

Race, Class and Sandino's Politics

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Contents

Sandino's Intellectual Development	4
Sandino's Nationalist Struggle	6
Sandino's Use of Race/Class Analysis	9
Hope and Tragedy	13
References	14

“The simple folk with whom we talked were all agog over Sandino. He had become ubiquitous. He had been seen here; he had been seen there. At night he had gone stalking along a ridge, god of the universe. Later I found the same mythology was believed everywhere in Nicaragua. At many a low doorstep I sat and talked over a jicara of chicha corn beer, or a glass of yellowish palm wine, and there was no place Sandino had not been seen. He had fired the imagination of the humble people of Nicaragua. In every town, Sandino had his Homer. He was of the constellation of Abd-el-Krim, Robin Hood, Villa, the untamed out-laws who knew only daring and great deeds, imbued ever with the tireless persistence to overcome insurmountable odds and confront successfully overwhelming power. His epos will grow-in Nicaragua, in Latin America, the wide world over. For heroes grow ever more heroic with time.” –Carlton Beals, *Banana Gold*, (1932)

FROM 1927 TO 1933, a small man with a rag-tag army kept the U.S. Marines at bay in the northern jungle-covered mountains of Nicaragua. Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral referred to the forces of Augusto C. Sandino (1895–1934) as the “small crazy army,” but she made the remark with respect and admiration; Sandino had become a symbol of resistance to the “colossus of the north” for an entire generation of Latin Americans.

Sandino’s primary objective was to rid his country of the U.S. occupation, which had lasted since 1912. His other aims, however, have been the subject of much controversy. Was Sandino a petit-bourgeois nationalist who merely wanted the Yankees out? Or was he a communist, a Bolshevik who would take property away from the land owners? What were his true aims?

Studies of Sandino and his writings which appeared outside Nicaragua between 1936 and 1979 show an almost total absence of political analysis. (Inside Nicaragua, in these same years under the dictatorship of the Somoza family, no materials on Sandino appeared.) In virtually every case, the authors assumed that Sandino was a nationalist fighting to rid his nation of U.S. Marine occupation and that he had no additional goals. The embarrassingly large number of ideas permeating his writings and the confused way in which they are often presented strengthened the notion that his main role was that of a national liberator.

In the 1970s and 1980s, leaders of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), following the example of their founder Carlos Fonseca, began emphasizing one previously overlooked aspect of Sandino’s thought, above all based on class. In the view of the modern-day Sandinista, Sandino used a “class-analysis,” siding invariably with workers, peasants and Indians, in a word, the oppressed — los oprimidos. FSLN writers emphasized that Sandino had two objectives: first, to rid his nation of the Yankee invaders, and second, to make social changes for the benefit of the poor majorities.

A thorough reading of Sandino’s writings, journalist interviews of him, and other studies shows, however, that Sandino used both a race and a class analysis of Nicaraguan society. Yet even the most competent of the interpreters of Sandino give little importance to Sandino’s race analysis.

Sandino lived in a period of intellectual effervescence in Latin America, in which the idea of anti-interventionism was combined with a glorification of the Indian and of Indo-hispanic culture as well as with various forms of populism, anarchism, socialism, communism and spiritualism. Sandino believed that Indo-hispanic unity was necessary to throw off the yoke of oppression

from the north but that Indo-America would merely light the fuse for a revolution of all the oppressed peoples of the world.

When this revolution triumphed, injustice would be destroyed and “love, with its favorite daughter, Divine Justice” (Sandino, 1976:214) would rule the earth.

Today the struggle to preserve ethnic identity often seems to lack that second stage — the commitment to struggle for the liberation of all who are oppressed, above and beyond but still including one’s own ethnic group. A new look at the thought of Augusto Sandino in this year of the centennial of his birth can help us understand how that further commitment might be attained.

