directed at other types of organizations.

The multi-class nature of these movements, their great mobilizing capacity plus the fact that their demands were acquiring a radical character – and could therefore not be met without a profound transformation of the existing social system- all these things attracted the attention of political parties and social theorists alike.

The political parties saw a challenge which consisted of trying to articulate, to strengthen, and to regulate these forces in line with traditional forms of political struggle. The theorists were faced with the need to understand the consequences of these developments from political theory, in particular for theories of a revolutionary character which claimed to be providing a scientific basis for the practice of social transformation. In some cases, pressing political circumstances have led researchers to reach theoretically questionable conclusions, based perhaps more on ideological predispositions than on scientific analysis.<sup>1</sup>

In both instances, the fact that social movements became fashionable led to their proliferation at the conceptual level. Classification systems were developed and various attributes of given populations (gender, age, territorial situation, consumption of particular goods, ethnic identity, nationality, fiscal status etc. ) were measured and categorized in order to nourish speculation on their 'agitational or anti-system potential'. Simultaneously , these ideas, along with their corresponding political practices, spread to other continents, particularly to Latin America where in

---

<sup>1</sup> See the pioneering work of Manuel Castells and J. Lojkin on urban social movements and their 'explanation' on the basis of the concepts of reproduction of the labour force or of the general conditions of production.

\* CRIES, Managua. The author wishes to thank the Guggenheim Foundation for supporting the research in Nicaragua, and the Center for Latin American Research and Documentation (CEDLA) where, as a visiting researcher, he wrote the first version of this paper.

some situations –by no means in all of them- they were in line with local developments.<sup>1</sup>

This process can be characterized as an *analytical moment* when societies are ‘pulverized’ –in conceptual as well as in organizational terms- into these simple determinations situated in a variety of social contradictions. However just as theoretical analyticism represents a failure of scientific practice if the movement towards *synthesis and reconstruction of the object* is not completed, so practical-organizational analyticism rapidly leads to a waste of energy and loses its effectiveness, in the absence of a *conjunctural accumulation of social forces* able to effectively challenge the existing system.

From this perspective, it becomes theoretically necessary, on the one hand, to reconstruct the concepts of ‘people’ as a synthesis (articulation) of a multiplicity of determinations and, on the other hand, politically necessary to critically reconsider the role of the *revolutionary party* as the articulator (synthesizer) of the various social forces which demonstrate a potential for action directed against the system.

To characterize the ‘people’ as a social class with a theoretically pre-determined ‘historical destiny’, and to assign to a particular party, viewed as the vehicle of this ‘objective conscience’, the role of *subject* of the social revolution, can now be done in a way which brings new elements to the discussion of the social revolution. Nevertheless, as long as the ‘problem of the people’ continues to be seen as a mere question of conceptual definition, separate from the real problem of self-perpetuation of the vanguards, our progress would still remain limited. It should also be said that the need for a vanguard cannot be put into question without falling into the trap of spontaneism.

In our opinion, a real break takes place when the concept of ‘people’ is redefined in terms of identity and organizational factors, and when this is coupled with the idea of a *complex subject* which corresponds neither to a class, a party or a movement, but rather to a *hegemonic system*.<sup>2</sup> Here, the concept of ‘people’ does not rest on what is basically an economistic theory of the inevitable tendencies of capitalism society which, in any case, would be accelerated by the actions of the vanguards. On the contrary, the concrete contradiction which run through the State and civil society, the differential positions of the *social agents* in material, ideological or organizational terms, will provide the ‘objective’ basis for an analysis which – from the perspective of power relations- will make it possible to develop a strategy of popular hegemony. This primacy of the political in relation to revolutionary practice does not make it any less necessary –quite the

---

<sup>1</sup> To the point where we have asked ourselves during this Workshop whether *Sendero Luminoso* in Peru is a ‘social movement’

<sup>2</sup> See: Ernesto Laclau, ‘Socialisme et transformation des logiques hégémoniques’, in C. Buci-Glucksmann (ed), *La gauche, le pouvoir, le socialisme*, Paris, PUF, 1983; Chantal Mouffe, ‘Socialisme, démocratie et nouveaux mouvements sociaux’, in the same work; Laclau and Mouffe, ‘Socialist Strategy –where next?’ in *Marxism Today*, January 1981; Bob Jessop, ‘The Political Indeterminacy of Democracy’, in A. Hunt, *Marxism and Democracy*. In fact this problematic of the social movements is closely related to the critique of ‘real socialism’ and of ‘real democracy’, as well as with the current which sees the struggle for democracy in Latin America as a popular, not necessarily a bourgeois, struggle.

contrary- to take account of class oppositions and to move towards an eventual theoretical reconstruction of economic laws and their historical tendencies.

By observing practice as such, we see the impossibility of establishing one-to-one correspondences between concrete agents and specific identities (determination of gender, class, age, ethnic identity etc.). Given that the diverse contradictions underlying these identities do not necessarily converge, neither in a single individual-agent or organization nor at the level of the people as a whole, it becomes impossible to reduce the identification of the 'popular' to a single determination. At the same time, an effective hegemonic practice does not presuppose a given complex subject but sets out to reconstitute the people. This, in turn, requires the elaboration of an articulated discourse, the *popular project*, which makes explicit in concrete terms the content of the new society yet to be constructed. Far from being a utopia, the popular project is a viable proposal for a struggle waged in solidarity against an oppressive system, where effectiveness of action and possible outcomes can be foreseen, and where conjunctural analysis and prospective allow popular ideologies to advance. This must take place in a climate of respect for existing autonomies and identities where there is a simultaneous articulation and development of these same identities.

Moreover, insofar as power relations are not reduced to relations 'between' the State and Civil Society, but are seen to be present in various instances and institutions of society as a whole, the liberation project of the people cannot be reduced to the idea of 'seizure' of governmental power by a given oppositional social entity; rather it presupposes a permanent *revolution of civil society* and thus a continuous *transformation of the subject*, that is, the people.

