

A Marxist Analysis of the Nicaraguan Revolution?

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LA BOTZ, D. H. **What Went Wrong? The Nicaraguan Revolution: A Marxist Analysis.** Brill: Leiden/London (Historical Materialism Book), 2017.

Dan La Botz is a US academic, journalist, a prominent activist in the U.S. labour movement and a co-founder of Teamsters for a Democratic Union. He is also a leader of the US socialist organization Solidarity, which apparently has roots in the Trotskyist tradition.¹ In 1998 he received his Ph.D in American history at the University of Cincinnati, and later became professor of history and Latin American studies at Miami University, USA. He is an editor of *Mexican Labor News and Analysis*, and author of *The Crisis of Mexican Labor* (1988), as well as other books on the labour movement.

La Botz sets out to show that the Sandinistas — Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN) — were principally shaped by the Soviet and Cuban Communist models, and thus lacked any genuine democratic socialism. It is for this reason that the FSLN lacked rank-and-file democracy in the decision making of the National Directorate, placing great power in the hands of Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega. This background led in later years to the FSLN leadership making an alliance with the capitalist class,

¹ The official website says Solidarity is a “democratic, revolutionary socialist, feminist, anti-racist organization”. See more at: <http://www.solidarity-us.org/>. Access on: Oct. 20, 2017.

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and the massive corruption of the party. La Botz uses a socialist internationalism analytic approach to the socioeconomic history of Nicaragua. His political and historical approach to the FSLN attacks the Sandinistas' Marxist-Leninism, "because as Communists they were also hostile to working-class power and democratic socialism" (LA BOTZ, 2017, p. XV). This he sees as at the core of the failure of the party.

What Went Wrong? The Nicaraguan Revolution traces the history of political struggle in Nicaragua from the 19th century to 2016. The first four chapters examine the roles played by Zelaya and Sandino, including the U.S. invasion from 1909 to 1927, up to the Somoza dictatorship from 1936 to 1975. Chapter 4 examines the founding of the FSLN, with chapters 5 to 7 examining the FSLN insurgency (1975-1979) and then the FSLN in power (1979-1990). Chapter 8 covers the election of the Violeta Chamorro government, and the changes made to the national economy. Chapter 9 looks at the Alemán and Bolaños regimes and corruption in power prior to Ortega's resumption of power (1996 to 2006). Chapter 10 examines the Ortega government up to the present. There is a large list of references, eighteen pages, in both English and Spanish.

In the Preface, La Botz finds that by the present decade the Ortega administration showed "no socialism, little solidarity" (LA BOTZ, 2017, p. XI). La Botz is a Marxist socialist of the "third camp" or "socialism from below" tradition, opposing both bureaucratic Communism and capitalism (LA BOTZ, 2017, p. XII). This approach clearly underscores his conclusions on modern Nicaraguan politics. Indeed he confirms that "this outlook is, in my view, essential to understanding the experience of a country like Nicaragua" (LA BOTZ, 2017, p. XII). The FSLN's failure to commit to participatory democracy led to the betrayal of the revolution. La Botz argues that, "[i]t was the authoritarian politics and ethos of the FSLN that created Daniel Ortega", and that only for brief periods "did the working people exercise any control over the workplace, labour unions, the party, the economy, or the state institutions" (LA BOTZ, 2017, p. XIV). He continues that he is "critical of the Sandinistas because as Communists, they were also hostile to working-class power and democratic socialism" (LA BOTZ, 2017, p. XV). By the 2000s, the

Sandinistas were “a party hostile to independent worker organisation and activity” (LA BOTZ, 2017, p. XVI). This line of analysis is clear in his conclusions.

In Chapter 10 – The Ortega Government (2006-) – La Botz relies heavily on *Envío*, the monthly magazine published at the Jesuit Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) in Managua. He notes that “since 2006 *Envío*, though a non-partisan publication, has generally been critical of the Ortega administration... over the years it has become more moderate” (LA BOTZ, 2017, p. 317). The UCA was founded in 1960, and Daniel Ortega is a former student. *Envío* is a political, social, cultural and economic review, and sees itself as the voice of the Central American Historical Institute (based at the UCA). In the 1980s there was no censorship by the Sandinista Government, with editions in several languages. Since 2003 the periodical has relied on the internet to publish its views on regional problems.²

Once re-elected to the presidency, Ortega made an alliance with president Hugo Chávez of Venezuela who, over the next five years, gave the FSLN funds amounting to US\$2.2 billion in loans and concessionary oil credits, which were deposited in a private company called Albanisa that invested in Nicaraguan enterprises, including agriculture, electricity, cooperatives, transport, mining and oil. Albanisa became, in effect, a US\$200 million per-year slush fund personally controlled by Daniel Ortega: neither audited, nor supervised by the FSLN. This meant that Ortega “could bribe or buy party leaders and legislators (many were for sale), make donations to influence the NGOs and church officials, or suborn anyone else who was willing to take money in exchange for political loyalty” (LA BOTZ, 2017, p. 322). The FSLN accepted the neoliberal policies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) which led to the cancellation of an IMF debt of US\$200 million and a World Bank debt of US\$1.5 billion. (LA BOTZ, 2017). Ortega cooperated with the U.S. government, collaborating with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency, and in exchange received military equipment and nearly US\$112 million in foreign aid between 2006 and 2008 (LA BOTZ,

² *Revista Envío*. See more at: <www.envio.ord.ni>. Access on: Oct. 01, 2017.

2017). By 2009 the FSLN had 1.1 million members but they received little if any political education. Rather than a revolutionary party, it was now a populist party.