The U.S. had invaded six Latin American countries (Cuba, Panama, Haiti, Nicaragua, Mexico and the Dominican Republic) in the first third of the 20th century. The violent Mexican revolution was in process of consolidation. Sandino was one of the most important symbols of this period of ferment, one of the sources of that intellectual effervescence while at the same time deriving sustenance from it. As leaders of various movements vied for Sandino’s allegiance, he absorbed what he felt was useful from their ideas and adopted them to the Nicaraguan reality as he perceived it.

Sandino’s Intellectual Development

Augusto Sandino was born on May 18, 1895, in the province of Masaya. He was the illegitimate son (later recognized) of a medium landholder and a servant woman. His class consciousness emerged in the course of his early poverty-stricken life with his mother at the same time that a legitimate brother lived in comfort.

While Sandino was in Mexico the first time in the early 1920s, he became a Mason; when he went there again in 1929–30 to obtain the Mexican government’s support in his struggle against the United States Marines he rose to the rank of Master Mason.

Also in this second trip, according to historian Donald Hodges, he became a member of the Magnetic-Spiritual School of the Universal Commune headquartered in Argentina. Founded by Basque Joaquin Trincado, the School combined spiritism and Spanish anarchism. It complemented the study Sandino had made in his previous trip to Mexico of the writings of Mexican anarchist Ricardo Flores Magon. (Hodges, 1986: 13)

Living and writing at the same time as Sandino were three actors on the Latin American political scene who shared with him the ideas of what was called indigenismo, a kind of racial mystique glorifying both the Indian and the mestizo person of mixed race. Exponents of indigenismo came from varying political perspectives: from the Mexican Jose Vasconcelos, who with middle age became conservative (much like the revolution he supported); through the Peruvian populist and spiritualist founder of the APRA Party, Victor Raul Haya de la Torre; to Jose Carlos Mariategui, the Peruvian intellectual who combined Marxist social and economic analysis with the agonistic Christianity of Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno.

All of these supported social measures in their countries that would improve the living conditions of the poor. They, along with Sandino of Nicaragua, were beginning to combine race with class in analyzing why and how some groups of people dominated and oppressed others. Black socialist anti-colonial leaders in Africa used this analysis, as would Martin Luther King when he

expanded his aims from purely civil rights for African-Americans to rights for the poor and to an end to the Vietnam war.

Class analysis was not enough in itself for Sandino or for others who sought to explain the contempt and scorn felt by the “Yanqui” for Indo-Americans. Racial prejudice was also involved. However, racial prejudice alone did not suffice to explain inequities within Nicaragua, where landowners were not always of lighter skin than the peasants whom they hired for the harvesting of their crops. An analysis also based on social class was necessary to explain these inequalities.

Many people find themselves uncomfortable with this combination of race and class. For one, Marxists have called the “race question” the “national question” and have found it difficult to resolve, given their emphasis both on internationalism and on the primary importance of economic class relationships. For another, Liberals who support equal opportunity may have no problem with supporting racial equality but object when questions of economic and social class are introduced, as many did when Martin Luther King expanded his horizons and began to do battle for the poor of all races.

To understand revolutions that have occurred in the Third World and elsewhere, one needs to grasp the ideological currents behind them. If racism is an important part of colonialism, slavery and neo-colonialism, then racial pride must inevitably become a part of the struggle for independence, freedom and national sovereignty. Vasconcelos, Haya de la Torre, Mariategui, and Sandino were determined to forge this kind of pride.

The combination of an understanding of class struggle, drawn from anarchism and Marxism, and of racial conflict between Indo-Hispanics and Anglo-Saxon Yankees was an essential part of Sandino’s ideology. This synthesis must be considered in order to make clear what this jungle general, who meditated long hours, read voraciously and corresponded with the world from his mountain hide-out, intended for Nicaragua and for Latin America.