In this paper, we shall attempt to discuss the question of whether the perspective described so far can have universal application, basing our discussion on the experience of the Sandinista Popular Revolution, some of whose specific features are described further on. Then, toward the end of the article, we shall return to the theoretical problematic.

## II The practice of social transformation in Nicaragua.

### II.1. Armed struggle, contrahegemonic practice and insurrection.

Popular insurrection, involving a breakdown of the economic system, a permanent state of siege directed at the enemy and the coming together of all the identities of a population rising against an oppressive regime, represents a moment in the history of a people. Specifically, it is a moment when contradictions become fused together and social forces have but a single objective: the overthrow of a regime.

In Nicaragua, this moment would not have arrived in 1979 had it not been for the long standing presence of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) on the political scene. Its very survival as a guerrilla force, through

and bad times, served as a constant reminder of the possibility of challenging the Somoza regime. But its organic ties with the masses only became fully developed during the two years before its triumph. Until that time, the FSLN conducted military actions as well as partial contrahegemonic practices through becoming involved in organizing students, women, workers, neighbourhoods, in what could be called a passive accumulation of forces.<sup>3</sup> 'Accumulation of forces is only possible in specific conjunctural situation, otherwise it cannot take place'.<sup>4</sup> A strategy of insurrection implies that organization no longer precedes action since the challenge to all of the institutions which reproduce the system of repression is simultaneous, involving unequal forces, growing as events unfold establishing spontaneous solidarities against a common enemy, one which is so obvious that it does not require any form of codification. To have shown up the repressive and exploitative nature of the regime, dooming to failure any attempt at camouflaging or reforming it, to have demonstrated its political and military vulnerability, these are undoubted achievements of the FSLN acting as vanguard. However, in the context of the insurrection, the FSLN often follows and acts in support of the masses rather than the opposite.<sup>5</sup>

Even were the FSLN to have had a more global vision of the secondary contradictions and their possible articulation, at the moment of insurrection the various identities of the people came together and the common objective was seen to predominate: to destroy the regime and its various politico-military agents. The popular organizations have served more as a network of communication than as a channel for conducting specific struggles. It is important to understand that even though organizations with specific demands conducting the struggle in particular ways were present, this was not a universal phenomenon and, in any event, tended to vary according to the conjunctural situation. For example, the main demands underlying the struggle of AMPRONAC (Association of Women concerned with the National Problem) were related to the question of human rights, of the disappeared and of support for the mothers of victims of the National Guard, rather than typical feminist demands. Again, while students and workers did organize within their places of study and work, as the struggle developed unemployment increased dramatically and the schools were closed down. Students and workers then moved back into their neighbourhoods and the CDC (Civil Defense Committees) benefited from this new organizational capacity coming to supplement the neighbourhoods' existing organizational

---

<sup>3</sup> See Humberto Ortega Saavedra, *Sobre la insurrección*, La Habana, Ed. de Ciencias Sociales, 1981. On the origins of the mass organizations associated with the FSLN before the triumph, see CIERA, *La Democracia participativa en Nicaragua*, Managua, May 1984. Certain organizations were under the FSLN's direct control, such as, in the trade union area, the Trade Union Movement of the Working People (MSPT), the Revolutionary Workers' Committees (COR), and the Committee for Workers' Struggle (CLT), all these in urban areas; then the Committee of Rural Workers organized initially in 1977 and which comprised workers, semiproletarians and small agricultural producers, later to become the Association of Rural Workers (ATC); on the student front, the Revolutionary Student Front, the Revolutionary Christian Movement, The Sandinista Revolutionary Youth, the Nicaraguan Revolutionary Youth, the School Students' Movement, the Association of Secondary School Students and the Managua Federation of Youth Movements; at the neighbourhood level, the FSLN called for the setting up of the Civil Defense Committees (CDC) which were to play a crucial role during the insurrection. Also in 1977 the Association of Women concerned with the National Problem (AMPRONAC), clearly directed by the FSLN, was created.

<sup>4</sup> Humberto Ortega Saavedra, op. cit.

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem, Passim.

base. In fact, the various mass organizations did not so much affirm and defend specific interests on the basis of their particular identities but rather they used these identities as a means of mobilizing social forces for a frontal struggle against the Somoza regime. Thus, the student organizations came to play a fundamental role by providing cadres for the rural guerrilla struggle.

We are thus faced with a momentary universalization, a massification of the people, and a contradiction in the attempt to organize specific social movements and to salvage their differentiated demands; one which was to continue after the triumph, in some cases –as that of the Association of Nicaraguan Women Luisa Amanda Espinoza (AMLAE)- leading to differences in outlook between the Nicaraguan organizations and equivalent organizations abroad.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, when the FSLN reached the moment of triumph with the people, it was at the center of a broad anti-Somocista front, something which would apparently imply a *fading out of the class content* of the revolutionary project. Nevertheless the concrete conditions of the triumph, involving the total dismantling of the National Guard and the creation of the Popular Revolutionary Army as well as unceasing efforts to consolidate the popular organizations, were to ensure the defeat of an emergency project articulated by the financial bourgeoisie designed to convert it into a hegemonic or 'dictatorial force without Somoza'.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, by ensuring the unity of broad range of social forces struggling against *somocismo* and its substitutes –supported until the last moment by the United States Administration- the FSLN succeeded in neutralizing the imperialist project in all of its variants, in such a way as to ensure that the class content of the revolution could not be put into question, given the characteristics of its social base.

## II.2. Popular hegemony as revolutionary practice.

The experience of the Popular Unity government in Chile is often quoted to support the thesis that it is impossible to 'have power' if control of government structures is not coupled with control of the repressive apparatus. According to this vision, the revolutionary forces in Nicaragua have indeed 'taken power'. The difficulty is that this vision is based on a rather limited definition of power which is seen to reside in one part or another of the State apparatus.

