

## Advanced Praise for *Provocation and Protest*

This book is at once a work of social science and a homage. At the same time that he offers a nuanced analysis of the student mobilizations in Nicaragua, José Luis Rocha reveals the great respect he has for the willingness of the university students to assume risks, to imagine a new and different Nicaragua, and to mobilize without depending on the top-down, masculinist hierarchies that were one of the Achilles' heels of social movements of the past. José Luis has an enviable ability to move easily back and forth between social theory, historical comparison, and empirical analysis of the reality. He gives us a detailed understanding of why and how the student mobilizations happened, and of why the government of Daniel Ortega is so terrified of a social group whose demands are not—as this book shows well—radical or transformative, much less terrorist. In a certain sense, José Luis presents these mobilizations as performing three vital functions simultaneously: they demand a cultural change toward a society that is more open, just, and sustainable; they transmit this cultural change by their very existence; and they reflect cultural changes that are already happening in Nicaraguan society and that no government can hope, in the long run, to completely control.

In sum, this book has convinced us that change will inevitably come, thanks to the combination of social and ethical values already present in the country's youth, the greatly increased number of students, and the social media to which the great majority have access. Whether the change comes with or without blood will be a decision made by the powers of the state. In any case, it will come. That is a “decision” that has already been made.

—Anthony Bebbington, *Clark University (U.S.A.), University of Manchester (England), University of Melbourne (Australia)*



Provocation and Protest:  
University Students in  
Nicaragua's Uprising



# Provocation and Protest: University Students in Nicaragua's Uprising

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Translated by Joseph Owens



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*“The revolution evaporates, and there is left  
only the slime of a new bureaucracy.”*

—Franz Kafka<sup>1</sup>

*“History is like a relay race of revolutions;  
the torch of idealism is carried by one group of revolutionaries  
until it too becomes an establishment,  
and then the torch is snatched up and carried on the next leg of the race  
by a new generation of revolutionaries.  
And thus the revolutionary cycle continues forward.”*

—Saul Alinsky<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Janouch 1968: 165.

<sup>2</sup> Alinsky 2012: 58.

## FOREWORD

The history of Nicaragua has known many struggles waged to defend the identity of the people. Like the rest of Latin America, Nicaragua fought for its political, cultural, and economic independence, finally triumphing on 30 April 1838. After that the combat was mostly internal because Nicaragua had to define the direction it wanted to take.

When I wrote “Tinísima” I discovered that Tina Modotti and Julio Antonio Mella had been attracted to Nicaragua during the 1930s by the great figure of Sandino, who was a hero for us Mexicans also.

At that time all the power was in the hands of the Sacasa, Debayle, Chamorro, and Somoza families. Their sons went to West Point for training, and their daughters attended the Sacred Heart convents in the United States. At Eden Hall in Torresdale, Pennsylvania, I was a classmate of Liana Debayle, a very intelligent, precocious, and beautiful young woman. She was also at the top of her class. We were all privileged girls, but we envied her because she was the only one who had a hair dryer. I remember that many sons and daughters of Caribbean and Central American dictators were educated in the United States; they returned to their countries not only speaking English but having a strong addiction to the “American Way of Life.” Meanwhile, the people of Nicaragua gave us a great example of perseverance and resistance.

The Revolution of 1979 marked another beginning for Nicaragua, which was able to save itself despite all the obstacles. It seemed to be taking a stable direction until 18 April 2018, when we heard the painful, horrible news that our beloved Central American country was being stained once again with blood.

The repression unleashed by the government of Daniel Ortega, who along with his wife and vice-president, Rosario Murillo, has been more than 12 years

in power, inflicted a deep wound on the citizens and the political analysts of Central America and on the many inhabitants of Latin America who before cared little about the politics of the isthmus.

As José Luis Rocha tells us in his book: “First, the kids took to the streets because they were oppressing the old folk. Then, the kids themselves were repressed in León, in the Camino de Oriente, and at the UCA. . . . On April 19<sup>th</sup> they killed one youngster and then a second, and the pot exploded.”

On April 18, 2018, Central America experienced a new political and economic rupture when the Ortega government decreed social security reforms that would severely affect pensioners. The reforms incited fierce anger in many people, and they were not slow to take to the streets to express their repudiation of the measures.

In his new book, José Luis Rocha has collected the emotional testimonies of the most violent days of the conflict and presents them in a way that will move his readers. He also provides a clear analysis of the history of social struggles in Nicaragua, that marvelous and most poetic nation of Central America. Despite a toll of 325 deaths and 700 political prisoners, the people continue to resist the wicked repression. The repression is “wicked” because it is coming not from the regime’s enemies but from the new form of treason practiced by the Ortega-Murillo duo, who have forgotten the reason for their own lives and turned their backs on their youthful ideals. They have mounted a bloody and treacherous Shakespearian scenario that exposes the cruelty of those who will never be able to wash from their hands the blood of the young Nicaraguans they have murdered.

“The question of national sovereignty was a call that did not appeal to the people. But when they began killing and repressing kids at the university—that was a much stronger message, and the people really understood it.”

As usually happens when such despicable acts are committed, the young people were the first to respond, the first to act, and also the first to pay the consequences. They are the ones who most readily risk their lives, their beautiful lives not yet lived. They are the ones whom Rubén Darío in his day recognized as courageous, the ones who now guide this generation of the new Nicaraguan spring.

... And the sun that today lights up the new victories won,  
and the hero who guides his company of fierce youth;  
the one who loves the insignia of his maternal soil,  
the one who defied, girt with steel and with weapon in hand,  
the suns of red summer,

the snows and winds of freezing winter,  
the night, the frost  
and hatred and death, for the sake of his immortal homeland:  
him the horns of war salute with bronze voices, playing the triumphal  
march!

The 20<sup>th</sup> day of April 2018 will be forever impressed on the memory of Nicaragua, for it was the day when Álvaro Conrado, a 15-year-old lad, was killed by a bullet that pierced his throat while he was carrying water to the students defending the campus of the National University of Engineering (UNI). How many more youngsters offered their lives for the sake of justice?

“They are at home in the streets. They began working the barriers—building, relieving, supporting, and giving all they humanly could, while the people gave them provisions.”

In this epoch when information flows like quicksilver and videos of testimonies circulate swiftly on social networks, it is difficult to believe that this repression is a battle against “delinquents,” as the Ortega government has perversely maintained.

Attacks against journalists shot up in Nicaragua just in the past year. On April 21<sup>st</sup>, just a few days after the demonstrations started, they killed the journalist Ángel Gahona, who was transmitting live for the “Meridiano” newscast. Over the last 12 months there were 1020 violations of freedom of the press, compared to 84 for the previous 12 months. Despite the intimidations, the theft of equipment, and the arbitrary censorship, Nicaraguan journalists persevere in informing not only the country but the rest of the world.

How is it possible that the nation that gave us Rubén Darío, Claribel Alegría, Vida Luz Meneses, Daisy Zamora, Gioconda Belli, Sergio Ramírez, and Father Ernesto Cardenal has now sunk into such detestable corruption? I remember how much I enjoyed meeting in Mexico the erudite Ernesto Mejía Sánchez, who formed part of the Colegio de México, then under the direction of Alfonso Reyes. I also remember Claribel Alegría, with whom I attended various literary symposiums. What would they say now at seeing their country betrayed by two of its children?

Gioconda Belli was firmly opposed to the dictatorship of Somoza Debayle. She did not remain behind her desk but went out into the streets, denouncing the injustices while shaking her lioness-like mane. She carried letters that could have cost her her life, she marched with the young people in 1970, and in 2018 she demonstrated in the U.S. and around Latin America against the crimes being committed in her country of origin. What you will find today in

these young men and women who have risen up against the oppression of the Ortega-Murillo regime is a longing for peace.

Our hope is that in the coming weeks Nicaraguans will flood into the streets, crying out with one voice: “We are done with the darkness and the barricades;/ no longer need we look in the rear-view mirror/ to see if they’re following us.../ No longer do we smell burnt rubber,/ nor is death a familiar presence,/ awaiting us at the turn of every corner.”

*Elena Poniatowska*





# 1. INTRODUCTION

On April 18, 2018 a civic rebellion began in Nicaragua. Its first few steps were neither novel nor exceptional. Only the events that unfolded afterward allow us to see that those initial efforts formed the foundation of a new social force in Nicaragua: the April 19<sup>th</sup> Movement or simply the April Movement, as it was denominated within a few days by the world's most important news sources. It began as a relatively small, limited protest against reforms in social security. It was just one more demonstration among those mounted against the policies of the Ortega-Murillo regime, but it was a protest that kept growing in response to the repression it unleashed, until it finally became a social movement with national reach and powerful lungs.

That protest came shortly after another protest, in which students criticized the careless way in which the government had managed the forest fire in the Indio-Maíz Biological Reserve, the second most important forest in Nicaragua. The Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN), either unaware of the depth of the people's anger or confident that it could quash any show of discontent, had approved social security reforms that were triply unpopular since they would increase contributions for both employers and employees and would reduce the amount paid to pensioners. In both these protests, and even more in subsequent events, university students became highly visible protagonists in the ranks of the opposition. Just days after the first confrontations, the government launched ferocious attacks against the still small groups of demonstrators, and the university students responded by occupying, one after another, four public universities and maintaining control over two of them for several weeks. The students were also among the principal promoters of the massive marches that followed; along with non-students, they

set up numerous barricades on the city streets; they united their forces in five organizations; and they were among those who took part in the failed attempt at dialogue between opposition forces and government. They were obliged to create new *ad hoc* organizations because the National Students Union of Nicaragua (UNEN), which could have been a good platform for the struggle, had for decades been functioning as an extension of the FSLN; it was plagued with corrupt and mediocre leaders who did not tolerate the kind of debate that is essential for sound politics.

With this bold display of direct action that showed that they knew how to read the signs of the times, the university students were giving continuity to a long Nicaraguan tradition. Toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the revolutionary Russian journalist Nikolai Shelgunov called the student movement of his day “the barometer of public opinion.”<sup>3</sup> In Latin America the universities have long been a fertile seedbed of rebels and counter-hegemonic struggles. In a 1933 article, Alejo Carpentier described the death rattles of the dictatorship of Gerardo Machado in Cuba, highlighting the role of the university in revolutionary struggles: “In America, since the time of the wars of independence, the university has always exercised influence on the revolutionary movements. Far from being a center for the exaltation of ‘aristocratic’ culture, it has had the surprising virtue of putting the bourgeois and petit-bourgeois classes in contact with the proletariat. And I say ‘surprising virtue’ because there are plenty of reasons to distrust those classes. The contact is usually ephemeral and very disappointing for the masses that trust in its effectiveness. But in Cuba at least, the reality has been verified with amazing constancy.”<sup>4</sup>

Such protagonism is the theme of this work. What are the historical antecedents of the university struggles? How did the revolts of April 2018 begin? What were their immediate antecedents? How did they develop? How did the other actors in the April Movement evaluate the role of the university students? What cultural changes were coming about? These are some of the questions that this investigation will attempt to answer.

I use the expression “university students” in a broad sense. Most of those to whom I refer are studying in a university. Others were studying in the recent past. Some were faced with difficult circumstances that unfortunately affect many young people: they had to interrupt or abandon their studies because of economic limitations. Some finished their studies but could not afford to pay the steep fees demanded for a degree. A few—perhaps more than a few—

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<sup>3</sup> Venturi, 1960: 220.

<sup>4</sup> Carpentier, September-October 1933.

were professionals who had recently graduated and therefore still had ties with friends who were studying. So these are the four types of university students who led the revolt: active students, drop-outs, graduates with degrees, and graduates without degrees.

## Antecedents: their position in the national debate

These four types of young people were the heart and the soul of the April revolt. Not only did their debut on the national political scene take political analysts by complete surprise, but it also ran counter to the criticisms they had made of the students only a few years before. The political involvement of the millennial generation<sup>5</sup> was treated in Sofía Montenegro's essay, *Hegemonic Masculinity in Post-Revolutionary Youth*, but the conclusions of this work caused a stir among some young people. They were disturbed at statements such as these: "In contrast to the youthful experience of their parents, this generation appears more impassive and family-oriented, busy with studies and diversions, somewhat involved in sports and religion. ... They say they are not interested in politics, and some even express a 'fear of participating in politics'; others think that political involvement and voting are useless since 'they rob elections.'

"In contrast with the generation of their parents, who hardly had time for personal projects but rather spent their youth involved in the swift currents of change and responding with 'bellicose heroism,' the principal motivations of the post-revolutionary youth are related to social mobility: they desire security, autonomy, independence, and economic well-being. In the face of institutional collapse, political crisis, and the closing off of spaces, young people have retreated from the public sphere and civic involvement; they prefer family and private space, devoting themselves to individual life projects and self-fulfillment. Individualism, political apathy, and patriarchal ideology seem to be the three components determining the beliefs, the attitudes, and the practices of the present generation of young people—all this within the context of the precarious political and socioeconomic situation produced by

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Leoncini defines the "millennials" as the generation "born between 1980 and 2000. They are the genesis of the contemporary 'liquid' natives, while those born more or less between the mid-'60s and the late-'70s or early-'80s consider themselves to be members of Generation X." Bauman and Leoncini, 2018: 21.

neoliberal capitalism in post-war Nicaragua.”<sup>6</sup> Other opinions of this sort had already been put forward from a respectable cohort of earlier analysts,<sup>7</sup> and other authors accepted them as sound and valid.<sup>8</sup>

In general terms, when young people reacted to such statements accusing them of lacking social and political commitment, they thought that those making such claims were themselves disoriented.<sup>9</sup> One such youth, by the name of Rodrigo Peñalba, wrote in a blog: “Their complaint seems to be that the young people are not taking by force the National Palaces or the houses of Chema Castillo, nor are they teaching literacy, as they did in 1981. ... It’s a drag to hear them telling us on the Internet: ‘You’re not heroic enough, the way we were.’”<sup>10</sup> Peñalba was reacting to a political cartoon in which Pedro X. Molina, whose work is normally brilliant, drew a series of vignettes representing a cynical series depicting the demands of Nicaraguan youth over many decades: starting in the Fifties (autonomy of the universities) and passing through the Sixties and Seventies (freedom), the Eighties (peace) and the Nineties (rights), and culminating in the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (wi-fi!).<sup>11</sup>

Both the verbal affirmations of Montenegro and the graphic depictions of Molina agree with the opinions of other respected analysts. The vision of Leoncini, whose epistolary exchange with Bauman gave rise to the posthumous book of the Polish sociologist, is pessimistic: “The internet with its social networks deceives us, making us believe that by our ‘likes’ and comments we can really shape and disseminate a universal democracy. Instead of that, however, what we create is nothing more than our own personal, individual vision, which ends up being joined to other, different individual visions. ... We often imagine that the comments on the social networks are like rivers made up of the same drops of water, but the whole business resembles more a lake with countless drops of oil that are unable to mix with the water; the drops show that they exist only individually, incapable of being really integrated. It is true that they resemble one another, but not sufficiently.”<sup>12</sup>

Such an analysis explicitly presumes that the millennials do their politics through their cell phones and their social networks and that an abyss separates

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<sup>6</sup> Montenegro, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Sotelo Avilés, 1995; Montenegro, 2001; Cuadra and Zúñiga, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Pérez-Baltodano, 2013: 15; Centro de Comunicación y Educación Popular CANTERA, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Sánchez Argüello, 2016; Valle Moreno, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Peñalba, Rodrigo, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Molina, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> Bauman and Leoncini, 2018: 71-72.

the way politics is done after the internet from the way it was done before the internet. Technology has supposedly traced an insuperable dividing line between the connected the unconnected: some people belong to the on-line generation while others survive in the off-line world. Bauman points out the danger of being on-line: “Some perspicacious observers have compared this divine sensation [of possessing power in the on-line world] to what a child feels when let loose in a candy store.”<sup>13</sup>

We are dealing here with a generalized prejudice to which many eminent analysts succumb. It is a curious and highly significant fact that the very accusation made by Montenegro was levied in the 20<sup>th</sup> century against the whole population of England, and it was refuted by the scholar Joseph Trenaman of the University of Leeds: “It has often been said that the mass of the population does not want to learn, that it wants only to have fun. This idea has no real foundation. I know of no study or proof that confirms such an idea, while there is evidence that shows the contrary. ... The difficulty is based partly on the fact that the desires of less educated persons to know things are related to their social activities and to class differences; the truth is that what we vaguely call culture is identified by them with social position, with privilege, and with power in our society.”<sup>14</sup> Extrapolating from this, we can argue that what we vaguely call politics is likewise identified by the millennials with social position, with privilege, and with power. Once the young people cracked that exclusionary shell, their involvement accelerated and expanded in ways and in dimensions that I hope this text will help to explain.

The critics of the young seemed to be using as a timeless yardstick of commitment that classical work, *The Revolutionary Catechism*, which some attribute to the nihilist Sergei Nechayev and others to the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin. They placed the criteria found in that manual on one side of the scale and used them to measure the heft of the millennials’ political engagement, moral fabric, and capacity to effect social change. For that catechism, the ideal revolutionaries are dedicated men who have no personal interests, relations, feelings, bonds, or properties. One young Nicaraguan reacted to those accusing the millennials of individualism and technological alienation by intuitively dissociating himself from the demands of that catechism: “Freedom to be stupid! Death to the computers! Fine, but how am I going to read *Confidential* if I don’t have wi-fi? I guess I wouldn’t have to read it because I would have died in the streets fighting against the system. That’s the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.: 77.

<sup>14</sup> Williams, 1971: 96.

truth. That's what the adults want. That is the radical response they're seeking from us."<sup>15</sup>

To judge by its influence, *The Revolutionary Catechism* was successful in a way the author of *Capital* would have envied. According to its directives, revolutionaries must have only one thought and one passion (the revolution); they have broken with the social order and its laws and customs; they despise public opinion; they are always severe with themselves and with others; and their character “excludes every type of romanticism, as well as every form of sentiment, exaltation, vanity, personal hatred, or desire for vengeance. Revolutionary passion must be combined with cold calculation. In every time and place, revolutionaries must yield not to their personal impulses but to the interests of the revolution.”<sup>16</sup> That was the creed exemplified by Daniel Ortega when he explained why he did not feel responsible for the murder of Sergeant Gonzalo Lacayo: “No, because I felt no personal hatred or rancor in carrying out that action. ... I saw it as something natural, something that had to happen. It is true that we were taking the life of a person, but it was a person who was robbing the life of the people.”<sup>17</sup> The same criteria are evident when the revolutionary mystique and the virtues of Carlos Fonseca Amador, founder of the FSLN, are described. Those are the qualities that the critics of the millennials find lacking in young, but one millennial unmasked the criteria of those critics: “The other day I was thinking about an older person who was telling me that what we need today is another Leonel Rugama, another Carlos Fonseca, another Arlen Siu, another Rigoberto López Pérez. He was saying that nowadays nobody like that exists.”<sup>18</sup>

Fabián Medina's portrayal of Daniel Ortega shows that the leader of the FSLN is obsessed with replicating in his own life the revolutionary hero described in the catechism: “Daniel Ortega assumes all that he does in his life as sacrifice, as part of his destiny. The war, being the leader, feeling himself a prisoner, not doing the things ordinary people do, even the difficult relationship with Rosario Murillo—they are all part of his cross. He delights in his pain, and he does penance, gratuitous and useless at times, but he wields it as his mission in life. He says he would like to do other, less ‘self-sacrificing’ things, but deep down he knows that he has nothing more to do.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Valle Moreno, 2016

<sup>16</sup> Ali, 2017: 69-70.

<sup>17</sup> Medina Sánchez, 2018: 23-24.

<sup>18</sup> Commentary of Leana V on the text of Moreno Valle, 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Medina Sánchez, 2018: 147.

As we will see in this text, the millennials' manner of doing politics— independently of social status—breaks with this paradigm of the revolutionary hero that served as a mold for a great number of the revolutionaries of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This difference is due partly to the fact that the rebels of April 2018 organized only after the fact. They entered politics through a movement, and they created five organizations of university students on the basis of the revolt's events. They did not enter politics through the classical revolutionary organizations that attempted to bring about social change in Latin America during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I want to emphasize, therefore, that the university students instigated and joined a social movement on which they had influence and by which they were influenced.

## Social movement? Civic insurrection? Peaceful revolution?

What kind of protests did these millennials engage in? What actions did they galvanize, and in what actions did they participate? The April revolt has been called a social movement, a civic insurrection, and even a peaceful revolution. Only by using poetic license can we apply the term “revolution” to the great diversity of protests that lasted from April to October of 2018. Not only did they not achieve any systemic changes: they never even proposed such changes. “Insurrection” is the correct term because it was an uprising against authority, but the phrase “social movement” has greater explanatory value since it is a well-developed concept, with a rich tradition of thought behind it. Much research has been done into the characteristics, the resources, the strengths, and the triggers of such movements, and also into the reasons why they fade after a time.

Charles Tilly defines social movements in terms of the methods of struggle. He argues that at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century a new political construct, a particular way of engaging publicly in politics, took shape and became progressively stronger in Western Europe and North America.<sup>20</sup> Tilly identifies social movements by their practices and resources. Their manifestations usually include displays of honor (sober conduct, presence of dignitaries), signs of unity (identical insignias, posters, uniforms, parades, songs and hymns), large

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<sup>20</sup> Tilly and Wood, 2010: 28.

numbers (signed petitions, occupations of buildings and streets), and strong commitment (defying bad weather, visible participation of older persons or the disabled, resistance to repression, willingness to sacrifice). According to Tilly, “the qualities that distinguish the demonstrations carried out by social movements from those of their predecessors are their regularity and their integration into a standardized repertoire.”<sup>21</sup>

Sidney Tarrow bases his characterization of social movements on a combination of content and method. He defines them “as collective challenges made by persons who share common objectives and who maintain solidarity in their sustained interaction with the elites, the opponents, and the authorities. This definition has four empirical qualities: collective challenge, common objectives, solidarity, and sustained interaction.”<sup>22</sup> Tarrow identifies social movements by the specific traits of their performance, their members, and the elements that give them consistency. Accordingly, a social movement requires contentious collective action that constitutes a threat for others; the action is carried out by people who lack access to power and its institutions but who are united by common aspirations; and the people engage in sustained sequences of interaction with their opponents.<sup>23</sup> His criteria exclude spontaneous short-lived revolts: “Rioting multitudes and spontaneous demonstrations are indicators of a movement in the process of being born rather movements in themselves.”<sup>24</sup> Continuity and content define a movement because they generate a collective identity: “The movement arises with common objectives, which provide a good reason for devoting time and taking risks. . . . These objectives, along with the collective identity and the identifiable challenge, are what make sustained collective action possible. Maintaining the objectives is the only criterion for typifying a contentious collective action as a social movement: its duration is proportional to the wake it leaves in history.”<sup>25</sup>

We can track social movements from the 18<sup>th</sup> century on. Among the pioneers are the hunger rebellions in France in 1775, when thousands of peasants rose up against the taxes and the bread prices established by the crown; they assaulted the bakeries and forced the bakers to sell them bread at affordable prices. These revolts were put down by a combination of *manu militari* and ideological coercion: “Turgot managed to put an end to the disturbances by

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.: 24.

<sup>22</sup> Tarrow, 1997: 21.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.: 19.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.: 24.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.: 23-25.

means of a massive concentration of troops and militias, hundreds of arrests, two public executions in the capital, and synchronized public exhortations from the village pulpits.”<sup>26</sup> The records of the police categorized the rebels even then as delinquents, a misrepresentation that historians like George Rudé have attempted to correct: “They were almost all local people, well-known by the merchants and land-owners; very few were vagrants, and only a small portion had any criminal history. In reality, they scarcely deserved the title of ‘bandits’ that was so generously applied to them in the official correspondence.”<sup>27</sup>

Other notable social movements include the French revolution of 1848, the agrarian revolts of the Luddites and the Daughters of Rebeka in the early 1800s, the Paris Commune, the civil rights struggle in the United States, and the events of 1968 in Paris and Mexico. In Latin America the social movement closest to us in time and space was the April 25<sup>th</sup> Movement in Guatemala, that culminated in 2015 with the removal from office of Otto Pérez Molina and Roxana Baldetti, who had been elected president and vice-president for the period 2012-2015.

The journalist and politician Miguel Ángel Sandoval described the great achievement of that movement, which extended well beyond its immediate success or failure, as has occurred with revolts of the past: “However it is analyzed, it was a process in which many men and women, especially young people, were born as citizens in a way formally unthinkable in this country. ‘Being born as citizens’ is easily said but not so easily understood. It was a process that in a matter of weeks unleashed a surge of participation that the country had never before known.”<sup>28</sup> The movement was also other things, including “a break with fear that had been instilled during the years of armed conflict. From another perspective, it was a citizens’ uprising of a type that nobody could remember or nobody could imagine happening in a country like ours. Schemas and paradigms came crashing down.”<sup>29</sup>

Sandoval refers to the Guatemalan youth with words that are perfectly applicable to the April rebels in Nicaragua: “No one would ever have thought that this generation (known as NEETs, ‘millennials,’ or the ‘lost generation’), which was considered estranged from social concerns, would have carried out demonstrations in our country that by their nature can be compared to the mobilizations of the Indignant in many countries or to the Arab Spring revolts

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<sup>26</sup> Rudé, 1979: 36.

<sup>27</sup> Rudé, 1979: 38.

<sup>28</sup> Sandoval, 2017: 13.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*: 38.

in the Middle East or North Africa,”<sup>30</sup> The belligerence of the Nicaraguan university students was a pleasant surprise to many analysts, and it shocked the regime, which they were at the point of ousting. Another similarity: during the Guatemalan spring of 2015, as during the Nicaraguan spring of 2018, the government wrote off the people as passive dupes and claimed that “everything was being manipulated by the embassy of the United States and its allies.”<sup>31</sup>

The first social movements, whose earliest forms took the shape of revolts, perished when they were crushed by the “the combined opposition of army, church, government, urban bourgeoisie, and rural landowners. Their defenders or sympathizers among the parish priests, leaseholders, and local officials were not enough to restore a balance.”<sup>32</sup> This situation of relatively monolithic confrontations changed when “the ideas of ‘freedom,’ popular sovereignty, and the Rights of Man, which would later align the middle and lower classes against a common enemy,” began to circulate among the urban and rural poor.<sup>33</sup> In the hunger revolts of 1775 in France, the rebels were sometimes led by leaseholders, school teachers, local officials, and even the village priest.”<sup>34</sup> Since then, as occurred in Nicaragua during the April revolt, many protests have blended the interests of various classes.

Despite the many similarities that allow us to classify the April rebellion in Nicaragua as a social movement, there is one interesting difference. Throughout history, social movements in the industrialized countries obtained their objectives by negotiation within institutions or with institutions. The April revolt in Nicaragua, like many others that happen in countries ruled by repressive regimes, was a repudiation of the institutions and, to some extent, the system. The arbitration and the allies had to come from outside the regime: the Catholic Church, the U.S. government, and international organizations such as the OAS, the UN, and their human rights commissions. That also occurred during the 2015 rebellion in Guatemala, but only in part. We must search further for the protest movement that the Nicaraguan revolt most resembles.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.: 18.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.: 30.

<sup>32</sup> Rudé, 1979: 38.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.: 38.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.: 259.

## Tlatelolco 1968 and Nicaragua 2018

What other movement can be compared to this April mobilization in Nicaragua and the events it unleashed? More than any other, it resembles the Movement of '68 in Mexico and its culmination in the massacre at Tlatelolco. Two social movements, two massacres: Mexico 1968, Nicaragua 2018. The nature and the action of the university students in both cases are similar. These include their style of leadership, their surprising volatility despite their supposed political apathy, their creativity in the use of resources, their daring engagements, their amazement at the massive support and brutal repression that very quickly followed, their international contacts, and their ability to gain press coverage favorable to their cause.

The petitions made by both movements were also similar: freedom for political prisoners, legislative reforms, elimination of the riot police, removal of police chiefs, and clear demarcation of responsibilities. No less similar were the events that followed on their actions. Both movements expressed themselves politically in massive demonstrations involving citizens who previously seemed to have resigned themselves to the abuses of a party-controlled state and to the “representative” democracy of a single party. They had the support of artists and academics (in *The Night of Tlatelolco* Elena Poniatowska created a still unsurpassable collage of visions of the massacre); they produced ingeniously barbed posters and slogan (and now memes as well); they engaged in dispersed, anarchical tactics; they involved many social sectors and classes; and a very long etcetera.

Who were the ones protesting, and against whom were they protesting? According to Oriana Fallaci, who was at the Plaza de las Tres Culturas, where she received a broadside of bullets that almost cost her her life, the protesters were “the students, the workers, the school teachers—in sum, whoever had the courage to protest against the Herod that in Mexico is called the Institutional Revolutionary Party, which claims to be socialist but with a type of socialism that is incomprehensible from the viewpoint of the poor of Mexico, who are among the poorest poor in the world.”<sup>35</sup> Such was the situation in Nicaragua, neither more nor less.

Many similarities existed also in the methods and discourses of the government: the claim to be revolutionary, the tight control over the university

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<sup>35</sup> Fallaci, n.d.: 301.

authorities, the refusal to engage in genuine dialogue, the heartless murders, the illegal detentions, the rush to impose normality (and the eagerness of the public university rectors to make all seem normal),<sup>36</sup> the erratic explanations and denials, and the claim to be the innocent victim of punishable crimes. A month before ordering the massacre, Gustavo Díaz Ordaz uttered these words before the Mexican Congress: “We have been tolerant to the point of being criticized for being excessively so, but everything has a limit. We can no longer allow the legal order to be violated, as has been happening in the eyes of all.”<sup>37</sup>

Five years after the massacre of Tlatelolco, Octavio Paz wrote an assessment that could have been written five months after the massacre of Nicaragua: “When the students take to the streets, they discover communal action, direct democracy, and fraternity. These are the weapons with which they confront repression and very quickly win over the people. ... When the groundswell of youth crashes against the wall of power, government violence is unleashed, and everything ends in a puddle of blood. The students were seeking open dialogue with power, and power responded with a violence that silences all voices.”<sup>38</sup>

The attitude of the Mexican government was very similar to that of the Nicaraguan, as Paz observes: “It is not that our government officials were blind and deaf. They simply did not want to see or hear. Recognizing the existence of the student movements would have been for them the equivalent of denying themselves. ... Accustomed to monologue and intoxicated with the high-sounding rhetoric that surrounds them like a cloud, our presidents and leaders have a hard time accepting the existence of wills and opinions different from their own. They are the past, the present, and the future of Mexico. The PRI is not a majority party: it is Unanimity. The president is not only the maximum political authority: as the incarnation of Mexican history, he embodies the Power that is transmitted as a magical substance from the first tlatoani, down through viceroys and presidents. ... The military operation against [the university students] was not only a political action; it took on an almost religious form as a *punishment from on high*.”<sup>39</sup>

Inspired by a similar script, the response of the government of Ortega-Murillo was to declare the students criminals by appealing to high heaven and then to call out its paramilitary forces to carry out punishment. It called

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<sup>36</sup> González de Alba, 1973: 113.

<sup>37</sup> Poniatowska, 1981: 52.

<sup>38</sup> Paz, 1989: 61.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*: 63.

the protesters “delinquents,” and it classified as terrorists those who dared to attack the incarnations of Nicaragua’s past, present, and future—those whose genealogical tree is traced back to Augusto C. Sandino and now culminates in Juan Carlos Ortega, the reincarnation of Sandino, according to the firm belief of his mother Rosario Murillo.<sup>40</sup>

Though Nicaragua 2018 is a half-century distant from Tlatelolco 1968, the numbers of those killed and imprisoned are not far apart. In Mexico some 325 were massacred, according to journalist John Rodda, who at that time was reporting on the Olympic Games for *The Guardian*.<sup>41</sup> That figure is shockingly close to the minimum estimate of those killed by the Nicaraguan police and paramilitary forces on orders of Ortega. How many were imprisoned? In Mexico the number was about 500, while in Nicaragua some 700 persons were kidnapped, as reported by family members to human rights organizations, and most ended up in prison.

Thus far the similarities and parallels, but the disproportions and dissimilarities are also striking: Nicaragua in 2018 was a nation with hardly six million people, whereas Mexico in 1968 had a population of 50 million and so was more able to absorb the blow of hundreds of slaughtered and imprisoned youth. The massacre in Mexico was concentrated in a single night, whereas the murders in Nicaragua were stretched out over more than two months. Tlatelolco was the great trauma and watershed of contemporary Mexican history, its wound still unhealed. Only time will tell what the effects will be of the rebellion and massacre of April 2018 in Nicaragua.

For the time being it is clear that the April uprising, like the demonstrations that preceded the Tlatelolco massacre, got transformed into a rebellion sustained not by well-articulated ideologies but by basic moral principles. Monsiváis described it thus: “*The ’68* is a great moral, anti-authoritarian, and juridical insurrection. It is not so much the government of Díaz Ordaz pitted against the National Strike Council as it is the spectacle of decrepit forces pitted against energetic weaknesses.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Medina, 2016.

<sup>41</sup> Doyle, 2006: 17.

<sup>42</sup> Monsiváis, 2008: 13.

# The method, structure, and nature of this study

This work is based above all on interviews with 14 persons who were protagonists in the April rebellion. They gave more than 14 hours of direct, recorded testimony between August 8, 2018 and January 30, 2019. The study also draws on many other sources, including dozens of reports and opinion pieces that appeared in hybrid communications media (conventional outlets on the internet), hundreds of hours of televised newscasts (including government-sponsored and other pro-government media), visits to the homes of prisoners and university students, careful examination of the memes that have circulated, participation in marches, and bibliographic review of theoretical and historical studies on social movements, including texts that describe the struggles of Nicaraguan university students in the decades of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.

The main objectives of this study are 1) to analyze the forms of mobilization and coordination of the university students as they developed and strengthened starting in April 2018 and 2) to examine their relations with, similarities to, and differences from other important movements in the country's history. The more specific objectives are the following: 1) to discern the personal, collective, social, and personal triggers that produced the mobilization of the university youth, their subsequent organization, and their connections with other social movements; 2) to identify the principal characteristics, functional forms, organizational models, and leadership styles within the university student movement, with emphasis on the roles played by men and women within the organizational spaces they occupied; and 3) to analyze the influence of the collective vision, mainly of the Nicaraguan youth, on the emergence of a critical force of university students with broad popular support.

Sections 3, 4, and 5, which are the heart of the study, correspond respectively to these three specific objectives. Section 3 treats the objective and subjective conditions of the emergent revolt. It seemed to me inadequate to present the socioeconomic and political conditions as sufficient causes in themselves to explain an event as complex—and in no way mechanical—as a social movement. Eric J. Hobsbawm observed that “the causes are not the same as the acts. Human beings do not react to the goad of hunger and oppression through an automatic response mechanism that leads them to rebel. What they do or do not do depends on their situation with respect to other human beings and on their environment, their culture, their tradition, and their experience. That is why we must now examine the social and mental world of southern

workers, especially what we know about their collective organization and their protests.”<sup>43</sup> My focus on perceptions is aimed at portraying that “social and mental world,” which is expressed in subjective visions and explanations that make manifest the motivations of the rebellion.