Sandino spent several years in revolutionary Mexico in the early 1920s working in the oil fields of Tampico which, according to Neil Macaulay, supported some fifty thousand workers and several different radical social doctrines. The long occupation of his country by the U.S. Marines was painful to Sandino. He said:

“In about 1925, I began to believe that in Nicaragua everything had become ignominious and that honor had completely vanished among men in that land. At that same time...I had a circle of spiritualist friends and we daily commented on the submissiveness of our Latin American peoples in the face of the advances through hypocrisy or by force of the murderous Yankee empire. On one of those occasions, I said to my friends that if in Nicaragua there were one hundred men who loved her as I did, our nation would be able to restore her absolute sovereignty, which the Yankee empire has imperiled. My friends answered me saying that there could possibly be that number of men in Nicaragua, or even more, but the difficulty would be in finding them.

It is because of this [Yankee] intervention that the peoples of Central America and Mexico hate us Nicaraguans. I had the opportunity to confirm that in my travels through those countries.

I felt wounded in the depths of my being when they called me ‘sell-out,’ ‘shameless,’ ‘traitor.’” (Sandino, 1976: 53)

Sandinino's Nationalist Struggle

Upon hearing the news of the revolt of Liberal Juan B. Sacasa against U.S.-imposed President Adolfo Diaz, Sandino returned to Nicaragua from Mexico in May of 1926. Although he joined the Liberal cause, it is quite certain that by this time he had moved beyond Liberal beliefs.

He began working at the San Albino gold mine, a company owned by Americans, and soon started talking to workers about how they were exploited by the capitalists and by the foreign companies. He told them that they had a right to unions, schools and medical care. "I also explained to them that I wasn't a communist but rather a socialist." (Roman, 1979: 49)

Soon Sandino left the gold mine with a small band to join General Jose Maria Moncada's Constitutionalist forces in Prinzapolca. He asked Moncada to supply his force with arms. Said Moncada:

"I saw Sandino for the first time in Prinzapolca. He addressed me, saying that he wanted to go fight in the interior; at the same time he gave me a written statement concerning his ideas, the concluding sentence of which proclaimed that 'PROPERTY IS THEFT.'" (Somoza, 1936: 85)

Needless to say, Moncada denied his request for arms and Sandino learned to hide his political convictions. With the help of a group of prostitutes, he was able to retrieve a quantity of rifles that had been dumped into the bay at Puerto Cabezas and arm his men with them. With each victory, Sandino's small army grew. His headquarters was in San Rafael del Norte where the Arauz family ran the telegraph office, and nineteen-year-old daughter Blanca became one of his most important collaborators.

By April of 1927 Sandino had taken Jinotega and the U.S. Marines had declared Matagalpa neutral territory. But by May, Moncada was negotiating with U.S. representative (later Secretary of State) Henry Stimson to end the fighting with the assurance that he would have the presidency in the 1928 elections.

Sandinino was the only one of the chiefs of the Liberal Army to oppose the pact. He returned with his men to San Rafael del Norte and sent a cache of arms into the mountains to be retrieved later. On May 18th, his thirty-second birthday, he married Blanca. A few days later he dared Moncada to come and disarm him: "I am at my post and waiting for you ... I will not sell out nor will I surrender. You will have to defeat me." (Sandino, 1976: 85)

He also wrote:

"We are alone. The cause of Nicaragua has been abandoned. Our enemies from this day forward will not be the forces of the tyrant Diaz, but rather the Marines of the most powerful empire in history. It is against them that we are going to fight...Those who are married or who have other family obligations should return to their homes." (Sandino, 1976: 90)

In July of 1927, Sandino led 800 men to take the city of Ocotal. A Sandinista victory would have been complete if the Marines had not sent airplanes to bomb the city, forcing the guerrillas to flee. The city was wrecked by the bombardment. This bombing from the air of towns and villages by U.S. planes was repeated all over the north. It forced Sandino to change his tactics to "a special system of war that we have taken to calling 'little war' (guerrilla)." (Roman, 1979: 146)

Neil Macaulay calls Sandino one of the precursors of modern revolutionary guerrilla warfare and says that 1927 marks the year that, because of the use of airplanes and machine guns, revolutionary fighters were forced to abandon the plains and deserts for the forests and mountains. (Macaulay, 1967: 9–10)