This vision, which makes a sharp distinction between political and civil society and which views power relations as belonging to the sphere of the former (and not that of relations between it and civil society), has been criticized by those who point to the political content of relations which take place inside various institutions of society (the factory, the school, the family,

---

<sup>6</sup> See Maxine Molyneaux, 'Mobilisation without Emancipation? Women's Interests, State and Revolution in Nicaragua', - the following chapter.

<sup>7</sup> See *Nicaragua: la estrategia de la victoria*, México, Ed. Nuestro Tiempo, 1980. See also Amalia Chamorro Z., *Algunos rasgos hegemónicos del Somocismo y la Revolución Sandinista*, Cuadernos de Pensamiento Propio, Serie Ensayos, 5, INIES/CRIES, Managua, June 1983.

the Church, corporate organizations etc.). Again according to this view, far from having achieved popular power, the triumphant revolution against the *somocista* regime is only now beginning to *build* this power. The slow destructuring of the inherited power relations had to be done simultaneously with the construction of a new system of social power. As long as this is not achieved, the old relations will tend to be reproduced and with them, the corresponding ideology of domination, within the revolutionary process. From this perspective, the process of building popular power implies that the masses must deny their own existence through a process of organization, of self-transformation, of developing its identities and creating new identities while others disappear. Having been 'massified' by generations of repression and ideological domination, the masses also carry identities which must be overcome and transformed (racism, machismo, authoritarianism and individualism are not exclusive qualities of the dominant classes).

While the FSLN was again to play a fundamental role in this process, the masses with their incipient organizations and their day to day struggles would continue to have the same kind of variable, dialectical relation with the vanguard that it had before the triumph; at times under the guidance of the FSLN, at other times ahead of and autonomous from it, generally without a neatly defined formula specifying the relationship between revolutionary party and mass organization. And in this process, both terms of the relationship between mass organizations and revolutionary party were to undergo modifications in both form and content.

Just as it did during the insurrection, the role of the FSLN was to point towards the strategic objective. In this case, to build a new society based on a *negation of the global logic of capital* ensuring that the imperatives of social accumulation remain subordinate to the satisfaction of the basic needs of the populations, achieving an effective democracy, popular sovereignty and national self-determination. At the same time, it was to indicate the immediate priority task: the *consolidation of revolutionary power* which is necessary to face up to external and internal enemies and leave open the possibility of transforming society. However within this broad orientation, the masses, increasingly organized, were to put forward their own answers, thus enriching and giving concrete content to the revolutionary project and translating the idea of *popular power* into reality. This, in turn, was to produce changes in the very structure of the revolutionary party.

This task required certain material conditions as well as a politico-ideological framework. Through oral and written discourse, but more fundamentally through its actions, the FSLN showed the political nature of the revolution ; this was not the path leading to the 'dictatorship of the proletariat – nationalization of the means of production, single party system- but another road leading to 'popular hegemony'.<sup>8</sup> But this was a hegemony still being constructed along with the historical subject of the Revolution: the Nicaraguan People. Rather than moving towards homogeneity of the

---

<sup>8</sup> On this question see José Luis Coraggio, *Revolución y Democracia en Nicaragua*, Cuadernos de Pensamiento Propio, Serie Ensayos, 7, INIES/CRIES, Managua, May 1984.

popular sectors, differences were acknowledged and indeed reflected within the various mass organizations, indicating the principal liberating demands; the peasantry, rural and urban salaried workers, women, youth, indigenous communities and, at the same time, consolidation of a new identity which, in embryonic form, will be found in revolutionary struggles, and the Sandinista Defense Committees representing the possibility of self-government, of *direct* social relations in community work, without mercantile mediations.<sup>9</sup>

The accumulation of forces is only possible in particular conjunctural situations. The revolution sets up tasks that are assumed by the masses, though not without contradictions. Throughout this process, new identities are created and others that lay dormant and oppressed are transformed and liberated. For example, the literacy campaign gives great social influence to the July 19<sup>th</sup> Sandinista Youth Movement as a political organization under the direction of the FSLN, through a process which is transforming the traditional relations between city and countryside, family relations and relations inside the schools. The resistance which develops in the wake of the National Literacy Campaign leads to an accumulation of this new social force. Then new identities begin to emerge; the popular teachers –there are 19,000 voluntary organizations in Nicaragua- the fundamental subjects of the post-literacy period, demonstrate the possibility of breaking with professionalism and educational monopoly while at the same time showing the people's capacity for innovation and autonomous action in relation to the State apparatus.<sup>10</sup> When they had to take charge of local government, the new Municipal Councils for Reconstruction provided another example of this process of discovering the people's capacity for selfgovernment; 136 municipalities previously under the control of local *caudillos* or representatives of local economic interests were taken over, after the revolution, by agricultural workers, peasants or urban workers, many of whom did not even have a primary education.<sup>11</sup> The task of defending the Revolution has given rise to the Sandinista Popular Militias, probably the best example of the same process, though one that cannot be appreciated by those who continue to see power as residing by definition in certain parts of the State apparatus. The transfer and subsequent consolidation of the capacity for combat to the masses was not limited to weekly training courses but also involved real struggle against the counter-revolutionaries constantly being infiltrated from Honduras. In fact, during a first phase, the armed struggle against the *somocistas* –supported by the Reagan Administration and the Central American oligarchies –was conducted mainly by the militias and not by the Sandinista Popular Army. An organized people learnt now to defend itself, first by organizing extraterritorial battalions, then by setting up

---

<sup>9</sup> The Sandinista Defense Committees have performed such tasks as organizing the supply of rationed products or night watch duties. Originating in the CDC, they now have approximately 600,000 members and are both multi-class and non-partisan.

<sup>10</sup> See Rosa Maria Torres, *De alfabetizando a maestro popular: la post-alfabetización en Nicaragua*, Cuadernos de Pensamiento Propio, Serie Ensayos, 4, INIES-CRIES, 1983.