Tarrow, for his part, argues that “even the most deeply rooted demands remain inert until they are activated. In my opinion, the principal activating factors are changing political opportunities, which produce new waves of movement and shape the way these are deployed.”<sup>44</sup> This concept of political opportunities is key for Tarrow: he uses it to explain why groups with few resources and moderate demands are able to translate potential movement into actual movement, while other groups that have abundant resources and profound grievances fail to do so.<sup>45</sup>

By presenting the facts regarding people’s intentions and perceptions, I show that the needed political opportunities were being forged through a mixture of flawed government policies, limitations of the populist model, and degradation of the Front’s membership and clientele. But another major factor was the accumulated organizing strength—resulting from feminism, LGBT rights, university radio programs, and other political battlefields—that crystallized in a revolt whose dimensions were not foreseen either by those who sparked it or by the government that confronted it. In this way I link together a Marxism of objectivity and a Marxism of subjectivity, making use of a hinge formed by the moral economy, that is, the interaction between cultural customs (in this case, ideologies) and economic activity.

Section 4 describes the essential elements of the struggles: how the organizations functioned, how decisions were made, the role of the social networks and the traditional means of communication, other resources and strategies of the April 19<sup>th</sup> movement, the movement’s relations with other actors, the role of the university students in material and symbolic terms with respect to Nicaraguan society, the types of coordination between the student movement and social movements with different origins (small farmers’ movements, women’s movements, etc.), the links with the Caribbean Coast, and the role of women vis-à-vis the patriarchal culture.

Section 5 analyzes the evaluations some “external” actors made regarding the role of the university students, with the understanding that few segments of the opposition could be classified as complete “outsiders.” This section

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<sup>43</sup> Hobsbawm, 1978: 61.

<sup>44</sup> Tarrow, 1997: 26.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*: 49.

provides an opportunity to develop some of the polemical themes that have been debated by important pundits and have captured much space on the opinion pages. The themes include the presumed political apathy of the millennials, the meaning of their incursion into politics, and the perennially great questions about the different ways of leading a revolt (spontaneity or conscious direction, horizontality or vanguard leadership). The antecedents of this polemic about leadership go back as far as the 19<sup>th</sup>-century disputes among the Bakuninists, the Marxists, and the social democrats. All three of these political currents saw the rebellion that gave rise to the Paris Commune as an example of the struggle of workers, but only Bakunin and his partisans would have embraced the type of values and the methods of struggle embraced by the university students of Nicaragua, who did not adopt the values and methods associated with Marxist-Leninist vanguardism. While the Bakuninists considered spontaneity and horizontality to be safeguards against the authoritarian virus, Engels thought that the lack of authority and centralization were the cause of the Paris Commune's failure.<sup>46</sup>

In each of these three sections I have included extensive quotations from my interviewees. My purpose in citing them at length is to infuse life into the text and to allow readers to form their own judgment on the basis of a large portion of the material I have seen and heard. I do not pretend to exhaust all possible interpretations or to have the last word. In any case, readers should keep in mind that these pages do not contain all the material recorded, nor do they include all the texts I have read on dozens of webpages. Not included either are the thousands of details about the interviewees' situations, their homes, the marches, the memes, or the jokes that form part of the great wealth of ethnographic work. But all that raw material undoubtedly whispered to me more than one interpretative clue as I trod the paths along which scientific investigation fruitlessly tries to advance.

Section 2 contains the indispensable background that provides readers prior knowledge—by means of contrasts and similarities—of the particularities, the ruptures, and the continuities of the university movements of today. This section does not aspire to give a full account of the history of university organizations in Nicaragua; it tries simply to describe their most significant features at moments of social upheaval—revolt, social movement—and their similarities to the organizations of April 2018. A full history of the university movement in Nicaragua is a task yet to be undertaken. I limit myself here to putting a little order into the information that is found in the testimonies of

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<sup>46</sup> Haupt, 1986: 53.

those who led the university struggles in the 1950s, 1960s, and beginning of the 1970s. Since those decades were not yet skewed by the guerrilla struggle or by government repression, they seem to me adequate as a comparative point of reference. References for each assertion are given not only to validate the source but also to give diligent readers a means for delving more deeply into the topic. In section 6, which contains the conclusions of the study, I attempt to reap the fruits of the comparisons made in the preceding sections.

The text has the virtue and the defect of having been written while the events themselves were unfolding. Several testimonies came from persons who later were imprisoned or forced to seek political exile abroad. Some mothers of detained youths gave their testimony weeks before their children were condemned in Stalinist show trials that are fit to be recorded in the annals of judicial infamy. The main virtue of the work consists in the spirited rebelliousness that is evident in the testimonies but will not be found in statistics or archives. The French historian Maurice Agulhon wrote about the advantage of this approach: “Historians today agree to treat periods close to them in time in order to enjoy the advantages of proximity. ... To put it schematically, today there are live witnesses but closed archives. It is the time of ‘immediate history,’ sometimes called ‘oral history’ (because of the importance of interviews). Their accounts are at once irreplaceable and provisional. Tomorrow the witnesses will be dead, but the archives will be open. Then it will be possible to undertake a new stage, a new and more complete synthesis.”<sup>47</sup>

The defect of this work, apart from the limitations indicated by Agulhon, is that the smoke produced by the events makes it difficult to discern clearly their direction and their significance. Quite pertinent at this time, then, are the conclusions of American philosopher Susan Buck Morrs about the elusive nature of the meaning and truth of history: “Truth is single, but it requires a constant process of inquiry because it is built upon a present that is a shifting ground. History is always escaping our grasp, moving in directions that we poor humans cannot predict.”<sup>48</sup> While it may be too early to strike a balance regarding elusive history, this is nevertheless an ideal time for examining the origins and the characteristics of the April 19<sup>th</sup> Movement through an exercise of oral history.

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<sup>47</sup> Agulhon, 2016: 53.

<sup>48</sup> Buck-Morss, 2013: 206.



## 2. UNIVERSITY STRUGGLES IN THE MIMEOGRAPH AGE

It happened exactly half a century ago: Carlos Fonseca Amador addressed a message to the revolutionary students in April 1968. By that time Fonseca had to his credit more than a decade of struggle that began in secondary-school classrooms, continued on university campuses, and culminated in clandestine fighting as a guerrilla. His document, printed on a battered mimeograph machine, contained only 13 pages, but they were explosive.<sup>49</sup> The heart of his message was a reproach of the student movement: “While the student guerrillas have shed their blood, the student revolutionaries who remained in the classrooms have basically sat idly by.”<sup>50</sup> When student guerrillas were killed, he wrote, “the solidarity of the organized student movement was limited to uttering simple expressions of condolence. . . . In seeking the causes of student inactivity, we should highlight both the lack of political discipline on the part of the revolutionary students and the capitalist penetration of the country’s two universities.”<sup>51</sup>

Carlos Fonseca did not accuse the university students of being politically apathetic. He was very familiar with their organizations, and he promoted the Revolutionary Student Front (FER) from his own base, the FSLN. The problem, he maintained, was the students’ lack of activism and their excessively moderate methods. He spurred them to take more forceful measures, even—or especially—actions outside the framework of law. Fonseca’s message resulted in perceptible growth in the FER and in the FER’s taking control in the University Center of the National University (CUUN). It also helped increase the number of acts of sabotage against the regime.

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<sup>49</sup> Fonseca, 1985: 129.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*: 131.

<sup>51</sup> Fonseca, 1985: 131-2.

Those were times when university students were confronting a dictatorship, and like our own times, they were painfully interesting. Studying them can throw light on the current struggles, especially if we pay attention to the contrasts and coincidences. For this work, which focuses on the university movements active during the time of the Somoza dynasty, I have collected information from more than a dozen sources, only one of which treats the university movements specifically: Rolando Avendaña Sandino's *Masacre estudiantil*, which examined the massacre on July 23, 1959. The challenge, therefore, was to put together a jigsaw puzzle, taking pieces from the kaleidoscope of discontinuous narratives and creating a coherent picture. The most interesting and inspiring source was Mónica Baltodano's *Memorias de la lucha sandinista*, a marvelous selection in three volumes of transcriptions of radio interviews the author conducted, mainly with militants of the FSLN. Several interviews were dedicated to the student struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. I also made use of the Sergio Ramírez's biography of Mariano Fiallos Gil and Matilde Zimmermann's biography of Carlos Fonseca Amador.

Just as telling the story of the April 2018 rebellion without mentioning Facebook or WhatsApp would produce a very incomplete account, so it is important to note that all the above mentioned sources and others I cite were often made available via mimeograph stencils. The flyers, pamphlets, study documents, manifestos, proclamations, and pronouncements of that epoch were typed onto stencils and then printed on the noisy apparatus called a mimeograph machine. The machine was patented by Thomas Alba Edison in 1887, and its disappearance marked the end of an age that had lasted a century. Without wanting to fall into technological determinism, I believe that the costs in time, risks, and money imposed by the mimeograph gave the words printed on it significant heft and tremendous value.

## The Embryonic University Movements and Organizations

In 1950 there were two universities in Nicaragua. The National University in León was founded as the University of León in 1812 by a decree of King Ferdinand VII and elevated to the rank of National University in 1947. The University of East and South operated in Granada for only a few years, from 1947 to 1951. Anastasio Somoza García founded the Central University in

Managua in 1941, and he closed it in 1946, extremely vexed because its students had become leaders of the anti-Somoza movement that opposed his re-election. Shortly after shutting it down, he declared: "I have begotten two daughters during my time in government: the Military Academy and the Central University. I consider the two my darlings, but the second turned out to be a whore."<sup>52</sup>

Only by forcing the terminology can we speak of university movements or organizations before the National University obtained its autonomy. An organization called Nicaraguan Liberal Youth was founded in 1941 and inaugurated a feminine branch in 1955. Another organization, Conservative Youth, began in 1952, having as an antecedent the quasi-fascist Blue Shirts Movement.<sup>53</sup>

These organizations conducted most of their activities outside the university, which was not a favorable terrain for political activity or any type of protest, even academic. When Mariano Fiallos Gil became rector of the National University in 1957, the students attended classes only sporadically. They matriculated, they spent several years studying in their homes, and finally they were examined. "In those years," recalls Rolando Avendaña, who enrolled as a student shortly after this period, "the ill-named professor would arrive three or four times during the whole course. Professors and students often had little personal contact. Students who wanted to advance had to study on their own; it was rare that they heard talks about the matter they were studying. When final exams were given, a high percentage of the students failed."<sup>54</sup>

One could not speak properly of a student body because the students hardly set foot on the campus.<sup>55</sup> This dynamic obviously limited organizing possibilities. The workers' movements in England arose only after the industrial revolution, when the concentration of many workers in one place during long workdays gave them ample opportunity to plan and conspire. University students did not have this advantage of daily contact with one another until the late 1950s.

This does not mean that the students did not occasionally come together before that time, or that they did not talk about politics. The university carnivals and the farcical parades with political allusions had a long tradition. They began in 1930, according to Sergio Ramírez, but the authorities tried to suspend them

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<sup>52</sup> Arellano, 2016.

<sup>53</sup> Baltodano Marcenaro, 2007: 101.

<sup>54</sup> Avendaña, 1960: 26.

<sup>55</sup> Ramírez, 1997: 121.

in 1932, fearing the students would use them to express their opposition to the invasion of U.S. troops. Resisting the prohibition, the students resorted to other strategies to express their discontent: “The U.S. forces ordered that there be a prior review of the list of disguises and costumes that would take part in the carnival parade so that there would be no allusion to political matters or government officials. This dictate was not accepted by the students’ committee. It was decided that there would be no farcical parade but rather a solemn funeral procession for the political constitution. The students would march with gags in their mouths.”<sup>56</sup>

There are clear signs that the university students followed the political events in other Central American countries closely. On June 27, 1944, the students of the Central University demonstrated in solidarity with the students of San Carlos University of Guatemala, whose campus had been closed down. The protest expressed opposition to the reelection both of Ubico in Guatemala and of Somoza García in Nicaragua. Ubico had been overthrown, but a right-wing junta had taken his place, and the old general, working behind the scenes, was awaiting the results of his latest political ploy. Two thousand demonstrators marched through downtown Managua, a considerable number if we keep in mind that there were no more than 600 university students at that time<sup>57</sup> and that the total population of the country was only 900,000.<sup>58</sup>

When the demonstrators passed by the prisons of the Hormiguero—now known as El Chipote—the National Guard attacked them with teargas and arrested more than 600 persons. The next day a large number of women, dressed in mourning, organized a demonstration to protest the great number of imprisoned and persecuted leaders. They were quickly attacked by a Somocista mob armed with sticks and stones. When Somoza García organized a counter-demonstration, the poor turn-out alarmed the dictator. His reaction to the rising tide of discontent was to close down the Central University.<sup>59</sup>

In 1955 an organization called Somocista University Youth (JUS) was founded for the purpose of working with the student population. Its first mission was to guarantee the re-election of Anastasio Somoza García, and its first social event was a reception at which Julio Centeno Gómez recited a poem in honor of the dictator. The organization came immediately into conflict with the University Center, the principal student authority in the National

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*: 47.

<sup>57</sup> Walter, 2004: 213.

<sup>58</sup> Bulmer-Thomas, 2011: 475.

<sup>59</sup> Ramírez, 1997: 76-7.

University. Of a total of 930 students, only 154 signed a letter supporting the JUS in 1956.<sup>60</sup> Beginning in 1958 the JUS had to function as an off-campus organization since it was considered a partisan group whose activities could compromise the university's autonomy.

According to historian Rolando Baltodano, "the JUS at this initial stage was never more than an acronym, a way of becoming visible to the regime. Its activity was erratic and unsystematic, and it never dealt with the problems of most concern to the students, such as the autonomy of the university. It never had a project, vision, or analysis of its own. It consequently had a relatively short life."<sup>61</sup> The massacre of July 23, 1959 removed the JUS from circulation. Its members were totally discredited for their complicity.<sup>62</sup> In the first election for the presidency of the University Center of the National University (CUUN) in 1960, 778 of the 1,200 enrolled students voted. The Liberal candidate received only 78 votes since the majority was clearly anti-Somoza.<sup>63</sup> Avendaña recalls that "on arriving at the university, I was not surprised to hear and experience the constant anti-government effervescence. I was not surprised to learn that of the thousands students some 900 were opposed to the government."<sup>64</sup>

## Year Zero: In 1956 the Struggle Begins

The watershed year was 1956. Not only was it the year that Somoza García was executed, but it was also the year that Carlos Fonseca entered that National University of Nicaragua in León to study law. At that time the school was engaged in a fierce struggle for its autonomy, which it finally obtained two years later when it became the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua (UNAN).<sup>65</sup> Almost immediately after becoming a student there, Fonseca founded the first cell of Marxist studies.<sup>66</sup> He joined a group of students linked to the Nicaraguan Socialist Party (PSN) and united in their desire to put an end to the dictatorship. Some of

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<sup>60</sup> Baltodano Marcenaro, 2007: 164-6.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*: 169-70.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*: 173.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*: 174.

<sup>64</sup> Avendaña, 1960: 24.

<sup>65</sup> Zimmermann, 2003: 54.

<sup>66</sup> Borge, n.d.: 16.

these students were members of the Nicaraguan Democratic Youth (JDN); when the JDN dissolved in 1959, they joined the Nicaraguan Revolutionary Youth (JRN). Both groups attempted to reach out to the great majority of young people who had little chance to study and to involve them in the struggle.<sup>67</sup>

After Rigoberto López Pérez eliminated the first Somoza in 1956, the university campus was converted into a military camp and hundreds of students were arrested. Fonseca was among them though he did not know López Pérez was ignorant of the assassination plot. He spent only seven weeks in prison because his father, the property administrator for the Somoza family, intervened in his favor. Tomás Borge spent two years in prison.<sup>68</sup>

In 1957 Fonseca participated, as a delegate of the Nicaraguan Socialist Party (PSN), in the Sixth World Congress of Students for Friendship and Peace, which was held in Moscow. He described his experience in the Soviet Union in a work called *A Nicaraguan in Moscow*, published in early 1958, the same year the university achieved its autonomy. As Fonseca was beginning his second year of law studies, he was chosen by university rector Mariano Fiallos and by Carlos Tünnermann to give the welcoming address to the students. On October 15, 1958, Fonseca and other students met with Luis Somoza to demand the release of the students who had been in prison since the assassination of Somoza García. In order to apply pressure, they called the first national strike of students in the Nicaragua's history. That strike served as a means for involving secondary-school students and creating an organization for them. The university students frequently gave talks in the public secondary schools, encouraging the youngsters to get involved in the struggle.<sup>69</sup>

Amid this constant agitation against the regime, news arrived in January 1959 of the triumph of the Cuban revolution. Celebrations were held in several cities in Nicaragua, especially in Managua, where fireworks were exploded all day long, according to *La Prensa*. Young people belonging to the Conservative Party, the Independent Liberal Party, and the Christian Social Party organized a march in which they shouted "Long live freedom!" "Long live free Cuba" and "Long live Fidel!" The National Guard broke up the march but could not extinguish the bright flames that shed light on the path toward change.<sup>70</sup>

The triumph of the Cuban revolution engendered enthusiasm in many students, some of whom decided that they had to adopt the same method:

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<sup>67</sup> Ferrero Blanco, 2012: 113-6.

<sup>68</sup> Zimmermann, 2003: 58-9.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*: 64-5.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*: 67.

armed struggle as a means of taking power. That was the method the Kremlin had long been “recommending” to the socialist and communist parties of Latin America. Influenced by the Cuban triumph, a group of youths founded the Nicaraguan Patriotic Youth (JPN), which counted among its members Joaquín Solís Piura (president of the CUUN), Fernando Gordillo, Manolo Morales, and other university students, as well as young workers like Julio Buitrago and José Benito Escobar. The regime’s security forces viewed the JPN as a quasi-communist group that had infiltrated the university.<sup>71</sup>

## Prelude to the Massacre of July 23, 1959

The events of 1959 occurred in the midst of an acute economic crisis. Many business establishments were shuttered, and many workers were laid off, even by solidly solvent firms. Bank credit was depressed, and Nicaragua’s cost of living was the highest in the region. When the situation reached a critical point, the Catholic bishops offered to mediate between the government and opposition groups in order to search for solutions, but their proposal met little response. The Spanish ambassador was alarmed because a large number of Spanish residents in Nicaragua—most were school principals and/or priests—had decided to support the anti-Somoza movement.

The regime’s corruption was condemned by conscientious citizens who were angered by revelations in *La Prensa* about the 23,000 córdobas spent on furniture for the Nicaraguan embassy in Washington and the 25,000 more spent on transporting the furniture. The discontent grew during the following years: between 1960 and 1964 some one million workers took part in 28 strikes. Luis Somoza responded to the surge in protests with repression, but he offered a bit of carrot along with the stick: he set up the Nicaragua Housing Institute (1959) and the Central Bank (1960), he established a minimum wage, he announced an agrarian reform, and he legalized the right to strike (1962). These last three measures were vigorously opposed by business leaders, who refused to pay the minimum wage and continued to persecute striking workers.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Baltodano Marcenaro, 2007: 176.

<sup>72</sup> Ferrero Blanco, 2012: 97-9.

Fonseca left the university in order to travel to Havana, where he enrolled in a military expedition whose aim was to overthrow Somoza. The expedition was ambushed by the Honduran army and the Nicaraguan National Guard in El Chaparral, Honduras, on June 24, 1959. Six rebels were killed, and Fonseca nearly died after his lung was pierced by a bullet.<sup>73</sup> His decision to engage in guerrilla activity meant that he would not return to the university or to the ranks of the Socialist Party. The Cuban revolution and his understanding of the El Chaparral massacre convinced him that armed struggle was the only way to defeat Somoza. His analysis and his option would have decisive consequences for organizing work in the university.

## The Massacre of 23 July 1959

In 1959 the traditional buffoon parade of the “neophytes”—the entering students—was suspended to express solidarity with those killed in El Chaparral. In its place the students held a silent memorial march in which the young men wore white shirts with black ties and the young women wore dresses of mourning.<sup>74</sup> Even that quiet protest was enough to provoke repression. According to Avendaña, an assembly was held before the march began; it featured “an emotional discourse by Fernando Gordillo, a second-year student in juridical and social sciences and a brilliant orator who courageously condemned the regime. Voting then took place on the program elaborated by members of the University Center to render posthumous homage to the university students who died at El Chaparral. As a first step, all the students present were asked to wear from that very moment black insignias and ribbons as a sign of the grief that had overwhelmed the whole university community.”<sup>75</sup> Messages were drafted at the assembly and sent by cable to the OAS, to the U.N., and to the president of Honduras, Ramón Villeda Morales.

The student demonstration took to the streets with no fixed destination. “There were things that didn’t concern us,” recalled Fernando Gordillo in a mimeographed chronicle he later distributed. “Someone—it’s difficult to remember details in the

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<sup>73</sup> Zimmermann, 2003: 73.

<sup>74</sup> Ramírez, 1997: 171. Gordillo, 1989: 292.

<sup>75</sup> Avendaña, 1960: 58.

rush of events—proposed that we march to the Sutiaba neighborhood, and there was immediate agreement. At that time Sutiaba, with its tradition of rebellion, seemed to us the best place to express our own rebelliousness.”<sup>76</sup>

After passing through Sutiaba, the march proceeded to the law faculty with the aim of recruiting law students. The route brought the students close to a base of the National Guard, and they soon found themselves face-to-face with a contingent of troops commanded by Major Ortiz. Just a few days before, Ortiz had warned demonstrating students: “Young fellows, don’t make me act because I have orders to blow you away.”<sup>77</sup>

Gordillo recalled that “they were a group of about 15 [soldiers], some still breathing hard from running. ... As always, the guards were aggressive and gruff, perhaps because, as Gorki says, in their hearts they did not like what they were doing. They had steel helmets and unsheathed bayonets, and they were accompanied by some traffic police with guns drawn. Unlike the guards, the police were cynical and tried to make fun of us.”<sup>78</sup> Avendaña states that “while the Guard were setting up machine guns on tripods and making ready to use teargas, the students adopted an attitude of passive resistance. They sat on the pavement, sang the national hymn, and kept crying out ‘liberty.’ They maintain this attitude for an hour.”<sup>79</sup>

Eventually the students and the guards agreed to withdraw simultaneously, as Gordillo recalls: “We would take one step backward, and the guards would do the same. In the end there were no arrests and no reprisals.”<sup>80</sup> The demonstrators proceeded a few more blocks along the main street when CUUN president Joaquín Solís Piura announced that several students had been detained near the El Sesteo Restaurant. He asked the group to stay at that point while an attempt was made to dialogue with the departmental commander. Refusing to release the arrested students while the demonstration continued, the commander addressed the leaders: “If you leaders of the university students don’t order the demonstration dissolved, then the Guard will dissolve it with tear gas and then with bullets.”<sup>81</sup>

The marchers continued as far as the Instituto Nacional de Occidente, where they stopped to ask for the students’ support. Bad news kept coming: more university students had been detained. A large crowd, inflamed with

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<sup>76</sup> Gordillo, 1989: 293.

<sup>77</sup> Avendaña, 1960: 51.

<sup>78</sup> Gordillo, 1989: 294.

<sup>79</sup> Avendaña, 1960: 115.

<sup>80</sup> Gordillo, 1989: 295.

<sup>81</sup> Avendaña, 1960: 115.

indignation, gathered near the church of San Francisco; they advanced toward the university until a squad of soldiers blocked their path at La Merced Park. At that point Gordillo saw that “a drunken guardsman had got mixed up in the crowd. ... He didn’t try to do anything, but when he was reprimanded by one of those who was about to beat him, he looked up, almost humbly one might say, and he shrank away. When it was clear that someone might really try to maltreat him, it was decided to expel him from their midst.”<sup>82</sup>

Gordillo was detained and then immediately released with a message from the commander. He was to “tell the young fellows to withdraw and disperse. He [the commander] was going to free the prisoners, and we should not be afraid because they were not going to do anything to us.”<sup>83</sup> Ten minutes later the machine guns opened fire on the students.

Sergio Ramírez recalls those moments: “I have a fixed memory of Fernando that whole afternoon. Not long before the massacre, I see him capture in La Merced Park a private who was just passing by; I see him trying to take him prisoner to the university, supported by other students. He wants to demand the release of our companions who have been detained by the departmental command. A squad of armed guards comes running, armed with Garand rifles; they shoot in the air, they grab the hostage, and they order him [Fernando] to step forward. I see him with his hands on his head as they lead him away. The other students follow him in Indian file, with their hands on their heads as a sign of solidarity. I follow him, but I lose track of him when I am in the street of the massacre. They say they have released Fernando and the others who were detained in the command base. In front of me there are banners. A squadron of soldiers has closed off the corner in front of the Social Club. There are slogans and shouts of protest. Someone gives the order to return to the university. The soldiers form in triple rank, some lying down, some on their knees, some standing. They cock their rifles, and the red bomb with tear gas flies. ... The machine guns rattle.”<sup>84</sup>

The students were fired on from behind while Joaquín Solís Piura and Fernando Gordillo were communicating to them the commander’s message. Four students died, as well as a woman and a girl. More than 80 students were wounded.<sup>85</sup> Avendaña called the deed a case of “mass murder.”<sup>86</sup> Fernando Gordillo wrote a poem called “Why?” I cite a fragment:

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<sup>82</sup> Gordillo, 1989: 299.

<sup>83</sup> Gordillo, 1989: 301.

<sup>84</sup> Ramírez, 1989: 12-13.

<sup>85</sup> Avendaña, 1960: 116-7.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*: 51.

Why do our brothers and sisters burn with hate and impotence?  
Why do we?  
And I hope someone will answer. ...  
Why, while they had their backs turned?  
Why, when they were fleeing?  
Why, if they were young and happy?  
Why that afternoon?  
Why?  
If some can answer, please answer me.  
If not, then let each one do what each one must.<sup>87</sup>

At first the National Guard prevented the ambulances from reaching the wounded students.<sup>88</sup> Later Luis Somoza offered to supply all the blood needed for the wounded and promised financial aid to attend to them.<sup>89</sup> His offer was rejected, and immediately students were hunted down and stuffed into the prisons. Groups of guardsmen and agents from the security office of León spent the whole night searching houses for students.<sup>90</sup>

The repudiation was immediate, even by supporters of Somoza. Avendaña reports: “The people of Nicaragua knew that it had been a cowardly act of betrayal. Somocistas, public employees, politicians in the opposition, and the people of Nicaragua in general repudiated the murders. They knew that the only weapons the students were carrying were their words.”<sup>91</sup> The funeral procession attracted a huge crowd of 12,000, and a nationwide strike was called.<sup>92</sup> The priests hurled condemnations from the pulpit.<sup>93</sup> Bishop Calderon y Padilla of Matagalpa led a demonstration demanding the release of the students of that city, and he warned the National Guard that he would climb up the bell tower personally to sound the alarm calling all “the Indians from the valleys.” The National Guard ceded to the demands of the prelate.<sup>94</sup>

One-fifth of the universities students abandoned their studies, and many left the country. Those who remained in the university would leave the classroom whenever a student who was in the military entered it. Many professors were in

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<sup>87</sup> Gordillo, Fernando, 1960: 14.

<sup>88</sup> Ramírez, 1997: 117.

<sup>89</sup> Avendaña, 1960: 125.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*: 131.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*: 96.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*: 106.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*: 121 and 155.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*: 156.

solidarity with the students and did the same.<sup>95</sup> The issue of soldier-students was hotly debated and reached a culminating point when several students—Manolo Morales and Joaquín Solís Piura among them—declared a hunger strike and called for those students to be expelled.<sup>96</sup> The hunger strike lasted five days, ending only when a large group of students took control of the campus, which by that time was surrounded by the National Guard. The university's board of directors finally decided to expel that soldiers who were students there.<sup>97</sup>

## Birth of the FSLN and Its Consequences for the University Struggles

In a long process that lasted from 1960 to 1964, the Sandinista Front of National Liberation (FSLN) was established by a group of students. In so doing they distanced themselves from the Nicaraguan Socialist Party (PSN), which sought to work within the framework of representative democracy. The acronym, FSLN, did not make its appearance before 1963. Student organizing at the university was quite affected by the way the FSLN conceived the struggle. Its militants viewed the university as a platform for social struggle and even for extending the work of the FSLN into the barrios.<sup>98</sup> For youths who were organized, the university was not a center of studies but a stage for agitation and protest. So identified was the university with subversive outbreaks, recalls Omar Cabezas, that the parents of students “were telling their children not to get mixed up in politics because politics only results in prisons and cemeteries. Politics was for adults, not for immature kids who had no position and derived no benefit. They should stay away from the FER (Revolutionary Student Front) and from the CUUN because both groups sympathized with the Russians and Fidel Castro.”<sup>99</sup>

The FER was created by the nascent FSLN in 1962 and worked exclusively with university students. It had bases not only in the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua (UNAN) but also in the Central American University (UCA), which had been founded in 1960 by the Jesuits. In 1963 the Christian

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.: 158.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.: 161.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.: 164.

<sup>98</sup> Baltodano, 2010: 109.

<sup>99</sup> Cabezas, 1982: 12.

Democratic Front (FDC) emerged under the aegis of the Christian Social Party. The Somoza regime made feeble attempts to regain ground on the university campuses, by setting up, first, the short-lived organization Young Liberal Students (JEL) in 1960 and subsequently the Liberal Student Front (FEL) in 1965. The FEL attempted to counteract the influence of the FER. The mottos it painted on the walls reveal much about the regime's view of student organizations: "Away with the FER. We want to study." The FEL organized "civic committees" of Liberal students in the high-schools but without much success since most young people were totally opposed to Somoza. After 1969 the FEL was little more than its acronym.<sup>100</sup>

## The University as Trench

Some of the organized university students were committed to promoting rebellion; they were studying in order to be able to wage a better struggle and to recruit more opponents to fight the regime. Omar Cabezas entered the FSLN rather than the university.<sup>101</sup> Víctor Hugo Tinoco admits that he learned very little medicine "because the study of medicine was really a cover; it became a cover against the repression."<sup>102</sup> Leonel Rugama entered the FSLN rather than the university and wanted to work strictly as a revolutionary. He wrote to his father: "Since I have to do some work at the university, I must enroll there. I should warn you that if I enroll in the university, it will not be to train for a profession but to carry out solidarity work with the students."<sup>103</sup> Rogelio Ramírez, who in 1969 had a summer job in the enrolment office of the National University of León, was drunk and unkempt when he received his diploma, and he wrote on it "Francisco L. Rugama."<sup>104</sup>

Some students entered the university after gaining organizing experience in secondary school. This was the case with Carlos Fonseca Amador<sup>105</sup> and many others, including Antenor Rosales, who had been active in student

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<sup>100</sup> Baltodano Marcenaro, 2007: 178-87.

<sup>101</sup> Cabezas, 1982: 7.

<sup>102</sup> Baltodano, vol. II: 111.

<sup>103</sup> Cabestrero, 1989: 313.

<sup>104</sup> Cabestrero, 1989: 318.

<sup>105</sup> Zimmermann, 2003: 54.

movements from the age of 12 and brought his extensive experience to the university struggles.<sup>106</sup> In order to reach a wider public, the organizing work included secondary schools, teachers' colleges, and business colleges. When the national university obtained its autonomy in 1958, it had barely a thousand students,<sup>107</sup> six hundred of whom came from outside León.<sup>108</sup> A decade later there were 5,000 university students and some 20,000 secondary-school students.<sup>109</sup> Fonseca realized the importance of addressing his message "both to the students at the university and to the students at the secondary level."<sup>110</sup>

Student organizing in the secondary schools contributed to the organizing at each university center. According to Hugo Mejía Briceño, president of the CUUN in 1968 and 1969, the Ramírez Goyena National Institute was a seedbed of activists who greatly strengthened the FER in the universities.<sup>111</sup> The Ramírez Goyena sent a large number of its graduates on to university studies, and these greatly facilitated collaboration among the diverse campuses.<sup>112</sup> The already well-organized students used the platform of the FER to take control of the CUUN. To do so they had to compete with the Christian Democratic Front (FDC), which claimed to be trying to prevent the "Marxist left" from dominating the student centers. The FDC managed to control the CUUN from 1964 to 1968, the year when Fonseca sent his message, perhaps with aim of reversing the correlation of forces favoring the FER.<sup>113</sup>

## Uniting Against Somoza: Different Emphases and Methods

The FER and the FDC were both anti-Somoza, and both included Christian students. Their members corresponded to some extent to the subjects they were studying; the social democrats, for example, were mainly in the faculty of

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<sup>106</sup> Baltodano, vol. II: 119.

<sup>107</sup> Baltodano, vol. I: 287.

<sup>108</sup> Avendaña, 1960: 36.

<sup>109</sup> Fonseca, 1985: 145.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.* : 129-48.

<sup>111</sup> Baltodano, vol. I: 292.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*: 293.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.* : 288-9.

economics.<sup>114</sup> What most differentiated them, however, was the basis of their motivation: the Marxists stressed class struggle<sup>115</sup> whereas the Social Christians stressed religious identity. Hugo Mejía considers that they differed also as to the best forms of struggle: “They had divergent agendas. The resistance of the Social Christians was simple declarative; it consisted of discourses. The FER demanded belligerence.”<sup>116</sup> If this was the case, then Fonseca’s message disapproved of the emphases and methods of the FDC.

The anti-Somoza movement, including its most radical elements, was never completely identified with a project that we would today call leftist. Tomás Borge began his struggle against the dictatorship from among the ranks of conservatives, and Rigoberto López Pérez had ties with the Independent Liberal Party (PLI) at the time he executed Anastasio Somoza García.<sup>117</sup> Some of the newly organized groups sought to combine the overthrow of the Somoza regime with a transformation of the whole socio-economic order, but the movement encompassed a broad ideological spectrum.

As the years passed and anti-Somoza sentiment grew stronger, other organizations appeared: the University Students’ Committees of Struggle (CLEU), linked to the Maoist Movement of Marxist-Leninist Popular Action (MAP-ML); the Nicaraguan Socialist Youth, affiliated with the Students’ Democratic Union (UDE); and the Marxist-Leninist League. The regime tried to recover some of the ground lost in the universities by establishing the Somocista Liberal Students’ Front, which later became the Revolutionary Nationalist Students’ Front (FERNA).<sup>118</sup> The organizing panorama became even more complex when the FSLN divided into three factions, two of which proposed their own candidates for the CUUN.<sup>119</sup> The schism extended into the student organizations in the secondary schools: the Proletarians had their Revolutionary Worker Committees (COR), and the Prolonged Popular War had the People-Worker Trade Union Movement (MSPT).<sup>120</sup> The fragmentation was considerable, so that the anti-Somoza movement wore many colors.

The advantage of being multi-colored was the support the students won from the professors. Most of the professors, not just the Sandinistas, were

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<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*: 293.

<sup>115</sup> Cabezas, 1982: 11.

<sup>116</sup> Baltodano, vol. I: 294.

<sup>117</sup> Zimmerman, 2003: 58.

<sup>118</sup> Baltodano, vol. I: 307-8.