International solidarity with Sandino was enormous. He received messages of support from Nehru and from Madame Sun Yat-Sen in Asia. In Latin America, Diego Rivera, Jose Vasconcelos, Victor Haya de la Torre, Jose Carlos Mariategui and many others were among his supporters. From Europe, French Communist Henri Barbusse sent Sandino a long letter that was a source of great pride to the guerrilla leader:

“General, I send you this greeting in personal homage and in that of the proletariat and revolutionary intellectuals of France and Europe...You, Sandino, general of free men, are performing a historic indelible role.” (Quoted in Macaulay, 1967: 109)

Sandino placed representatives in several countries to help in obtaining support for the anti-interventionist cause. Probably the most important of these representatives was Honduran poet Froylan Turcios, editor of the journal *Ariel*. Turcios was geographically close to Sandino in Tegucigalpa and could transmit Sandino’s messages to the outside world.

But when Sandino announced that he would not accept the results of the 1928 elections and would set up a rival government and continue the war rather than negotiate with the Managua government to speed Marine withdrawal, Turcios broke with him. He said Sandino had now gone beyond his original nationalist goal and was considering civil war. Turcios also objected to Sandino’s call for Central American union and Latin American solidarity to revive the dream of Simon Bolivar. (Sandino, 1976: 141–159) Turcios could not comprehend Sandino’s broader vision.

Liberal Party candidate Moncada won the U.S.-supervised elections of 1928. The U.S. Marines stayed on to continue the fight against Sandino and to train a National Guard i.e., to Nicaraguanize the war. Sandino’s struggle was now no longer fought under a Liberal banner; rather he began to emphasize broader objectives than mere Yankee withdrawal. This may have been the result of the influence of Salvadoran Communist Augustin Farabundo Marti, who joined Sandino in the Mountains. Or possibly Sandino had merely peeled off another layer of his true beliefs. Whatever the cause, it resulted in the loss of some supporters.

Communist organizations like the Anti-Imperialist League of the Americas and the Mexican-based Hands off Nicaragua Committee worked very hard to build support for Sandino, but in return expected him to adopt the program of the Communist International. Sandino was himself committed to a broad anti-imperialist front, at the very time that the Comintern was abandoning that strategy for a hard (“third period”) line against social democratic and socialist parties, calling them “social-fascist.” (Cerda, 1983: 91–103; and Baines, 1972: 135–136)

Central to Sandino’s strategy were his continued efforts to gain the support of the moderate revolutionary government of Mexico. He went to Mexico in 1929 but, although his expenses were paid by the government, he was not able to arrange a meeting with President Emilio Portes Gil until early 1930. The results were minimal. With a few guns and a little ammunition, he returned to Nicaragua in May of 1930.

Meanwhile, the Mexican government had been suppressing leftist organizations. Several communist leaders were killed. In January of 1930, the Mexican government broke diplomatic rela-

tions with the Soviet Union. The fact that Sandino and his men were receiving two thousand pesos a month from this very same government angered the Communists. (Cerde, 1983: 102)

Nevertheless, in February Sandino did enter into a series of secret talks with Communist Party representatives, apparently agreeing to denounce the Mexican government. But the guerrilla leader soon broke with the Communists – explaining, however, that the rupture was strategic, not philosophical.

The military struggle in Nicaragua continued in 1929 and 1930 with increasing ferocity. The U.S. Marines were heavily involved both in the jungle and in the air. At about this same time Sandino issued his famous Light and Truth Manifesto to his troops:

“Many times you will have heard people speak of the final judgement of the world. By final judgement you should understand the destruction of injustice upon the earth and the reign of the Spirit of Light and Truth, that is Love What will happen is the following: The oppressed peoples will break the chains of their humiliation, with which the imperialists of the earth have kept them imprisoned. The trumpets that will be heard will be the horns of war, playing the hymns of the freeing of the oppressed peoples from injustice of the oppressors. The only thing that will be forever destroyed is injustice; what will remain is perfection, that is, love; with its favorite daughter, Divine Justice. We in Nicaragua my brothers, have the honor of being chosen by Divine Justice to begin the judgement of injustice on the earth. Do not be afraid my dear brothers; and be sure, very sure that in a very short time we will have our definitive triumph in Nicaragua which will light the fuse of the ‘proletarian explosion’ against the imperialists of the earth.” (Sandino, 1976: 214)

This was the kind of inspiration which Sandino used to keep his ragged army fighting year after year. His forces carried out attacks throughout the country in 1931 and, at the end of that year, U.S. charge d’affaires Willard Beaulac considered the situation “as grave or graver than at any time since I have been in Nicaragua.” (Quoted in Crawley, 1979: 76)

The United States, however, was determined to withdraw the Marines on schedule after a new president was elected in 1932 and inaugurated in 1933. “Politicians in Washington were already promising the American nation that the United States would never again become entangled in such a predicament.” (Crawley, 1979: 76)

In 1932, Sandino held the hope that he would be able to take power and install a revolutionary government in Nicaragua. The reality, however, was different. Liberal leader Juan B. Sacasa won the election over Conservative “Yankee puppet” Adolfo Diaz. The “traitor” Moncada finished his term and twenty-four hours after Sacasa was inaugurated [on January 1, 1933], the U.S. Marines sailed out of the port of Corinto. Sandino was forced to re-evaluate the situation. He explained in a letter to Aleman Bolanos:

“When foreign intervention in Nicaragua has ceased, albeit in appearance alone, the people’s spirit has cooled down. Political and economic intervention is suffered by the people, but they cannot see it – even worse, they do not believe in its existence. This situation placed us in a very difficult position, and in the meantime the government was negotiating a multi-million dollar loan and preparing to blast us to hell and consolidate the political, economic and military intervention in our country. As this

government was elected mainly by the Liberals of Leon, our strength would have dwindled in any confrontation; our financial and military resources were exhausted, and our troops could not have sought refuge in Honduras because the war in that country is raging intensely, and Nicaraguan refugees are being murdered there. Nor could we count on El Salvador, where the government is machine-gunning the peasants.” (Quoted in Aleman Bolanos, 1980: 160–1; trans. in Crawley, 1979: 82)

Sandino realized also that the U.S. would not stop “its intrigue and manipulation substituting for armed intervention another type of intervention that is too subtle to be fought with weapons.” (Roman, 1979: 165) He thereupon decided that the only good course of action was to negotiate the best concessions he could get from Sacasa for whom he still retained a modicum of respect and he did so.

According to the treaty signed February 2, 1933, Sandino was given a large extension of land along the Coco River in the north. The treaty called it “empty land” but in reality thousands of Indians lived there who had been supporters of Sandino’s cause and whom he wanted to organize into agricultural cooperatives. Sandino was allowed to keep one hundred armed men as an emergency force, which the guerrilla leader saw as a sort of insurance policy against violations of the treaty.

However, General Anastasio Somoza, whom the U.S. Marines had left in charge of the National Guard, was furious at the concessions the newly-elected president of Nicaragua had made to Sandino and he continued to harass the Sandinistas. He realized there were three forces in Nicaragua: President Sacasa, the National Guard and Sandino’s small army. Somoza already had his eye on the job of his uncle the President; Sandino, who denounced the newly trained National Guard and repeatedly pledged the loyalty of his forces to Sacasa in the event of a Somoza coup, stood in the way.

A year after the peace treaty had been signed Sandino went to Managua to talk with the President. On the night of February 21, Sandino and several of his supporters ate with Sacasa at his home. When they left the dinner, Sandino along with Generals Francisco Estrada and Juan Pablo Umanzor were taken prisoner by members of the National Guard, driven to the local airfield and shot. Their bodies were never recovered.

A few days later the National Guard massacred the occupants of the Sandinista camps in the north. The era of Sandino’s small crazy army was over. The Somoza era had begun.