<sup>11</sup> See Charles Downs and Fernando Kusnetzoff, 'The changing role of local government in the Nicaraguan Revolution', mimeo, April 1982; also published in *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, vol. 6, N° 4, 1982, pp. 533-548.

territorial militias, again breaking a professional monopoly which the capitalist State guards jealously.<sup>12</sup>

In other cases, the revolutionary context has made it possible for an identity that had previously been subjected and alienated to become qualitatively transformed and come to play a crucial role in the revolutionary process. Under *somocismo*, Nicaragua peasants had not been allowed to organize in defense of their interests. Until the end of 1980, a year after the triumph, their interests were still 'represented' by agricultural corporations controlled by the large producers. Then in December 1980, the small producers of the Department of Matagalpa decided to break with the Central Cooperative of Coffee Producers and to set up a provisional committee of small producers in other departments. These meetings provided the impetus for the formation of the National Union of Farmers and Cattlemen (UNAG). Not only did UNAG immediately begin to put economic demands to the government, but it also asked to be represented on the Council of State and on various bodies dealing with problems of the agricultural sector. From then on, this mass organization has gained increasing political space, maintaining a critical attitude to what it considered to be deviations from the policy of agrarian reform. During the first year of the revolution, there was a discussion of the *choice* which would have to be made between the cooperative model or a Statist management model based on socialization of the productive forces. The development of a peasant identity made possible by the revolutionary process has had an impact on the agrarian strategy until the year 2000: both models would be implemented in equal measures.<sup>13</sup> However it has been the coming together of production and defense needs as a result of increasing external aggression which has given UNAG an enormous impulse and set it firmly at the center of the revolutionary process. The agrarian reform in favour of the peasantry is being accelerated, and it involves much more than simple technical criteria. Peasants are demanding and being given both land and arms, and this is taking place within an irreversible process of class consolidation in the context of an authentic social and political revolution.<sup>14</sup>

In July 1984, UNAG took another step which consolidated its position as a significant social force within the revolutionary process. It decided to incorporate agricultural producers *regardless of the sine of their holdings*, with the only condition that they should productively support the process of national liberation.<sup>15</sup>

In other situations, such a measure would have undoubtedly led to a situation where a few large landowners came to dominate the mass of small producers and to use the organization for their own benefit. In the context of a social revolution however, it implies the reverse: *popular hegemony the integration of the minorities under the direction of the majorities*.

---

<sup>12</sup> The 1983 Law on Compulsory Military Service, had the result of socializing the task of national defense, breaking down the mechanisms which used to ensure that the Sandinista Popular Army was made up principally of people coming from the less well-off classes.

<sup>13</sup> See *Estrategia de desarrollo agropecuario y reforma agraria*, MIDINRA, Managua, December 1982.

<sup>14</sup> The most explicit forms which this phenomenon has taken are the almost 200 Cooperatives for Defense and Production, with almost 7,000 members, in the border areas.

<sup>15</sup> See the statements by Daniel Núñez in *Barricada*, official organ of the FSLN, on July 7<sup>th</sup>, 1984, and the announcement made at the second assembly of UNAG and published in *Barricada*, July 9<sup>th</sup>, 1984.



The case of the Association of Nicaraguan Women Luisa Amanda Espinoza is a different one. This organization has been especially active whenever issues mainly concerning women were being discussed, such as the law on the family or more recently the law on compulsory military service which made service optional for women. In general, however, the association has not enjoyed the kind of increasing political influence which European feminist movements in particular had hoped for and expected. This can be attributed to the difficulties involved in breaking the ideological and material structures which perpetuate women's subordination in comparison with demands voiced by youth and workers' organizations. However, as the leaders of AMLAE have themselves stated, their priority task is to contribute to the defense of the revolution by other means, and thus prepare the grounds for the subsequent struggle for women's liberation.<sup>16</sup>

To be sure, the government –in this case the Revolutionary government- is in a position to regulate, block or promote demands voiced by various groups. Going beyond that, however, our hypothesis is that the *conjunctural situation, through a dialectical relation between revolutionary party and mass organizations determines which identities will be developed, at what speed and in which direction*. The advance of the peasant sector can be explained in terms of the fact that their specific demands coincide with the material and ideological needs of the revolution (planning alternatives to capitalist sectors that are reluctant to produce, placing restraints on the State bureaucracy, developing productions and consolidating defense against external invasions. In the case of the specific demands put forward by women, on the other hand, a new and complex area of struggle would have been opened up, not only against opposition forces such as the Church hierarchy but also within the popular front. The party sees this, and the organization itself is prepared to voice only limited demands while waiting for more favourable circumstances to develop when the 'general interest' will no longer clash with its specific interest.

Thus, there is nothing structural about the revolutionary project which is likely to prevent the full liberation of Nicaraguan women.

One mass organization which is not generally regarded as such is the Catholic Church. It also corresponds to a deeply rooted identity of the Nicaraguan people. What we shall have to say about the Church also applies to other mass organizations. Pluralism and democracy are not just features of the external linkages of various organizations, they also have something to do with what happens inside these organizations. In the case of the Church, we have an institution which existed before the revolution and which in principle, is governed internally in accordance with strict rules of hierarchy. In fact it would be difficult to imagine a more vertically oriented organization than the Catholic Church. However in practice, there is a certain degree of pluralism within the Church, and different currents representing secondary contradictions within Christian thought co-exist. In the context of a country struggling against imperialism, these come to

---

<sup>16</sup> See Máxime Molyneux, op. cit.

assume great significance for the conjunctural situation of the Church. With a Catholic population engaged in a process of liberation ready to fight to the death against its oppressors, the internal equilibria of the Catholic hierarchy cannot be dealt with out of context without alienating its own popular base.