<sup>119</sup> Baltodano, vol. II: 108.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*: 111.

disposed to collaborate with the rebellious students. The exception was the law faculty, a haven for conservatives. According to Omar Cabezas, who was a law student at the time, “the most reactionary and obscurantist of the university professors took refuge there. They used individual study programs in which they defended the political constitution of Somoza, validated the representative democracy of Somoza, and taught us to respect the Civil Code above all things.”<sup>121</sup>

## The Revolutionary Student Front (FER) Wins the CUUN Election

The FER did not win control of the CUUN easily since its candidates for the presidency could not openly confess their membership in the organization,<sup>122</sup> but Fonseca’s message drove them on. Winning the elections, according to Cabezas, gave them a great boost: “FER’s victory in the CUUN elections helped us greatly in developing the political organizing work because the mere fact of controlling the CUUN offices meant that we had a place to meet apart from our houses and rented classrooms. It meant that we had typewriters, photocopiers, and mimeographs for printing. And what was still better: we had money! That is, FER’s ascent to the CUUN allowed us to make use of the public university’s legal structures to carry out the work of the FSLN and the FER as well as the work of the CUUN. Until then we had been financing the FER by contributing weekly dues, but they amounted to very little.”<sup>123</sup>

After working with very limited resources, they suddenly had a great many, as Cabezas describes: “How delighted we were when we got 200 pesos that allowed us to buy ten cans of spray paint to make posters and banners and to paint the walls of the university and the city. Maintaining control of the CUUN meant having money for all that.”<sup>124</sup> The availability of resources multiplied the work, extended the discussions, and intensified the influence.

They made banners, posters, flyers, and booklets all hours of the day and night.<sup>125</sup> They also held mass meetings and occupied university buildings,

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<sup>121</sup> Cabezas, 1982: 44.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*: 38.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*: 40.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*: 41.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*: 31 and 39.

“exploding string bombs, setting up speakers, sitting in the street in front of the university. There were discourses, songs, guitars, poems, dialogues with the authorities, commissions for this, commissions for that.”<sup>126</sup> They occupied not only the universities but also the secondary schools, the churches, and even the cathedral, demanding the freedom of the political prisoners.<sup>127</sup> They staged protests in order to obtain the bodies of their companions who had been murdered by the National Guard. If they did not get the bodies, they performed symbolic burials, though these were repressed and sometimes ended with an additional death or two.<sup>128</sup>

The students planned ingenious events that entertained or disconcerted the citizenry, such as buffoon carnivals that made fun of Somoza, or midnight processions with 500 lighted candles, which they deposited at the door of the house of the law faculty dean, an ultra-conservative Catholic.<sup>129</sup> They organized carnivals where they elected a “Clown King” and ridiculed the government functionaries. Rolando Avendaña recalls that “in 1958 the student César Blandino was a candidate for Clown King with the name Nicolasa I, thus mocking the sadly famous Nicolas Sevilla.”<sup>130</sup>

In the neighborhoods of León, people’s trials were held in which citizens voiced their complaints about public services.<sup>131</sup> Skits, trials, and music were strategies used to reach a wider public, with a view to informing them about the struggle and getting them involved. One of the first staged works that went on tour was called *Frustrated Murder*; it exposed all the truths the Somoza regimen tried to hide.

Gradually the students became more involved in the international arena. Edgar Munguía traveled to New York in 1970 to represent the CUUN at the World Youth Congress, and there he vigorously denounced the violations of human rights in Nicaragua. In 1973 he went to Chile and then visited Cuba.<sup>132</sup> The international trips caused discontent among some members, who thought that those sent on the missions were not necessarily the best suited to speak on the issues.<sup>133</sup>

The trips had their impact all the same; they succeeded in raising funds that in the 1970s allowed the organization to create a second-level United People Movement (MPU). The MPU brought together diverse organizing endeavors,

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid.: 43.

<sup>127</sup> Baltodano, vol. I: 301.

<sup>128</sup> Cabestrero, 1989: 320.

<sup>129</sup> Cabezas, 1982: 45.

<sup>130</sup> Avendaña, 1960: 39.

<sup>131</sup> Baltodano, vol. I: 304.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.: 300.

<sup>133</sup> Avendaña, 1960: 49.

some linked to the FSLN, some to the Socialist Party, and various independent associations, such as the Association of Nicaraguan Women to Deal with the National Problematic (AMPRONAC) and the National Association of Educators of Nicaragua (ANDEN).<sup>134</sup>

## Means of Struggle: The Word on Soapboxes and the Word on the Wind

Due to the many mass meetings, the activists had to cultivate and master the art of oratory, and the FER trained its members well in that regard. Appreciation for oratory was widespread in the secondary schools, which organized competitions.<sup>135</sup> The leaders of the FER believed that oratory was an indispensable skill, an effective instrument for convincing people and thus recruiting more followers for the cause.<sup>136</sup> The leaders had to be good speakers, and some of them were outstanding. The Sandinista poet and militant Fernando Gordillo won oratory contests in Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Mexico. When Sergio Ramírez met him in April 1959, he was the Central American oratory champion.<sup>137</sup>

There was space in the movement for women, and they too excelled in oratory. Brenda Ortega of the FDC and Michelle Najlis of the FER competed with one another in the elections of 1966-1967, Social Christian versus Marxist.<sup>138</sup> Hugo Mejía recalls that “Michelle Najlis was one of those leaders who would hold forth on a soapbox, wherever she found herself.”<sup>139</sup> Her leadership was partly based on her eloquence.

Recourse was also had to the word on the wind, that is, the word set to music. The musical accompaniment that Carlos and Luis Enrique Mejía Godoy gave to the movement was extremely important. Hugo Mejía states that “music played a decisive role because it lifted people’s spirits and it encouraged human contact—one could say, the expression of love—between students and revolutionaries and the whole population.”<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Baltodano, vol. II: 111.

<sup>135</sup> Baltodano, vol. I: 298.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*: 301.

<sup>137</sup> Ramírez, 1989: 21 and 11.

<sup>138</sup> Zimmermann, 2003: 56.

<sup>139</sup> Baltodano, vol. I.: 295.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*: 304.

## Means of Struggle: The Word on Stencils

Hugo Mejía recalls that when Carlos Fonseca was a student in the Instituto Ramírez Goyena, he along with other students published an ephemeral mimeographed bulletin called *Diriangén*.<sup>141</sup> When he entered the university in León, Fonseca was made the chief editor of the University Center's journal, *El Universitario*.<sup>142</sup> He immediately published strong denunciations, such as these reported by Tomás Borge: "250,000 school-aged children without schools or teachers. 5% tax on mining companies exporting gold, while the same are exempt from taxes on agricultural and mining machinery, electrical devices, etc. Our country pays foreigners to exploit the subsoil and carry off the gold—we are left coughing."<sup>143</sup> Fonseca also took part in rallies and put out propaganda flyers.<sup>144</sup> The mimeograph machine was the principal weapon during the whole period when armed confrontation with the National Guard was impossible.

Between 1960 and 1963 the UNAN in León had another student publication, *Ventana*. It was a political literary journal backed by the rector, Mariano Fiallos, and run by Sergio Ramírez and Fernando Gordillo. Its 19 issues included the writings of many university students, including Ramírez, Gordillo, Napoleón Chow, Octavio Robleto, Luis Rocha, Fanor Téllez, and Alejandro Serrano Caldera. It even included the work of Michelle Najlis, who was still studying at La Asunción. According to Ramírez, "at the journal we required social commitment of the writers, though its pages were open to every kind of artistic expression. We avoided dogmatism, sectarianism, and censorship. Already politically committed, we brought our politics to the journal. It was part of our expression of militancy for a cause that we began formulating then and that would definitely be the cause of the Sandinista Front. When Carlos Fonseca made a clandestine trip to León [in 1962], a half-dozen of us students met with him in the house of Sergio and Octavio Martínez. He talked to us about the importance of *Ventana* and its significance as an instrument of combat."<sup>145</sup>

Once the FSLN was established, its leaders placed great value on the written word and the communications media. In 1963 the FER founded the journal *El*

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<sup>141</sup> Zimmermann, 2003: 54.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*: 56.

<sup>143</sup> Borge, n.d.: 14.

<sup>144</sup> Zimmermann, 2003: 57.

<sup>145</sup> Ramírez, 1989: 18.

*Estudiante* and placed it under the direction of Fernando Gordillo.<sup>146</sup> He called it his organ for information and “agitation.” Years later he sent Leonel Rugama to the university to reinvigorate the journal since it was not being run well.

Fonseca made further proposals: “We are also thinking of using strictly academic means, such as the publication of materials that study national problems in depth, debates on the same problems, seminars along the same lines, etc.”<sup>147</sup> The students followed through, printing countless booklets on the mimeograph machine and distributing them widely. They studied Marta Harnecker’s *Elemental Concepts of Historical Materialism*, and they ventured forth into the barrios—Sutiaba, for example—to teach *The Communist Manifesto*.<sup>148</sup> The FER placed great importance on formation, especially in history and oratory.<sup>149</sup>

## University Students Armed

The 1960s in León were a time of homemade bombs that students set off in the homes of military officers and government officials.<sup>150</sup> Such activity, however, was episodic. The militants of the following decade were more bellicose, and if they were members of the FSLN, they were doing military training. Irving Larios states: “We did not take our mortars out into the streets because of the repressive actions of the Guard. They would have annihilated us in our first march. But we went to the barrios with student theater, and we mobilized the people to build bonfires. Those were the methods we used because creativity was needed in the struggle.”<sup>151</sup>

However, others who were active at the time recall that the student leaders often carried arms and even grenades.<sup>152</sup> Óscar Gutiérrez, who was a friend of Leonel Rugama, recalled one event clearly: “I saw him [Rugama] with a bag made of paperboard. He went with some university students to the Institute

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<sup>146</sup> Baltodano, vol. 1: 289.

<sup>147</sup> Fonseca, 1985: 136.

<sup>148</sup> Cabezas, 1983: 31 and 54.

<sup>149</sup> Baltodano, vol. 1: 301.

<sup>150</sup> Ramírez, 1997: 206.

<sup>151</sup> Baltodano, vol. 1: 289

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*: 311.

because he wanted to organize the Estelí students to stage a symbolic burial. They got a coffin and put it in the hall with the flags of Nicaragua and the FSLN. The people came, and there were speeches. ... Around seven or eight at night, the people went out into the streets with the coffin. I heard when the Guard shot and killed René Barrantes, my cousin, and when a Molotov cocktail exploded. Leonel was carrying that explosive in the paperboard bag, and he through it at the Guard when they opened fire.”<sup>153</sup>

On several occasion the Sandinista militants obtained money by mounting assaults that they called “recuperations.” For example, the attack on the main installations of the Santa Cecilia liquor factory included, among others, Leonel Rugama and Emmett Lang, who is now president of the Nicaraguan Olympic Committee. The same two robbed the Banco Boer on January 10, 1970.<sup>154</sup>

## The Response of the Regime: Repression

The regime invariably responded to the struggles of the students with repression. The city of León found itself often in a *de facto* state of siege,<sup>155</sup> and an actual state of siege was sometimes declared, as happened in May 1959 after the anti-Somoza rebels landed in Olama and Mollejones. Avendaña recalls the state of siege decreed on July 1, 1959: “At any hour of the night they would come knocking on the doors of the houses. It was inevitably a group of guardsmen, disturbing the tranquil sleep of the home. They would ask for the head of the household, search every corner of the house, and then carry the head of the household away for a time that might be a month or six months or even a year. At that time poor Nicaragua was like Hitler’s Germany.”<sup>156</sup>

Sergio Ramírez recalls those moments in his biography of Mariano Fiallos: “It would be difficult ever to forget the faces of those killed, their brains spilled on the sidewalks, their blood flowing through the gutters, the cries and the laments, the wailing of the sirens, the shouts, the muffled sound of rifles being cocked, the command to fire, the blinding and asphyxiating tear gas fumes, and the terrible *ratatat* of the machine guns that kept assaulting us right through

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<sup>153</sup> Cabestrero, 1989: 320.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.* : 367-8.

<sup>155</sup> Ramírez, 1997: 220.

<sup>156</sup> Avendaña, 1960: 81.

the night. Those were days when we heard the Guards patrolling the sidewalks, their boots hitting the cement hard, the butts of their rifles striking the ground. We heard the whisperings, the companions being pursued, the all too familiar vision of the prisons.”<sup>157</sup>

Even before the 1959 massacre, the buses traveling to León were being searched by the military at the beginning of the school year. Avendaña recalls “that morning in June [1958] when the bus began its route from the capital to the cities to the west and stopped at a checkpoint, as was the custom. Immediately two police boarded the vehicle and carried out a meticulous search of all the bags. They asked the bus driver for a list of the passengers, and they went over the names one by one.”<sup>158</sup>

Infiltrators and informers were used to intensify the repression of student leaders.<sup>159</sup> In 1958 Luis Somoza stated publicly that he had ordered secret agents to enroll as university students.<sup>160</sup> Shock troops were used frequently. Nicolasa Sevilla, who used to take command of the Somocista Popular Fronts, gained much renown by breaking up the occupations of buildings and the demonstrations of the opposition.<sup>161</sup> No less famous were her attacks on the communications media: Radio Mundial and Radio Deportes were her victims in 1958. When the National Guard denied they knew nothing about Nicolasa Sevilla, the Conservative Youth announced in their journal, *Semanario Movimiento*, a reward of 5,000 córdobas to anyone who could provide information as to her whereabouts.<sup>162</sup>

The repression was constant and the fear pervasive, according to Irving Dávila, another student leader in the 1970s: “I recall that I couldn’t go to parties because when we were returning home around twelve at night, we were terrified if we saw a vehicle behind us—because if it was the Guard, they were sure to take us away.”<sup>163</sup> Life was uprooted for the organized students, as Tinoco recalls: “I no longer live in a house, and I can no longer visit my family home. I basically live at the university, and when I leave there, nobody knows where I’m going.”<sup>164</sup> The repression produced students who were full-time insurgents.

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<sup>157</sup> Ramírez, 1997: 289.

<sup>158</sup> Avendaña, 1960: 13.

<sup>159</sup> Baltodano, vol. I: 312.

<sup>160</sup> Ramírez, 1997: 156-7.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.: 200. Avendaña, 1960: 32.

<sup>162</sup> Baltodano Marcenaro, 2007: 49.

<sup>163</sup> Baltodano, vol. I: 316.

<sup>164</sup> Baltodano, vol. II: 111.





### 3. ANTECEDENTS AND ORIGINS OF THE APRIL 19<sup>TH</sup> MOVEMENT

The revolt of April 2018 was not—as was often said of the storming of the Bastille—“an explosion out of a clear blue sky.”<sup>165</sup> There were explosive antecedents: the protests against fraudulent elections, the demonstrations against the law prohibiting all types of abortion, the struggles against the inter-oceanic canal, and the #OcupaInss movement of 2013.<sup>166</sup> These forceful actions revealed and channeled the people’s intense dissatisfaction with the policies and methods that were enriching Daniel Ortega and his followers and strengthening their hold on power. But these were isolated, sporadic struggles that were difficult to sustain; often they were repressed and apparently crushed, reduced to innocuous levels.<sup>167</sup> In contrast, the revolt of 2018 has been massive and has lasted already more than six months.. It has extended, at different moments, to almost the whole nation, and the repression—crueler and bloodier

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<sup>165</sup> Godechot, 1985: 29.

<sup>166</sup> #OcupaInss was a support movement for members of the National Unit of Seniors (UNAM). In June 2013, after demanding for five years restoration of their right to an old-age pension, they occupied the installations of the National Institute of Social Security (INSS). The protest culminated in a violent attack by members of the Sandinista Youth against the seniors and the young supporters who took part in the occupation.

<sup>167</sup> There are outstanding examples of important and highly effective social struggles, such as the anti-canal movement and the victorious resistance to the mining efforts in Rancho Grande. However, those struggles had great limitations. The anti-canal movement had the virtue of serving as an organizing axis for a multitudinous and belligerent *campesino* movement, but it soon experienced serious fissures due to power struggles, and its call to resistance that never reach the national level. Regarding the anti-mining struggle, there was some success at Rancho Grande, but even that triumph was called into question by activist Víctor Campos, director of the Humboldt Center, who complained that there were still “seven other concessions in Rancho Grande, three of them granted to the same B2Gold company, yet only one of them was declared ‘unviable.’ ... Will all the mining activity in Rancho Grande still be considered ‘unviable’?” Campos, 2017: 19. The victory of Rancho Grande can also be interpreted as a tactical concession on the part of the government, which waves the leftist ecological banner—canceling a project of barely 1,301 hectares still at the exploratory state—in order to avoid touching any of the other ongoing exploitations, which total more than 10,000 hectares.

than anything applied to the earlier protests—has not succeeded in quelling it.<sup>168</sup> Although the uprising did not come out of a clear blue sky, it was impossible to anticipate it among all the dark clouds to which we have become habituated, as will be seen in my observations about the objective conditions.

This section will investigate the objective and subjective conditions that incubated the rebellion. Reliable information about the objective conditions can be gathered from documents and statistical sources describing the political and socioeconomic situation prior to the rebellion. The term “objective” is not used as the opposite of “phenomenal,” that is, as some ultimate reality beyond physical manifestations; rather, it is used in the sense of the reality as seen by observers who processed it with their analytical instruments. It therefore corresponds to an *etic* focus (that is, from the perspective of outside observers), and it consists of databases and other sources or of verifiable events, such as the passage of laws or the failure to observe laws.

The subjective conditions consist in the participants’ perceptions of politics and their role in it. These perceptions are seen retrospectively from the viewpoint of the participants themselves, the university students who were the indisputable protagonists of the rebellion. This is the *emic* focus. Our aim in this investigation is to approach the origins of the movement from this twofold perspective and to compare its strength with that of earlier protests.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> A similar perception was expressed by the journalist Fabián Medina in his best-seller *El preso 198*: “After April 18<sup>th</sup>, Nicaragua changed radically. It began with a peaceful protest against some reforms to social security, which was met with the usual treatment: police and shock groups beating the protesters with clubs. What was different this time was that the protest did not dissolve. To the contrary, it grew. The government responded with more repression, including live bullets against the demonstrators. When the first youngsters were killed, Nicaragua rose up. Barricades were erected in the barrios and the cities, and the reasons for the protest evolved from discontent with the social security reform to demands for the resignation and prosecution of Daniel Ortega and all those implicated in crimes.” Medina, 2018: 245.

<sup>169</sup> Using terms from linguistics, a U.S. anthropologist distinguished between an *etic* and an *emic* perspective: “The *emic* or *etic* nature of the descriptions of events that informants have observed or participated in depends on the origin of the categories they establish in the framework of discourse. When the description refers to categories of time, space, weights and measures, number of persons present, corporal movements, and environmental effects of the observer, the description will be *etic*. A census provides the most familiar example. If we limit ourselves to asking the informant, ‘What persons live in this house?’ the answer will have an *emic* character since the informant will use the native concept of ‘live here’ to include and exclude the persons present or absent in the dwelling.” Harris, 1985: 51-52.

### 3.1. The Objective Conditions

The writer Sergio Ramírez uses the expression “underhand governing” to refer to Somoza’s behind-the-scene control of government when he was constitutionally ineligible for reelection during certain periods.<sup>170</sup> Daniel Ortega governed “from below,” as he has promised, during the 17 years (1990-2006) that separated his two presidencies. The three presidents of that period—Violeta Barrios, Arnoldo Alemán, and Enrique Bolaños—had to confront the disturbances, the strikes, and the other disorders that Ortega actively and openly promoted in order to make his power felt.

When Ortega was not instigating unrest, those adversely affected by government politics rarely protested. There were multi-million-dollar privatizations; the Atlantic coast was almost completely ceded to mining exploration and exploitation; social security contributions and value-added taxes were increased; and with the rise of private medical companies, there was a marked deterioration in public health services—all this, and nobody raised a voice in protest. The direct involvement of the hierarchs of the FSLN in the privatizations, the mining concessions, and the commercialization of health services guaranteed the neutralization of potential dissidents. During its decade in power in the 1980s, the FSLN had effectively coopted the most important mass organizations and unions, making them into disciplined executors of its dictates. After its electoral defeat in 1990, the FSLN maintained tight control over the organizations and used them as weapons against succeeding governments.

Irving Larios, a student leader in the 1970s, contrasts the protests of the 1970s with those of the 1990s: “[Before] we had leaders who really convoked and motivated the young people. ... Work was done for the sake of conscience, not for a salary, as is happening today with student leaders. They used to send us to find housing, to seek resources in general, to recruit people. ... It was a situation totally different from what we have now, and that matters. This new generation doesn’t work with the same values. ... Now we have the same deterioration in health services, the same conditions of illiteracy, and the people are not motivated.”<sup>171</sup>

When the FSLN won the elections in 2006, it not only had control of the mass organizations—control tested and proven a thousand times while

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<sup>170</sup> Ramírez, 1997: 89.

<sup>171</sup> Baltodano, vol. 1: 315-6.

governing “from below”—but it dominated the Supreme Electoral Council, the Supreme Court of Justice, and most of the lower courts. It also regained control—if it had ever lost it—of the National Police and the Nicaraguan Army.<sup>172</sup> In the subsequent election the FSLN won most of the municipal mayoralties and most of the seats in the National Assembly. To ensure that the system functions better and is less vulnerable, the state institutions have hollowed out their webpages, falsified the information, and opted for an enigmatic style that, as some researchers have noted, protects the state agencies from public scrutiny.<sup>173</sup>

An alliance with the entrepreneurial sector has helped consolidate the FSLN’s dominion. Tax exemptions were maintained, and some top members of the Front became associates in new business enterprises. The project of the inter-oceanic canal—which aroused angry reactions among intellectuals, journalists, and especially the *campesino* movement—moved the Front closer to the elites, who were not slow to perceive new openings for their businesses. But perhaps the most eloquent and evident expression of the business sector’s satisfaction with Ortega’s government is displayed in the following chart, which shows the sustained growth of the financial sector, the heart of the capitalist system.

### Indicators of the national financial system.

(In July of each year, monetary amounts in millions of córdobas)

YEAR	2002	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2010
Full-time Employees	3,806	5,489	7,158	8,156	7,717	7,601	7,471
Assets	28,630.5	52,582.1	60,569.8	71,707.	76,212.5	92,474.5	103,870.4
Credit portfolio	9,322.5	27,126.5	34,537.0	44,671.5	42,002.1	40,877.5	43,864.5
Deposits	23,436.2	39,770.4	43,135.3	49,728.3	52,729.2	68,582.7	81,285.2

<sup>172</sup> Regarding the FSLN’s control of the National Police (and the two groups within that institution fighting to control it), see the information based on declarations of a former Minister of Justice in Rocha, 2007: 533-549.

<sup>173</sup> Weegels, 2018.

YEAR	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Full-time Employees	7,792	8,888	8,363	9,424	10,731	11,272	11,120
Assets	113,956.2	125,461.1	150,433.5	176,384.2	203,037.3	236,812.0	255,458.9
Credit Portfolio	58,774.5	72,892.0	89,295.6	107,796.7	131,123.1	152,736.5	160,013.1
Deposits	89,464.6	96,927.0	111,702.5	130,110.4	143,958.4	156,919.0	146,050.8

(Source: Central Bank of Nicaragua)<sup>174</sup>

During the five years of the government of Enrique Bolaños (2002-2007), the credit portfolio and the volume of deposits of the Nicaraguan financial system grew at an annual average of 5,043 million and 3,940 million córdobas respectively. During the first 10 years of the government of Ortega (2007-2017), the corresponding annual increases grew by 11,820 million and 11,378 million córdobas respectively. Given the increase in those funds and an average brokerage margin of 9.8%, bankers in Nicaragua reached a profit rate of 29%, far above the regional average of 18%.<sup>175</sup>

The financial growth revealed in the chart shows why the entrepreneurial class has had solid reasons to fall into line and to support what their amenable intellectuals (like Arturo Cruz) called “responsible populism.”<sup>176</sup> The adjective “responsible” had a capacious enough meaning to include a government that raised the country’s external debt in recent years to more than 80% of GDP.<sup>177</sup> Big capital’s official position and its close relationship with the Ortega government were noted by the economist and former finance minister of Chile, Andrés Velasco, in a stunning statement made in August 2017, barely a half year prior to the rebellion: “When the U.S. government recently caused a commotion by stating that in Nicaragua influence trafficking and arbitrary application of laws were frightening off foreign investors, José Adán Aguerrí, president of COSEP, the foremost business organization in the country, came out in defense of the government. He declared that, if the U.S. Embassy gave him a list of the foreign companies that were facing obstacles, he personally would take charge of resolving their problems.”<sup>178</sup> Velasco was one of the several birds of ill omen that pointed out the unsustainability of an economic

<sup>174</sup> Banco Central de Nicaragua, Indicadores financieros mensuales, [https://www.bcn.gob.ni/estadisticas/monetario\\_financiero/financiero/financiera\\_mensual/index.php](https://www.bcn.gob.ni/estadisticas/monetario_financiero/financiero/financiera_mensual/index.php)

<sup>175</sup> Sáenz, 2016: 235.

<sup>176</sup> Cruz Sequeira, 2011.

<sup>177</sup> Sáenz, 2016: 238.

<sup>178</sup> Velasco, 2017.

model based on receiving \$500 million annually from Venezuela for almost a decade. Venezuela's "cooperation"—in the form of loans, investments, or donations—actually reached \$728.7 million in 2012 and \$681.2 million in 2013. In that latter year the petroleum contributed by Nicaragua represented 34% of the government's fiscal revenues and was equivalent to 23% of the value of Nicaragua's exports. The total of those funds through 2015 came to \$4,440 million. The International Monetary Fund calculated that 62% of those funds were destined for "profit-making" projects.<sup>179</sup>

Reflecting the contentment of the business leaders, the 2017 report of the Nicaraguan Foundation for Economic and Social Development (FUNIDES) projected an economic growth rate of around 4.6% in 2017 and 2018. Nothing in the 2017 report would have allowed readers to suspect the crisis would overwhelm the whole country in April of the following year; still less was there any indication that the crisis would explode because of events related to social security. Although the report mentioned a deceleration in the growth of the number of contributors to social security, it indicated that "between January and June of 2017 there were 921,102 persons insured by the Nicaraguan Institute of Social Security (INSS), representing an increase of 7.5% in comparison with the same period in 2016."

Exports were also increasing, according to the report: "Through June 2017, the Nicaraguan economy exported goods with a value of \$2,775 million, which represents an increase of 12.3% compared to the same month of 2016." The performance of remittances was also encouraging: "During the first half of 2017, remittances amounted to \$664 million, representing an increase of 9.0% with respect to the same period in 2016. The total flow of remittances in the first six months of the year represents 9.5% of the GDP for that period and has shown acceleration." According to FUNIDES, inflation was not affecting real wages: "Inflation in July 2017 was 3.1%, continuing its downward tendency since February of the same year, after remaining stable during 2016." The commercial trade deficit was reduced, and the public sector registered a budget surplus of 0.5%.<sup>180</sup> A survey conducted by FUNIDES revealed that "in June 2017 consumers perceived an improvement in their present and future purchasing power" and that "there was an increase in the percentage of business owners who saw improvement in the economic situation of the country and of private enterprise."<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Sáenz, 2016: 218-9.

<sup>180</sup> FUNIDES, 2017: 11.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*: 16.

As both cause and consequence of the positions taken by business leaders, the multilateral financial agencies—except the IMF, which reduced its loans in 2012—continued to provide funds to the Ortega government and the private sector. The increased loans partially compensated for the decline in resources coming from bilateral cooperation, since several donor countries sanctioned the Ortega government for the fraudulent elections and the dismantling of democratic institutions.<sup>182</sup>

The picture painted by FUNIDES in 2017 did not include all the available information; indeed, it did not even include all the information offered by the public sector. More careful examination of the data make less surprising the fact that the crisis exploded as the result of measures related to social security. It is true that there had been an increase in the number of contributors, but only 35% of those affiliated with the system were contributing 52 weeks a year, while some 40% contributed for fewer than six months a year.<sup>183</sup> This juggling of figures explains the alleged increase in the number of insured contributors in relation to the economically active population from 22% in 2008 to 27% in 2017.<sup>184</sup> FUNIDES did not comment on the structure of costs, which is key for understanding the finances of INSS and for explaining the swift shift from surplus to deficit. The Bolaños government ended its term in 2007 with a surplus of almost 1.2 billion córdobas in the INSS, but in 2014 a deficit phase of 158.5 million córdobas began, and the deficit kept growing and accelerating until it reached 1.9 billion córdobas in 2017.<sup>185</sup>

Another aspect of Nicaragua's financial growth is the source of capital funds. The rising tide of deposits was not especially associated with an increase in national savings. Nicaragua is listed as one of the most important jurisdictions in the world for money laundering, according to the most recent "International Narcotics Control Strategy Report," published by the U.S. State Department in March 2018, on the eve of the rebellion. Among other elements, the report mentions the 212 companies that operate under free-zone status. The most damning paragraph of the report points out that "Nicaragua's vulnerability to money laundering is increased by the proliferation of phantasm enterprises and the existence of many non-transparent, quasi-public businesses that are

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<sup>182</sup> Sáenz, 2016: 230.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*: 262.

<sup>184</sup> Instituto Nicaragüense de Seguridad Social (INSS), 2017: 323.

<sup>185</sup> Banco Central de Nicaragua, Finanzas públicas, Balance del Instituto Nicaragüense de Seguridad Social (INSS), [https://www.bcn.gob.ni/estadisticas/finanzas\\_publicas/finanzas/index.php](https://www.bcn.gob.ni/estadisticas/finanzas_publicas/finanzas/index.php).

linked to the governing party and carry out large cash transactions. ... The Nicaraguan government strongly supports Venezuelan President Maduro, and it has accepted approximately \$3.6 billion from Venezuela since 2007. The company *Petróleos de Venezuela S.A.*, which has been sanctioned by the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), owns 51% of Nicaraguan conglomerate *Albanisa*.” In its final lines the report warns that “regional investigations show that illicit flows of money are permeating the banking system.”<sup>186</sup>

The pervasiveness of money laundering in the country indicates both a weakness and a strength in the regime. On the one hand, it is a suspect government whose ties with Venezuela place it in conflict with the geopolitical strategy of the U.S. government. On the other hand, the flow of illicit money is a financial prop that solidifies the material bases of regime’s hegemony. In order to offset both the U.S. government’s censuring of the laundering activities and the Wikileaks revelations showing that the “Embassy” was concerned about police corruption and the close ties between police and drug traffickers, the Ortega regime agreed to establish a “wall of contention” migratory policy, a move which the U.S. ambassador in Nicaragua, Laura F. Dogu, applauded as a coordinated effort between Nicaragua and the United States to stop the flow of drugs.<sup>187</sup>

Foreign investment has also had reason to feel comfortable with the policies of the FSLN. Mining is an industry that has especially prospered during the decade of Ortega’s administration. Exports of gold grew at a dizzying rate from 10,800 troy ounces worth \$4.2 million in 1994 to 285,900 troy ounces worth \$357 million in 2016. When the FSLN came to power in 2006, the production was 99,400 troy ounces worth \$55.3 million.<sup>188</sup> Income from export of gold in 2016 represented 20% of the value of the principal export products, putting it in third place after beef and coffee.

The changes introduced by the FSLN during 11 years of governing sent a message to the poorest multitudes, even though some changes were merely cosmetic. After assuming office, the government froze the fares on urban buses and provided a subsidy for electric energy. Given the inflationary context, these measures meant cheaper transportation costs and lower electric bills. The regime

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<sup>186</sup> United States Department of State, Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, “International Narcotics Control Strategy Report. Volume II. Money Laundering”, March 2018: 14, 153, 154, and 155, <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/278760.pdf>.

<sup>187</sup> Baca Castellón, 2016.

<sup>188</sup> Banco Central de Nicaragua, Exportaciones, [http://www.bcn.gob.ni/estadisticas/sector\\_externo/comercio\\_exterior/exportaciones/index.php](http://www.bcn.gob.ni/estadisticas/sector_externo/comercio_exterior/exportaciones/index.php).

also financed expensive and outlandish entertainment for the masses, such as an end-of-year ice-skating rink. There is no question that the regime's policy of expanding public employment greatly benefited its supporters: between 2006 and 2017 the number of persons employed by the central government increased from 39,140 to 108,208.<sup>189</sup> But even such growth was insufficient in view of the fact that the economically active population grew from 2,283,370 in 2006 to 2,912,900 in 2015, thus adding 629,530 persons to the workforce.<sup>190</sup>

Besides the issue of employment there are other important considerations. In its 2017 report, FUNIDES included data from the National Institute of Information for Development (INIDE) to the effect that "the open unemployment rate at the national level has not reached double digits in more than ten years."<sup>191</sup> But the report also expressed its reservations about the quality of work, again drawing on official data: "One way of measuring the quality of work is based on working hours and wages. The employed population includes the fully employed and the sub-employed. Included in the latter group are 1) persons who work fewer than 8 hours a day and want to work more (visible sub-employment) and 2) persons who work 8 hours or more but earn less than the minimum wage (invisible sub-employment). Using data from the Ongoing Survey of Homes for the first trimester of 2017, the INIDE report (2017) calculated that 42.6% of workers were sub-employed."<sup>192</sup> In 2008 the sub-employment rate was 29%.<sup>193</sup> It is likely that a large segment of young people recently incorporated into the workforce were and continue to be among those most affected by sub-employment and that the decrease in real wages registered between 2006 and 2015 has affected them seriously, despite the moderate inflation.<sup>194</sup>

The small business sector—both formal and informal—has also been hit hard by government policies since it has not had access to compensation for the increased costs resulting from the \$0.23 rise in fuel prices, which in 2015 added \$200 million to government revenues over and above what would have been obtained if fuel prices had been kept at the regional level.<sup>195</sup>

Finally, one negatively affected sector that knew how to react belligerently

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<sup>189</sup> Banco Central de Nicaragua, 2017: 61.

<sup>190</sup> Sistema Integrado de Información Estadística del SICA, Análisis estadístico, Población Económicamente Activa (PEA).

<sup>191</sup> FUNIDES, 2017: 27

<sup>192</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>193</sup> Sáenz, 2016: 249.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.: 249.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.: 233-4.

was that of women who were victims of domestic violence and their defenders. Not only did the government fail to enforce Law 779 (the integral law prohibiting violence against women, a reform of Law 641 of the Penal Code), but a presidential decree emitted in July 2014 was designed to limit the reach of Law 779; it did so by doctoring the figures of murders of women and by referring victims to agencies that were still to be created and that would favor non-penal solutions.<sup>196</sup>

The balance of objective conditions in 2017 caused serious deterioration of the international image of the Ortega government, resulting in reduced flows of bilateral cooperation. The government benefited from the pragmatism of the U.S. government and also received help from several International Finance Institutions (IFIs), which continued to supply funds. (Still another source of finance was the not inconsiderable flow of illicit capital.) The financial support of the IFIs was reflected politically in the backing that Luis Almagro, Secretary General of the OAS, gave the regime: not only did he refuse to condemn the fraudulent elections, but he allowed Ortega ample freedom in reforming the electoral system. The opposition, for its part, continued its denunciations, sought the backing of international allies, and encouraged passage of the Nica Act. Meanwhile, the government's patronage politics had to confront the biggest challenges of its decade in power: the sharp decrease in Venezuelan aid, the inability to increase public employment further, the imminent bankruptcy of the INSS, and serious deterioration in public services.