Sandino’s Use of Race/Class Analysis

“My obsession is to rebel with the dignity and pride that is characteristic of our race, any and all domination that, with the cynicism typical of the powerful, the assassins of weak peoples are preparing in my country.” –Augusto Sandino, Letter to Froylan Turcios, September 20, 1927

It was probably in Mexico that Sandino discovered his racial identity. Macaulay states:

“Sandino found in Tampico a Mexican nationalism that gloried in Mexico’s Indian heritage ... He began to identify himself with a broad nationality embracing all Americans of Iberian and Indian descent. (1967:53)

When Sandino returned to his homeland “to search for one hundred men who loved her as he did” he found, according to Jaime Wheelock’s analysis, a nascent working class. Its diverse elements included peasants who had been made landless by the expansion of the cultivation of export crops, as well as workers on the banana plantations and at the great lumber mills of the Atlantic Coast. These workers formed an independent force with homogeneous ideas, interests and demands and they were ready to join an anti-oligarchic struggle. (Wheelock, 1979: 119–120)

Shortly after Moncada laid down his arms and Sandino began his solitary struggle against the Marines, the latter issued his famous Political Manifesto, which reflects his conviction that he and his men were fighting in defense both of their race and of their class:

“I am a Nicaraguan and proud that Indian-American blood, more than any other, flows in my veins — blood that contains the mystery of loyal and sincere patriotism. The bond of nationality gives me the right to assume responsibility for my actions with respect to Nicaragua—and indeed to Central America and the whole continent that speaks our language—without caring what names the prophets of doom, cowards and eunuchs may choose to call me. I am a city worker, an artisan as they say in my country, but my ideal is a wide horizon of internationalism, the right to be free and to demand justice even if to win the state of perfection it be necessary to shed one’s own and other’s blood. The oligarchs, that is, the geese that paddle in the muck, will say I’m plebeian. Good enough: my highest honor is having come from the oppressed masses who are the soul and nerve-system of the race

“I swear before country and history that my sword will defend our nation’s dignity, that it will be a sword for the oppressed. I accept the invitation to fight, and will personally provoke it The last of my soldiers, the soldiers of freedom for Nicaragua, may die; but before that, more than a battalion of your blond invaders will have bitten the dust of my wild mountains.

“I will be no supplicant for the mercy of my enemies, who are the enemies of Nicaragua, for I don’t believe anyone has the right to be a demigod. I want to convince indifferent Nicaraguans and Central Americans and the Indo-Hispanic race that up here in the Andean heights, there is a group of patriots who will know how to fight and die like men.” (Quoted in Selser, 1981: 91–92)

In this manifesto, Sandino appealed for an internationalism based upon race and class. He said his sword would be the weapon of the oppressed against both the traitorous oligarchs and the blonde invaders. To Sandino it seemed that while economic and political motives were the bases for the Yankee invasion, a racial disdain expressed toward those of Indian blood was also present.

But there was a racial factor inside Nicaragua as well. Because of inequities stemming from the conquest, the poorer classes in many Latin American countries were made up mostly of Indians and mestizos and thus were united on class and racial bases against the more purely Spanish oligarchies. These oligarchies frequently joined with the imperialists to oppress the lower classes and sell out the interests of their own countries.

In order to arouse as many people as possible to his cause in Nicaragua and in the rest of Latin America, Sandino glorified both his race and his class origin as something to be proud

of. Elsewhere in the Manifesto, he vented his fury on the oligarchs of both the Liberal and Conservative Parties whose interests, he asserted, were not patriotic but rather treasonous.

The interests of the workers and of the people of Indian blood, Sandino felt, were those of the nation as a whole and led them in consequence to the patriotic defense of national sovereignty against the invader.