In reality, while the highest authority of the Church states explicitly that it disagrees with the development of the revolution, the Christian and the revolutionary identities have entered into a special relationship, to the point where several obviously Christian principles have been incorporated as revolutionary ideology by the FSLN; at the same time many priests and many of the faithful are prepared to challenge the counter-revolutionary political orientations of their own hierarchy without abandoning their apostolic mission or their Christian faith. The counter-revolution has tried by ever possible means to break this unity and to use the Church as the ideological platform which the weak bourgeois opposition is unable to provide.<sup>17</sup> Paradoxically, it is the FSLN which is involved in maintaining the unity of Christianity and the Revolution and which sees no contradictions between the two identities.

The clearest evidence that the identities of the masses do not automatically develop in a way which contributes to the consolidation of the revolution is offered by the case of the indigenous communities (Miskitos, Sumos and Ramas) and the *criollos* of the Atlantic coast. In 1981, the FSLN and the government issued a statement of principles by which they pledged themselves to support the maintenance of indigenous cultural traditions, to guarantee participation in the affairs of the nation as a whole (the Misurasata organization immediately took its place on the Council of State) and in those of the Atlantic coast in particular, to provide legal guarantees of ownership of their landholdings, either as communal lands or in the form of cooperatives, and to 'support the organizational forms coming from the communities themselves in order to achieve the degree of representation which is necessary in the social, political and economic institutions which direct the affairs of the Atlantic zone'.<sup>18</sup> However these principles were not taken to heart by a community whose relations with the State has always been marginal, whose dealings with multinationals had led to exploitation and loss of resources, and who were used to see the inhabitants of the rest of the country as 'the Spaniards'. Another negative inheritance from the past was the fact that their participation in the struggle against Somoza had been marginal. Moreover a revolutionary transformation of the indigenous identity implied not only a change in the communities' articulation with the outside world but also a change in outlook on the part of the revolutionary forces, something which is very difficult to achieve when judged by the long series of unsuccessful attempts to deal with the ethnic question, not only in Latin America but in other parts of the world as well. The fact that contra infiltration takes place via the Atlantic zone while, at the same time, certain religious leaders of the communities began to identify the revolution with 'the devil', gave rise to situations in which the response of the FSLN or the

---

<sup>17</sup> See Ana Maria Escurra, *Agresión ideológica contra la Revolución Sandinista*, México, Ediciones Nuevaomar, 1983.

<sup>18</sup> See 'Declaraciones de Principios de la Revolución Popular Sandinista sobre las comunidades indígenas de la Costa Atlántica', which appears in CIERA, op. cit., p. 156.

government cannot always be seen as an 'error'. In many cases, this response was the inevitable result of the real contradiction between the need to defend territorial integrity against external aggression and the desire to allow self-determination and a gradual re-articulation of the indigenous communities to the society-in-revolution.<sup>19</sup>

The case of the indigenous communities illustrates how the *process of liberation of identities requires a transformation of the relation (in this case inter-ethnic) by both parts*, and how its evolution is not exclusively dependent upon the decisions of a government or a revolutionary party.

One case where the FSLN has played an important role in placing limits on the 'natural' development of a popular identity is that of the salaried workers. The economic difficulties inherited from the past as well as those which emerged as a result of a deterioration in the terms of trade and the rise in interest rates, the obvious weaknesses of a State which is being constructed, the natural disasters plus the economic and financial boycott imposed by the Reagan Administration, all these factors to which must be added the political decision to maintain a broad internal front under popular hegemony, required that certain forms of the class struggle had to be slowed down. These forms included the old economic demands by the trade unions that had been suppressed before the revolution and a generalized demand for workers' control of the means of production. These limits placed upon the forms of struggle were also made to apply to land occupations by the peasantry.<sup>20</sup>

The decision to opt for popular hegemony implied the maintenance of a pluralist social system which, in turn, had to accommodate the demands of private proprietors for property guarantees as well as for the chance to make a profit without being stigmatized as exploiters. The revolutionary government provided these guarantees on condition that private property should fulfill its social function: to produce under acceptable conditions of efficiency.<sup>21</sup>

Thus the class struggle was not arrested, it simply took other forms; workers' control of the *use of property*<sup>22</sup>, demands for improved working conditions, demands for an indirect salary on the part of the State and, fundamentally, something which workers' organizations still had to delegate to parts of the government apparatus: control of the economic surplus through economic

---

<sup>19</sup> For an objective report on this problem, see Trabil Nani, *History and Current Situation in Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast*, CIDCA, April 1984. A summarized version is available in ENVIO, Year 3, N° 36, Instituto Histórico Centroamericano, Managua, June 1984.

<sup>20</sup> On November 21, 1979, the FSLN issued a communique ordering 'The immediate and complete suspension of all confiscations and interventions of residences, vehicles and rural and urban properties...' (See *Barricada* of that day). Through the Sandinista Workers' Central (CST) and the Association of Rural Workers (ATC), the FSLN impressed upon the population that it was necessary to maintain production, but in the face of the external aggression which was already looming, the Revolutionary Government had to resort to the Law on Social and Economic State of Emergency (Degree 812) of September 9<sup>th</sup>, 1981, which penalized land invasions, the occupation of places of work and strikes. See *Leyes de la República de Nicaragua*, Ministerio de Justicia, Volume V, July-December 1981.

<sup>21</sup> See the Law of Agrarian Reform (Decree 782 of August 10<sup>th</sup>, 1981 which was characterized as 'productivist' by critics of the extreme left. In *Leyes de la República...* op. cit.

<sup>22</sup> The Law on Decapitalization (Decree 805 of August 28<sup>th</sup>, 1981 was going to allow workers to maintain a strict vigilance over the management of private capital in this area.

policy as well as through the State monopoly of both the financial system and the commercialization of major products. This new expression of workers' identity required an understanding of the conjunctural situation and a clarity of vision with respect to the revolutionary project which not all workers possessed.