## 3.2. THE SUBJECTIVE CONDITIONS

The subjective conditions are those that came into being through the perceptions and actions of the university students who were, as this investigation maintains, the protagonists of the revolt. Highlighting the role of the students runs counter to the history of great episodes and Weberian sociology, which prefer find the explanation of such events in subjects endowed with charisma. The students do not appear as charismatic leaders. The most visible figures in the revolt, those who took part in the Civic Alliance, have deliberately avoided epithets indicating leadership or vanguard roles. They have also been harshly

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<sup>196</sup> Miranda Aburto, 2014.

criticized for that choosing that strategy, attitude, evasion, or whatever it may be called.<sup>197</sup>

What we have collected here is the testimony of the students themselves and the mothers of two of them. Their vision and their activity open a window for us onto a fresh view of history. This investigation makes use of the varied ways in which ordinary people explain events, whether for themselves or for others. Historian Robert Darnton wrote that ethnographic history “attempts to investigate [a people’s] cosmology and to show how the people organize reality in their minds and how they express it in their conduct. It is not a question of making the man in the street a philosopher but of discovering why life in the streets requires a strategy.”<sup>198</sup> Adopting such a perspective regarding subjectivities will enable us to understand certain aspects of the rebellion’s origins, and to consider to what extent the testimonies here collected reveal a change of mentalities.

Studies of social movements do not usually concern themselves with individuals who are part of the crowd and whose reputations as heroes—or more rarely, heroines—have not been validated by the passage of time. History rescues from anonymity only a few, and it does so according to the criteria of social power, which extol those who were “considered particularly important by virtue of their work in favor of a specific nation or group of persons.”<sup>199</sup> For reasons I will explain in the next section, the information age breaks with this dynamic and allows—or even imposes—the visibility of other actors. It is that condition of visibility that allows me to justify the presentation of the perceptions and actions of those other actors as subjective conditions whose analysis is necessary for understanding the April revolt.

I also need to present a methodological reason. Sociologists generally set sociogenic factors against psychogenic ones, the macro against the micro. The perspective I propose is a fusion of both because it presents the interviewees as particular individuals in whom the great chains of ideologies and events are absorbed, processed, and expressed, with the result that their discourse can help us to situate changes, evaluations, perceptions, and social tendencies. Norbert Elias proposed linking biographical micro-processes to historical

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<sup>197</sup> See, for example, Bárcenas, 8 December 2018.

<sup>198</sup> Darnton, 2009: 11.

<sup>199</sup> This was Norbert Elias’s criticism of Weber, among others. Zabludovsky, 2016: 50.

macro-processes.<sup>200</sup> Here I propose to read the tracks of the macro-processes in the short oral autobiographies of the protagonists of the revolt in order to identify the subjective conditions that brought it about.

## The Roots: Sandinista Parents, Disappointed Rank-and-File

The first trait that stands out in most of the young people visible in the revolt is their Sandinista background and even militancy. Although my sample was not representative, its random character succeeded in avoiding biases, so it is remarkable that the Sandinista origin of this segment of the rebellious youth and their disappointment with the FSLN emerge as a significant reality. To broaden my sample of direct interviews, I made use of the larger universe of interviews available on both conventional and digital media. I did this by noting the persons most visible in public appearances, especially those who participated actively in the Civic Alliance. Whatever the source, the result was the same: Sandinista sympathizers of diverse types rose up against their own party, disgusted with its failure to fulfil promises, its assaults on human rights and the country's institutions, and its abusive manipulation of patronage.

Hansel Vásquez was brought up in a family of solid Sandinista tradition. His path toward rupture with the FSLN took many turns, but it moved forward rapidly in recent years. As his mother Lilian Ruiz will tell us later, Hansel faced many difficulties when his disillusionment clashed with his family's continued loyalty to the Sandinista Front. Lesther Alemán, according to information obtained by Argentine journalist Martín Caparrós, comes from a long tradition of Sandinista ideology: "He read about Sandinista ideals. ... His hero is the founding father of the Front, Carlos Fonseca, who died shortly before the triumph of the revolution. Lesther began to develop his ideals on the basis of books, videos, and songs. His hymn is 'Nicaragua Nicaragüita,' and his favorite songs are the testimonials."<sup>201</sup> As evidence of this great interest, he had beside him, when he was interviewed by journalist Jon Lee Anderson, a

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid.: 65. In his study on Mozart, Elias states: "It is not a question of creating a historical narrative but of elaborating a contrastable theoretical model of the figuration that constitutes a person—in the present case, an 18<sup>th</sup>-century artist—in view of his interdependence with other social figures of his time." Elias, 1991.

<sup>201</sup> Caparrós, 2018.

book on the history of the Sandinista revolution.<sup>202</sup> But Lesther Alemán never belonged to the Sandinista Youth or to any other organized group.

Víctor Cuadras went further in his involvement with the FSLN: “I am a Sandinista. I am a leftist. I was formed in the ranks of the Sandinista Front. In 2014 I entered the ranks of the Sandinista Youth in my neighborhood, and there I began my political formation. And if you ask me, ‘What party would you like to belong to, and what party would you like to restore and renew?’ it would be the Sandinista Front, the party in which I was formed politically. I do not believe that the Sandinista Front needs to disappear. The Sandinista Front is a party with a great trajectory; it is well constituted party.”<sup>203</sup> An article from those days reports that “Víctor grew up hearing stories about the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN). His father belonged to the Sandinista army and was in fact one of those wounded in war. He withdrew from the institution in 1989.”<sup>204</sup> Jeancarlo López, of the April 19<sup>th</sup> University Student Movement, shares the same sympathy with the Sandinista movement as Cuadras; he supports many of his ideals, “those of pure Sandinista doctrine, not those promoted by Ortega.”<sup>205</sup>

Dolly Mora, a 26-year-old feminist activist, founded the Trans and Cultural Women’s Association (AMTC) in 2011, together with a trans friend. Well-known also in the Nicaraguan University Alliance (AUN), Mora stated that she “grew up in a Sandinista family. My uncles took part in the revolution, and my grandfathers also.” But she believes that Ortega “has played fast and loose with the memory of the revolution.”<sup>206</sup>

Alfredo is another activist youth, a member of “Generational Dialogue.” According to Harley Morales, “Alfredo is very interesting because he is a fellow who belonged to the Sandinista Youth in Ciudad Darío. He is a Sandinista and comes from a Sandinista family, and he has been involved in this insurrection from the beginning, from the moment the pot exploded in the UNI until now. They have taken reprisals against him and his family for their involvement.”

Juanita Paz,<sup>207</sup> who has a social work degree, was active in the occupation of the National University of Engineering (UNI) and later in León. She also spoke of her Sandinista roots: “My family has always been Sandinista. They

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<sup>202</sup> Anderson, 2018.

<sup>203</sup> Houston Castillo, <https://www.trendsmap.com/twitter/tweet/1007427680772509698>

<sup>204</sup> Reyes, 2018.

<sup>205</sup> Martínez, 2018.

<sup>206</sup> Nodal, 2018.

<sup>207</sup> Pseudonym.

have historically been involved in the party, but when everything began to happen on April 18<sup>th</sup> and they saw how they were attacking the young activists, they told me: ‘This government has died.’ It was incredible. I think they gave me the impulse and the strength to be able to say, ‘Yes, we can. Nicaragua can change. The people are not blind, and we are finally going to tell them what we’ve wanted to tell them all these years—many organizations, many women feminists, many young men and women.’ This whole struggle that the people are seeing—and that they’re going to see more of—will get even stronger. I think that is what has been achieved: we see that so many people have risen up and have said, ‘I am not in favor of this.’ That is what is incredible.”

The most immediate political involvement of Madelaine Caracas has related to her participation in feminist and artistic groups; as a painter she has sought to “use the arts to denounce violence against women.” She readily acknowledges her Sandinista roots: “My father was in the revolution. He was a guerrilla. I grew up with those stories, but I also grew up having political debates with my parents. Neither of them has remained active, though my father sometimes has some relations with the Front.” The parents of Valeska Valle are not Sandinistas, but her uncles and a brother are; their experience in the FSLN got her involved and had a paradoxical impact on her, as will be explained in what follows.

Of all the persons I interviewed, the one who introduced himself as Carlos Herrera—in memory of a companion killed in the struggle—was the one most immersed in the Sandinista world, both directly and by family tradition. His testimony shows that his spirit of rebellion was born of the same revolutionary vision and values, but they were now turned against the Sandinista regime. “My line was always political. I got a degree in political and civic formation. I also took a course in Marxist philosophy, taught by a Cuban professor from the University of Havana. I was part of the Sandinista Front. I have my membership card. My dad was a guerrilla with the Sandinista Front. He was in the struggle against the Contras all during the 1980s. Afterward, my mom and my dad took part in all the projects, like literacy. In the 1990s, which is the epoch I knew, you grew up with all the songs and the stories. I grew up in that setting, and I loved it. I found history very interesting. In high school I was part of the Sandinista Youth. The Front was not in power, but we were organized at school. We helped fix up the same school. From when I was little I liked all that. I even read the discourses of Fidel [Castro] because I liked to see how he structured them so that I could do the same with mine.”

Rodrigo Espinoza, Edwin Carcache, and Harley Morales do not come from that same Sandinista background. Rodrigo’s mother, Brenda Gutiérrez,

explained to me that their family had always been apolitical. Edwin claimed to have ethical reservations about politics, probably for religious reasons. Before he was captured, Edwin spoke to me about how he had resisted the siren calls of the Sandinistas: “I am 27 years old and have a four-year-old baby girl. I graduated from the UCA with a degree in social communications. I now study business. I remember that when I entered the UCA in 2008 it was a time of elections, and many of my companions were part of a network of communicators belonging to the Sandinista Youth. That is to say, all those guys we see today on the government television channels were my classmates. Often those fellows tried to get me involved with the government, but I always said no. I wanted to be more involved in pastoral work, in leadership programs. I didn’t think that politics was serving the people well. I’ve always been known as someone who assists others in concrete ways, with a social aim of helping my neighbor. Many times these fellows tried to get me to join their ranks, but they didn’t succeed because I know what politics is like, and I decided to stay in my line of being a social communicator. You know that as a student one thinks about ethics and about those aspects that are fundamental for the profession. That’s why I preferred to stay out of politics and not get involved with any party.”

## The Tricks of Politics: Preserving Power, Losing Legitimacy

Electoral fraud and patronage, the strategies most used by the FSLN to make sure it stayed in power, kept stirring up discontent among the Front’s own bases. The mechanisms used by the FSLN to reinforce its control and seduce the masses have had a kind of boomerang effect, causing disillusionment among militants and sympathizers. The testimonies I offer below reveal the tension caused by a collision of values: on the one hand, many Nicaraguans feel they owe loyalty to a party that has incarnated the ideals of social equality and opportunities for workers and small farmers; on the other, many Nicaraguans embrace those ideals but feel they lack an institutional footing.

Lilian Ruiz, mother of Hansel Vásquez, relates how her son experienced that collision: “Hansel always saw it [the corruption of the FSLN], and I was always fighting and arguing with him. ‘Aw, mom,’ he would say, ‘you’re blind about this government. Those shoes and backpacks they give the schoolkids—

do you really think it's Daniel giving them? It's not Daniel: they're from [foreign] cooperation, mom. And what they give is the dregs because the best part they keep for themselves.' That's what he was saying when he was in the university. He was always very critical, and he was always telling me that. On one occasion he even worked at the electoral tables with the Sandinista Front, and he told me: 'I'm going to work there, mom, because maybe I'll get a job.' Later he told me: 'I worked [for them] like a fool, and I even gave them a winning ballot box. I did what they told me because they didn't really win that table.' That was one of the mayoral elections. He did that out of sheer necessity. 'Look, mom,' he told me, 'I curse the hour that I did it. Those sons of ...' From that moment he was gripped by a visceral hatred. But still, out of sheer need he had to get a job there [at channel 8], and he had to swallow many things. There he got to know them still better. That is where he became even more aware."

Valeska Valle recounts a similar experience of electoral fraud as the starting point for her disillusionment with the unfulfilled promises and the manipulative patronage. She tells of infiltrating a voting station in order to collect proofs that she could show others: "My family is not Sandinista, but I have uncles who are Sandinistas, and it's because of them that I was critical, because I saw how they were being used. When they were no longer useful for the regime, they were simply tossed aside. I remember that my brother took part in the 2006 elections, and they promised him many things. He was studying at the National University of Engineering. He got involved in the electoral contest and did the dirty work, but later he never was given all the scholarships and opportunities they had talked to him about. From the time I was in high school I was very critical and sowed a lot of discord in the district. When they talked about politics, I exploded. I was very disturbed by the conformism of those who bought into this system because their situation was always precarious. It seemed to me that the regime was taking advantage of their ignorance. They gave them some food or a little house that wouldn't even hold up during a hurricane or an earthquake, and they felt happy with that. At the university I infiltrated the Sandinista groups in my second year because of a debate I had with a friend who was a Sandinista. He had told me: 'You can't say that Daniel Ortega robbed the elections if you weren't there.' So I thought, maybe this fellow is right. The CPC of my district had previously offered me a chance to work in the contest, but since I wasn't interested, I said no. However, that day I went to the house of the woman who was the CPC and I told her, 'You know what? I've thought about it, and I want to help out.' I began the paper work, they gave me my ID card as a militant, and I began to attend meetings

faithfully. I began to see the basic work that they do, and also the brainwashing. I was even made president of the voting station. Then they told me that if the total ballots came out to more than 400, then I had to note down 400, and the rest were votes we could count on. And the truth is that they nearly killed me that day because I refused to register the names of people who did not vote. I had to fight with several people. The vice-president of the committee, who lived near my house, said that I was distorting things and that I had infiltrated from another party. Obviously what I did in my own voting station was not very significant, but if they did it in my committee, then they did it in all of them. They had monitors supposedly from other parties but they were actually from the same party. When that was over, I went to my district and told my friend: ‘Now I’ve seen it myself. Your president robs elections.’ He felt betrayed and even left the Sandinistas. I don’t know why since he was closer to all that. From that point on I was very critical.”

## Mounting Disappointments

The fraudulent elections seriously affected some of the Sandinista membership, but they were not the only things breeding discontent. Indeed, they simply added to the mountain of disappointing realities that distressed both Sandinistas and non-Sandinistas: illicit enrichment, patronage, murders, blackmailing of public employees, violation of institutional safeguards and human rights, and suppression of citizen participation. Lilian Ruiz speaks of the negative factors that slowly made her son, Hansel Vásquez, and the rest of her family question their loyalty to the FSLN. They are in fact the same factors that she has been denouncing since the FSLN took power: “The reality of the matter is that those men are drunk with power. It’s ambition. Imagine the way they have enriched themselves! And not satisfied with that, they keep wanting more money, more power. They forgot that the people who put them there are the people who now are saying that enough is enough. It is the people who will remove them. They always preached, ‘The people are president,’ and so where are these people who are president? The ‘people who are president’ have already decided because they are tired of all the deaths that have been uncovered—for example when they killed the children in Esquipulas, them and their families. What happened with all the people they have killed, the

lands they have taken? What happened with the fire in Indio-Maíz? The young people rose up to defend their nation. And I always say: it was the young people who urged us to rise up and accompany them in the struggle because the young people have not been corrupted by any party. It's rare that you see a young person corrupted that way. The only corrupted youths you have right now are the ones who sympathize with the Sandinista Front. But to some extent they also are deceived because they give them perks, or they tell them that they'll give them a scholarship. 'We're going to give you 300 pesos. We're going to give you a bag of rice.' Because that has happened: 'You can't work here unless you have political backing or unless you're a neighbor or a relative of the coordinator.' If you were lucky, they gave it to you. That is a reality. I tell you that because it happened to me. I submitted about forty thousand requests to work about fifteen years ago, when I was still able to work. And wherever I went, they closed the doors to me. One time I arrived at the Department of Revenues, and I had my papers, all the documents that accredited me as a Sandinista. You know what the director told me? 'No, those can be copied.' Such humiliation. And if you don't go to the marches, they chase you away. If you didn't go the strikes, they chase you away. The whole thing is manipulation and submission. It's for all these reasons that the people exploded, and Hansel was one of them. All those things make the people grow tired of the many abuses. Here they made change in the Constitution, but the people played no part. The Assembly simply did it. Here they decreed laws without taking the people into account. They said that the people were represented by the Sandinista Front. No other party could compete with it. It's obvious that the so-called democracy that they always proclaimed didn't exist. What happened is that there were things that we thought of as normal because our minds were stultified."

Lilian Ruiz also pointed out another critical factor: "Something else that characterizes the Sandinista Front now is the vulgarity; it was not that way before. Did you see when they made those attacks against '100% Noticias'? They bordered on the vulgar. It's one thing for you to have sympathy with a party, but it's another thing for you to be vulgar. We go to the blue-and-white marches, and you won't see any vulgarity there. There harmony reigns. There peace, unity, and love reign. That is how the Nicaraguan people are. Nothing is won by entering into confrontation. Yesterday, when they ousted the protesters from the U.N., it was a gang of bandits with red-and-black flags, backed up by the police."

Other militants, like Carlos Herrera, were deeply affected by the degradation with the party: "I associated more with older people. I didn't spend much time with the Sandinista Youth. It always seemed to me that another type

of formation was needed. I saw that the Front was becoming only a mass party, without a line. I saw that the young people had no political formation. There were no schools for cadres, something that before had been fundamental for the Front. And that was because when they returned to power, the strength of the Sandinista Front was that 30 to 32 percent of faithful voters. At that point they waged a campaign to install themselves in power. They were no longer interested in political formation; their only interest was winning, and winning over people. That's why we have assistance projects in a terribly impoverished country. You win over the bases, who are mostly poor people, only because you're giving them things and assisting them. I was seeing all that because there actually *was* some continuing formation, but only for a very small group in which I was involved. In the area where I was working, the young people had political formation; we went to schools for cadres, and they took us to camps. But in general, when we visited the barrios, the young people would arrive because we were giving them something, like a T-shirt, or because we were throwing a party. I remained faithful to the party for several years, but I withdrew in 2013."

Feminists who took part in the rebellion had as their primary motivation the defense of women's rights, but they also expressed their indignation at the electoral fraud. Juanita Paz is one such woman: "Yes, I am extremely disturbed by the violation of the rights of women and girls, but I have also been aware of all the fraud they've committed, especially during elections. I was close to them when I was very very young, and I was able to see how they stole elections: they let many people mark ballots who were not voting. Being aware of all that allowed me to know what position I was in and what direction I wanted to move in."

## Underground Politics: Many Small Initiatives

In that breeding ground of discontent, there was a proliferation of diverse organizing efforts for the young people who would later be involved in the rebellion. These efforts allowed them to get some formation and training, to let off steam, and to take their first steps in politics. The testimony of Harley Morales is very eloquent in this regard: "I am an industrial engineer. Sociology was my second major. When I studied engineering, I got involved in certain

organizations. For me it was a kind of political school. I don't come from a very politicized family. The organizations in which I got involved had a political bent. We did politics differently, we used to say. Those organizations marked out my trajectory. I got involved in Techo [Shelter]. Then we wanted to establish something called the Platform for Student Impact (PIE), an attempt to organize the student body of the UCA. The attempt didn't last long. We wanted to dialogue with some movements that were expanding at the time, such as Nicaragua 2.0<sup>208</sup> and the "No!" Movement. Then I got involved in a project called Prendo, an attempt to set up a project of popular education. We borrowed much from the philosophy of Paulo Freire in our efforts to conscientize a rural community through literacy. That was in Santa Julia in El Crucero. What was interesting was that the leader there was on the other side of the table in the dialogue. That project got me involved in sociology, but when I studied sociology, I wasn't working with organizations. I began to relate to politics in a rather contemplative way, like a sociologist who views things from a distance. I stopped being an activist and was not actively involved in politics. However, we had a radio program at the UCA called "De Kriterion," where we interviewed a lot of people, including the candidates for mayor of Managua. The program arose out of the Center of Sociocultural Analysis (CASC), and I was there in CASC. That got me politicized. I was always critical of the government, but we were looking for other ways of doing politics. For example, I never joined the Wednesday protests in front of the Supreme Electoral Council because we were disillusioned with institutional politics. We used to say that the political parties do not represent us and that the political oligarchy was not just the Sandinista Front, even if that was its paradigmatic expression. The political oligarchy was the whole vitiated political system. We said that what we needed to do was organize—or wait for someone else to organize of—a new youth movement that would combat that whole political elite whose vanguard was the Sandinista Front of National Liberation.

"And then this exploded, and it took us all by surprise. The discontent was already being felt. People were already beginning to talk in the halls. On April

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<sup>208</sup> The on-line journal was launched in July 2011: "Lanzan Nicaragua 2.0," *Confidencial*, 5 July 2011, <https://confidencial.com.ni/archivos/articulo/6779/lanzan-nicaragua-2-0>. The journal's initiators were demanding more education and less corruption when they were attacked by mobs on September 11, 2011, while the police stood by passively. "Members of 'Nicaragua 2.0' denounce aggression," *El Nuevo Diario*, 11 September 2011, <https://www.elnuevodiario.com.ni/politica/113968-miembros-nicaragua-2-0-denuncian-agresion/>

17 I published an article in ‘Managua furiosa’ that was called ‘Don’t move from struggle to struggle—organize!’<sup>209</sup> What I was trying to say was that the young people who had been in [the protest for] Indio-Maíz moved on to protest for the reform of social security and forgot the former struggle. I argued that [the protests] had to be articulated in terms that would allow them to be framed in a bigger narrative. The protests could not be only against the government’s bad handling of the Indio-Maíz fire or the social security reforms. ... The struggle needed to be framed as against an enemy, and that enemy was the regime. I remember that I began to meet with people who were then leading the Indio-Maíz [protest]. That was the night of April 17<sup>th</sup>. Then on April 18<sup>th</sup> I began to contact other persons after the repression at the Camino de Oriente, and I remember that we began to form groups. The first group was called Paro [Strike]. On April 18<sup>th</sup> we were already thinking of a national strike. I made contact with Dolly and with young people I knew from other platforms, like Generational Dialogue. I was not part of Generational Dialogue, but they always invited us because we were like allies. We invited them to ‘De Kriterion,’ and they invited us to ‘Dialogue,’ a program that reflected on historical memory.”

Karla Lara, a professor of communications sciences, corroborates this testimony and traces the antecedents of that upsurge of political initiatives: “The moment I mark as the awakening, to describe it as such, was related to the great many criticisms of the present generation, and that began more or less around 2013 with OcupaINSS. That was when they began publishing stuff about the lost generation and other types of negative commentary, which unfortunately originated with journalists. Many took a critical stance toward the public passivity of the students. Why do I call it public passivity? Because those of us within the university had many projects which proved that the students were quite concerned about critical topics and were having a certain influence on society. The awakening came with OcupaINSS because the young people themselves felt strongly about it. The movement arose from them. It didn’t come from us professors. Still, there was a group of us professors who supported them by showing them how to manage communications and security. Later on we became aware of what was going on in Bosawás through debates and academic activities. At the time there was an intensification of violence in the north Caribbean coast. There was the red Christmas. Then the youngsters began to take interest also in more specific matters. The issues that first moved them were Bosawás and INSS. They were much involved in those struggles, and I think that’s where all this began as a movement,

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<sup>209</sup> Morales Pon, 2018.

as something organized around specific concerns. We also began to see, in the final-term research projects, how interested the students were in getting involved in areas linked to politics. That is, we advanced at some point from simply monitoring sensationalist news in the media to touching on topics like gender, migration, violence, sexual abuse, etc. The young people could see that these were topics that went beyond the discipline as such, which in this case was communications. We could see that the students were taking steps in a different direction; they favored time for reflection, and this brought about a certain change of attitude in them; they became interested in themes that had national repercussions and were ultimately for the benefit of society. What also helped this process is the discussion we had with various intellectuals, such as Oscar René Vargas. He took part in a course called ‘Interdisciplinary themes of communication.’ I remember that we [professors] said: ‘There’s something special about this generation.’ You could sense that they wanted to be part of something, to be involved. We took note of that and said as much at the time. This was a generation that wanted a lot of space in the congresses, that wanted to be invited whenever there was talk of politics and communication. Even if it was the law faculty that called a conference, they wanted to be there in that type of space. A whole series of clues indicated to us that there was something different going on. Then we studied the Pope’s encyclical [*Laudato Si*’], and Indio-Maíz happened. A moment came for acting on what we were teaching; it was time for knowledge to be translated into concrete action. They felt a great need to take part in the protests.”

That same pattern of diverse initiatives extended to the rural departments and flourished there thanks to the vigor of civil society and local politics. For example, Alfredo Ocampo, a leader in Matagalpa, told of his own experience: “For about 28 years I have been involved in organizing social movements made up of young people, women, environmentalists, and the LGBT community. During those same years I’ve been involved in communication because I am a communicator and also a sociologist who has done research related to social concerns. ... I have taken courses on promoting democracy and equal rights for all the populations of Nicaragua. I arrived at this post-April 18<sup>th</sup> social movement with much previous experience. I spent several days supporting OcupaINSS, and then, when the Indio-Maíz fire happened, I began on April 12<sup>th</sup> to organize people in Matagalpa to stage protests, and that’s how we began. When the social security reform law was passed, I personally, as a professional and a social security contributor, was indignant. I began protesting and have not stopped since then. ... It was important for me to understand that, ever since this government assumed power, there has been a chronological history

that has sought to restrict spaces for citizen participation. That is why they eliminated the town meetings and other open spaces where we young people were at times involved. I was part of the commission for children and young people in Matagalpa during the neoliberal governments and the first Sandinista government. But when the Sandinistas took over the central government, all those spaces were abolished. Since then the indignation has been permanent.”

Juanita Paz, who was very active in the León uprising as part of the April 19<sup>th</sup> Movement, spoke about her political involvement in León and other areas: “I studied at the UNAN León. I’m 28 years old. I finished my studies in 2011, but before finishing I became an activist for the rights of young people. For seven years I’ve been an activist in Nicaragua, and I have organized in different places. My activism is aimed at exposing the human rights violations that the Ortega-Murillo government has been committing for many years. I’m a lesbian feminist activist who has clearly been violated constitutionally not only in government spaces but also in other social spaces. That is what has motivated me to get organized. I’ve taken part in countless marches at different times in which they’ve repressed us, such as the march of March 8<sup>th</sup> [2018, #YaNoMás] and the march of November 2<sup>th</sup> [2016 and 2017, protesting violence against women and attacked by anti-riot police]. Such marches were repressed by the government in previous years. For me government repression is nothing new; we weren’t just discovering that we were dealing with a repressive government. What is new is all this violence. I have been in spaces with young people, and we’ve been organizing ourselves. We’ve taken action to strengthen our various abilities, both those related to personal development and those that can help us undertake something new. We have mainly been young people. Personally I’ve been more involved with the spaces where young people have taken decisions, and we’ve begun to do something to improve our lives and to leave something better for Nicaragua. We have worked in the barrios and the universities. We have tried to reach a very wide public.”

The explosion of April 2018 did not come out of a clear blue sky. It was preceded by many manifestations of discontent. They took the form of a great variety of political activities, such as promoting classroom discussion, inviting speakers, detecting electoral fraud and collecting convincing proofs, carrying out investigations with a political edge, instigating community activism, and participating in feminist and LGBT groups. There was much dispersed energy, and it was in constant ferment. Ecology, gender, sexual diversity, and machismo were the themes that most actively engaged the young people who confronted the regime, in part because the regime was more tolerant toward their protests and proposals.

## The Spark: The Empathic Imagination and the Repression That Builds a Movement

All the narratives include repression as an element that produces compassion and/or provokes protests. In this sense it can be said that repression built the movement. Indignation was combustible fuel that had long been awaiting a spark, as Alfredo Ocampo, an activist from Matagalpa, explains: “The indignation has been longstanding, but for me it became especially decisive when they began to attack the old folks again in León and Managua. That was the last straw for me, and it was what most aroused me. The other thing was when they killed the first students at the UPOLI. I remember that I was with some friends, helping to collect food and water for the people entrenched at the UPOLI. When we heard that those first ones were killed, it was as if to say, ‘This is the glass, and this is the drop that made the glass overflow. From here there is no turning back.’ And since then I haven’t stopped.”

Enrieth Martínez also underlines the emotional impulse: “We felt our impotence. More than those events as such, which were certainly extremely violent, I believe that what moved us was that we felt attacked, vulnerable, impotent, and at the same time we felt anger and rage.”<sup>210</sup> That was also the experience that motivated Edwin Carcache: “It was afterward, when I was at work and the protests were beginning, that I heard that they were beating many people I knew in the UCA, at the Camino de Oriente. I decided to leave my work, and I went to demonstrate with the people.” These two students and many others made use of the empathic imagination that Susan Buck-Morss suggests could be “the best road for humanity”; she proposes that it could help us to “progress beyond the constant circle of victims and victimizers.”<sup>211</sup>

Catalan sociologist Manuel Castells considers sorrow and hope to be key elements of rebellions. Individuals who share these emotions form networks and join with others who are on the same emotional frequency, independently of their personal viewpoints or their organizational ties. They join together and help one another to overcome fear and transform it into indignation.<sup>212</sup> Sorrow in the form of compassion and faith in the possibility of change were among the political emotions that impelled many of the young people in the April

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<sup>210</sup> Le Lous, 2018: 4.

<sup>211</sup> Buck-Morss, 2013: 198-9.

<sup>212</sup> Castells, 2015: 2, 3, and 60.

rebellion. When grief and rage took hold of Carlos Herrera, he joined with other rebels, as did many of the other townfolk of Diriamba. United together, they formed a sea of insurgents, despite their past Sandinista militancy and their ideological distance from the political opposition. Carlos explains: “I wasn’t demonstrating much or going to the anti-government marches, first, because I really didn’t know if I was against the government and, second, because I didn’t like marching with people I found disagreeable: political figures like Montealegre. So the moment came when I said to myself: ‘I don’t like what is happening, the way they’ve hoarded all the power.’ But there was no alternative. There was no figure that could take hold of the reins of the country. That’s why I didn’t cut myself off at that moment. But this year my girlfriend said to me: ‘I’d like to go to one of the marches in Managua on Women’s Day.’ So we got together a group of friends, and we traveled to Managua on March 8<sup>th</sup>. We were moving along with the march when we came upon a huge police barricade that didn’t let the march reach its endpoint. The roadblock consisted of three ranks of anti-riot police with their shields, backed up by police officers. I did not like that at all. What have we come to, I asked myself. Besides, the persons with whom I was marching were in no way aggressive. Then I saw everything that happened with the Indio-Maíz fire. I thought conditions were building up for an explosion. This year the marches were more frequent, and the whole atmosphere was tenser. Then came the business of the INSS. I saw on the news how on April 18<sup>th</sup> they [the security forces] came and were thrashing the journalists and the kids who were demonstrating there at the Camino de Oriente. I saw some guys I know, students, kids who were very active in political matters, serious youth very interested in change. And I also saw some kids from a government institution where I work. I realized that those guys I work with were the aggressors. They have their jobs only through politics, because in reality they are incapable of doing the work they’ve been given. I know their violent disposition, and I saw them attacking those others whom I also knew. That was quite shocking.

“Then came the 19<sup>th</sup>. I saw one of the guys wounded because they were shooting rubber bullets, one of the guys I know from my neighborhood. He’s studying veterinary medicine. It came out on the news, and I saw where they’d shot him. After that I found out that they wounded the brother of one of my best friends, a kid I’ve known forever, a young fellow who had just started in the university. That had a great impact on me, but still I didn’t explode. I had a business in Carazo, and I was trying to stay on the sidelines for the sake of my business. I was working with the mayor’s office, the police, INTUR, and I didn’t know where this was going. Then came April 21<sup>st</sup>. There was a march in Carazo,

and the march passed near my business. I didn't participate because I didn't want them to take reprisals against me. But I knew how they [the marchers] work, so I had first-aid kits ready in bags, and I had two paramedic friends there in my business. I thought that that could be my contribution, without my getting involved. At that point I saw a family and some women passing by, and I saw that some violent men started to shout at them; there were even some young women breaking bottles at their feet. They were acting super-crudely, and that shocked me. Then I saw some young fellow who were well-behaved, and some gangs began to arrive and shoot at them with mortars. The thugs were shooting at them, and the police in the town hall did nothing. At that moment I really exploded. I covered my head with a sweater and a bandana and began to make Molotov cocktails in the house. I went out with my other friends to fight against those thugs in an unequal battle since they were firing at us with mortars and even bullets. At first the march was small, but then we saw how the people were uniting together. They kept coming out of their houses until there was a huge crowd of people.”

The indignation emanated from the repression, as was the case in the repression and revolt that culminated in the Tlatelolco. The actress Margarit Isabel tells the story in *La noche de Tlatelolco*: “I joined the Student Movement because one day the riot police suddenly descended on the School of Fine Arts with police dogs and chains, and they arrested everybody. ... This arbitrary invasion woke up many of us actors, and we decided to unite with the students and help them, and to do so in reality, not just by going to demonstrations and shouting at rallies.”<sup>213</sup>

By forcing people to make decisions, the repression contributed to the rebellion. What were isolated and sometimes languid protests were transformed by the repression into a potent movement that extended nationwide. The struggle, however, did not allow itself to be influenced by the form of the repression or its instruments. While the repression was armed and cruel, the rebellion remained predominantly non-violent. While the repression did not shape the uprising's agenda and methods, it did contribute to its energy, its importance, and its massiveness. Such was the case also in Tlatelolco, according to Carolina Pérez Cicero, a student at the National Autonomous University of Mexico who was interviewed by Elena Poniatowska: “I think that the force and the importance of the Student Movement came from the repression. More than any political discourse, the mere fact of repression politicized the people and succeeded in getting the great majority to take an active part in the assemblies.”<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> Poniatowska, 1981: 15.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*: 16.

# The Rupture

Resistance to repression is one characteristic of social movements,<sup>215</sup> but resistance was not the reaction that had prevailed during the previous decade of Ortega's government. To increase the challenge to any regime, there is a need for some event or events that rupture the fear and that hegemonic control, thus making it possible for power to be based not only on coercion but also on authority.<sup>216</sup> The Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek describes such a rupture in the Iran of the Shah in these terms: "In the *Shah of Shahs*, the classical explanation of Khomeini's revolution, Ryszard Kapuscinski localized the precise moment of that rupture: it was when a solitary demonstrator, at a crossroads in Teheran, refused to obey after a policeman shouted at him to go away, so the policeman, feeling embarrassed, had to retreat. In a few hours all Teheran knew about the incident, and although there was fighting in the streets for weeks, everyone somehow knew that the jig was up. Is something similar happening today?"<sup>217</sup>

A similar rupture happened in Nicaragua on April 13, 2018, when a group of students who were part of #SOSIndioMaíz invaded a classroom in the Faculty of Juridical Sciences at the Central American University (UCA). Many of the professors were thought to favor the regime, as was the case also with the Faculty of Law at the UNAN of León in the 1960s and 1970s. Now they call the professors "conservative" or "anti-cool," whereas in León they were saying, according to former law student Omar Cabezas, that "the most reactionary and obscurantist of the university professors took refuge there. They developed individual study programs in which they defended the political constitution of Somoza, validated the representative democracy of Somoza, and taught us to respect the Civil Code above all things."<sup>218</sup>

At the UCA the students invaded the class of the head of the Sandinista bench, constitutional law professor Edwin Castro, and read a statement protesting the government's poor handling of the fire in the Indio-Maíz forest reserve, where 5000 hectares of forest had been destroyed. The students also objected to statements that Deputy Castro had made the day before, accusing

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<sup>215</sup> Tilly and Wood, 2010: 23.

<sup>216</sup> In fact, Hannah Arendt held that government resort to violent submission when they have lost their authority. Arendt, 2008: 60.

<sup>217</sup> Žižek, 2011, 35.