La Botz sees that the root cause of the Ortega government falling into massive corruption was that:

The combination of the Marxist-Leninist commitments of the cadres and the military training of much of the older rank-and-file created an exceptionally efficient political machine capable of taking commands from Daniel and Rosario [his wife] on high and turning them into marching orders for the rank-and-file. (LA BOTZ, 2017, p. 327).

This is shown in how the party controlled the Supreme Court. Article 147 of the Nicaraguan Constitution meant that after the two terms as president (2006-2012) Ortega could not be elected for a third term. However, he pushed a law through the National Assembly that decreased the Supreme Court's quorum, and had the constitution changed to allow him to run for a third presidency (LA BOTZ, 2017). By 2007 Ortega had allied himself with Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, North Korea, Libya and Iran; the nations which US president G. W. Bush spuriously called the Axis of Evil.

In November 2011 the FSLN won 62 of the 92 National Assembly seats. Ortega now controlled all four branches of the Nicaraguan government: Executive, National Assembly, Supreme Court and the Supreme Electoral Council. By 2012 Nicaragua received US\$1.28 billion in foreign direct investment, mainly from Venezuela, Panama, the United States, Spain and Mexico. Much of it went into industry, energy, mining, services, and the free trade zones' *maquiladoras* factories. Yet poverty remained extremely high.

La Botz sees Ortega as a *caudillo* who dominates the political and economic structure of the country. "Yet the Ortega government cannot be characterised as a totalitarian government or a police state; and while it is authoritarian, it has not used the prison system and the police against its opponents and critics" (LA BOTZ, 2017, p. 359). La Botz then follows by warning of the concerns on human rights violations by Amnesty International, Human Rights

Watch, and the US State Department, in 2008, though without references.

My review of the *2013 Human Rights Report* found that the police and army had been accused of arbitrary killings that were politically motivated, though impartial investigation was difficult to find. There were no reports of any politically motivated disappearances. There were reports of police abuse during arrest, and claims of torture by agents of the Directorate of Judicial Assistance during high-profile arrests of those involved in organized crime. Prison conditions remain harsh and life-threatening, overcrowded, with little medical care, and there has been an increase in prison numbers. Judges are often submitted to political and economic pressures that compromise their independence. There is little reliable evidence of political prisoners, with Angel Antonio Gómez Matamoros's conviction in 2012 for an anti-government protest the only one given. He remained under house arrest at the time of the report. Illegal land-seizures, without compensation, were common. The government regularly restricted media freedom through harassment and the arbitrary use of libel laws. The government has also closed independent radio stations and cancelled opposition television programs (USA, 2013).

In dealing with the labour movement, La Botz concludes that:

While sometimes paying lip service to democratic ideals, the FSLN, like the Communists, but different from various other socialist traditions, had no conception of the relationship between representative democracy and participatory democracy, no conception of the role of independent labour unions, no commitment to workers' control. (LA BOTZ, 2017, p. 361).

This conclusion is based on his study of the failure of union movement in the *maquiladoras* in the free trade zones. Much of this relies on information supplied by *Envío*. If, argues La Botz, the Ortega government's failures had roots "in the Sandinistas' early Stalinist indoctrination, they were all exacerbated by the Castro-Guevara notion of the *foco*... The Cuban model was the greatest problem" (LA BOTZ, 2017, p.363). The party failed "to build a

dynamic interrelation between the revolutionary organisation and the working class and people at large”, which led to a failure to form a democratic socialist society (LA BOTZ, 2017, p. 363). Nor did it build a clandestine labour movement among workers and peasants. These failures have led to the formation of the *rearmados* guerrilla group operating in the mountains, financed by drug dealers (LA BOTZ, 2017).

Massive corruption began under the Chamorro government, and continued into following governments. La Botz’s analysis focuses mainly on political corruption, and goes into little detail on economic corruption, despite the level of foreign investment in Nicaragua. My review of the *Nicaragua Corruption Report* of 2017 finds that rampant corruption within political circles led to widespread favouritism in regard to which international company is allowed to invest, and where. There is bribery in the tax and customs sectors, and investment is plagued by extortion and kickbacks. The country’s legal system is cumbersome with high levels of corruption. The Natural Resources sector has a moderately high level of corruption. Up to 30 percent of the illegal logging in Nicaragua is linked to illegal drug trafficking (NICARAGUA..., 2017).

Many of the references in the Bibliography rely on internet downloads. A number of significant references one would expect to find are missing, such as Daniel Chávez’s *Nicaragua and the Politics of Utopia: Development and Culture in the Modern State*, 2015, and Ricardo Santiago’s *The Nicaragua Revolution: From Liberation to Betrayal*, 2013. La Botz’s analysis of the failures of the Nicaraguan Revolution could have been improved with some anthropological and sociological input, such as Johannes Wilm’s *Nicaragua, Back from the Dead? An Anthropological View of the Sandinista Movement in the Early 21st Century*, 2012. Nor could I find reference to Russell White’s *The Nicaragua Grand Canal: Economic Miracle or Folie de Grandeur?*, 2015, which would have been useful for examining the expropriation of peasant lands and protests by indigenous peoples.

While La Botz has done splendid research on the earlier history of Nicaragua’s politics, I found the attack on Marxist-Leninism for the failures of the FSLN may have led the author to miss other, complementary avenues of research to explain these failings. One

has only to compare Nicaragua to Honduras and El Salvador to see that they are regional failings, and not solely of Marxist-Leninist origin.

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