The situation was made worse by the general crisis of the industrial sector in Central America which also hit Nicaragua and slowed down the planned expansion of urban employment. It is not surprising, therefore, that the government had to resort to legal measures in order to suppress certain strikes, given the emergency conditions which affected the country, even though the principle of trade unions pluralism had allowed the survival of certain trade unions who tended to voice demands of a classical kind, as well as that of certain opposition unions who were now waving banners which they had never raised during the Somoza dictatorship.<sup>23</sup>

In the absence of seasonal migratory movements from outside the country and thanks to unprecedented levels of coffee production and a recovery of cotton production, rural workers were in a position to achieve some of their traditional demands (improved working conditions, a social wage, fair payment for the work done etc.) and even to place limits on the progress of mechanization of the cotton harvest whenever there was availability of labour. The identity of the rural worker as proletarian was maintained and the possibility of organizing a movement back to the land (reconstitution of the peasantry) was never raised. One thing which did affect the availability of wage labour over the short term was the external aggression, not only because it gave rise to a strong migratory movement toward the cities, but also since it resulted in the movement of soldiers and members of the militias for the purpose of defending the country. These labour shortages were constantly being filled through voluntary work.<sup>24</sup>

Given the importance of the Area of Public Ownership (AOO) for permanent rural employment, one of the increasingly widespread demands was in favour of effective worker participation, which gave rise to a contradiction with the bureaucratic tendencies of certain government officials.<sup>25</sup>

The construction of popular hegemony presupposes not only the development but also the articulation of the identities of the people as subject of the revolution. Moreover, and in contradiction to this, it also involves the reproduction-transformation-rearticulation of identities which, historically, had been considered antagonistic to the popular project. In the particular case of the first phase of the Sandinista revolution, the figure of the rentier was hit hard by the new revolutionary law because of the impact of what they were doing to both agricultural and urban property.<sup>26</sup> The

---

<sup>23</sup> In fact the trade unions multiplied after the revolutionary triumph. From 133 trade unions with 27,000 members, numbers rose (by December 1983) to 1,103 trade unions with 207,391 members, of which approximately 80 percent accept the leadership of the FSLN. See CIERA, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

<sup>24</sup> The 1983-84 harvest witnessed the mobilization of approximately 40,000 voluntary workers who joined in the coffee and cotton harvests, which constitutes a new identity of the Nicaraguan people. See CIERA, *op. cit.*, pp. 64-65.

<sup>25</sup> On the question of worker participation in management, see CIERA, *op. cit.*, pp. 100-123.

<sup>26</sup> The Governing Junta for National Reconstruction fixed the maximum rent at a level several times lower than what was normal for the best land (300 cordobas per manzana for production of export crops and 100 cordobas for precuts designed for the internal market). See decrees 230 and 263 of January 1980. *Leyes... op. cit.* Moreover urban rents

popular project would find no place for that identity except in a form under which it had lost most of its economic significance. In 1984, it is the shopkeeper given to speculation who is most affected by the new mechanisms and regulations designed to ensure the supply of food and other goods to the population.

On the other hand, from the very beginning the revolutionary discourse has referred to the idea of a 'patriotic bourgeoisie' as a fundamental element of the hegemonic system and of economic, political and ideological pluralism. Independently of the fact that members of the government may be of bourgeois origin and that they may even continue to enjoy the ownership and use of mean of production, the question is whether it will be possible to maintain the identity of the bourgeoisie as a class, or whether the changes which it will have to undergo before becoming integrated into the hegemonic system will in effect lead to the dissolution of its class identity. The Sandinista project involves setting up a system of relations (identities) within which the private ownership of the means of production may be regulated by the profit motive in terms of particular decisions, while at the same time, when taken globally, remains subordinate to the satisfaction of the material and spiritual needs of the people and to the maintenance of popular sovereignty. In this context the process of accumulation is regarded as a means rather than an end. This is by no means impossible, particularly in view of the history of the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie. It could therefore reproduce itself as an *economic class*, putting forward its own particular demands on questions of public policy regarding the economy or industrial relations etc. However *in actuality*, the popular hegemonic project, that is the new system of social and political relations, would prevent the bourgeoisie from achieving its class project of imposing its own particular interests over those of the majority. It would thus be an 'alienated' *political class*.<sup>27</sup> This would not prevent the bourgeoisie from participating in various government bodies, either as individuals or as representatives of a class which is organized corporatively, or else through the political parties. The pluralist project which is part and parcel of popular hegemony makes it legally possible for the bourgeoisie to seek governmental power. However the development and consolidation of popular power are such that this objective cannot be achieved as a result of a correlation of forces which ensures that the interests of the majority remain dominant.

Theory tells us that capital, as it develops, invades every sphere of society, transforming all relations into mercantile ones and using the liberal State and parliamentary democracy as instruments of ideological and political domination over the masses, thus ensuring the atomization of the masses into individuals-citizens.

The challenge to which Nicaragua is responding is that of arresting these global tendencies while at the same time ensuring the continued existence

---

were reduced by a figure of up to 50 percent by Decree N° 216 of December 29th, 1979. While these levels have not been maintained as a result of the operation of market factors, the initial political-ideological effect has not been lost.

<sup>27</sup> On the 'bourgeois question' in Nicaragua, see J. L. Coraggio, op. cit. One of the increasingly significant features of the relationship between the Revolutionary government and the bourgeoisie is that the government maintains a continuous dialogue with and responds to demands from specific fractions, but it does not regard the associations which claim to speak on behalf of the class as a whole as valid spokesmen.

of private capital, albeit in a 'deformed' state as a result of its subordinate situation within the hegemonic system.

Another issue which must be raised and which applies to the so-called non-capitalist middle sectors is the question of conspicuous consumption. In a certain sense the 'achievement' of much of the bourgeoisie has been associated with the maintenance of privileged levels of consumption rather than with accumulation as such. This aspect of the identity of the bourgeoisie should perhaps be controlled, in view of the need to further the general interest; however a certain degree of *inequality* may be allowed (though not related to a project of domination).<sup>28</sup>

### II.3. The open character of the hegemonic system.

A few decades ago, we were told in Latin America that economic theories based on the notion of a closed economy were not applicable to our societies, showing as they do an exaggerated degree of openness and dependence upon shifts in external markets and in the distribution of transnational power, as well as in the economic policies of the center (as opposed to the periphery) States. However openness and dependency also affect political systems. To think of hegemonic relations 'as if' the national society were a closed system in which one can calculate correlations of forces on the basis of their social importance, their degree of organization and the ideological relations among social sectors, is to deny the reality of our societies.