<sup>218</sup> Cabezas, 1982: 44.

them of being “computer environmentalists trying to take advantage of the misfortune.”<sup>219</sup> The students had simply proposed the creation of a bank account that would collect funds to help finance reclamation activities not undertaken by the government.

Edwin Castro was the same man who, in an interview with Monica Baltodano, recalled the rebellion against the first of the three Somozas: “Actually, this stretch of history began in 1954, when the founder of the Somoza dictatorship, Anastasio Somoza García, announced his intention to be reelected and began his political campaign. To confront that situation, an anti-reelection committee was formed at the University of León, under the leadership of Aquiles Centeno Pérez, Tomás Borge Martínez, and Edwin Castro Rodríguez.”<sup>220</sup> Sixty years after the first Edwin Castro undertook his subversive anti-reelection activities, his son Edwin Castro Rivera presided over the Sandinista bench in the National Assembly that modified the Constitution to allow the indefinite reelection of Daniel Ortega.

It is impossible to assess the subjective repercussions of the challenge to authority represented by this bold student invasion. Two of the YouTube videos that recorded the event were viewed 17,127 and 6,259 times. Apart from any quantitative evaluation, the event needs to be appreciated as the first in which a ranking functionary of the regime was publicly challenged by students who did not hide their identity and who justified their action by means of a pronouncement and other declarations.

## The Events Gave Birth to Organizations

Some of the young people involved in the April movement were already taking part in formal or informal organizations, ranging from small groups coalescing around a radio program to the robust national women’s organizations. Such organizations, however, were not adequate for channeling the efforts and the public promotion needed by the April movement. The young people replicated the formula that had previously proved successful. In the cases of #OcupaINSS in 2013 and of #SOSIndioMaíz in 2018, they had organized

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<sup>219</sup> Mojica, 13 April 2018.

<sup>220</sup> Baltodano, *Tome 1*, 2010, 117

around very specific causes. In April they formed groups around events. In both cases the calls to action were based on the “snowball” effect produced by invitations sent to groups of friends via social media.

The April 19<sup>th</sup> Student Movement and the April 19<sup>th</sup> University Movement were born as a single organization during the occupation of the Polytechnic University (UPOLI), but a split occurred while the students were entrenched there. There are divergent opinions as to which was the original and which was the result of the division. According to spokespersons of the April 19<sup>th</sup> University Movement, the first meeting took place on April 20<sup>th</sup>, when the movement had still not been constituted as such; it took place during the occupation of the National University of Engineering (UNI). The University Coordinating Committee for Democracy and Justice was born out of a conference called to organize thematic working groups. When those attending the conference came together for a television interview, they decided to establish themselves as an organization. The Nicaraguan University Alliance (AUN), for its part, was set up on April 20<sup>th</sup> by the group of university students who came together during the occupation of the cathedral in Managua. Each of these four organizations included young people from the different universities. In contrast, the Committee of the National Agrarian University (UNA), which was formed during the occupation of that school, was made up exclusively of young people from that institution.<sup>221</sup>

Harley Morales gives a detailed account of the leap from these small initial groups to the University Coalition: “The organizations are arising in response to the emergence of focal points of resistance and struggle. At the present moment we are seeing three. First was the group from the university zone that came together at the cathedral. The people waging the struggle at the UNI on April 20<sup>th</sup> had to take refuge in the cathedral. Then [the struggle at] the UPOLI emerged. Legitimacy, representativity, and leadership emerge in respond to certain events happening in the struggle. It was by landmarks. Leaderships were consecrated in the struggle, in the heat of combat. The students of the UNA held elections and were very formal; they organized the Committee of the UNA.

“After the repression at the Camino de Oriente, I began to contact Dolly and people I knew from other platforms, such as Generational Dialogue. The first meetings were held on April 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>. The first time we met it was with the Indio-Maíz group: Ariana, Madelaine, Eloisa.... Since the protest was self-organized, we feared there would be too many issues, too many actions—it

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<sup>221</sup> Mojica, 6 June 2018.

was very disordered. The fear I shared with Dolly was that it would be anarchic and would dissipate. It was a fear I had from times past. We never imagined that what actually happened would ever have happened, that it was going to explode so powerfully, and that people would rise up in that way. That is why we came to share the idea that we had to raise the stakes. The demands had already built up, and I felt the moment was favorable for making our enemies reveal themselves clearly and for us to declare a sort of counter-position: ‘us’ against a clearly demarcated ‘them,’ which was the regime. The others reacted by saying, ‘What is this guy talking about? If we’re going to take an action tomorrow, what we should be doing now is discussing the logistics of the action.’ On the 20<sup>th</sup> we began to meet in the offices of a foundation. Among those attending the meeting was one of the lads who had shouted at Edwin Castro. We formed something that for the moment was called the Group to Deal with the National Problematic, borrowing a little from AMPRONAC. In a communiqué we said that it was necessary to set up a committee of sectorial representation that would include participants from all the sectors. On the 21<sup>st</sup> we decided that we would give a press conference in the afternoon. That meant risking a lot since many of the young people had taken part in different struggles.

“At that time we learned that eight other collectives were doing the same thing we were doing, so we met together with those eight collectives. In the first attempt, which I attended, there were students from the UAM, the UNAN, the UCA. When we joined with those eight collectives, more people joined in, producing a sort of coalition called the Self-Convoked People [not just of students]. At that time we weren’t seeking to represent universities because it was still not a question of university organization. The uprising was still just beginning.

“We established the Self-Convoked People and put out our first pronouncement. We did it in Bahía del Contil, a barrio near the UPOLI. It was a neighborhood conference. There were already barricades in the barrios, and the UPOLI was full of barricades. Dolly, who was working in the barrios, read the pronouncement in which we made our basic demands: stopping the repression, freeing the political prisoners, stopping the reprisals against the TV channels. ... Then came the matter of dialogue, and we began to join forces with other movements. There was no clear leadership; there was no clear organization. Instead there were various organizations, just as happened in the UNAN, where there was no fixed organization but several, one at each entrance. Then there was the organization of Valeska and Victor, so we began to meet with Victor of the April 19<sup>th</sup> University Movement. The students of the UPOLI were the ones

with the most legitimacy; they were on the campus. They belonged to the April 19<sup>th</sup> Student Movement: Jeancarlo, Edwin Carache.... But not all were from the UPOLI; Jeancarlo was from the UNAN.

“Those of us in the Self-Convoked People were more involved with the UPOLI because we felt that the focus of the resistance was there. At this time there were still no roadblocks, and Masaya had not become active. In less than a week the people felt that the UPOLI was the symbolic bastion of the struggle. Those were the first moments, and after that we began to organize as the Coalition. We were all struggling for the legitimacy of our own student movement: that it be recognized as the legitimate representative on the campus. At the UPOLI three groups were competing for leadership, but we made it clear that there were some issues that brought us all together: the slaughter [of the protesters] and the departure of Ortega. That was and that is the cry of the people. Then, in order to know what people were thinking and how they were seeing the events, we began to meet with certain sectors: labor unions, NGOs, business people. That was even before we organized as a coalition, which was the most difficult thing.”

### **3.3. Reflections on the Objective and Subjective Conditions**

The young people who took an active role in the April movement had begun to organize years before that April protest. Some of them had been involved in organizations for 5, 7, or even 11 years, generally in ecological or feminist movements. Some groups had a national scope, and others were more local, such as community organizations or groups of university students who conducted radio programs that promoted political debate. Such involvement calls into question the thesis of the young people’s political apathy, but it does not negate it completely if we consider the observations of Professor Lara and her colleagues. They found that the generation that spearheaded the rebellion had an unusual interest in social themes, as was evident from their research topics, the debates they organized, and their desire to take part in political conferences. The confluence of general opposition to the Ortega regime—due to economic problems and a deteriorated international image—and the political interests of these young people was the hinge that united the objective and subjective conditions and made it possible for the movement of university students to defy the regime. The irruption of students into Edwin Castro’s

classroom was one of several rupture points where the authority of the FSLN was directly challenged.

The testimonies of the young people reveal not only the discontent that was brewing but also the political vitality that took the form of small discussion groups and radio programs. Such political activity was relatively invisible to the general public, but it became evident in the platforms that proved to be incubators of the organizations that emerged during the rebellion. German historian Reinhart Koselleck has stressed the role of private clubs as spaces for political life which had repercussions on the intellectual, social, and administrative history of Prussia and Germany.<sup>222</sup> In Nicaragua the university students broadened the public sphere by cultivating small (private) groups with political interests. The groups were not massive, but neither were the groups of the 1960s and 1970s, when the young people interested in politics waged their struggle against the Somoza dictatorship.

The small sample of persons interviewed for this study and their references to other participants in the rebellion reveal the strong presence of many lower-class university students, who were hoping to ascend the social ladder by graduating as professionals. The parents of many of the students had never had access to higher education, and they were hoping that their children's insertion in the labor market would contribute to the family's upward mobility. This prospect was threatened when the labor market proved incapable of providing good jobs for graduates; the best it could offer was visible underemployment (part-time work) or invisible underemployment (salaries below the legal minimum). The fact that some of the students were pursuing a second university career may indicate that the first one had not provided them the place they had hoped for in the labor market.<sup>223</sup> Unfortunately, statistical corroboration of these assertions, which I offer as a conjecture, is beyond the reach of this investigation.

In the microcosm revealed as we examine the personal experiences of some of the revolt's protagonists, we can see first of all a notable presence of a disillusioned Sandinista spirit. In our small sample, which makes no pretense at being representative but does indicate clearly certain noteworthy subjective conditions, most of the young people have parents who are or were

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<sup>222</sup> Koselleck, 2007: 68.

<sup>223</sup> Several of those involved in the protest were graduate students or recent graduates. For example, Douglas Castro, Rodrigo Espinoza, Harley Morales, and Doctor Veneno, who is profiled by journalist Carlos Martínez, were all graduate students. Martínez, 16 October 2018.

Sandinistas, and many of the young people themselves belonged to the party or to the Sandinista Youth. Their testimonies bear witness to the growing disappointment among Sandinista bases because of the party's abandonment of its original principles and because of the limitations (and decline) of the patronage model on which the FSLN based its mass appeal.

Moreover, the increase in the number of jobs for public-sector workers (objective condition) remained below people's expectations (subjective conditions). If we calculate that a third of those joining the workforce between 2006 and 2015 had some type of link with the FSLN—membership, being a relative of members, or some form of service—that would justify their hope of obtaining a government job, then we would have around 140,000 persons whose dreams were dashed or whose services in many cases were unremunerated. The government could not increase its employees to match the growth of the workforce. The conflict arose because the FSLN founded its legitimacy partly on state paternalism that fostered expectations of that sort.

That collision between young people's expectations and the limited growth of public-sector employment marked a point where objective and subjective conditions fused, providing a breeding ground for loss of political faith and even rebellion.<sup>224</sup> First, Sandinista militants were unhappy because of unfulfilled promises, regarding not only the attractive programs offered to the public as a whole, but the special benefits offered to collaborators. Second, the persons most exposed to this collision were the university students and recently graduated professionals just entering the labor market. As a result of these circumstances, the FSLN has lost young members from its bases during its time in power. Carlos Herrera made it clear that patronage and solid membership were incompatible for various reasons: militancy was not for the masses.

Young Sandinistas were also expressing revulsion at having to get

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<sup>224</sup> Historian Eric J. Hobsbawm emphasized that great revolts arise not necessarily from great aspirations but from the demand for elemental rights: "It is when the relatively modest expectations of daily life begin to seem unattainable without a revolution that individuals become revolutionaries. ... Of course, the modest expectations of daily life are not purely material. They include all the demands we make either for ourselves or for the communities of which we consider ourselves members: respect and consideration, determined rights, just treatment, and the like. But these are not utopian demands for a new life that is different and perfect; they have to do with the ordinary life we observe all around us. ... Once again, what pushes people toward revolutionary consciousness is not the ambitious nature of its objectives but the apparent failure of all the alternative paths for attaining the objectives, the closing of all the doors that lead to them." Hobsbawm, 1978: 349-350.

personally involved in the fraud. The experience only reinforced their scruples about collaborating with a regime that cannot represent the original values of the Sandinista movement because it does not practice them. Susan Buck-Morss wrote about the ambivalence of political guilt, which becomes evident “when one refuses to do one’s socially prescribed duty in order to do what is correct. That means betraying the collective that claims one as its own (by reason of nation, class, religion, or race), so that one risks losing the protection provided by the collective.”<sup>225</sup> This happens very frequently with young gangs, creating a cultural bond that is very difficult to dissolve. It also happens with political parties and religious denominations, but above all with parties that function as religious denominations. When individuals decide to break their ties, they do so because they feel impelled by another type of guilt, a guilt that “originates in the gulf between reality and social fantasy, not between reality and individual fantasy.”<sup>226</sup> The guilt is social, not individual, because it is rooted in the subject’s relations with a political collective, and therefore “it breaks the official silence that allows the unjust state of things to continue.”<sup>227</sup>

We can interpret the conduct of the disillusioned Sandinistas who rebel against the FSLN—the institutional incarnation of those values—in the light of Robert K. Merton’s understanding of deviant behavior. Although his aim was to understand delinquency, his ideas are appropriate for our case since they describe conduct as either admissible or deviant in terms of a specific normative framework. The connection appears to me pertinent because Buck-Morss’s characterization of guilt can be associated with Merton’s concept of anomia, which is the tension experienced by individuals when they are exposed to a conflict between social norms and the social reality.

In the case of disillusioned Sandinistas, I want to focus on the tension existing between the ideals advocated by the FSLN and the party’s actual practice. In the face of the present situation, the Sandinista bases have basically three reactions, which I will name with Merton’s nomenclature: conformism, ritualism, and innovation.<sup>228</sup> The conformist Sandinistas are those who accept the values of the FSLN and the means the party proposes to achieve them. For them there is no conflict: they are the disciplined and unconditional militants

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<sup>225</sup> Buck Morss, 2013: 122.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*: 123.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>228</sup> My application of these concepts is circumscribed by the universe of the FSLN and its set of values, not by that of the whole of society. That is why it does not correspond fully to Merton’s categorization. Giddens, 1993: 161.

who serve faithfully, convinced that what is good for the FSLN is good for the country or least for the poor. Fraud is legitimate because it is the means for maintaining the FSLN in power so that it can continue to implement its social programs. The ritualist Sandinistas are similar to the conformists, but they differ in that they have already lost sight of the values that originally motivated their affiliation with the FSLN so that they act by simple compulsion.

The innovative Sandinistas accept the values that the FSLN proclaims but the means they used to achieve them provoke a rupture with the FSLN: rebelling against the FSLN is the way to realize the true values of the Sandinista movement. Another hypothesis, therefore, is that the present objective conditions have made the sharp divergence between ideals and practice more evident and more objectionable for some Sandinistas. I am not saying that disillusioned Sandinistas made up the majority of protesters; I am simply affirming that they were a determining factor and that the revolt cannot be explained without taking them into account. In any case, the growing dichotomy between practice and ideals was without any doubt the principal factor impelling many Sandinistas to break with the FSLN, and that rupture was a watershed in their lives that made possible their participation in the April rebellion. Carlos Herrera exploded when he witnessed the violence, Hansel Vásquez felt revulsion at taking part in the electoral fraud, and Lilian Ruiz observed the sharp contrast between the comradely concord of the blue-and-white marches and the violent vulgarity of the Sandinista crowds. Their testimonies give evidence of the historical split in many subjectivities.

Given that the objective conditions were unfavorable and the subjective conditions were calling authority into question, the regime's repressive reaction to the protests around the Indio-Maíz fire and the social security reform had the effect of sharpening the demands, and as Harley Morales explained, it also helped create a polarized narrative, "us against them," that served as a cohesive factor. As that narrative spread, the student organizations were taking shape, and later they joined together in the coalition. That last leap was the most difficult task, Harley Morales recalls, because it required a shift from networks with some affinity toward the motley plurality of the self-convoked youths.

This trajectory remains incomplete if we fail to consider empathic imagination as another condition of possibility for the revolt, the organizing, and the overcoming of fear, which is, according to Castells, the most paralyzing factor for political initiatives. All the interviewees stated that they felt emotionally stirred to get involved in the protest at some key moment, such as the thrashing of the elderly or the maltreatment of persons they knew. The accumulated woes were converted into a rebellious impulse when

nourished by the empathic imagination's reaction to the repressive events. Reason and feeling went hand in hand. The revolt was provoked partly by the disillusionment of Sandinistas, but it acquired new dimensions thanks to the feminist and environmentalist struggles on behalf of issues the traditional Sandinista movement had neglected.

The revolt was also the fruit of the empathic imagination's processing of the repression. When the resultant indignation combined with frustration at political corruption and the lack of decent work, it produced a crucible that fused together the objective and subjective conditions of rebellion. A similar confluence provided the spirit of rebellion in Mexico in 1968, according to Carlos Monsiváis: "The first rebelliousness came from the technical students, who were able to combine, among other elements, rage at the arbitrary conduct of the police, social rancor, and the impulse of marginal citizens who want to stop being marginalized."<sup>229</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> Monsiváis, 2008: 18.





Ni Terroristas, Ni Delincuentes  
ESTUDIANTES  
Conscientes. #SOS  
Nicaragua.

## 4. THE STRUGGLES OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN THE INFORMATION AGE: FORMS OF STRUGGLE, RUPTURES, AND REPRODUCTION OF CULTURAL PATTERNS

The university students of today, 21<sup>st</sup>-century millennials, experienced in the April 19<sup>th</sup> Movement a baptism of fire unprecedented in Nicaraguan history. When Fonseca sent his message to students, he listed the students who had fallen in a decade of struggle: a total of 23.<sup>230</sup> Between 1958, when Edwin Castro began to organize an anti-reelection movement, and 1968, when Carlos Fonseca mimeographed his message, only 23 students were killed. In the rebellion of April 2018 more than 400 persons were killed, almost all of them young people, many of them university students. Among the 400 political prisoners recognized by the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights (CIDH), a large number were currently enrolled or recently graduated university students.<sup>231</sup> The arduous road toward that fateful tally of victims was the intense involvement that made university students into organizers of barricades, key actors in the national dialogue, and interlocutors with external multilateral organizations. Some analysts even considered the students' collective protagonism to be messianic. This section will attempt to explain part of that difficult itinerary from the perspective of the defiant university students, who felt themselves very much part of a national movement, which they were provoking but which also transcended them.

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<sup>230</sup> Fonseca, 1985: 129.

<sup>231</sup> Miranda Aburto, 5 November 2018.

## 4.1. Events as Seen by Their Protagonists: Toward Freedom via the University

### The Medium Is the Message: The University Coordinating Committee for Democracy and Justice

The formation of the University Coalition and then of the Civic Alliance presupposed that the participants had arrived at a certain basic consensus. Harley Morales asserts that “there were issues that brought us all together: justice and democracy. We then translated that into ‘Ortega must go.’” Each collective actor made specific contributions, at least two of which are worth singling out because they show clearly the different ways in which today’s university students conceive of the struggle and the need for organization.

Giving a general explanation of the University Coordinating Committee, Madelaine Caracas stated that “the Coordinating Committee does not pretend to be a movement but a coordinating body, as its name indicates. It is a space where different groups, movements, and individual students can dialogue and unite their forces; it is place where we can put forth our demands and our concerns. Beyond creating a movement, such as the April 19<sup>th</sup> Movement, we want to go to the student bases and create a totally inclusive space. A feminist space. That is how the Coordinating Committee defines itself. Before setting up the Coordinating Committee, we held conversations with many students who had been leaders in other initiatives; we got to know them through their protests. We began to talk about the values that would define us as the Coordinating Committee. We wanted to set up horizontal processes because we are dealing with a chauvinist, authoritarian, hierarchical regime that is representative of Nicaragua’s political culture from the beginning. How were we going to make demands if we did not try to turn things around with our own organization and begin to generate the changes needed? That was why we wanted to be a group that included many other groups and that would work horizontally. We want to reach consensus in our demands.”

I would sum up Madelaine Caracas’s discourse in a classic phrase: the medium is the message. Organization is not only an instrument; it is the space where transformation is brought about and made manifest. If the regime is authoritarian, chauvinist, and hierarchical, then the organization that opposes it must be inclusive, feminist, committed to horizontal processes, and built on

consensus. Political struggle is a type of epiphenomenon. Cultural struggle is the real struggle, and without it there can be no political transformation. The organization is the revolution: it is an end in itself because it embodies the goal to be achieved. It is Gandhi's "Be the change you want to see in the world."<sup>232</sup> The Coordinating Committee is definitely provoking a confrontation of values and worldviews, not just of political figures or programs. Its inclusiveness signifies that it is not a group that has ideals (conscience) which it tries to impose (conscientize) on the rest of society. Since inclusiveness relates to diversity—a crucial value in our age of multiculturalism and sexual diversity—the Coordinating Committee emerges as the most culturally globalized organization.

Madelaine Caracas propounds an ideology of civic struggle that is inclusive and pluralist; it is opposed to the mentality that glorifies the hero of history and the organization as an end in itself. It favors cultural changes and the struggle around values: feminism versus the patriarchy, the rights of LGBT persons, and the reorientation of persons toward concern for ecological problems. But the ideology is also a strategic element because it serves as the base for uniting diverse sectors.

## Rupture and the Pacifist Option

The other clear difference of mentality has to do with the form of the struggle. The testimony of Valeska Valle was very eloquent in this regard: "Even in the midst of fear, I was always thinking of meeting with friends and planning what we were going to do. The first days forced us to take rapid actions: first-year medical students were giving first aid. The entrenchment at the UPOLI was terrible on that April 21<sup>st</sup> that none of us who were there will ever forget. . . . We had to run out and look for the wounded. They had been shot in the neck and were shouting for help. Since the doctors had left to get some

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<sup>232</sup> This saying of Gandhi reflects a much deeper thought: "We but mirror the world. All the tendencies present in the outer world are to be found in the world of our body. If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As we change our own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards us. This is the divine mystery supreme. A wonderful thing it is and the source of our happiness. We need not wait to see what others do."

rest, we used the networks to ask for help, doctors, ambulances, or private cars. That's what we were doing. We caught the attention of the international news media. They couldn't understand why we were using stones, slingshots, and mortars when we were up against heavy arms. The thing is, we were waging a pacifist struggle, and all the sectors—students, lesbians, feminists, LGBT—had to be included. But if we had taken up arms, some of them would have been excluded. At least I would have been excluded because I can't shoot a gun; I don't have military training; it never interested me. By choosing to wage a civic, pacific struggle, the whole student body was going to be involved. At first that strategy was favored by just a few, and we had to convince people by telling them, 'No, don't go looking for weapons. Look what happened to little Álvaro. Let's not sully his memory.' Fortunately we chose the longer road: the pacifist road and the sensitizing of the people."

According to Valeska Valle, not only the organizational design but also the form of struggle is oriented by the desire to be inclusive. Pacifism is at once a value and a method of struggle. Pacifism won the day despite the fact that the movement, like all slightly anarchic platforms of collective action, involved initiatives that were dispersed and diversified and extended beyond the control of the representatives at the table of dialogue. That means that the pacifist strategy was not an idea or a "line" dictated by the leaders, something unthinkable in a non-hierarchical movement; rather, it resulted from a tacit collective consensus to produce an insurrection by other means. It is possible that the social media played a role in the creation of that consensus, but there must have been a prior cultural element that rejected violence. That prior element probably was less a pragmatic consideration—the obvious disparity in an armed encounter and the certainty of failure—than it was the desire to disavow the method, the discourse, and the identity of the FSLN, which had risen to power by force of arms and had repressed the struggle of April 2018 by the same means. There was a rupture with the collective vision and the myth to the "heroic Nicaragua," to which an informant will allude below. The pragmatism that took hold was grounded in the certainty that pacifism would not only have an immense resonance in the social networks but would significantly influence world opinion about the rebellion and the moral quality of its protagonists. That deliberate option gave the lie to those who maintained that there was no strategy in the uprising or that armed struggle was necessary to defeat Ortega. When Madelaine Caracas was asked about the differences between these struggles and earlier ones, she stated: "This is a pacifist insurrection."

Gene Sharp has explained the advantages of non-violent struggle, adding to those mentioned by Valeska Valle: "Non-violent discipline is also extremely

important in the process of political jiu-jitsu. The regime's sheer brutality against the clearly non-violent activists has negative political consequences for the dictator's position, causing dissension in his ranks and motivating the general population to support the resistance."<sup>233</sup> Non-violent action can also help doubtful people make up their minds, as happened with Carlos Herrera. That happens, writes Sharp, "when members of the opposing group are emotionally moved by the suffering the regime has inflicted on the valiant activists of the resistance, or when they are rationally persuaded that the cause of the resistance is just."<sup>234</sup>

## The Occupation of the National University of Engineering (UNI)

Taking these ideals to heart, the young people decided to occupy the universities. The National University of Engineering (UNI) was occupied only two days, April 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>. "It lasted only two days," Juanita Paz explains, "because they used all their weapons against them. Besides, there was nobody around the UNI to support the students. The UNI is in a very vulnerable zone. On one side was the baseball stadium, on another side the UCA, in front there were just businesses and open fields, behind was the cathedral. It wasn't like the UPOLI, where there were barrios that supported the young folks. There were no barrios near the UNI that could support the occupation. If you tried to get close, it was super-dangerous. There was no way to provide the students external support. They were besieged there for hours, doing what they could. You could say that they almost practiced magic to be able to survive with mortars. The other side had weapons; outside there were weapons, many weapons. Bodies were lying there, and we couldn't pick them up because we had to run to get away. In fact, we never knew whether those bodies were picked up. They were the bodies of young people who still have not appeared since April. There was no way to identify them because there was no way to reach where they were."

The people in a nearby barrio provided limited support: "Many people were involved in helping the students—a great many people. Most of the

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<sup>233</sup> Sharp, 2011: 33.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid.: 35-36.

people living in the barrio provided places to sleep. When the students fled from the campus, they stayed there. There were young people who stayed up all night, and families gave them a place to stay even though they knew it was risky. When they saw the whole situation, people didn't try to do anything to draw attention. Since it was a small neighborhood, they tried not to expose it to danger. I personally had to leave there because I was feeling constant stress. I saw on the news that they coming to remove X from his house. Here we are very vulnerable: everyone knows where you live, who you are, how many people live in your house. At any moment the police could arrive at your house for the simple reason that you carried a blue-and-white flag in the street. When I realized that, I decided to leave Managua.” Citizen support for social movements is key to their success; it contributes to their duration and their impact.

## The Occupation of the Polytechnic University (UPOLI)

The occupation of the UPOLI lasted about one month, according to Edwin Carcache. Four of the principal leaders of that occupation are now political prisoners. One of them is Rodrigo Espinoza, who is in the maximum security section of La Modelo prison, with head shaven clean. When they offered him a deal if he would make a video saying that Félix Maradiaga had obtained funds to finance terrorism, he responded: “I am in this struggle because it is the struggle of my people and I am defending my country.” He paid the price. Treated as a highly dangerous prisoner, he is in confined alone in a cell with poor ventilation; he is not allowed family or conjugal visits; he cannot make his two weekly phone calls; he gets no time for recreation and sunlight.

His mother, Brenda Gutiérrez, comments: “My son is now studying music at the UPOLI and agricultural engineering at the UNI. He has a scholarship at the UNI. Actually, he has a scholarship at both schools because he was paying the minimum at the UPOLI. He's a musician. He plays guitar, lyre, piano, and flute. I was telling him: ‘I prefer you here playing one of your instruments rather than taking part in demonstrations because the Sandinista Youth shoot to kill.’ He told me: ‘No, don't worry.’ So when he told me that, I thought, ‘Ah, he's moving with the troublemakers,’ and I told him, ‘Look, they shouldn't be hurting the old folks,’ and I began to counsel him. He didn't tell me his plans.

He didn't tell me anything. ... He told me, 'I'm not going to let them take our university away from us.' That day I went to leave them food, and they stayed there. The next day the UPOLI exploded. They occupied the UPOLI. That was on April 19<sup>th</sup>. I went to see him again, and I explained to him that if he was going to be in that protest, he shouldn't expose himself to gunfire because the police would do anything. He told me, 'The police can't do more than we can.' And in reality there was a huge community of students there. They were united with the UNI and the RUPAP. There were a lot of young people, only young people. Later, at night, when we heard about the first attack of the anti-riot police against the students, all of us parents went there. We went to see our children. That was when the first person was killed at the UPOLI, and we were all afraid that we would lose our children. We talked a lot with our children, and they said, 'This is definitely not going to stop. We are going to keep on.'

"He is part of the April 19<sup>th</sup> Movement. He was entrenched in the UPOLI a long time. He was in charge of getting food, medicines, and other provisions. He was one of those who would call people who had vehicles to take out the wounded. They were necessary tasks because the attacks on the UPOLI were daily, and they were extremely aggressive. There were always dead and wounded, and they transported the wounded to the hospitals. Many of them died during the trip. Instead of scaring my son, all that made him stronger and stronger. There were plenty of problems at the UPOLI, and for that reason the movement itself wanted to leave and join the coalition with the Civic Alliance. But Rodrigo, Hansel, and Marlon did not accept that; they decided it would be better to be independent. They did not want to sit at a table of dialogue, and when they were offered refuge in hotels, they did not want to go there. They said no. The three of them joined forces, and with the support of people not directly involved in the struggle, they began to look for provisions, medicines, and all the things needed by the people entrenched in the universities and at the roadblocks. So whenever the police were attacking the roadblocks, they were there. It was as if the bullets were following them around; it was if they were looking for action. That's why it was very painful for us every time there was a roadblock, because we didn't know how it was going to turn out. We would call them, and they would say, 'Right now we're in such-and-such a place, and they're attacking us.' It turned into a Calvary. I imagine all three of us mothers were thinking the same thing. I would say, 'My son is there,' and I'd be seized with desperation. When the worst of it was over, he would call me and tell me, 'Everything's fine. Be calm. Nothing's happening. Here we know how to protect ourselves. Don't worry.'"

## The Young Are People of the Streets ... and Heroes

Brenda also explains some of the many feats of her son and his young friends: “They are at home in the streets. They began working the barriers—building, relieving, supporting, and giving all they humanly could—and the people gave them provisions. And as I told you, when Masaya was under heavy attack, they managed to enter and bring them provisions. Often the wounded couldn’t leave Masaya because the paramilitaries had them surrounded, but they brought the wounded out. During the attack on Mother’s Day [which left 18 dead] they went out in front; they said they were protecting the mothers. When the first ones were killed, they were there. In fact, there was one lad that they put on a motorcycle, but he was already dying. My son was with that fellow, and he grabbed him as he was falling. That death made a great emotional impact on my son because he said he had never seen anyone die that way. The fellow’s head was coming off. My son felt at once impotent and vulnerable. He had nothing to protect him, and he was seeing one casualty after another. They thought that all of them were going to be left there. However, they began to take out the wounded and the dead and their relatives. They had to get water for the relatives because they were fainting when they saw their slaughtered children there.

“They also had to help them [Rodrigo and friends] since they were being pursued as leaders. They got them out of there to save their lives and took them to the cathedral, where they stayed hidden. Later on a vehicle took them from there to Masaya and then to another spot so they wouldn’t be in the places under attack, but they [the police] were still after them. These three young fellows were also in Ticuantepe and Estelí when those roadblocks were attacked. They were always helping the wounded and bringing medicines—until the end came. They were driving toward Managua from Masaya after leaving many supplies there. Masaya had been 10 or 15 days on strike, and the stores were not open. The city was closed down, and there was nothing there, so that’s why they collected a lot of supplies and took them there. When they were returning, they were captured at the Nindirí roundabout. The police searched the vehicle, but they weren’t carrying anything. However, when the police presented them [in a tribunal] four days later, they claimed they had a lot of weapons. They said they had AKs, rifles, and fantastic new weapons that have never been seen here in this country. They claimed they had pistols and ammunition. They said they were coming with a whole arsenal of weapons. When they searched them,

they had no money. Only Marlon had some, about 40 dollars. Rodrigo had only about 140 córdobas. They took two cellphones away from each of them, and they got the passwords by beating them. After that they were transferred from the station in Nindirí to El Chipote.

“There in El Chipote they began to torture them physically. I saw that his [Rodrigo’s] thumb was hurt, and the first thing I asked him was, ‘Did they yank out the nail?’ because they were doing that kind of torture at that time. He told me, ‘I just tripped. You know I’m a clumsy walker.’ I just looked at him and knew he was lying to me. It wasn’t until recently that he admitted that one of the tortures they applied to him was on the thumb. They pressed it to the point that it was ready to explode so that he would tell them that he was one of the financiers of terrorism in Nicaragua. After they prosecuted him, they presented him with a list of the financiers of terrorism in Nicaragua. On the list were the names of Félix Maradiaga, Mónica Baltodano, three members of the MRS, Víctor Cuadras, and I think Lesther Alemán. There was also Rodrigo Espinoza, who is my son. They were all accused of being the principal financiers of terrorism in the country. All I could think was: my son is a kid, he’s a student—how is he going to be able to finance something so big?”

Lilian Ruiz, mother of Hansel Vázquez corroborates the testimony of Brenda: “On April 22<sup>nd</sup> he [Hansel] left on a trip. I saw him only two more times before they kidnapped him. He composed all the pronouncements and read them publicly. I was telling him, ‘Why aren’t you at the table of dialogue since you have so much ability? That is a lot safer.’ He responded, ‘I’m not at the table because I didn’t want to be there. I’m not for tables. I leave that to the pretty kids. The table of dialogue is only for the little pink bottoms. I don’t like to ride on those pick-ups.’ He preferred to delegate others to go. On the marches he walked alongside the people while others road in the pick-ups. Hansel is a simple lad. He has no great aspirations.

“They kidnapped those three—Hansel, Marlon, and Rodrigo—on the night of July 11<sup>th</sup>. Since they were well-known in Masaya and were captured in Nindirí, their kidnapping went viral. They were ambushed by three pick-ups, each carrying about ten hooded men. They were not police. After they made them get out of their vehicle, they began to beat them and beat them and they didn’t stop. Hansel says that they gave him a good thrashing—they hit him on the face and kicked him in the ribs. They still hurt from the beating. Finally the chief of police arrived, Avellán, the beloved son of Masaya. The accusations were made against them in a matter of hours; the police report came out quickly. The report seems to be boilerplate text—they just change the names. They have the rough draft and just fill in the name of the citizen they’re

taking away. They talk about terrorism and organized crime. In La Modelo [prison] they put them in gallery 16, where there are only political prisoners. Rodrigo was under precautionary measures, and they put him in the maximum security cells. There's no way of seeing him there every week. His mother couldn't see him for two months."

These testimonies highlight the heroism of the young men, but their heroism consisted in helping their companions in the struggle; it was not fighting. Here there is a re-editing of the code of values of the revolutionary catechism: being on the streets, being among the people, austerity, breaking with a social order that values important posts at the tables of dialogue, relative disregard of public opinion, readiness for self-sacrifice, severity with oneself, and rejection of adulation and vanity. It is the triumph of Nechayev/Bakunin, a reconnection with the tradition of university struggles of the 1970s. The old revolutionary morality reemerges: grassroots leaders disdainful of luxurious hotels and pick-ups and the glamor of the table of dialogue. Rodrigo's mother recalls the precocious revolutionary dreams of her son: "He was always reading about history. He was saying that he was going to be a revolutionary." These young people did what the adults—among others, Fernando Cardenal, trained in those struggles and training others in them—thought they should do. Perhaps the members of the Coordinating Committee would have said that their actions were exclusionary because they could not be recommended to just any member of the movement, and there would have been few indeed who dared to undertake them. I am not proposing that that sort of return to some of the old ideals revealed a conflict within the University Coalition, but at a certain point it produced frictions that were resolved by a split in the organization. I cite the case as an example of the diversity of conceptions of the struggle within the university movement and also as an example of the solidity of the common denominator: pacifism. Nevertheless, that type of heroism had the benefit that Sharp describes: it aroused sympathy or empathy in the ranks of the rival. That is, it succeeded in giving the repression a boomerang effect.