Carleton Beals, the Nation correspondent who visited Sandino in his jungle hideaway and then visited high U.S. Marine Corps officials as well as U.S. Embassy officials in Managua, agreed with Sandino:

“[The imperialist] does not analyze his own deeper motives nor does he see the contradiction between his faith in democracy and his fervent belief in his own race superiority. He never stops to try to reconcile his inner conviction that backward dark peoples are incapable of progress, efficiency, honesty or democracy with his belief that the only possible way for a foreign people to be happy is to be standardized into the mold already created in the United States. Because of his faith in the value of lightness of skin, he hobnobs with the aristocratic Creoles who have exploited and betrayed their countries since the first days of independence.” (Beals, 1932: 295)

For Sandino the interests of race as well as of class demanded the expulsion of the Yankee invaders from Nicaragua. Further, the unity of all of Latin America was necessary to prevent continued U. S. domination of the area. But in order to achieve this goal, those governments which sold out their countries to the Yankee invaders had to be overthrown, by popular rebellion if necessary. “Tyrants do not represent nations,” Sandino wrote, “and liberty is not conquered with flowers.” (Sandino, 1976: 142–143)

After the Yankee invaders were expelled, Sandino felt the next stage for Nicaragua would be a profound popular social revolution: “the oppressed people will break the chains with which the imperialists of the earth have held them down.” (Quoted in Ortega, 1980: 94) At the time of the 1932 elections Sandino issued a circular, whose realistic possibilities he himself may have doubted but which provide an idea of what his hopes for a popular revolution included:

“Our army is prepared to take the reins of national power in order to then proceed to the organization of large cooperatives of Nicaraguan workers and peasants who will exploit our own natural resources in benefit of the Nicaraguan family as a whole.” (Sandino, 1976: 254)

Sandino also had hopes that, in the future, international solidarity of the oppressed and exploited would triumph over racial prejudice. In an earlier letter to Spanish socialist Luis Araquistain, Sandino had said that “if in the present historical moment our struggle is national and racial, it will become international as colonial and semicolonial peoples learn to unite with peoples of the imperialist metropolies.” (Quoted in Selser, 1981: 110)

Whether Sandino expected this to happen with relation to the United States is not clear. He appeared to remain convinced that North Americans supported their government’s imperialist adventures. A few months after he wrote Araquistain, Sandino sent a letter to a man named Henry Amphlett in which he said:

“For a long time I believed that the North American people were not in agreement with the abuse committed in Nicaragua by the government of Calvin Coolidge; but I have become convinced that North Americans in general applaud Coolidge’s intervention in my country and for this reason all North Americans who fall into our hands will have met their end.” (Sandino, 1976: 148)

This did not of course mean literally “all” North Americans because Beals of the Nation, which opposed Coolidge’s policy, was well received by Sandino at about this same time.

Sandino was a great admirer of Simon Bolivar, telling Spanish journalist Ramon Be-lausteguigoitia that reading Bolivar’s life always moved him and “had made him cry” (Sandino, 1976: 287) The story of Bolivar tragic, and one with which Sandino could identify readily: Bolivar was able to drive out the Spanish colonialists but was unable to achieve Latin American unity.

For Sandino the Monroe doctrine was the antithesis of Bolivarism and he offered a new modified version of the former:

“Speaking of the Monroe Doctrine, they say “America for the Americans.” Fine; that is well put. All of us who are born in the Americas are American. The mistake has been that of the imperialists who have interpreted the Monroe Doctrine as saying “America for the Yankees.” All right, so that the blond beasts do not continue in their mistakes, I reform the phrase as follows: “The United States of North America for the yankees. Latin America for the Indolatins.” (Sandino, 1976: 140)

Sandino anticipated that the Indolatins – and most especially those of Nicaragua – would “ignite the fuse of the proletarian explosion against the imperialists of the earth” and bring on the reign “of the Spirit of Light and Truth, that is Love,” as he said in his Light and Truth Manifesto quoted above. Here again is presented in these documents the political-spiritual rhetoric that associates the oppressed classes and the brown races with love, truth and light and the blond capitalists and imperialists with oppression and injustice.