The case of Nicaragua is an obvious one. Faced with the popular project expressed by the FSLN and the mass organizations, the domestic bourgeoisie had no opportunity of competing for a hegemonic role. With limited control of the means of mass communication, with no possibility of obtaining support from the armed forces, lacking any strategy for economic development and for pulling the country out of the crisis other than continued dependence on the United States, the bourgeoisie was unable to put forward a real political alternative. The two possibilities open to it were either to leave the country or to become actively incorporated –with all the contradictions implied by such a move– into the 'patriotic bourgeoisie' within the popular hegemonic system.

However the Somocista system of domination had not been a 'national' system but a sub-system operating within a network of imperialist relations of domination; here, Central America was regarded as the 'back-yard' of 'Uncle Sam' and Somoza was made to play a policing role in the region on behalf of the United States. Moreover a defeat for imperialism. Once the battle was lost, the U.S. Administration *immediately* began to lay siege, economically and politically, around the revolutionary government, with the

---

<sup>28</sup> With this aspect as with many others, it is impossible to crystallize a revolution in accordance with a projected 'model'. One of the results of the economic and military aggression of the Reagan Administration, coupled with the crisis of world markets, has been to lead the government to introduce a program of macroeconomic adjustments which tends to drastically reduce conspicuous and non-basic consumption, while the consumption of mass goods and salaries has been affected relatively less.

intention of influencing the way in which power was distributed in the country. Economic aid from the United States flowed towards sectors of the bourgeoisie and their allies in order to promote their activities and their organizations. The aid ceased when the revolutionary government decided to put a stop to these direct relations. The obvious consolidation of the popular forces in Nicaragua soon persuaded the Americans that the only way to stop the revolution in its tracks was to reactivate the Somocista National Guard, which had already been expelled from the country. Washington set out to do this with the support of the regional oligarchies. Finally the aggression took the form of a relentless process of U.S. intervention in the internal affairs of Nicaragua. It is difficult to say what the popular hegemonic project might have yielded under other conditions, but the fact is that imperialist initiatives helped to determine the subsequent development of events and to define with greater clarity the anti-imperialist ideology of the Nicaraguan people.<sup>29</sup>

#### II.4. Parties and movements: the problem of articulation.

The social project which is emerging in Nicaragua is being developed on the basis of popular hegemony. The central elements of this project are the mass organizations and their dialectical relations with the FSLN and with the revolutionary government. These relations have been mediated by laws and institutions –often of a provisional nature- that have facilitated the regulation of conflict, the establishment of instruments of participation and the anticipation of the consequences of specific types of behavior.

Nicaragua is now on the verge of taking an important step toward institutionalization<sup>30</sup> by organizing elections to a National Assembly which will be made up of 90 representatives elected on the basis of territorial constituencies.\*

A Law on Political Parties has already been approved. The electoral system will be based on universal suffrage, electoral competition among *political parties* and pluralism through a system of proportional representation. The question which arises is this: how will the social movements be represented in these political structures? Or rather, which other structures must be created in order to ensure that some of these social forces will be able to participate in the political process at the level of government? At the present time, political parties and social movements are both represented on the Council of State. By establishing suffrage as the instrument of representation, it no longer seems possible to treat parties and movements within a common dimension, competing for social representation. This becomes obvious, not only because of the multiple identity of the social

---

<sup>29</sup> On the question of this identity which was forged during Sandino's struggle, see Sergio Ramírez, *El Pensamiento Vivo de Sandino*, San José, EDUCA, 1974, and Carlos Fonseca, *Obras*, Editorial Nueva Nicaragua, 1982

<sup>30</sup> See the Law on Political Parties and the Electoral Law which were promulgated recently.

\* This was written before the Nicaraguan general elections which were held on November 4<sup>th</sup>, 1984. The results of the elections to the National Assembly were as follows: FSLN 61 seats; Democratic Conservatives 14; Independent Liberals 9; Social Christians 6; Communists 2; Socialists 2; Marxist Leninists 2. The FSLN obtained just under 67 percent of the vote in both the Assembly and the Presidential elections.

agents but also because of the need to maintain the specificity of movements and parties. The former are more oriented towards the expression of partial demands while the latter have the function of synthesizing demands and integrating them into a national project which, in turn, involves many dimensions which do not take the form of identities and of social movements.<sup>31</sup>

One possibility is that the political parties should include on their lists representatives of various mass organizations which, in a system of proportional representation, involves a process of negotiating the order of names on the lists and the incorporation of the movements' demands into the party programmes. However if the social movements and their leadership are transformed into vote catchers for the political parties, there could be a tendency towards something which can be observed in its extreme form in the United States. A party can become overloaded with contradictions and particular interests that are translated into a salad of partial promises which, taken together, not only fail to make up a proper national project but are also incompatible with each other and not viable as a package, with the result that they tend to slow down social change rather than inject into the social situation the dynamism which it requires.

On the other hand, while organizational autonomy of the social movements as the expression of certain social forces seems to be desirable in a popular democracy, at the same time, given the open-ended nature of the process of construction/transformation of popular identities, it becomes difficult for these to crystallize in clearly defined qualitative and quantitative situations.

Another institutional alternative that might be considered is that of a second Chamber of a consultative-deliberative character, where issues of national significance would be debated and where the principal social forces of the country could express their points of view. In any case, direct participation by the mass organizations in various decision-making bodies would not be incompatible with these new forms of government.