## The Repression: Its Language and Its Effects

As we have seen, the general practice of the repressive forces was to submit most of those captured to immediate torture. The aim of the torture was to force

the detainees to implicate in violent acts other members of the movement and also well-known persons such as Dora María Téllez, foundress of the Sandinista Renewal Movement (MRS), and Silvio Báez, auxiliary bishop of Managua. Sometimes the torturers succeeded in their task. For example, torture was used to wrest a confession from Valeska Alemán, who remained entrenched in the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua (UNAN-Managua) from May 7<sup>th</sup> till early dawn on July 14<sup>th</sup>, when a joint force of heavily armed police and paramilitaries launched an attack against the students.<sup>235</sup> But her case was an exception. Another effect of the repression was to sow such intense panic that the size of the demonstrating crowds diminished. In this way the FSLN recovered control of the public spaces.

More than anything, however, the repression amplified the level of mass participation, even among militant members of the FSLN. It was of such a response that Saul Alinsky wrote: “True action resides in the reaction of the enemy. The incited enemy, led by his reaction, will be your greatest strength.”<sup>236</sup> In accord with this perspective, “repression” is not only a response to provocation but also a step toward an escalation of belligerent actions. In this regard, there are interesting historical antecedents. The massacre of between 50 and 100 demonstrators on the Boulevard des Capucines during the 1848 French revolution produced even greater bellicosity among the masses.<sup>237</sup> And when the government panicked during a demonstration of 14,000 workers and decided to punish the protest as an attempted coup d’état by arresting 400 of the insurgents, it unleashed a civil war.<sup>238</sup> What came afterward was, according to Lenin, “the yoke of the Napoleonic regime, which carried the country not only to economic ruin but to national humiliation.”<sup>239</sup> Here we have a contingent and dialectical element at work: the reaction of the dominators defines the dominated, conferring on them cohesion and a sense of identity. Repression created the April 19<sup>th</sup> Movement. The succession of murders created the group of the Mothers of April.

According to Harley Morales, the repression gave the April movement greater strength than that attained by the protests of earlier years, even when these had the backing of belligerent and solidly constituted organizations: “The question of national sovereignty was not a issue that appealed to the people.

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<sup>235</sup> Navarrete, 5 August 2018: 8-11.

<sup>236</sup> Alinsky, 2012: 155.

<sup>237</sup> Rudé, 1979: 174.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*: 177.

<sup>239</sup> Lenin, 1977: 481.

But when they were killing and repressing kids at the university—that was a much stronger message, and the people really understood it. There was no need to hear it from an authorized spokesperson or someone like Chica Ramírez. That was something everybody understood. That produced a clear message: here is a regime that needs to be confronted because it is repressing us and killing our kids. I think that is the message communicated to the people of the barrios, and all Nicaragua understood it. The day they killed Álvaro Condado, for example, the consternation was incredible. Everything sprang up in a way opposite to the way we thought it would. We thought we would have to go out and give instructive speeches. No way! The discourse was being produced by the struggle itself. First, the young people went out into the streets because they were repressing the old folk. The young people were repressed in León, in Camino de Oriente, and in the UCA. Then on April 19<sup>th</sup>, when they killed the first youngster and they killed the second, the pot exploded.” The same type of action was produced in the 1950s, ’60, and ’70s, as we saw in the second section. The same happened in the 1970s in the Universidad San Carlos in Guatemala: the repression spurred the boldness of the demonstrators and strengthened their conviction.<sup>240</sup>

Given the contingent character of the levels and forms of repression, as well as of the people’s reaction, both Carlos Herrera and Harley Morales indicated that they had no idea where events would lead. Repression often plays a major part in building the movement, as Gene Sharp observed: “Sometimes a specific action on the part of the dictatorship has so enraged the people that they have rushed headlong into action, without having any idea how the insurgency will end up.”<sup>241</sup>

## The UPOLI as a Laboratory of Struggle: Organization, Representation, and the Price of Self-Convoking

In an earlier section Harley Morales spoke of the importance of the occupation of the UPOLI. One of the protagonists, Edwin Carcache, became fully aware of this only after the fierce repression had frightened away many

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<sup>240</sup> Matute, 2017: 29.

<sup>241</sup> Sharp, 2011: 41.

demonstrators but had inflamed many more: “Everybody was there at the UPOLI. It was impossible to control who was who, who was throwing stones and who was not. How did I get involved with the leadership at the UPOLI? Many of the first leaders left. Others are outside the country. Some abandoned the struggle for reasons of fear, security, that type of thing. I arrived because there was a failure in communication. There was disorder and a lot of noise. Some people were acting badly, so we began to try to organize ourselves better. By means of communication, which is my forte, we turned things around and achieved a more horizontal style.

“When we were protesting in the streets and at the barricades, infiltrators caused some internal disorder. We saw the need to unite with the various movements that existed at that time, so we formed the University Coalition, which then became part of the Civic Alliance. My own focus was always on organizing both the communication and the street activity: convoking the masses, being a ‘rabble rouser,’ as the guys called me. I believe it has always been important to do that. The mobs, the police, the government—they were determined to repress us. As a communicator I was aware of things, and I had to get involved. The moment came when that glass overflowed, and I exploded. And now I can go out into streets every day I can. I fight to show that in our country things are not normal. We have to fight for our companions in the struggle who have been kidnapped by the regime. They were at my side, and I know them all. If I am arrested, then we’ll all be together, because it’s almost certain that they’ll put me in a maximum security prison if I end up in their hands.” His words were prophetic because less than a week after our interview he was arrested, confined in El Chipote, and then transferred to the maximum security cells of La Modelo prison, whereas he has remained from mid-September till the present time.

Carcache had the difficult task of mediating between competing initiatives and leaders: “It was hard to keep spirits up and to combat the idea that the crisis was going to worsen and that we were entering into a war, because that is the history of Nicaragua. The task was complicated because some people wanted to put extremist names on the organization. Some wanted it to be called the National Opposition Front Movement and other names like that. However, we agreed on the adjective ‘student’ simply because we were on a university campus.

“The people themselves designed the first logo. It was the biggest movement, and now it has five persons in the leadership, in different departments. Jeancarlo is our main voice in the national dialogue, but there are also Ángel Rocha, María José Bermúdez, Jairo Bonilla, and myself, Edwin

Carcache. Jeancarlo goes to the UNAN. I graduated from the UCA and now am at the UNIVAL. María José, Jairo, and Ángel are at the UPOLI. The majority are at the UPOLI. Previously we were much more numerous because we were more inclusive. Rodrigo [Espinoza] was part of our movement, but now he now he is kidnapped. There were also Hansel, Marlon, and others. I worked with Hansel because he's a communicator and I also was in communication. Each one had a specialty. Some worked on communication, others on security, and so on. There were many people at the UPOLI, and that made it impossible to control everybody. It was impossible, for example, to get people to dispose of rubbish properly. The best thing was to appoint a group to collect rubbish.

“Apart from that, sometimes small groups of three or four students were arriving and saying that they were officially organized and they wanted to be at the UPOLI and to be leaders there. Many arrived with that attitude. Our main concern was security and maintaining order, but these guys were arriving and saying, ‘We come from the UCA, and we want this. Or we come from the UNAN, and we want this.’ They came with proposals, but it was very difficult and complicated to settle on anything concrete.” Harley Morales corroborates these statements: “At the UPOLI we had three groups competing for leadership. It was a problem, so we said, ‘Let them work it out themselves.’ ... Because there were persons saying, ‘Why are you in charge if you aren't from the UPOLI?’ Others were saying, ‘Why is this guy in charge if those of us who have cars are guarding the perimeter of the campus and putting our people at the barricades?’ People were always trying to justify their claim that they were the legitimate leaders at the UPOLI.”

Carcache and others attempted to give legitimacy to the movement by having recourse to traditional procedures: “Often we collected signatures showing support for the student movement at the UPOLI. We obtained the signatures to show some kind of backing and to be able to say, ‘Here are the students who have signed and in some way support the movement.’” Harley Morales described the situation: “The UPOLI students were the ones who had the most legitimacy since they were the legitimate representatives of the campus. It was not a question of ideology or doctrine. It was a question of who would manage what on the campus. It was a struggle for power, and it came about because you had a university that had been coopted by a student organization that was allied to the regime. There was a moment when the students felt that things were in disarray, and in the midst of that disarray came these guys who had been in the ranks of the UNEN and the Sandinista Youth.”

Edwin Carcache explained: “We tried to do that type of thing [elections, collecting signatures], but it was difficult because of the persecution.”

Morales realized that representativity was imperative but that even more important was legitimacy: “Lesther didn’t have legitimacy just because he spoke to Ortega. He already had a certain legitimacy because he had calmed the insurgent group and had negotiated with the government authorities who came to take the kids away. His legitimacy was won with deeds.”

But legitimacy did not guarantee avoidance of other dangers, according to Carcache: “It was difficult to maintain a concrete organization because the regime was always infiltrating people and sabotaging the project. There was no mission and no vision. There were no concrete objectives because there were too many people and it was impossible to control them. There were young people involved in matters that we never agreed to. We decided to leave the campus because the regime was sending in more people to create disorder. They brought us a bus of volunteers, but they were the same Sandinista Youth who were coming as infiltrators. Entrenchment is not good when there is no order, no line, no organization. The struggle was not only with the government but also with the organization: we had to deal with follow-up in the media and with harassment of family members. The pressure was tremendous and draining. There was a lot of discussion and argument. It was difficult. It wasn’t impossible, but it was difficult. Nevertheless, much was accomplished. The occupation was a lost battle, after having won more than 20 battles.”

The members of the Nicaraguan University Alliance (AUN) experienced similar organizing demands and challenges, according to Harley Morales: “The AUN movement concerned itself more with maintaining the roadblocks. The University Coordinating Committee, since it was more representative of the students, operated more within the UNAN. We created a network called Security, Protection, and Supplies (SEPA). What we tried to do—when possible, because there was a time when it was impossible—was set up supply routes: Managua-Masaya, Managua-Granada, and Managua-El Crucero-Carazo. Those were the strongest points of resistance. Since we were working in the cathedral, that was the collection center, and we set out from there in caravans. We worked to supply the roadblocks, figuring that supplies were necessary so that people could continue the uprising. It was also what the people were requesting—for example, in Masaya. But we were also thinking that providing supplies would give us a chance to have contact with the organizations that were taking shape. The organizations were emerging from the struggle, and we had to form networks with them in order to do political work. There were the April 19<sup>th</sup> Movements in Jinotepe and Diriamba, the FCUN in Carazo, the April 19<sup>th</sup> Movement in Granada with Yubrank. [We wanted] to be present there. In Granada a coalition had already been formed, which included not only

the April 19<sup>th</sup> Movement but other organizations as well. Whenever we went to Granada, we would work with the coalition. We did likewise in Masaya, where the Civic Alliance for Masaya was formed. We were also in Rivas. In Carazo there were several movements, but they collaborated. We tried to stay coordinated. We did the same on the route to Mateare, Nagarote, and La Paz Centro, but we didn't reach León."

Most importantly, this combination of spontaneity and planning made it possible for the April 19<sup>th</sup> Movements to develop in many larger and smaller cities and even in the rural areas. When Harley Morales declares that their form of organization was "the most authentic," I believe that he is positing that they were building the most adequate organization possible for a social movement whose management—to the extent that one can speak of such—was not exhausted by those representing it in the dialogue. According to Edwin Carcache, the members of the April 19<sup>th</sup> Student Movement were faced with the tremendous difficult of instilling a minimum of order and direction in a social movement that by definition was a form of mass protest that had a common objective but was fraught with diverse and often contradictory initiatives. The price of "self-convocation" is dispersion, contradiction, infiltration, disputed representation, and disorder; it gives rise to self-appointed leaders who seek to impose themselves and their agendas on others. The price of self-convocation is the inability to control the "quality" of volunteers, who can easily become a Trojan horse. To mitigate this problem, an effort was made to supplement representation with legitimation. Legitimacy was gained not through elections but through mutual recognition of activists' taking part in events with symbolic value, such as the entrenchment in the UPOLI, taking sanctuary in the cathedral of Managua, or evacuating the wounded, or supplying provisions. The occupation of the UNI was a first approximation to joint struggle: many young people active there appeared later as representative of various organizations. However, such a solution was not an infallible vaccine against infiltration, bewilderment, rapid rotation of leadership, and dispersion of energies.

However, these difficulties and dispersed initiatives did not imply a lack of strategy and organization. The organizations of university students practiced a division of labor by commissions. Basic tasks like rubbish collection as well as strategic ones like communication were well organized. Even in the midst of chaos, therefore, food and medicine could be collected, casualties could be evacuated, and supplies could be provided for those defending the barricades and the occupied universities. The Security, Protection, and Supplies Network (SEPA) was an example of good logistical strategy, but not the only one. The efficient delivery of supplies served a twofold purpose: provisioning

the insurgents at the barricades and maintaining contact with the rebels in other areas. In older language, this latter objective would have been called “maintaining contact with the bases,” but the nature of the relationship had changed from earlier times, and the university students made a great effort to insure that such was the case. They strove to develop a fresh perspective, one that did not see the “masses” as a means. Gene Sharp considered such a new type of relationship essential because “the objective is not simply to destroy the current dictatorship but to establish a democratic system. A strategy that limits itself only to destroying the reigning tyrant runs a terrible risk of producing another.”<sup>242</sup> The form in which the struggle developed, therefore, was of the utmost importance. Hierarchical organizations carry in their entrails the embryo of a new dictatorship.

## The Organizations in Matagalpa

Particular conditions gave rise to the uprising in Matagalpa, which occurred later than the others. One factor, as Alfredo Ocampo explained, was a deterioration in the image of the local authority: “Sadrach [Zeledón] was a mayor who enjoyed great popularity. I worked for the mayor’s office in 2008 and 2009. Sadrach was a mayor whom everyone loved but who later changed and became different from the one we had known. Previously he would sit and talk personally with the people every Wednesday, but in the last two terms of office he has been a missing person. He was never there in his office. He was wearing three hats: he was the delegate of the Association of Municipalities of Nicaragua (AMUNIC), the political secretary of the Front at the departmental level, and the mayor of Matagalpa. He was no longer attentive to his duties in the mayor’s office but worked rather in the departmental delegation of the Front.”

Another factor contributing to the uprising was the development of grassroots organizations. Neither of these factors, however, would have allowed observers to predict what actually happened. The uprising came suddenly, surprising both Tyrians and Trojans. According to Ocampo, “Matagalpa was late in exploding. The pro-government people thought they could maintain control,

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid.: 42.

but on April 23<sup>rd</sup> they realized that that was not the case because the people of Matagalpa rose up overnight. The situation in Matagalpa was so fierce that it scared even us activists because we never thought that the people could react the way they did. What happened was that they [the pro-Ortega forces] were left without anybody, so they began to bring in reinforcements from Dalia and other towns to attack the demonstrations in Matagalpa. The first confrontation happened on May 10<sup>th</sup>, when a judge from San Ramón took out a gun and fired at the march and the people. Since there were so many people around, they disarmed him and attacked him, something that was hardly expected since they [the Sandinistas] thought they were the majority. In Matagalpa they had always won the elections with 70 or 80 percent of the votes. They thought they had control of the population, but at the city-wide level they did not have control, and they don't have it now." The confrontation with the armed judge made plain the forcefulness of those who had no power: the people who were "so many" achieved what could not have been achieved by even the most daring of individuals. Alinsky maintained that "the two principal sources of power are money and people. Without money the dispossessed must build power with their flesh and their blood."<sup>243</sup> And that is what happened in Matagalpa.

The organizing initiatives followed those first outbreaks of mass rage, making good use of the solid social capital that had been developed over many years: "There were three strong expressions" of social capital, explains Ocampo. "First, the coalition of social activists of Matagalpa, of which I was a part. We were a group of about 30 to 50 persons who were active in social organizations. We provide logistical support only: safe houses, food, and medicine. We had nothing to do with weapons or gun powder. Nothing at all. Second, there was the April 19<sup>th</sup> Movement, which was an expression of the self-convoked youths of Matagalpa and the university students who were organized under that rubric. And last, there was the Matagalpa SOS Movement, which was responsible for the roadblocks. Matagalpa SOS included the guys who were in charge of organizing the roadblocks—they were there 24/7. Having these three expressions in Matagalpa, we created a working commission that delegated groups of persons to coordinate and do follow-up." When government and paramilitary repression broke through the roadblocks, the Coalition for Justice and Democracy was created. "It was a new type of coordination that brought together the residual population, so to speak, the people who were still not involved. That coalition was charged with restructuring and maintaining all the activities taking place in Matagalpa."

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<sup>243</sup> Alinsky, 2012: 147.

Ocampo continues: “Each of the three expressions I mentioned—the social activists, the April 19<sup>th</sup> people, and the Matagalpa SOS folks—had its own leaders and its own organization. We had a departmental committee that united those three organizations and that made decisions about how to organize the marches, how to run the demonstrations, how to create barricades that were safe for the population, how to eliminate illegal charges, how to prevent people from infiltrating the roadblocks and causing damage. We had meetings before every activity, and we planned who was going to be spokesperson, who would read the pronouncement, in what tone it should be done, etc.”

Ocampo indicates, however, that the movement suffered a certain lack of control similar to that experienced by those involved in the occupation of the UPOLI, though the risk of infiltration was much less since people knew one another better due to the small size and the social ambience of the city. “To give you an example,” says Ocampo, “the people at the barricades, even though they were there 24/7, found it impossible to control the number of people joining them. There was one day when we had more than 800 barricades in Matagalpa. That means that the whole southern zone of the city was completely barricaded, and at each barricade there was an average of between six and ten persons. So I don’t know how the Matagalpa SOS Movement managed to keep track of who was at each barricade, but I do know that whenever we brought them food or other things, they knew quite well who was in charge of each crew.”

Ocampo considers that the participation of students was important: “The university students took part in the April 19<sup>th</sup> Movement. The students occupied the university and asked other, non-student groups not to intervene. So when the UNAN [in Matagalpa] was peacefully occupied, nobody was involved from the movement of the self-convoked—that is, the April 19<sup>th</sup> people—or from the social activist movement or from the Matagalpa SOS Movement. The only ones who took part were the students of the UNAN.”

Because of the presence of the university students and the playful, theatrical tone of the struggle, the protests did not consist only of marches, demonstrations, roadblocks, and occupations. “In the social movement,” reports Ocampo, “we wanted to promote theater, music, and artistic expression in any form. We decided to organize an artistic festival that would allow the people to express their rejection of what was happening artistically.” The people contributed spontaneously to the festival: “The staging of the event was well organized but not its content.” Each artist requested time and presented a dance, a monologue, a skit, a poem, or a song. The various acts contradicted the old stereotype of the stern, strait-laced revolutionary who, adhering to the *Revolutionary Catechism*, rejected the basic pleasures of life. Alinsky teaches:

“A good tactic is one the people enjoy. If your people are not having a good time, something is wrong.”<sup>244</sup> As far as they could, the rebels of Matagalpa created a setting in which denunciation and art went hand in hand and the people enjoyed themselves.

Then came the repression, and it was as bloody and overwhelming as in other places. The struggle continued, however, now with more caution, making use of such permissible tactics as ostracism. Many videos had shown the mayor, Sadrach Zeledón, “handing out mortars and organizing mobs,” but now, according to Ocampo, the people who had enthusiastically elevated him to the mayor’s office “felt literal disgust when they saw him. When he went to Mass, for example, they hauled him out of the church. Most recently the faithful actually shouted him out of the church. Then, when photos appeared of him handing mortars out to the mobs, they asked him to leave town, shouting out that he was a murderer. Since then he hasn’t been seen in public spaces like the church. He’s a Jehovah’s Witness, but he often went to Mass, I suppose for the sake of the social relations between the church and the municipality.”

## The Carazo Commune

Masaya, Estelí, Matagalpa, Jinotepe, Masatepe, and many other cities rose up in April. Their insurgencies, like the hunger revolts in 18<sup>th</sup>-century France, were “far from being simultaneous eruptions planned from a central control point; they were a series of lesser flare-ups that exploded not only in response to local agitation but also thanks to the force of example.”<sup>245</sup>

If the UPOLI was the heart of the insurgency in Managua, pumping blood through the country’s veins, Monimbó was the indisputable national symbol. The actions that took place there are among the best documented of the April rebellion. Little is known about the outlying communities of Masaya even though Masatepe, Nandasmo, Catarina, Niquinohom, and La Concha organized their protests precisely to block access to Monimbó. All forces were mobilized to protect the historical indigenous people. Even less is known about events in the cities of Carazo, such as Jinotepe, Diriamba, and Dolores.

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid.: 149.

<sup>245</sup> Rudé, 1979: 36.

In order to throw light on the less publicized deeds, I will explain what happened in one of the cities of Carazo. Carlos Herrera, a sociologist and former FSLN member, gives us an idea of what happened in that part of the country: “In Carazo the people truly rose up. You wouldn’t believe the number of people. The riot police had no recourse but to take flight. The town remained very tense. Nowhere could you see the Sandinista Youth or the political secretaries. But we did not rise up right at that moment. There were marches but no barricades, and the marches were enormous, with true representation of the people. I wore a hood. Then a nearby town rose up in mid-May, and I went there to support them. There we were assigned to a barricade, and we stayed there until the police attacked. The police came from outside, not from Carazo. The ‘sky-blues’ of Carazo did not get involved. All of us left from my city in trucks and pick-ups, using alternate routes. We had mortars, contact bombs, and Molotov cocktails. After that we moved about on foot, through paths and along streams. Many were wounded and captured. They captured four youths, and we captured four police officers. In the afternoon we made an exchange. But at dawn they began to shoot at us. They were sharpshooters. At six-thirty in the morning the battle began again. During the morning the elderly men from the old school—the ones they called ‘the pups’<sup>246</sup>—came out to support the young rebels. Many of the rebels reacted saying, ‘Unbelievable! I never thought that old guy would come here to support us,’ because many of them were quite formal gentlemen, wearing glasses. But they came out. When that happened, everything changed because they had military training. The police drew back.

“At two in the afternoon we were exhausted, and we said we needed relief. We returned to our city, and that day my city rose up. They began to build barricades on the main streets in all the barrios. I proposed to the young rebels that we begin to organize our city. We began by designing an organigram because we wanted to set up our own municipal government. We worked with some women, one of whom had the whole electoral list of the Front. We declared a free territory, and in fact we took charge of the mayor’s office. We said that nobody should pay taxes because they were financing the attacks. We organized security brigades because the Front itself was carrying out pillaging. A well-known band of men was moving about; they were not a gang but a band of guys who had been imprisoned for murders and serious robberies. The garbage trucks [decorated

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<sup>246</sup> He is referring to men who made their obligatory military service in the 1980s, officially called Patriotic Military Service. The FSLN propaganda called those who served “Sandino’s pups.”

after the style of Rosario Murillo] were painted blue and white, and clean-up crews were organized around the city. We asked each house to contribute five or ten pesos for the diesel and to give the youngsters some incentive, so the people contributed. They came out of their houses with sodas and cake and gave them to the young people. There was a structure, a sort of command post. The young people were given the job of coordinating the security brigades, but there were only two of us young people in the innermost group. That situation lasted from the beginning of June until the paramilitaries attacked us on July 8<sup>th</sup>. I worked on the organizational part. We even had help from a man who had been a guard in the time of Somoza; he told us how to do some things. Alongside him was a woman who had been a guerrilla; until a couple of months ago she had been one of the strongest elements of the Front in my city. And there were other men helping out. The young guys were more undisciplined. They wanted to spend all night at the barricades, but we had organized shifts.

“We began to see what the best ways were to organize ourselves. I went around all the barrios to do a survey. I saw that every barrio had its leader, and we began to work with them. We asked them for their numbers, and we began giving them orientation. Since I had taken courses in cartography and GPS, I drew a map with a security structure for the city. We saw how many trucks we would need to block the roads and so be more secure. We sought out the most strategic places. We presented a proposal for approval. That was how we organized the security.”

They also organized logistics for food supply: “In every barrio there were families that cooked for the young people because at dawn they were hungry. Many people were aware of that, so they took them food and a lot of coffee. They began to make ‘lollipops,’ which were bags full of rice and beans and cheese. They could be eaten easily, along with the coffee. Each barrio in the city had four or five barricades, and there were about 50 young people at each one. That was the maximum number, but there were never fewer than 30. And they all needed to be fed.”

The narrative of Carlos Herrera stresses organization. The spontaneity of the social movement did not eliminate the need to structure the initiatives for action. The experience of this city of Carazo was probably somewhat exceptional, but it was not atypical because we saw the same happen in Matagalpa and to some degree also in Managua. In both these cities the prior organizing experience of the leaders provided a type of superstructure—a certain knowhow—that made it possible to structure certain actions of the movement.

Social movement theorists correctly explain that people do not engage in forms of collective action with which they are not already familiar. The

combative actions undertaken in simple revolts or social movements usually follow certain norms that reproduce patterns of action that make use of traditional resources. They correspond to a prototype described by Tarrow: “Each group has its own history—and memory—of collective action. Workers know how to call a strike because generations of workers have done it before them; the Parisians build barricades because barricades are inscribed in the history of their city’s revolts; peasants occupy land, holding up symbols that their fathers and grandfathers used before them.”<sup>247</sup> What was extraordinary in the case of Carazo was that the movement was able to draw on the combined knowledge of an ex-guardsmen of Somoza and an ex-guerrilla of the Front. The technical knowhow of a regular army was joined to the revolutionary traditions, the profusion of barricades, the mortars, the entrenchments, and the artisanal logistics for supplying the insurgents.

A curious contrast was quite evident in Carazo: while the FSLN militants sowed chaos, the social movement built a para-state order. This particular state of affairs has occurred only a few times in history. Normally social movements hope to be able to negotiate with the established order, or they seek to reform some aspect of that order by having recourse to the authorities. Sometimes they appeal to a supra-local authority with the hope that it will attend to their demands. The April 19<sup>th</sup> Movement did not seek to replace the government, but in that city it ended doing precisely that because of the collapse of the local power structures.

Local empowerment reached such a point that when movement leaders arrived from Managua with support for those entrenched at the barricades, the new authorities in Carazo told them that they would receive the aid as a collaboration but would not become a subsidiary of any of the organizations of the capital. Something similar happened during the French Revolution: “From among the *sans-culottes* themselves came trained leaders and militants who advanced through stages of political indoctrination and experience by attending sectional meetings, by joining societies and committees, and by working with the National Guard and the revolutionary army, which was formed to supply food to the city. And these were not docile agents of the Jacobins or any other governing party: they had their own social aspirations, points of view, clubs, and slogans, and they had their own clear ideas about how the country should be governed.”<sup>248</sup>

Like those in 18<sup>th</sup>-century France, the revolts of April 2018 in Nicaragua exploded after a prolonged period of lethargy.<sup>249</sup> In both cases the revolts were

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<sup>247</sup> Tarrow, 1997: 51.

<sup>248</sup> Rudé, 1979: 109.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*: 107.

organized by local persons who were well-known to their neighbors,<sup>250</sup> and perhaps for that reason they were more vulnerable to betrayals. Both revolts, separated by an ocean and more than two centuries, had another feature in common: the violence of the insurgents was discreet in the sense that it focused on inanimate objects and not on the bodies of their opponents. The lives lost were those of the rebels.<sup>251</sup> If in France there was what the French called *taxation populaire* (unofficial price control through collective action),<sup>252</sup> in Carazo the people voluntarily offered public services. But there is an enormous difference. The revolts in France and England were instigated by the lower classes (called “lower orders” in England and *menu peuple* in France), and they were led by “men whose personality, wardrobe, manner of speech, and abrupt taking of command marked them out as leaders.”<sup>253</sup> In contrast, the great marches of April in Managua and other cities, as well as the occupations and barricades in some cities—most notably in Masaya and Carazo—were multi-class phenomena, quite similar to what happened in France in 1787-1795 when students, teachers, professionals, civil servants, small rentiers, and writers all took part in the insurgencies.<sup>254</sup>

## What Is Self-Convocation? The Price and the Meaning of Spontaneity

Self-convocation means strength, but also segmentation. It means that there will be demonstrations that some want to turn into improvised marches, so that a division occurs between those who stay at the demonstration and those who go on the march. It means a plethora of personal and group initiatives that compete with one another at the most inopportune moments, and sometimes even in loudness. It means organizing assemblies of students in a demonstration contaminated by infiltrators; it means arguments about who should be in the dialogue; it means problems of communication and coordination.

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid.: 65.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.: 66.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid.: 31.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid.: 14.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid.: 210.

Self-convocation means exposure to the danger of infiltration. One of the interviewees recalls that during the first few meetings all were asked to deposit their cell phones in a box until the meeting ended. She is convinced that there would have been many more deaths if the matter of security had not been taken seriously. Security means avoiding indiscriminate pluralism. Whenever the sheer vigor of the movement imposed such pluralism, a high price was paid: that was the debacle at the UPOLI.

In his combined essay/instruction titled “From Dictatorship to Democracy,” pirated copies of which circulated among the insurgents, Gene Sharp laments that those engaged in the struggle are often “incapable of thinking and analyzing in strategic terms; they repeatedly allow themselves to be distracted by trivial matters, frequently responding to the actions of their adversaries rather than taking the initiative for democratic resistance.”<sup>255</sup> Sharp therefore insists on the need for strategic planning in order to “calculate a course of action that will make it possible to pass from the present situation to a desired future.”<sup>256</sup> Planning is necessary, and we have seen that sometimes it was carried out with admirable sophistication in the April uprising. Sharp runs the risk of forgetting that social movements have an ungovernable character: history is not made the same way as a table.<sup>257</sup> Historian Eric J. Hobsbawm observed that “social revolutions are not made: they happen and they develop. For that reason, metaphors of military action like strategy and tactics, so often used by both Marxists and their adversaries, lead to confusion.”<sup>258</sup> Social movements always imply that we are formed by the actions of others, thus introducing a high degree of contingency. That was why the young people insisted: “We never

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<sup>255</sup> Sharp, 2011: 44.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*: 42.

<sup>257</sup> This was a criticism Hannah Arendt made against the theories of Karl Marx: “Political activity is no longer considered to be the establishment of immutable laws that will produce a community and have as a final result a reliable product, just as its creator had planned it—as if laws or constitutions were like tables made by a carpenter in accord with a plan he had in his mind before beginning to build it.” Arendt, 1995: 92.

<sup>258</sup> Hobsbawm, 1978: 117-8. As was his custom, Hobsbawm then qualifies his statement: “However, they cannot triumph without establishing a national government or army, that is, without exercising effective management and coordination of the nation. . . . Spontaneity can overthrow regimes or at least make them unviable, but it does not offer a viable alternative to a society that is more advanced than that of archaic subsistence farming.” Hobsbawm: 117-8. In the case that concerns us, his qualification does not apply because the April rebellion was essentially seeking to overthrow a regime, not to establish a new society.

imagined that we were going to become what we are now.” Hobsbawm would have added: “Most revolutions that have occurred and triumphed began as ‘happenings’ rather than as planned productions. Sometimes they grew rapidly and unexpectedly from what seemed normal mass demonstrations; other times they grew from resistance to the enemy’s actions. But rarely if ever did they take on the form prescribed by the organized revolutionary movements, even when these predicted an imminent revolutionary explosion. ... Like buoys, the revolutionaries do not produce the waves on which they float; they simply roll with them. But unlike the buoys—and here is where revolutionary theory differs from anarchist practice—sooner or later the revolutionaries stop rolling with the waves and try to control their direction and movement.”<sup>259</sup>

Sharp states that “tactical victories that do not reinforce the attainment of strategic objectives can in the end become wasted energy.”<sup>260</sup> That may be, but we should tally victories in accord with objectives while keeping in mind the polymorphous nature of politics. The social movement in Matagalpa experienced power in its artistic presentations and its dramatic repudiation of the mayor, Sadrach Zeledón. In Carazo power assumed a para-state form: it was not a full government, but it solved logistical problems and at the same time had a terrific stage effect. This happens because much of the theatricality in politics refuses to be governed by the principle of performing only those actions that will obtain practical benefits; it seeks rather a change of perceptions, a coup de théâtre, or the discrediting and distress of the opponent, all of which are proper to power acting on stage. Such is the view of Georges Balandier, who stresses that political actors must “pay their daily quota to theatricality” because each and every manifestation of social existence is based on theatricality.<sup>261</sup> Self-convocation and the will to horizontality achieved a tremendous theatrical stroke by removing politics from mere mechanical instrumentality and carrying it to higher ludic levels—such also was the price that the movement had to pay for those triumphs.

Is self-convocation good or bad? Is spontaneity a strength or a weakness? Is a certain dose of spontaneity good or bad? Should signs of anarchy be viewed with alarm? Saul Alinsky held that “describing any procedure as ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ is the sign of a political illiterate.”<sup>262</sup> Self-convocation was the sign and seal of the April 19<sup>th</sup> Movement. It has had many achievements and has paid a price. Harley Morales rightly maintains that it was totally

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<sup>259</sup> Hobsbawm, 1978: 131.

<sup>260</sup> Sharp, 2011: 47.

<sup>261</sup> Balandier, 1994: 15.

<sup>262</sup> Alinsky, 2012: 54.

authentic. Perhaps it was also the young people's particular style of struggle. The struggle was definitely very inclusive, reflecting a trait of the students' organizations that from the start was both a means and end in itself. Apart from the movement's benefits and costs, the abundant evidence that the rebellion was "self-convoked" totally refutes the thesis of a coup d'état meticulously planned by imperial forces, thus completely confounding the ramifications of such a thesis for civil society.

## 4.2. Strategies and Resources for the Struggle: Social Networks

When Enrieth Martínez, one of the founders of the University Coordinating Committee for Democracy and Justice, was asked whether the "Nicaraguan Spring" began with the fire in the Indio-Maíz Reserve, the repression at the Camino de Orient, or the beating of the old folk in León, she responded: "I believe that the explosion happened in the social networks. For example, I was not in León at that moment, but I felt outrage when I saw the way they were attacking the young protesters, the way they were attacking the old people, and the way they were attacking the feminists who were at the head of the INSS protests there."<sup>263</sup>

Valeska Valle was even more emphatic in evaluating the role of the social networks in the April rebellion: "Although it may sound cruel, there is something that is true: it was not the deaths in themselves that caused the greatest media impact inside or outside Nicaragua. It was the boom of the social networks. It was a weapon the regime didn't take into account, but we did. And so, even though they censured the independent media, we had already spoken, and we told them: 'If you're going to kill us, then kill us while we're streaming live, and that way our death will be recorded the way it was.' So wherever we were there was live streaming: there were videos that showed them beating us or that showed the arrival of the paramilitaries, the anti-riot police, the mobs. You could see how they were grabbing the cameras from the journalists of the independent media. That medium proved a perfect weapon for us. This time it was not two-edged because we used it correctly, so that all the international media knew what was happening in Nicaragua."