Although Sandino came very close to race-hatred it appears that he used it rather as a tool for consciousness raising. It was softened by the compassion he felt for the families of the Marines killed in battle and the respect he expressed for Marines who deserted and asked to join his struggle. (They were not allowed to join, by the way, because only Latin Americans could be members. Sandino, 1976: 133)

Sandino’s statements also were softened by the hopes he expressed for class solidarity with people of other races including those in the old colonial nations. The Indolatin race would light the fuse and then proletarians of all the world would join.

By 1933, when he signed the peace agreement with Sacasa, Sandino knew that the explosion might not come immediately. He anticipated, however, that the depressed world economic situation of that day would hasten its coming. Sandino decided to begin building in his corner of Nicaragua the kind of society he envisaged for the nation and the rest of Latin America.

Sandino had a revolutionary social agenda which he hoped to put in practice in Nicaragua in which the land would belong to the state and would be farmed in cooperatives by mestizo and Indian peasants. Meanwhile, as he waited for the correlation of forces to be right (Sandino had an appreciation for stages in the revolutionary struggle), he organized cooperatives in the area allotted to him in the peace treaty.

Sandino told Jose Roman that he would rather stay and work with the Miskitos, Sumos, and other Indians than accept invitations to travel to Paris and South America, where he felt he would be exhibited like a singer of tango music. (Roman, 1979: 98)

“I will stay here along the Coco, the most savage but most beautiful part of our nation, to bring it out of the abandonment it has suffered first by feudo-colonial exploitation and now by that of the capitalists. I want to do what is possible to civilize these Indians who are the marrow of our race.” (Quoted in Roman, 1979: 98)

By “civilize” Sandino meant health care, education and better living conditions, and not the destruction of Indian culture. But these efforts to improve the lives of the Indians, to farm the land and mine gold cooperatively were too revolutionary for the “vendepatrias” in Managua and, in February, 1934, the experiment came to a bloody end, destroyed by the National Guard of Anastasio Somoza.

Carleton Beals said:

“The few people we met were all loyal Sandinistas, fleeing ever deeper into the wilderness...They were seeking safety, a new patch of ground to clear. But one and all, they vowed never to give up the struggle, and if necessary, pass it on to their children.” (Beals, 1932: 242)

When the early fighters of the FSLN went into the mountains, they found those old Sandinistas who had survived and they learned from them how to flee from the National Guard and how to live in the jungle.

Hope and Tragedy

Much of the left of Sandino’s day did not understand the importance he placed on the racial question. Today many involved in struggles for national, ethnic, and racial identity, pride and respect often seem unable to come together around questions of economic oppression. A close reading of Sandino can provide us with an heroic example of someone who never compromised in his endeavors in both those essential struggles.

Many who have examined Sandino’s letters and political manifestoes have concluded that the totality of Sandino’s cause was the Bolivarian struggle for freedom from foreign domination and the quest for Latin American unity against the colossus of the north. This thesis was given credence by Sandino’s refusal to become a part of any sectarian political grouping and instead to accept the aid of all. Sandino went his own way and the Mexican revolutionaries, the APRA of Peru and the Comintern had to decide if they would support him.

Because he was such an important anti-imperialist symbol, the Comintern waited until 1930 before definitively breaking with Sandino. They had repudiated the APRA and Mariategui months previously. Many analysts, both Marxists and non-Marxists, through the years have assumed because of this break with the Comintern that Sandino did not have a revolutionary social agenda. But the break only indicates that his politics were not in accord with those of the Comintern in 1930.

While Sandino emphasized that the first part of his struggle was “national and racial,” the class nature of the cause, for all who cared to look for it, was visible in the social class of Sandino’s

supporters, and in the social class of those he condemned repeatedly for having sold out their country to the invaders.

In the last year of his life Sandino alternated between hope for the future of the revolution and his sense of Bolivarian tragedy, of impending doom. If it is true that he cried before the firing squad (out of anger, he said) it must have been because now, for him, the dream was gone, tragedy was real.

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