This problematic has also other consequences. The dialectical relation between the revolutionary party and the mass organizations, in the context of a pluralist system, can take two forms: either the party is maintained as a *cadre party*, made up of selected cadres who, in many cases, emerge from the practice of the mass organizations, or else it becomes transformed into a *mass party*.

This has important implications for the question of the articulation of the People. The cadre party does not only set tactical and strategic objectives but it is also physically present in the *leadership* of the mass organizations through the process of incorporating the outstanding leaders who wish to become militants of the party. The mass party is present among, and in symbiosis with, the masses, seeing and absorbing their contradictions and

---

<sup>31</sup> This is not always clear. In other countries, social movements organized around issues such as peace, human rights or natural resources transcend the level of specific demands and take on the role of critics of the course which humanity has taken.



achievements, where the figure of the “representative of the people” is doubly articulated with the party and with its specific bases.

We must then ask ourselves whether –given a prolongation of imperialist pressure on Nicaraguan society- the first model, which could be represented in the form of a tree with the FSLN at the top and the mass organizations lower down, might not be more vulnerable than the second, which would allow direct horizontal contacts among the various social movements.<sup>32</sup>

As a final observation, it is possible that the Church, as a current and also as an organization rather than as a social movement standing “next to” all the others, should be seen as an articulator of social movements, to be found at the base of the movements as well as among various levels of the leadership. In this sense, the FSLN and Christianity could converge (or compete) in the task of consolidating and giving form to the subject of the new Nicaraguan society.

### III. Epilogue: some theoretical questions arising out of revolutionary practice in Nicaragua.

We have tried, in the introduction, to present a theoretical discussion of social movements based on developments in Europe. Then in the second part of the paper, we discussed the experience of the Nicaraguan revolution from this perspective and in doing so, we pointed to a number of limitations of the original conceptual framework, sometimes explicitly and sometimes only implicitly. In what follows, we shall consider some of the theoretical issues raised by the Nicaraguan revolution which theories of social movements must take into account.

In the first place, the identities referred to in the conceptual framework cannot be viewed as ‘attributes’ which permit us to classify (or organize) individuals into groups (social movements). It is much more productive to think of them as interpersonal or social *relations*. In addition, they must not be seen as oppressed or alienated ‘essences’ that must be liberated but rather as situations that are constantly transformed by the revolutionary process. Moreover, these identities are not given, either in an embryonic or in a fully developed form, indeed new identities can spring up and others disappear as a result of the process.

Just as a correct theoretical outlook must move towards a synthesis and reconstruction of the object, which in this case means that the concept to be determined is that of *people*, this movement is incomplete unless it is coupled with the perception of a complex subject, incorporating contradictions and brought together by an internal hegemonic system. The fact that the working classes make up a majority determines the class

---

<sup>32</sup> In fact, recent developments seem to indicate that the need to strengthen the internal front and the very dynamics of the electoral process will have to move closer and closer to the mass party model, even though the term vanguard may remain.

In a certain way, this implies a partial ‘internalization’ of the confrontation of identities and particular interests within the revolutionary party. We should not confuse the cadre/mass opposition with the vanguard character of *the party*. A mass party can perfectly well play a vanguard role in relation to the social forces within a conscious process of building a new society.

content of this system, and the people emerge as *revolutionary subject* through a complex network of organizations and institutions.

At the level of political practice, where the objective is not to wipe out all forms of power but rather to ensure that social power is exercised by the people, the movement towards synthesis referred to earlier correlates with the process of articulation of social movements in which the political parties have historically played a central role. In particular, in reflecting on the process of achieving a correlation of power which would lead to a break with the structures which subjugate the people, we must reintroduce the role of the *revolutionary party*. Not only because it articulates specific movements into a front of social forces but also because in many cases, it is a product of these movements and of the way in which they operate. And this is no less true of situations that are as different from that of Nicaragua as the European societies, where political parties have not been divorced, either in the past or in the present, from the process of creating and giving content to social movements.

In that sense, the people sees itself as a *historically determined category*, changing circumstances, which is not to be reduced to a pre-determined class nor to a collections of universally determined identities. And its internal structure as a hegemonic system includes articulation between part(y)ies and social movements and leaves no room for 'choosing' between one or another form of collective action. The historicity and the conjunctural character of the movements (and identities) leave open the possibility that they might disappear, lose their effectiveness, become rearticulated as a result of these same processes of transformation. Should this be the case, it becomes difficult to come to terms with the tendency that can be observed in certain authors to predict (or indeed wish) that the political party system will be replaced by the social movements.

Neither can we sustain the idea that the former might provide a favourable and exclusive access to democracy or might have a greater capacity for developing the people as a subject. It is far more useful to think in terms of a hypothesis which would posit that the presence of social movements on the political scene is indicative of a genuine critique of the parties' ability to provide a channel for the expression of contradictory social developments, and that their actions will, of necessity, result in a transformation of this political system. In the context of an authentic social revolution, in a society where the civil sphere has another kind of density, these dialectical relations can take other forms, also historically determined. We begin to see this when we raise the issue of moving from a cadre party to a mass party, as we move from a phase of organization and accumulation of forces against the dominant regime to a phase of building popular power in the presence of a revolutionary government.

Finally as we have accepted that political parties must be incorporated into the analysis, we must examine in particular the *form of articulation* between parties and movements. Here, we find a 'verticalist' option which places the mass organizations in a subordinate position vis-à-vis the parties, even when they feed it ideas and information, and we have the option of a party

which articulates the various identities and their corresponding popular organizations 'horizontally'.

The preceding discussion does not represent an attempt to innovate in the area of theories of social movements. However we have tried particularly to touch on certain aspects of the question that have not received the attention they deserve in recent forums. We also believe that Nicaragua is a unique laboratory that might allow us to test whether certain propositions –sometimes extrapolated from other societies to Latin America rather precipitously- have universal application, while still keeping in mind that this comparative analysis can also put into question the validity of certain academic views with regard to Europe itself.