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<sup>263</sup> Le Lous, 3 June 2018: 4.

Alfredo Ocampo has a similar view of the role the social networks played in providing international coverage of the struggles in Matagalpa: “Without the social networks we would not have been able to have the impact we had. I have a page in the internet where information was given out. There was a need to find information and offer it to others. Without the social networks, the regime could not have been exposed the way it was.”

These resources are key elements for giving a social movement the resonance it needs. In the opinion of Karla Lara, social media use marked a clear difference between the self-convoked movement of April and the *campesino* movement that fought against the inter-oceanic canal: “With the canal struggle there was another type of public. If you examine the matter closely, that issue was not discussed in the social networks. Also, those of us who are more adult have learned something about how today’s young people function. That business of OcupaINSS was pure social networks. Putting that issue on the social networks guaranteed a response from the young people. If there hadn’t been a well-planned strategy at the level of the social networks, you can be certain the young people would not have arrived.” According to George Rudé, a historian of mass movements, a crowd is a group that is in direct, face-to-face contact.<sup>264</sup> In the April revolt in Nicaragua, the crowd was first virtual and then physical. That resource was the generational link making mass movement possible because it is a medium that is “cool” and so is in tune with the *Zeitgeist*.

Journalist Miguel Ángel Sandoval recognized the impact of the social networks during the Guatemalan Spring of 2015, when protests culminated in the removal of President Pérez Molina and Vice-president Baldetti: “Posters circulated through the networks, criticizing all the deputies who had voted for the Monsanto Law and denouncing them as traitors to the country and the peoples. It was no doubt the moment when some sectors, especially the youth, recognized the power of the social networks, the impact that they were having, and the fact that something in the country was changing.”<sup>265</sup>

Sandoval attributes this new awareness above all to the university students: “They more than anybody contributed youthful joy to the protests that started on April 25th, so that May and June were impelled by that energy of young people, sometimes university students and sometimes from other sectors. They added color to the protests and gave them a different tone from what has been customary in recent years. Instead of painful conflicts over old quarrels, there

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<sup>264</sup> Rudé, 1979: 11.

<sup>265</sup> Sandoval, 2015: 17.

was the freshness of the social networks bringing new forms to protests and political action.<sup>266</sup>

Sandra Ramos, director of the Maria Elena Cuadra Movement for Working and Unemployed Women, considers the use of informational technology to be a characteristic trait of this generation: “They are different from our generation since we did not have technology; we had weapons. I think we have to realize that the world is globalized and that the young people live in this globalized world, and the internet gives them instruments. Who wants to go and die foolishly? Who wants to be killed by the weapons that the army and the police possess? That is why the young people from the start did not engage in vandalism. As far as I can see, they did not. Today’s technology is the best pacifist weapon for achieving change and for avoiding the trap the Sandinista Front wants to set for us, because the only things they know about are wars and massacres. But this generation does not want that. Otherwise they would have armed themselves.” If Tarrow is correct in stating that the cultural framework is a key factor for social movements, then the new technologies were the means that allowed the rebellious university students to be in contact with the wider, globalized cultural frameworks. The networks, connected as they are to a global complex, make it possible to refresh the spirit of the struggle, transmit what is happening live, wield a “pacifist weapon,” and make a clean break with some aspects of the old cultural molds. The social movement of April was able to connect with tradition and with innovation. Traditional were the barricades, the slogans, and the songs. Innovative were the social networks with their memes, their global reach, and their live transmissions.

The social networks were an instrument for facilitating and accelerating communication and coordination, as well as for sounding the alarm. Juanita Pérez expressed it thus: “Most times the communication was more about what we were learning through the social networks and through the news media coverage of what was happening. Since we could see early on April 18th that they were attacking the students and the pensioners who were marching against the INSS reform, we were fully aware that the demonstration being planned for the afternoon of the same day in Managua would also be attacked. Being aware of that, we could prepare, at least psychologically, for what we knew what we were going to face in the afternoon. And that’s how it was with the rest of the protests. We were saying: ‘There’s a live clip in such-and-such a place. Watch it so that you’ll know what that zone is like.’ That helped us.”

She then added, as if wishing to nuance her statements: “The problem was that in the end that communication also harmed us, because we were getting

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<sup>266</sup> Ibid.: 70.

informed, but so was the other side, and they ended up attacking us. In the end communication on the social networks turns out to be a double-edged sword. The business of digital communication has many disadvantages. At various times we have been harmed by that. Most of us young people are not aware of how easy it is to have their information hacked, whether it is your Facebook account or Twitter or whatever you're using. Another person can see everything you have on your telephone or in your computer. Being conscious of this, we tried to maintain more or less stable communication that would allow us to communicate smoothly without exposing ourselves too much. We didn't want to expose where we were, who we were with, what we were doing."

Edwin Carcache mentioned another problematic element: "You had the government people doing videorecordings of us. They released a whole lot of videos on the networks, trying to discredit the struggle, trying to make us look bad. The government is quite skilled in this, so we learned that it is better to do some things stealthily and not so openly." Karla Lara corroborates his statement: "The false portrayals of the demonstrations were all obvious." While Madelaine Caracas qualifies it: "But that can't be compared with the mass of the population that cancel out all the false information." Her optimism derives from the massive character of the communication: we are dealing with a group actor, not one formed by the fusion of different individual visions, as Leoncini would maintain.

Lilian Ruiz, mother of Hansel Vásquez, told an amusing story that revealed the double-edged nature of the social networks: "He left on April 19<sup>th</sup>. 'I'll be back, mom. I'm going to the UPOLI.' 'Be careful so the people from the channel don't see you.' He was no longer working for Channel 8; he had resigned a month earlier. Still, they could do something to him, you know, because of the [earlier] relationship. 'Be careful,' I told him. 'Don't act crazy. Come home early.' 'Don't worry, mom. I'm going to be there just a short while. I want to support them. This has already exploded. We're moving ahead. You'll see that we're going to win.' And he went. Then, after about three hours, I was hearing the news that the UPOLI was under fire and that bullets were flying. As a mother I was worried, and I called him on the phone. While I was dialing the number, my younger son was at the computer, and he saw everything that was coming out on the networks. They were recording and transmitting live. And he said to me, 'Mom, mom, come see where Hansel is.' And I saw the young bandit going crazy, throwing rocks and bottles. That was tremendous. I could see him running here and running there. At one point he stopped, and I called him. I said to him, 'Where are you? Find some way to get home.' And he said, 'No, mom, I'm only watching things from a distance. I'm not doing

anything.’ ‘Look, you big bandit,’ I told him, ‘I’m watching you live because Marlon is recording you. Why are they recording?’ So he shouted, ‘Marlon, stop recording! My mother already saw me!’ So the transmission stopped right then and there.”

Use of the social networks creates a tension between desired diffusion and undesired disclosure, between the goal of informing and persuading and the danger of being exposed to unscrupulous viewers. The networks give immediate access to persons who are distant but possibly interested in supporting the struggle. Social networking allows those who are far away to participate; they are brought closer to the reality. But the networks also increase the degree of vulnerability. The struggle becomes more transparent, but there is still the risk of manipulation.

The conventional media were already performing some of the same functions as the social networks, but the digital media were able to reinforce and greatly accelerate those functions. Armand Mattelart argued thus: “By becoming organs that linked the masses with their class-oriented political projects and by documenting their practice of civic resistance, the newspapers, the journals (from the women’s weekly to the children’s magazine), and the radio and TV stations controlled by the right desisted from their ancestral mission of atomizing and demobilizing the mass of their readers and audiences and assumed instead the role of ‘collective agitators and organizers,’ thus supporting a new concept of ‘solidarity’ and breaking with the individualism of their political clientele.”<sup>267</sup>

What have the social networks of the information age added to agitation, organization, and the breakdown of individualism? It’s not just acceleration. They also added the possibility of feedback (which existed in a limited way with radio, through the telephone), and they made possible the creation of differentiated segments among the masses. Facebook and WhatsApp groups are hybrid media that are both massive and segmented because their dynamic is based on affinity groups. Although the groups tend to grow, each one maintains a certain homogeneity—and solidarity—greater than that achievable by a group of readers of a newspaper or by an audience of a radio or TV news program.

The social realities made Lenin’s dream a reality: “To create a new form of communication, the organized receivers must become transmitters of their own reality.”<sup>268</sup> But we must not forget what Mattelart warned us about decades ago: “The laboring classes have traditionally been relegated to being

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<sup>267</sup> Mattelart, 1988: 13.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*: 20.

passive consumers of information and culture. The aim should be to reverse that situation while avoiding the danger of populism.”<sup>269</sup> On the one hand, the laboring classes have not been fully incorporated into the grid of transmitters on the social networks. On the other, a certain type of populism has not been completely avoided. Nevertheless, workers and others who ordinarily are no more than blurred faces in the crowd have emerged as actors, thanks to the social networks.

The old-school theories of organizations and social movements had the idea that a few persons could be “the voice of those who have no voice.”<sup>270</sup> The concept of voice is a metaphor referring to the expression of opinions in political contexts. According to Peter Dahlgren, “voice functions both within and beyond politics; it is basically the process of giving information about oneself and the circumstances in which one acts. ... Voice presupposes a reflective intervention; it is included in the horizons of the social actors. At base, voice is a social process that weaves together the life of collectivities; it is not a collection of atomized personal histories. It requires resources and access in order to take on material form.”<sup>271</sup> Dahlgren insists that voice is a value in itself; abundance of information is not only a manifestation of voice but a confirmation of its value. And even though we may feel overwhelmed by and suspicious of the countless blogs that ventilate personal experiences, “a society that speaks out and expresses itself publicly is more likely to make progress toward democracy than one that keeps quiet.”<sup>272</sup>

The young university students not only had a voice that they used it effectively to make pronouncements, as I indicated above, but they also made good use of the democratizing potential of the social networks to give voice to other actors in the collective of the self-convoked. According to Norbert Elias, the individuals who have captured the attention of historians were persons who stood out for the role they played on behalf of a particular state or human grouping: “They were ordinarily and primarily persons holding social positions that gave them great opportunities to exercise power.”<sup>273</sup> Their heroism derived from their social position because opportunities to exercise power are social not individual. Historians and political analysts, complains Elias, forget that it is social structures that provide individuals with their opportunities and fields

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<sup>269</sup> Ibid.: 26.

<sup>270</sup> Matute, 2017: 145.

<sup>271</sup> Dahlgren, 2012: 45-67.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid.: 59.

<sup>273</sup> Zabludovsky, 2016: 50.

of action. The social networks of the information age have broken this iron law by making it possible to visualize ordinary people and to appreciate actions that were formerly unseen by those who were not actually present and/or were not part of the immediate milieu of the actors. The virtual ovations of simple acts of rebellion bestow on such acts perlocutionary effects, giving them the ability to persuade a wider public and to move them to more actions.

In his posthumous book *Liquid Generation*, Zygmunt Bauman states that “the famous are known because much is said about them, but even those with the most beneficial ideas must make a name for themselves if they want their ideas to be seriously read, heard, and debated. The internet dismantles many of the barriers erected in the past around entryways to the public sphere, barriers that in too many case were the equivalent of informal censoring. Nobody could appear in public without earning the approval of a television channel. ... These barriers, these rigid restrictions imposed on access to the public sphere, are not a thing of the past.”<sup>274</sup>

By virtue of their courage and grace, “ordinary people” have been the protagonists of the April 19<sup>th</sup> Movement. Motivated by their values, they have been catapulted by events—especially repression—into the eye of the hurricane and onto the great stage of politics. Examples abound: Doña Coquito, the water seller who was arrested because in a bold rush of compassion she decided to give her merchandise to the mothers of the arrested university students; Doña Flor, shoved roughly into a military patrol vehicle and then on to El Chipote because she performed folkloric dances in the anti-government marches; Commander Little Red Riding Hood of Monimbó, single father of two and vendor in the Masaya market, who was subjected to police investigations for having made threats against the Ortega regime in videos that went viral; and the 62-year-old marathon runner Alex Vanegas, who literally runs around the country calling for the release of political prisoners. Vanegas has been arrested more than seven times and was recently freed after being imprisoned for almost four months in subhuman conditions. These are symbol-people. These are the self-convoked.

Their images circulate as if commemorating the great champions of our liberation. They are present on stickers, piñatas, plastic dolls, cups, and T-shirts that a subterranean economy run by “hooligans” has taken charge of distributing, in a significant marriage of market and politics.

Doña Coquito, Doña Flor, Commander Little Red Riding Hood, and Don Alex are just a small portion of the “ordinary people.” Thirty years ago they would have been no more than an anecdote, circulating perhaps by word of

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<sup>274</sup> Bauman and Leoncini, 2018: 80-81.

mouth. Today they are giants of the rebellion. The young people have made them visible and audible through their social networks. To show this is so I propose an experiment: search for “Nicaraguan marathoner” in Google, and the first 61 entries in January 2019 referred to Alex Vanegas (there were 21 entries two months earlier). Coverage of his actions could be found in media as varied as *Confidencial*, *La Prensa*, *El Nuevo Diario*, *Telemetro*, *Publimetro*.pe, *Gaudiumpress*, *Yahoo*, *Vaticannews*, *El Economista América*, *La Prensa Gráfica*, *La Vanguardia*, *Revista Ecclesia*, and the news agency EFE, as well as in many other digital platforms. He is the Nicaraguan marathoner par excellence. In a letter Marx wrote two months before the fall of the Paris Commune, he observed that “the daily press and the telegraph, which diffuse their stories throughout the world in the blink of an eye, fabricate more myths in a day than could be fabricated in a century in former times.”<sup>275</sup> What would Marx say of the social media of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? No doubt that they are capable of elevating simple folk to the status of legend and of making them known to millions of people in a matter of minutes.

These four ordinary persons do not lead anything. They do not aspire to any ministry, embassy, or benefit. No manifesto has emerged from their pens, and until a week ago they had never stepped inside a television studio. Nevertheless, they are heroes of the movement. Like the university students, these four actors first appeared on the social networks, and from there they made the leap to the news channels. They debuted on minuscule cell-phone screens before reaching the TV sets, which are in fact hybrid forms of communication, combining the conventional and the digital. They were, in effect, “elected” on the networks, and so they were identified by the regime as dangerous persons. Now they are a real danger for the Ortega-Murillo regime. So much is this the case that Alex Vanegas was kept in prison even though a judge ordered his release. Meanwhile, early on the morning of January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2019, Doña Flor was attacked, probably by paramilitaries or a pro-Ortega mob, and left unconscious; she needed stitches for the severe wounds she suffered. The illegal imprisonment of Alex Vanegas and the beating inflicted on Doña Flor simply confirm the influence of their image and the panic they provoke in the regime’s structures of power.

According to Sidney Tarrow, social movements arise when social agents who normally lack the strength needed to confront the elites are given the opportunity to intervene politically with the authorities and with their social adversaries.<sup>276</sup> The social networks and, in a second moment, the traditional

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<sup>275</sup> Marx, 1975: 223.

<sup>276</sup> Tarrow, 1997: 17.

media made it possible in a way for these normally disempowered people to present themselves as a formidable challenge to the regime. Tarrow adds: “Once the resources necessary for ongoing collective action were within reach of folks in the street and those who claimed to represent them, the movements extended to whole societies.”<sup>277</sup> The new technologies were the resources that enabled the masses to initiate and maintain collective action and to involve ever more people in it. Even the mimeograph was a limited resource by comparison with the omnipresence of cell phones and the access they give to social networks. In the mimeographed pronouncements of the 1960s and 1970s, Doña Coquito and Don Alex would have been at best curious figures whose deeds were overshadowed by more dramatic news. The networks have generated a more democratic vision that allows for lesser figures to emerge.

Rumor, gossip, and calumny have been the weapons of the weak for many centuries. With WhatsApp, Facebook, and Twitter these arms have increased their power, extended their range, and accelerated their rhythm. The rebellious actions of the weak, which have been analyzed by anthropologist James C. Scott, are subversive stories that get magnified in the social networks.<sup>278</sup> Political analysts must pay close attention to what is being communicated at the grassroots, whether verbally or graphically. They must have a “sense of rumor,” Marc Argemi’s name for the ability to capture the attitudes of the people in the social networks, “where the brainy opinions of renowned intellectuals are mixed with the latest witticisms of teenagers who think they are comedians.”<sup>279</sup> In sum, the social networks can provide individuals with opportunities and openings that were formerly denied them by the social structures. The youngsters of the April rebellion were able to break through that constraint and so expand the opportunities for democratizing the voices of the public. Following James C. Scott, we could say that Facebook and Twitter transform the arms of the weak into strong weapons: what were formerly underground conspiracies or simply outlets for exasperation become in effect public subversions. In this way the rumors, the murmurings, and the sardonic humor reach an ever wider public.

The preponderance of faces that stand out in the crowd—without being separated from it—prefigures perhaps a future democratization: the struggle has renounced the vanguard and has opted instead to highlight the humble rather than exalt the few. We still do not know whether this is a mere mirage; it may even be paving the way for some politicians to turn these events to their

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<sup>277</sup> Ibid.: 27.

<sup>278</sup> Scott, 1987.

<sup>279</sup> Argemi, 2017.

own advantage, coopting the faces of the students and others who have been most sought out by the cameras. For the moment, though, this democratization of the struggle demonstrates the breakdown of the perennial hegemonic thought, with its verticalism, exclusiveness, and vanguardism.

The traditional means of communication also played an important role in the April rebellion. I have emphasized the use of the social networks because they were seen as vital by the university students who were interviewed and because they were the means of communication which not only featured the students but were managed by them with exceptional skill. The line dividing conventional media and social networks tends to blur with the presence of radio stations and TV channels on the internet and with the proliferation of blogs where those in the “audience” become active contributors. Often a frank exchange of opinions, whether it is done with deference or aggressiveness, provides far more information than the article that provoked the exchange; the comments are an excellent thermometer for measuring the heat produced by certain topics. As regards the April 19th Movement, it is not unreasonable to argue that it was there in the social media that plebian voices—of both students and non-students—socialized and joined hands with the public intellectuals as they mutually discussed their tactics and objectives.

### **4.3. Relations with Other Actors in the April Rebellion**

Saul Alinsky writes that “nobody can negotiate without the power to force negotiation.”<sup>280</sup> Harley Morales shows his agreement when he asserts: “We planned out a strategy: international impact in order to put international pressure on Ortega, along with mobilization and negotiation. The degree to which we could advance in the negotiation depended on the degree to which we advanced in our belligerence on the streets. We could have the best negotiators—there could be five Doctor Tünnermanns there—but this could not be resolved by the individual capacity of those negotiating. Once I told the business leaders: ‘Individuals don’t make history; social forces do.’ Very Marxist! We were there at the table and we could advance in the negotiations only if kept the barricades strong and maintained the pressure on the streets.” Julio López

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<sup>280</sup> Alinsky, 2012: 141.

Campos made a similar statement, insisting that the only language Ortega understands is people in the streets: “What we need is more mobilization in the streets, more roadblocks, more barricades, more neighborhood and community organizations, constant strikes—we need to accumulate more forces to break the politics of terror he has imposed on us.”<sup>281</sup> It is significant that the analysis and the conclusion are the same, despite the difference in generations.

In view of this strategy, the close relations between the university students and other actors in the April rebellion were a key factor in making the struggle massive and democratic. In 2014 there were 123,220 university students out of a total of 1,283,174 young people between 15 and 24 years of age.<sup>282</sup> The students therefore made up about 10% of that age cohort. The Coordinating Committee encompassed more than 12 organizations, with students coming from many universities, including the UCA, the UNAN Managua (RUC and RUCFA campuses), the UNAN León, the UNI, the UAM, the BICU, and the Multidisciplinary Regional Faculty (FAREM) of Matagalpa and Carazo. They are a cross-section of public and private universities with the Committee seeks to organize; “the objective is to have diversity,” explains Madelaine Caracas. Each of these university organizations has the force and the ability to wrest a portion of public space from the government. Nevertheless, the university students, while an important segment of the population, are relatively small in number.

It was therefore important to cultivate relationships with other actors. Harley Morales recalls that “before organizing as the Coalition we began to meet with the trade unions and with Sandra Ramos. We even met with the business sector, and they told us: ‘Yes, yes, the common denominator of the struggle is justice, democracy, and the departure of Ortega.’ We also began to meet with the church.” The struggle included many classes and was cemented with a variety of alliances with old and new networks. That’s why it was possible to advance from “just a few” to the multitudinous crowds.

Edwin Carcache asserted that “the UPOLI was different from any other type of mobilization in that it had the support of all Nicaragua. The heart of Nicaragua was there. At the beginning, when we still had some organization, the relationship with the people was marvelous. The people embraced us; they were very kind and very helpful. They supported us even though the tear gas was reaching their homes. We felt the backing of the people in the marches and

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<sup>281</sup> López Campos, July 2018.

<sup>282</sup> Duriez González, 2016; CINDA, 2016: 10; National Institute of Development Information (INIDE), 2015: 32.

when they arrived to cook. What was sad was that they began doing bad things, egged on by people I had never seen. Some people will always take advantage of a chaotic situation, like the ones who went to the barricades and did harm to the people or like the volunteers who arrived at the entrenchments.”

Sometimes communications were sporadic, as often happens in social movements, especially at peak moments of revolt. The communications involved eminently practical matters of administration, logistics, and the like. Juanita Paz describes the situation: “We have had occasional communication with persons who exercise political leadership. We have to take care not to expose ourselves too much. Because of our vulnerability, we have been careful in discerning how and when and with whom we can communicate. At that time, in April, our communications were simply to advise such-and-such a person: ‘Look, we don’t have anything to eat’ or ‘We have food. How can we transport it?’ We had a more fluid communication for moving things and supporting those in the struggle, but for other things [communication and coordination] were lacking.”

At other times communications were more constant, especially when the Civic Alliance began to function and when other actors, such as the Mothers of April Movement, were emerging as a result of the repression and the demands of the struggle. There were also more communications and relations as April 19th movements were established in other cities and as already established organizations joined forces with the rebels.

In Matagalpa, according to the testimony of Alfredo Ocampo, relations were more intense because they were built on networks and linkages with considerable history. These close relations reinforced the capacity for resistance: “I was close to Doña Chica and Medardo and the whole campesino movement because I worked with the movement for two years. I was with an organization that gave support to the campesino movement after Law 840 [law of the inter-oceanic canal] was passed. So I personally knew all the campesino leaders. I visited almost all the territories they came from, and I participated with them in many spaces. That allowed me to feel close to Medardo, Doña Chica, Monica, and the people in the campesino movement, as well as to public figures and grassroots groups that were not public figures. So when I joined the movement and was at the roadblocks, that [closeness] was a great advantage because I made connections with various municipalities and helped them coordinate directly with the people from the campesino movement who were organizing the roadblocks. So there was good coordination, and there were clear channels of communication. The idea was to maintain a single profile throughout the country.” And Ocampo adds: “There has always been good communication with women’s groups and with the other groups in which I was participating.”

“Doña Chica” was Francisca Ramírez, the coordinator of the Council for Defense of the Land, the Lake, and National Sovereignty. When the university students were being assaulted by the paramilitaries and the police, she traveled with a group of campesinos, both men and women, from Nueva Guinea to the capital with a view to organizing various marches and demonstrations. Now in exile in Costa Rica, she remembers the collaboration between students and the campesino movement: “The campesino movement and all of us organized campesinos decided to go out into the streets when we saw the massacres of the university students. We did it because for five years we were suffering in the streets the same kind of repression that the world saw on April 18th, and we campesinos have been experiencing it since 2013. We had campesinos who had been taken to the prison of El Chipote, campesinos who had lost their eyes because of rubber bullets, campesinos who had lost their organs because of lead bullets. The massacres have been taking place in rural zones for years now, but because we had no access to the means of communication, the government’s version prevailed: ‘they were bands of drug traffickers or common delinquents’—that’s what they were saying. We therefore decided to struggle in the streets alongside the young people. All the organized campesinos decided to begin to apply more pressure. We knew that the marches were not enough, so we decided to set up roadblocks on the highways. And today we are paying the price: there are campesinos exiled in Costa Rica and other countries. There are campesinos like Medardo Mairena, Pedro Mena, Víctor Díaz, Ronald Henríquez, Lener Fonseca, and Freddy Navas—six campesinos who today are in prison, paying the price for seeking democracy and freedom. The campesino movement had the opportunity to visit and meet with the students entrenched in the universities on several occasions. Since I was not in the dialogue, I had more opportunity than others to talk with them. Most of the campesino leaders, like Medardo Mairena and Pedro Mena, were also able to spend time with the university students, both during the dialogue and at other moments. The students succeeded in getting international bodies—like the CIDH—to declare that Daniel Ortega had committed crimes against humanity, crimes that needed to be prosecuted. This was an achievement of the students in which they had the support of the campesinos, the civil society, and the people of Nicaragua in general.”

It was also important to elicit the sympathy of the non-organized population, who were always a majority. According to Salvadoran journalist Carlos Martínez, during the occupation of the UNAN Managua, “most of the vehicles passing by the university sounded their horns as a sign of support; the passengers fleetingly stuck their heads out and gave the students a thumbs-up. The gesture was received with great enthusiasm. Some young people stopped

busses and painted ‘Ortega is a murderer’ on the sides. One bus drivers asked them to paint not only the sides, but would they please also paint the front of the vehicle! After a while he returned with his bus and asked the kids to redecorate it completely.”<sup>283</sup>

There was relatively little relationship with the Caribbean coast, as Ocampo explains: “We had relations only with the nearby municipalities and with Waslala. We made the connection with Waslala because it was under the political jurisdiction of Matagalpa. The people of Waslala contacted us for help with organizing, so we were quite close with them. We were able to go to Waslala to organize.” In return, the students entrenched at the UPOLI received reinforcements from the Caribbean coast.

The relationship with the business sector and COSEP was ambivalent. While some students appreciated their supportive role in the dialogue and in the two national strikes they called, others thought that they were acting as a brake on more belligerent actions, especially when it was imperative to protest the kidnapping of members of the Civic Alliance by security forces. Several of those interviewed stressed the movement’s relationship with the LGBT community, which included university students. Ocampo states that the role of the LGBT movements must be stressed because “we have LGBT people who are imprisoned today precisely for being activists, and they are treated with as much or more hatred than those who are seen to be heterosexual. In Matagalpa—and to be truthful, in many other cities—those who first offered resistance were the movements of feminist women and the movements for sexual diversity. The great majority of the national leaders were persons from the LGBT groups. Independently of whether they were students, campesinos, or self-convoked activists, there were many LGBT persons involved. At the table of dialogue nobody is saying, ‘I am lesbian or bisexual,’ but many of the young people there are LGBT. ... In 2008, when this government named Samir Montiel as Special Procurator for Sexual Diversity, it was deceiving us. It deceived us because it wanted to create ties with the LGBT community and then to penalize abortion. I consider that treasonous because they named a person whom I esteem greatly but who had little or no role in our affairs. As procurator she was not close to the LGBT community, nor did she express concern for their human rights. And we have so many cases of young gays, lesbians, and bisexuals who have been tortured, humiliated, raped. It arouses indignation in us. And so the government has fooling itself with the idea that we are represented in its affairs.”

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<sup>283</sup> Martínez, 16 October 2018.

What creates qualitative change in social movements is precisely that mixture of classes and that diversity of identities in organizations and individuals. George Rudé reminds us of a thesis of Gustave Le Bon: the crowd may possess virtues that are denied to most of the individuals who make it up.<sup>284</sup> The motley crowd of the April 19<sup>th</sup> Movement was much more than the sum of the individuals and groups that participated in its marches, roadblocks, demonstrations, and entrenchments.

## 4.4. The Role of Women and the Continuities and Ruptures with Patriarchal Culture

In 1968 Carlos Fonseca directed his message “to both women and men who, while being students, uphold revolutionary ideals.”<sup>285</sup> Was it necessary to state that the message was for both men and women? Is it no longer necessary? The active participation of women in the university struggles of the 1960s and 1970s was firmly established in the second section of this text, but much information is missing. Specialized research is needed to delve more deeply into the continuities and the ruptures that occurred with the patriarchal culture at that time, and the same can be said of the rebellion of April 2018. Here I offer a first approximation to the forms in which—and the extent to which—the long-term feminist struggle was included in the April rebellion.

Some prominent actors in the rebellion highlight the participation of women and its limitations. Edwin Carcache, for example, offered this assessment: “There is much participation of women in our movement, even though now there is only one [woman leader]. At one time we were even: seven men and seven women. In our movement now there is only one woman, but the other movements have many women who are leaders.” Here Carcache is concerned only about numerical equality. Neither he nor the other members of university organizations with predominantly male leadership (the exception being the Coordinating Committee) know how to explain the reasons for the imbalance. The most likely reason for the disparity is that those organizations developed out of previous associations: groups of friends, people with a certain ideological

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<sup>284</sup> Rudé, 1979: 17-18.

<sup>285</sup> Fonseca, 1985: 129.

affinity (feminists, ecologists, sociologists), or coworkers in collective tasks (such as radio programs).

Carcache goes on to stress the involvement of women: “Women have been fundamental in all this. I have seen women on the barricades and in the entrenchments. I have seen them throwing stones, curing persons, firing mortars, driving cars, cooking, passing out water—just like the men. It would be false to say that I saw a battle with just women or just men. The women are leaders of territories right now, and they keep on demonstrating. Then we discovered that only men were involved in the dialogue. That was strange because there are women in the Alliance. Most of the advisors are women.” Carcache was unable to explain the absence or scarcity of women among those taking part in the national dialogue, but he pointed out their equal involvement in the work of the struggle.

Speaking about the distribution of tasks in León, Juanita Paz told a different story: “We women prepared the meals. There was no masculine involvement in the preparation of food. All of us were women. It’s true that later on some male friends tried to join us, but they had to work and had to go to the office. When they came back from the office, they worked with us and could provide some support, but it was mostly in seeking out resources because they couldn’t do anything in the house. What happened was that for security reasons the work of the women involved in the struggle got suspended, and that made it possible for us to give direct support.” Juanita Paz attributes the distribution of tasks, which followed the classical patriarchal pattern, to labor conditions, even though she is coming from feminist struggles and is probably well aware that those labor conditions are part of the structure of male domination. Nevertheless, with her apparently exculpatory words, she perhaps wants to emphasize that certain roles were assigned not by the actors in the struggle but by particular conditions that limited the possibilities for those making decisions.

But the main criticism Juanita Paz makes concerns not the distribution of tasks but the relative invisibility of female involvement: “I assure you, there are a great many women taking part in the struggle, but we are not visible for one reason or another. It is only with great difficulty that they deem us women to be capable of political leadership, but they are doing it. It has been hard for the women holding positions in these leadership spaces because they have to be continually educating those people who think that women are inept. They may say they are persons who are educated or who have studied a lot, but they are not conscious of the meaning of being a woman or of the value of women’s rights. I think it is still hard for many of us women to take on visible leadership roles, and that prevents us from being involved in those spaces.

There are many women who simply step aside because of these situations; they don't feel valued within these spaces."

And she adds: "People generally look for a man as a leader, not a woman. Historically, leadership has been criticized in Nicaragua, especially with reference to certain women who have been in power. One example is Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, who was always criticized and challenged on many accounts. Obviously not all of us are aware of the significance of that woman's presidency. Or reference is made to the political leadership of Rosario Murillo. There is no discussion of other types of female leadership, such as that of Arlen Siu or that of the women guerrillas. They truly represented women. I believe those errors are still being committed. They don't let us women present to the world our true capacity for leadership." The problem, then, is not participation in activities or distribution of tasks; it is that women are excluded from the spaces of leadership. That could be seen especially in the national dialogue, according to Carcache.

Although women were mostly excluded from leadership positions, their condition as women exposed them to greater dangers, according to Alfredo Campo: "In Nicaragua there is a great need to work on the question of equality of gender; there is always going to be something more to do. There was male chauvinism in the barricades, and the women were exposed to sexual abuse by the paramilitary groups. There have been many cases of women who were raped and tortured, and that had to do with their biological condition of being women. ... These events gave the aggressors the opportunity to act on their instincts—animal instincts, I would say—to damage the bodies of women. Such situations are always going to be present, especially in a war where some have weapons and other do not."

Some members of the University Coalition, such as Enrieth Martínez, have concluded that male chauvinism was inevitably present in the struggle because it is an omnipresent cultural element: "It is quite naïve to think that such things are going to diminish in a country with a political culture that is so vertical, so macho, so racist. We are persons who have been socialized in these systems and through these processes. It is important to recognize that all of us, even now, are crisscrossed with chauvinist, sexist, racist streaks. There is obviously male chauvinism everywhere. This state and this government have been built on it. Our society functions because it is machista, because it is racist, and because it is capitalist—and classist as well. You're always going to see expressions or micro-expressions of machismo. The important thing is always being ready to build anew in this process."<sup>286</sup>

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<sup>286</sup> Le Lous, 2018: 6.

That process of reconstruction had already begun, according to Alfredo Ocampo, and its persistence is what gave rise to the April uprising: “As a man committed to feminism, I believe that this process of social revolution would never have happened if the women organized in the women’s movements had not been working for years on many issues, including the self-determination of peoples, freedom of expression, social auditing, and the whole question of transparency. ... I think the women have been important, and the faces of women have certainly been there among the young people from the social movements who have come forward and risked their lives to denounce the regime. I believe the role of women has always been seen: they are there, and they have been recognized. It’s not that they have been *given* recognition but that they have *earned* recognition. ... Women’s groups were participating in all the activities. ... Without the women’s movements, Nicaragua would be much more screwed up than it is because for more than 20 years the women’s movements have been talking about these topics: human rights, justice, democracy, participation, equality, violence, sexual abuse, abuse of power.”

From this perspective, the April rebellion was not only a stage on which our characteristic machismo was on inevitable display; it was also in great part a consequence of feminist struggles. The organized women’s collectives have long been reflecting on the ideals that inspired the April rebellion. The link between feminism and the April rebellion was organic (women’s organizations were platforms of struggle and provided logistical support); it was pedagogical (those organizations were where collective actions were put into practice); and it was thematic (the struggle against authoritarianism and the struggle for human rights are linked to the struggles for women’s rights). In other words, the rebellion was a clear indication that cultural reconstruction had already begun.

Madelaine Caracas was quite aware of the need for cultural reconstruction: “Once you define your objectives and goals, I believe that they will then define in great part who participates in your spaces. That is why our values of inclusiveness and tolerance are important; they are in keeping with a feminist ethic and horizontal organization. As a result, some people have withdrawn in the course of the process: people with violent, chauvinist attitudes who damage other people’s integrity. But I think that the ones who are with us [the Coordinating Committee] are in the same line. I really believe that if they draw closer to us, it will be because they recognize our position on these issues. For example, when our student movement supported the gay pride march, not many of them said anything because they were maintaining a neutral position. But for us it is important to give visibility to all the actors who have been

excluded from political participation.” According to Madelaine, the fact that the Coordinating Committee had explicit positions on certain issues determined its composition and its ways of acting during the rebellion.

Caracas corroborates the information given by Edwin Carcache and Juanita Paz: “When the Coalition and the student movements were formed, we saw that most of the positions were filled by men. In most of the movements it was the women who edited the communiqués and devised the political strategies, but in the end the spokesperson was a man. That is why we are demanding that women be given their voice and that they be the ones who read the pronouncements. You can see that at first there were mostly men. Someone once said: ‘With such a sweet, soft voice she won’t be able to read the pronouncement, because it wouldn’t have the same impact as it would if read by a man, who has stature and voice.’ And there have been other similar comments, for example, that Doña Chica doesn’t have the ability to speak or to take part in the table of dialogue because she’s a country woman.” The commentary of Caracas is significant: the segregation of women from spaces of power is not just automatic, something tacitly agreed to; at times it results from reasoned arguments that disqualify women because they do not fit the stereotype of a leader. But of course that stereotype is conceived within the traditional parameters of gender (men speak louder) and class (the educated city dweller with a certain type of manners). The testimony of Juanita Paz lends weight to other aspects of discrimination: the stereotypes of female leaders are limited and are based on experiences that have been discredited or misunderstood.

Madelaine Caracas concludes: “There are major problems that we are still struggling with. At the table of dialogue the majority are still men. We have tried [to discuss the matter] and have only received criticism. It is wrong to think that we should not speak on these issues for the sake of unity. In a video I speak about an inclusive feminist revolution, and then someone from another student movement says that we should stop talking about feminism and social strategies because all that will be resolved later—as if these were not themes that pervade the situation. Some people think that because we are young we perhaps should all be aligned in our thought, but the movement is diverse, just as Nicaraguan society is. There are different political stances. But in the end we know that we are united by justice and democracy. Of course, on that path each person is independent. The fact that you’re young or you’re a woman doesn’t mean that you’re more progressive. Machismo is part of our society; it is something we’ve grown up with. We’re going to have to keep deconstructing a chauvinist society. Because Daniel [Ortega] is not the problem. Daniel is a

product of all that. The problem is bigger: it's the structures. When Ortega is gone, we will still have to place on the table the whole heap problems that we have as a society.”

Madeleine Caracas explained two overlapping dimensions of the struggle: one is long-term (in which Ortega is only an instrument and an expression), and the other is short-term (the demand for justice and democracy, which means removing Ortega from power). The second dimension is the only point of consensus in a movement that is diverse but not always pluralist; that is, it is not always open to granting equal importance to the agendas of all groups. The first dimension was important above all for the Coordinating Committee.

Sandra Ramos, as an external observer, has her own evaluation, which coincides in large part with what the young people have already said: “I saw the young women and the young men together in the marches and in all the struggles, but being together does not mean that the women are present in most relevant spaces of leadership [as indicated by Edwin Carcache and Juanita Paz]. Achieving that means breaking with the paradigms of the patriarchy [as indicated by Madelaine Caracas and Enrieth Martínez]. Some of the young women have succeeded in transcending the barriers, like this young woman called Macha and others who are imprisoned. But I feel that there is still no equality. In the decision making I have seen more men than women, and I have seen women more in the rearguard, in the support networks, transporting provisions [as indicated by Juanita Paz]. In the matter of raising the profile of women's leadership, [this movement] is more of the same. Everything is determined by the machista culture in this country. The fact that all this has exploded doesn't mean that the chauvinist culture has exploded. Machismo lies latent in all the structures. This is a permanent struggle.”

The experience of Sandra Ramos in the Civic Alliance is similar to that of Caracas in the University Coalition: “[In the Alliance] a moment came when we feminists were relegated and called ‘old ladies,’ ‘crazies,’ ‘cranks.’ But the feminist movement has a long history of struggle in this country: in its day it marched in the streets and put its finger on the wound. And today it has taken to the streets again, where I have since a new generation of young feminists. In the universities they had spaces where they came together and sat down to discuss matters. There was a small movement there of self-convoked women, and that is what is coming to the public's attention. But unfortunately the only leadership that this society recognizes is masculine and patriarchal. That is why we have insisted that the revolution must be feminist. But the objection is always the same as before: ‘Please put those sectarian matters aside,’ they

tell us, ‘because they distract from the struggle to defend the revolution.’<sup>287</sup> I have repeatedly heard that the feminist struggle is sectarian and that right now ‘justice’ and ‘democracy’ are the key words. And so justice and democracy end up being ethereal because justice and democracy for me have to do with economic problems. Business can’t be done the same way as it was done before, at the cost of impoverishing the country and its people. For me democratization is based on a principle that we all know already: people are at the center. And if democracy does not touch the points of the different sectors, we’re going to be left with pure political platform.”

These first commentaries on the protagonism of young women in the April rebellion seem to point toward conclusions similar to those reached by Anne Campbell in her pioneering ethnographic study on women in the gangs of New York City: “Even though the young women seemed more and more like sisters and less and less like girlfriends of the gang members, they continued to be ‘annexes of the masculine group,’ subject to the men’s control and their restrictions.”<sup>288</sup>

The question is this: did the organizations of the University Coalition consciously consider gender equity and so give ample participation to women? “In the Coordinating Committee,” says Karla Lara, “that was no doubt the case. It is true in the Committee more than in the AUN because it has several women students who belong directly to feminist movements. That helped because, if you have a good formation that includes a stress on gender, you don’t think that much about male representation. They’re careful about that. In the other case [the AUN] I saw only one woman, but in the April 19<sup>th</sup> Movement I have the impression that there is a good balance.”

By going more deeply into this theme, these reflections have brought together various dimensions that appeared in a scattered way in earlier

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<sup>287</sup> This position prevailed in sectors of the left, and we can still find it in thinkers as enlightened as Eric J. Hobsbawm: “What is the role played in every revolution or social change by the cultural revolution, which is today such a visible feature of the ‘new left’ and in some countries, such as the United States, even its dominant feature? There is no important social revolution that does not have this type of cultural dissidence mixed into it, at least peripherally. Perhaps today in the West, where the principal engine of rebellion is ‘alienation’ rather than poverty, no movement that fails to attack the system of personal relations and private satisfactions can be revolutionary. But cultural rebellion and cultural dissidence are themselves symptoms, not revolutionary forces. Politically they are not too important.” Hobsbawm, 1978: 308-309.

<sup>288</sup> Hall and Jefferson, 2014: 32.

sections: the patriarchal culture that continues to be present in university organizations and in the conception of political leadership, the cult of Ortega as an expression of that patriarchal culture, the feminist movements as a condition of possibility—by virtue of their organizational infrastructure and their capacity to raise consciousness—of the April rebellion, and the feminist conception of organizational horizontality as an anticipation in the present of the future society that is the goal of the struggle.





## 5. The University Struggles of April as Seen by Other Actors

A Sandinista militant who identified himself as Armando Martínez called in to a radio program in which Mónica Baltodano was recalling some of the struggles against the Somoza dictatorship. While discussing the university organizations of those times and their battles, the Sandinista criticized the university students of today: “Now I see that the students are interested only in the 6%. The everyday problems of ordinary citizens don’t matter to them. They don’t protest anything, and there is no one leading these struggles.”<sup>289</sup> The refutation was not long in coming: #OcupaINSS happened in 2013. The university students came out into the streets and were beaten by the security forces for defending the rights of pensioners. Even so, this action did little to dispel the widespread opinions disseminated in books and articles written by adults who viewed the new generations as apolitical, individualistic, and even boorish. Three years after #OcupaINSS a bitter polemic took place about the millennials, the various aspects of which I described in the introduction. The stereotype of the young person uninterested in political affairs remained firmly established.

This section deals with the way in which that stereotype, which may have greater or lesser objective basis, was demolished by the events that took place between April and October of 2018. I do not want to give the mistaken impression that the April revolt exhausted the whole gamut of politics that has been and is still practiced by the millennials. Much less do I want to imply that it serves as the only guiding norm for future possibilities. However, the revolt did mark a before and an after in the way many adults perceive young people’s involvement in politics.

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<sup>289</sup> Baltodano, *Tome I*: 317.

In this section I will give the word to several adults who offer their explanations and confess their puzzlement regarding those events between April and October. Even while recognizing the falsity of the stereotype of apolitical youth, some still remain faithful to the old patterns and protocols of social struggles. Given the evident danger that the April events will tend to encourage retrospective evaluation, I propose to consider the polemic about millennials as the *ex ante*, the prior situation, with its amalgam of conflicting viewpoints. What follows are the visions that were gathered after April 2018. They are the perception *a posteriori*, the fruit of the deeds of the young men and women and of a system of values shared by both young and old.

## Evolution? Involution?

A professor<sup>290</sup> at one of the several schools of political formation that have flourished in recent years in Nicaragua—schools in which several leaders of the April rebellion were formed—confesses that, during her eleven years training more than 300 young people in oral and written expression and analysis of reality, she had an increasingly negative view of them. She maintained this judgment until the eve of the civic insurrection. When I asked her what she thought of those young people, she told me: “The curious thing is that I have seen involution in the young students. At our last graduation, in November 2017, I was totally discouraged. I was thinking—and I said as much to the person in charge—that these kids are getting worse and worse; they dishearten me more and more. My discouragement was brought on by their lack of political interest, their inability to concentrate, and their disinterest in reading. In my module I used to try to convince them that no political leadership is possible unless the spoken word is made passionate and convincing, but their speech was slapdash. They used the jargon of the NGOs, which does not reach the people. Such language has become commonplace because many people think that plain and simple speech betrays ignorance. When I had them speak, most of them used NGO vocabulary. They sounded like broken records.”

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<sup>290</sup> The professor quoted asked to remain anonymous and to be called simply “the professor.” From this point on, therefore, that is how we will refer to her.

This professor's opinion does not exist only among adults. Young Valeska Valle agrees with her: "We are to blame for what we are seeing right now because we never got involved in the country's economy. We never got involved in politics, and we didn't care what was happening in health care. We weren't concerned about the education of our little sisters and brothers or what was happening with the kids who attend public schools. We just laughed at the bad conditions, and I can say that because I was one of them."

The professor's job was to help the young people to enrich their vocabulary and get rid of the NGO jargon: "I lent them books with essays. They had to read them and talk to me about what they had read. That's when I got discouraged. I was thinking: these people are so caught up in the networks that they think in terms of Tweets. That's why reading is so hard for them. That worried me, because a leader has to read. I also tried to help them understand that doing analysis of reality is not just saying, 'This guy is a jerk, and this other guy is wonderful.' Rather, they had to use words and concept that would help them analyze the situation of their own persons, their families, their communities, and this territory that is their country. For years I have tried to make them understand that politics is not pure emotionality. My discouragement was motivated by their failure to read, which meant that their cultural formation would be very limited. I saw that they had very little appreciation for or skill in the kind of oratory that was displayed by the leaders who fought against Somoza. Instead of their being interested in politics and in escaping from the scant content of the networks, I saw only involution, and I blamed it on the social media."

The professor also saw that the scope of their analysis was limited: "I could see that individual morality and family problems were what most interested them; that was where they were most capable of debate. But the more the scope of analysis expanded—to the community, to the country—the less capable they were. Considering the reality of what the country was going through, I became convinced that I would die without seeing Nicaragua change."

It is interesting but not surprising that, for a wordsmith like this professor in a school of political formation, the disqualification of leaders in training was based not on what they do—protesting, demonstrating in the streets—but on what they say and how they say it, and on whether their speech reflects analytical thought. Her criticism includes a deeper element, one related to the skills that were the patrimony of the student leaders of past struggles. She is disappointed at seeing young people ensnared by the social networks not because they are confined to a restricted physical space but because their world of ideas is so limited: they do not transcend the narrow borders of the ego in

order to arrive at a broader sense of identity, such as that of the community or the country.

The dichotomy the professor uses to explain her students' analytical weaknesses is not between rationality and sensibility but between society and individual. Though she points out the problem of a purely emotional type of politics, she believes that the principal limitation of the young people in her courses was their inability to transcend the sphere of their individual problems so as to situate themselves on a social plane—and to do so with language different from that of the NGOs, whose repetitive phraseology has become a means for evading original thought and taking refuge in clichés. The young people who attended her courses of political formation lacked a language that was truly their own and that would sway their audience at political functions. In other words, they lacked a language that was passionate and convincing.

## Politics and Organizations: How They Are Built Now, How They Were Built Previously

At the other pole on this spectrum of opinion is Sandra Ramos, director of the María Elena Cuadra Movement of Working and Unemployed Women. She gives good reasons for assessing the political involvement of young people more optimistically: “The youngsters are the emerging political actors in this country. This process was under construction. Young people have been interested in the reality of this country for some time now. You can see young boys and girls at the stoplights begging for something like “Operation Smile.” You can see them collecting funds for the Telethon or Los Pipitos. They work with Techo de Nicaragua. And I see it right here: the young workers come and do volunteer work in this organization, teaching the older women about their rights. But we haven't succeeded in publicizing all this volunteer work.” Ramos's manner of tracing the political involvement of young people through their volunteering and their activity in social programs coincides with the account of Harley Morales. The archeology of these other forms of doing politics is a pending task. In ordinary circumstances, these forms can coexist with tyrannical and unpopular regimes without altering the functioning of politics proper, in the sense of who controls state power and how the power is used. After the April rebellion, and after tracing the first steps in politics of

some of the young leaders in the movement, I think it is important to reevaluate the role of those spaces as expressions of the young people's interest in public affairs and as potential steps toward greater political engagement. Eric J. Hobsbawm knew that rebellions did not arise out of nothing, and for that reason he carefully traced the roots and inspirations of rebellions by examining the experiences their protagonists had previously had in fraternal associations, in collective labors, and in places of informal debate, such as taverns.<sup>291</sup> He found that the voluntary organizations served as schools and seedbeds for the social movements.<sup>292</sup>

Ramos emphasizes that the way her generation approached politics and the way the present generation does are quite different because her generation was impelled by a war to undertake certain actions. The context was very different, and it influenced the methods of struggle. Her direct personal experience with young people also gives her a different perspective: "I am the mother of two young men. The younger one is 27, but I never saw him as resembling the ones they call millennials. He had his ideas and his criticisms, but he didn't make them public except with his young friends. We've seen the same here in the María Elena Cuadra Movement, with the young women workers. When the duty-free zones began in the '90s, we saw a generation of rather adult workers enter the factories. They brought experience to the workplace; they didn't let themselves be humiliated; there were hundreds of strikes in those factories. There was oppression, but the people knew how to respond. When that generation left and the new generation came in, the factories were filled with young women and men who were just finishing secondary or primary school, some without even graduating. The factories attracted young people who had no other opportunities for education in this country, and so they had to throw themselves into a perilous labor market. There I saw them slowly taking action in defense of their rights, and that is what our organizations are for. We began to show them their rights in the world of labor so that they would make up their minds to defend them. I saw that process. Everything is under construction. It's just that some people are changed for the worse, like Daniel Ortega, and others are changed for the better, like these young women and men."

While the new generations may appear less politicized, Ramos recalls a highly significant eruption: "Some aspects have been studied very little, such as the young people who came out in defense of the labor and economic rights of the pensioners. That was #OcupaINSS. It is important to study the linkage

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<sup>291</sup> Hobsbawm and Rudé, 1978: 72-3.

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*: 74

there between the economic, social, and labor aspects. Why did the young people rise up for a problem that affects older people? It was because we adults did not rise to the defense of the elderly; it was as if we thought it didn't concern us. The young people were surely thinking, deep within themselves, that they were going to be professionals and would one day be facing the same situation. Working hard and being able to retire is a goal for people. Maybe that wasn't the main thrust of the campaign, but I imagine it was in their subconscious. They were moved by what they saw and heard in their families. If your grandfather is a pensioner, even if he's receiving only a miserable sum, you'll hear people talking about that right to a pension. The young people got involved because of their ties to their grandparents: they saw their grandparents or their aged parents in those old people who were demonstrating. They put themselves in their shoes, and that means that they were never lacking in concern about the reality of this country."

The views of Karla Lara, professor at the Central American University (UCA), were midway between those of the professor and Sandra Ramos, though more to one side than the other: "The students were involved in many social activities. While I've been teaching here, I have never thought that the students are apathetic. I believe that the ways in which they are expected to react are conditioned by the behavior of the adults at a certain moment of history. But those adults don't stop to analyze the present-day context and the type of young people we have today. That analysis has to be done first, before deciding what method should be used to get them involved. When the events of 2013 took place [OcupaINSS], the students gave a superb example of dignity, coherence, and values. That was when they began their awakening—no, not their awakening; rather, that was when their public engagement in politics began." Thus, Karla Lara recognizes that the young people were already politically active in relatively private spheres: they ran radio programs, attended conferences, and chose social and political subjects as themes for their graduation monographs.

## The Rebellion: The Revelation

Then came the rebellion of April. Several informants state that it was for them a revelation when the young people suddenly emerged on the streets and

become the heart and soul of the April 19<sup>th</sup> Movement. The professor recalls a conversation she had with one of her graduates who took part in the uprising: “‘You were very hard and critical with us,’ she told me, and I admitted it: ‘I’m sorry. You have been braver than I ever could have imagined.’”

This professor of oral and written expression was one of the few analysts and activists—perhaps the only one—who confessed that their perception of the young people had drastically changed. However, she was not the only one to experience that drastic change. The campesino leader Francisca Ramírez recalls that “before April many people were criticizing the university students for being apathetic. Their country didn’t seem to matter to them even though everything was being totally destroyed. At the time when the concession was granted for the canal, we felt that the sovereignty of Nicaragua had been surrendered, and we saw that many of the young people were saying nothing. We thought they had been won over by the lies. For a time we concluded that it suited the Ortega government to keep the people divided: the government was giving hope to some people, telling them that the canal project would lift them out of poverty, but for the campesinos it was sad news. We were going to be dispossessed of our lands, because Law 840 state that the land would be handed over to a Chinese man. So we believed the young people were not informed and would not support us.”

Francisca later changed her ideas about young people and their involvement in politics: “That was happening because the government always tried to divide people, but we see today that was false. It is true that many analysts and many of us Nicaraguans believed that the young people had submitted to the lies, but that was not the case. Today we feel that we were wrong; we failed to see that they were really well informed about what people were experiencing in Nicaragua. In fact, many times I have asked their pardon because the courage of the young university students was so great that many of them lost their lives and many others are in the prisons because they wanted to see a free Nicaragua and not be subject to oppression. It is true that many Nicaraguans were criticizing the young people. Sometimes we tried to have forums with the young people, and they hardly participated. But it is untrue that they were indifferent; they were well informed. When the Indio-Maíz reserve was burning, they said ‘Enough!’ That was the voice that exploded, and it inspired us with hope for the future, that Nicaragua would not end up in the enslavement that the Ortega Government was imposing. The participation of the young people in the April 18<sup>th</sup> rebellion gave Nicaraguans hope. They showed themselves to be the country’s moral reserve because with great courage they raised their voices and refused to be subjugated any longer. They resolved to lose their

classes and their year of studies, and thanks to that we are going to have a free country and a democracy.”

Elvira Cuadra wrote in 2011: “The young people between ages 16 and 19, especially those in the upper-middle and upper socioeconomic levels, are those who are least willing to sacrifice themselves for a cause. ... One of the characteristics of the youth of modern times is their lack of interest in politics. ... This parochial culture combines with a set of materialist values that demonstrate the young people’s desire for greater and better opportunities for social and economic insertion as a way of achieving a personal life project.”<sup>293</sup> In 2018 Cuadra did not hesitate to acknowledge that the young people were at the forefront of the revolt: “The protest movement is being led by young students who were born after the revolution. ... The wave of mobilization and social protest, instigated mainly by university youth, took the government, Nicaraguan society, and the international community by surprise.”<sup>294</sup> The political analysts were equally astonished. Cuadra accordingly turns her statements around: “The social movement has caused great surprise because it is self-convoked and led by young students who until now were totally unknown. They come from the third generation born after the revolution; that is, they were born after the war and the revolution, and they thought that Nicaragua was a democracy; they thought that citizens had rights. Their apparent apathy and lack of interest in politics was actually an expression of their strong repudiation of the conventional political actors.”<sup>295</sup> Journalist Julio López emphasized this change of perception: “We can consign to the past the claim that young people, since they lack ‘interest’ in politics, are apathetic, insensitive, indifferent, and unconcerned with solving the problems of Nicaraguan society. ... Today the young people have reached the conclusion that their personal projects are impossible unless there is a change in the country.”<sup>296</sup>

Fernando Bárcenas praised the leadership displayed by the young people: “The ones who should be directly engaging in dialogue with Ortega are those valiant young folk, if conditions are right. The rest of the upstarts are superfluous.”<sup>297</sup> Carlos Fernando Chamorro also commended the leadership: “A peaceful exit from the dictatorship will be possible only if the national dialogue is accompanied by the highly mobilized state that has been led by the

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<sup>293</sup> Cuadra and Zuñiga, 2011: 60-61 and 93.

<sup>294</sup> Cuadra, May 2018.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>296</sup> López, September 2018.

<sup>297</sup> Bárcenas, 5 May 2018.

self-convoked student movement.”<sup>298</sup> He also recognized the young people’s actions as the first step in the revolt: “When a group of young university students and a few dozen older adults united together in a peaceful protest against the blow to the pensioners’ economy, the magnitude of the people’s reaction was something unexpected.”<sup>299</sup> That initial trigger was also recognized by Mónica Baltodano: “First there were the students, who peacefully mobilized, along with some pensioners. They were met with brutal repression, which was clearly aimed at journalists and some of the more visible leaders, such as those of the feminist movement.” She also acknowledged that it was the students’ fearlessness that transformed a demonstration into something more: “The belligerence of the ‘self-convoked’ young people turned the march on April 23<sup>rd</sup> into a veritable mass mobilization.”<sup>300</sup>

The assessment of the young people and their role in national politics took a 180-degree turn from what it had been in the debate about millennials. Church leaders, politicians, analysts, and activists did not hesitate to pay passionate tributes to the young people who started and joined the movement. The stereotype of the individualistic, apathetic youth was supplanted by the stereotype of the bold, committed, generous, and keenly conscious youth. According to the auxiliary bishop Silvio Báez, the university students became the moral conscience of the country; they were propelling an “ethical revolution” that was waking up the whole society, a society that had been silenced by fear and other motives and that had little opportunity to express its desire for a deeper sense of citizenship. “I always believed,” said the bishop, “that this society was going to wake up some day because of the deep structural problems of a social, political, and economic nature. The young people woke up the whole society and made us aware that Nicaragua could be a different and a better place.”<sup>301</sup>

## Action, Repression, and the Empathic Imagination

How did the young people get involved in the struggle, and how did they manage their involvement? From almost the first moment, the government

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<sup>298</sup> Chamorro, 28 April 2018.

<sup>299</sup> Chamorro, 21 April 2018.

<sup>300</sup> Baltodano, April 2018.

<sup>301</sup> Rivas, 6 August 2018.

maintained the thesis that it was a coup attempt and that the streets had been taken over by a “miniscule” group that in no way represented the true sentiments of Nicaraguans.<sup>302</sup> That thesis was easily refuted by even a quick glance at the huge crowds that attended the demonstrations. Militants of the FSLN also put forward the thesis that the insurrection was being furtively managed by “right-wing” politicians in collusion with the International Monetary Fund.<sup>303</sup> Sandra Ramos offers a very different interpretation of the events: “Tell me what party directed them! There is no party here that can move such massive throngs of people. The kids who are in prison and the kids in León are the leaders. Don’t be looking for leaders elsewhere, thinking that this was managed from outside. This uprising was the fruit of a consciousness of civic rights that was generated among the students themselves, because in the universities they talk about rights. They don’t just talk about partying. The kids go to parties because that is their right.”

The young people got involved initially, according to Ramos, because they naturally aspire to contribute to and enjoy a pension someday. They were concerned about their own future, but they were also moved by their empathic imagination, which made them enraged when they saw the old people being beaten. They realized that history demanded more of them. If a simple march can be transformed into a social mobilization, as Mónica Baltodano maintains, what does it take to convert an ad hoc protest into a social movement? It is impossible to predict such an evolution because it depends to a large extent on the response of the people—whether they are persuaded by the rightness and the justice of the protest—and on the reaction of the group against which the protest is aimed. The professor recalls that “during the uprising one of my students sent me this message: ‘Tell the prof that I am in the street because of what she taught us.’ Afterward I looked for her and told her: ‘Did you know what you were doing? Did you know that you opened a window that we were unable to open?’ She replied: ‘We had no idea. Absolutely none. We are surprised at what we’ve done.’ That give you an idea of what happened. That is to say, there cannot be a conspiracy if people are not fully conscious that they are engaged in a conspiracy.”

Ramos attributes the surprising social outburst in April to the values inherent in the Nicaraguan character, and she maintains that they can be traced back through the country’s history: “The universe of us Nicas is different from that of all other Central Americans. We are very affable: if we can protect you,

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<sup>302</sup> El 19 digital, 4 September 2018.

<sup>303</sup> Insurgente.org, 23 November 2018.

we will protect you; if we can help you, we will help you. And this fact should be taken into account in the analyses, so that analysis is done from the human reality. Who are we Nicas really? Why do we explode in this manner? Why do we explode at the massive violation of our rights, especially the right to life? Three times the people of Nicaragua have risen up to defend the young people because we see our own children in them, just as they saw their grandparents in the old people who were attacked. When we were fighting against the Somoza dictatorship, I saw this people rise up—not for the Sandinista guerrillas but for the defense of the young people. The people rose up when the Somoza guardsmen began to kidnap the young people, just like now. They captured them and then disappeared them on the Cuesta del Plomo. The people rose up when they saw a whole bunch of youngsters being beaten, killed, and burned in the barrios. The second uprising I saw was the one in the '90s; it was a peaceful protest because of the vote. I remember that the people petitioned the Sandinista Front to stop the Patriotic Military Service, which became obligatory toward the end. Supposedly this man [Ortega] was going to announce [the end of the service], so all the people came out. But he chickened out—the one the call the ‘fighting cock’—because he thought he had the whole people behind him, and he didn’t say what he was obliged to say. And I saw how the people swung around completely. And now once again, the people rise up when their young people are being massacred. Our people protect their future. And right now you might ask me: why did I personally protest? It was because I saw my own children in these kids; my own children were students, and they fought for the 6%. When the people saw that rubber bullets were taking out the eyes of the young students, they rose up in protest. People rose up in Wiwilí, Muelle de los Bueyes, Rancho Grande—places that are far away and have no universities. The campesino movement came down from the mountains to defend the young people; for their sake they mobilized, and for their sake they stayed.”

The empathic imagination appears here again: the ad hoc protest evolved into a social movement not only because there was ferocious repression but because the people saw their own children in the young protesters and so counterattacked. The social movement arose in defense of the young. Carlos Fernando Chamorro makes the same point: “The brutality of the repression unleashed by the government’s shock forces, who were protected by the police, generated feelings of indignation, and these were fed by the images of wounded youngsters and adults and of journalists being attacked and beaten.”<sup>304</sup> Mónica Baltodano clinches the point: “At the Polytechnic University (UPOLI), which

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<sup>304</sup> Chamorro, 21 April 2018.

is surrounded by poor barrios, the police could not dislodge the students. The neighbors erected barricades to protect the hundreds of young people who took refuge in the classrooms and who have maintained this place as a bastion of struggle until now.”<sup>305</sup> The people of the barrios and even the campesinos joined together to mount a massive defense.

One of the smaller towns near Masaya was tremendously transformed by the repression and by the people’s reaction: “Z. is a peaceful, almost sleepy town,” Ricardo Castro<sup>306</sup> explained to me. “It’s a happy place, but not politically active. Nothing happened there until the young people decided to organize a march, and after that they built a roadblock. That was the point beyond which the Front was not going to let them advance. On June 13<sup>th</sup> they launched a merciless attack. Hooded agents and riot police arrived from two other localities, and that night the youngsters didn’t even have powder for the mortars. As a result, there was a massacre. They killed five kids, and the rest ran for cover. As a result of what happened that night, everyone got to know who was with whom, so that now those who took up weapons of war against the kids are isolated. The inhabitants don’t want anything to do with them. The people who had restaurants or eateries, the teachers at the Institute, and even the director of the Institute—they are all isolated for having taken up arms against the kids. It was a tremendous shock for the population in general to see those people—more or less decent people, accepted as important figures in the life of the community—with weapons of war in their hands. This caused a powerful change in their reputation in the community.”

## Leadership, Vanguard, and Social Movements

As a result of this swift series of events in which there was no stable leadership, the youthful promoters of the rebellion were subjected to an avalanche of critical commentary. The criticism had to do with the concept of leadership, reviving the old debate on the left about the need for organization versus the spontaneity of the masses. When journalist Jon Lee Anderson asked who was in charge of the Civic Alliance, Lesther Alemán responded: “There

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<sup>305</sup> Baltodano, April 2018.

<sup>306</sup> Pseudonym.

is no leader because there is fear of succumbing to strong-man rule. We don't want to repeat what has happened in this country."<sup>307</sup> This was neither the first nor the last time that a member of the University Coalition refused to consider the old-style leadership. In fact, shortly before leaving for exile, several of these young people reaffirmed that they were spokespersons for the university movement but not its leaders; they rejected autocratic rule and stressed the transitory nature of the Civic Alliance and the ethical role of the students.<sup>308</sup>

Fernando Bárcenas was the harshest but also the most insightful critic of the students' position; he was also an analyst with a solid political formation. He reacted quickly to the declaration of the University Coalition regarding its principles of leadership: "It is regrettable that the student representatives do not know how to differentiate conceptually between a good leader and a strongman. In their interview with Confidential, the student representatives said that they abhor strongman rule, and they described themselves as spokespersons not as leaders. What is important is not what they abhor but the creation of the centralized, coherent leadership that is essential in any struggle."<sup>309</sup> This comment echoes the criticism made by the professor: how to advance from "This guy is jerk" to a more analytical position, which in this instance, according to Bárcenas, is expressed in centralized leadership. But his criticism also reflects Engels' critical reaction to Bakunin's enthusiasm regarding the anarchism of the Paris Commune. When Bakunin claimed that the application of his anarchist ideals had preserved the Commune from the authoritarian virus, Engels replied: "I know of nothing more authoritarian than revolution. What cost the Paris Commune its life was the lack of centralization and authority."<sup>310</sup>

In previous articles Bárcenas had insisted on other aspects related to leadership. He defended the need for a theory to guide the struggle: "In order for the struggle to have a revolutionary direction, it is not enough for the students and the campesinos to be extraordinarily courageous, honest, incorruptible, intelligent, and self-sacrificial; what they especially need are revolutionary political principles, that is, revolutionary theory to guide the praxis."<sup>311</sup> He insisted on the need for planning a strategy: "The lack of a method and clear objectives favors the status quo, that is, Orteguism. . . . The students' repudiation of Orteguism should be expressed in political positions that possess ideological

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<sup>307</sup> Anderson, 2018.

<sup>308</sup> Salinas Maldonado, 3 September 2018.

<sup>309</sup> Bárcenas, 5 September 2018.

<sup>310</sup> Letter of Engels to C. Terzaghi, dated 14 January 1872. Cited in Haupt, 1986: 53.

<sup>311</sup> Bárcenas, 22 May 2018.

coherence. Right now, the movement's major weakness is its spontaneity and its lack of a program of change that would involve the nation."<sup>312</sup> Before making these criticisms, Bárcenas had opted for the old Marxist formula: "It will be necessary to forge a unified movement of workers in order to overthrow the dictatorship through mass struggle."<sup>313</sup>

I have cited the critical statements of Bárcenas because they represent the most adroitly argued defense of vanguardism and because many of his ominous predictions regarding the dialogue came true. The collapse of the dialogue may have been due at least partly to the defects he identified. Nevertheless, the resolute refusal of the young people in the University Coalition to make themselves into a vanguard should not be attributed simply to a cultural trait of this generation or to a resurgence of anarchistic romanticism. Social movements are a type of phenomenon where there is no room for vanguards. If perchance there should be some room for vanguards, it would be through a multitude of dispersed leadership groups.

That is what has happened in other social movements: after the July 1789 revolution in France, one of the insurgents, when asked by the police about the leaders who had directed the crowd toward the Royal Palace, gave this response: "They have no leader; each man is as free as the others."<sup>314</sup> George Rudé, the historian who reported this statement, maintains that such must have been the situation for a small sector of the disturbances, or it must have seemed that way to the thousands of persons who took part in them. But what is clear is that in the French Revolution there were many types of leaders—as was the case in the April revolt in Nicaragua with Lesther Alemán and Irlanda Jerez—who emerged from unsuspected places: in France a woman intoned stanzas to spur sacking and burning, an illiterate nurse was the spokesperson for the women who marched to Versailles, and a stevedore led the assaults on the customs posts.<sup>315</sup> In social movements there are various types of leadership that are difficult to trace. Sidney Tarrow states that "movements rarely find themselves under the control of a single leader or organization. Otherwise, how can they keep up their collective defiance of personal egotism, disorganization, and state repression? This is the dilemma that has been debated by theorists of collective action and students of social movements over the last few decades."<sup>316</sup>

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<sup>312</sup> Bárcenas, 5 May 2018.

<sup>313</sup> Bárcenas, 3 August 2018.

<sup>314</sup> Rudé, 1978: 258.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*: 259.

<sup>316</sup> Tarrow, 1997: 25.

While Bárcenas criticized the absence of leadership and strategies, Valeska Valle argued that the absence of leadership is itself a strategy: “We are not breeding bosses, and that is what is driving Daniel Ortega and the regime crazy. If he grabs me tomorrow, you can be sure that another young woman will be out there in the streets, still shouting! Here it’s not just Lesther Alemán, Valeska Valle, and a few others. Though our faces are known, if we were not here, there are more leaders in the departments and in Managua who will continue the struggle. They would have to build twenty Chipotes and lock all of us up in them. Even if they capture us, they can’t put an end to the struggle. And that is something we have all thought about.” This is not a unique strategy, nor is it the first time it is found in the history of social movements. When the Luddites overran the English countryside in 1830, they often denied that they had a leader; they declared, “We are just one.” George Rudé is uncertain whether such declarations should be attributed to a primitive egalitarianism or to a fear of public exposure.<sup>317</sup>

Social movement theorists have the same perception of the young university students of the Coalition: they believe they organized the way they did intuitively: “Instead of Lenin’s centralized party, today we recognize the need for mobilizing structures that are more elastic.”<sup>318</sup> That was what happened in Guatemala during the 2015 uprising, according to Miguel Ángel Sandoval: “They went out into the streets without visible or recognized leadership, without proclamations, without the presence of any political party or social organization, without the old ideas...”<sup>319</sup> The situation has changed, or at least the approach to reality has, as Tarrow points out: “Instead of Gramsci’s organic intellectual, we center our attention on broader, less controllable cultural frameworks; instead of the tactical political opportunism advocated by both authors [Gramsci and Lenin], we work with a more structural theory of political opportunities.”<sup>320</sup> Such an opportunity came thanks to the empathic imagination provoked by the repression. The movement did not wait for propitious circumstances, such as the worsening of the contradictions, nor did it produce such circumstances by force of will. The movement was born when diverse social sectors from many classes were moved by indignation; such a phenomenon has been well documented by Manuel Castells in his *Networks of Indignation and Hope*. And as Carlos Monsiváis wrote, “Indignation is not a bad organizing principle.”<sup>321</sup>

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<sup>317</sup> Hobsbawm and Rudé, 178: 115.

<sup>318</sup> Tarrow, 1997: 40.

<sup>319</sup> Sandoval, 2017: 17.

<sup>320</sup> Tarrow, 1997: 40.

<sup>321</sup> Monsiváis, 2008: 16.

Theories of collective action and revolt have increasingly maintained that the lack of a vanguard is a positive sign: “Since movements rarely use selective incentives or exercise constraints on their followers, the leadership in collective action has a creative function that is lacking in more institutionalized groups.”<sup>322</sup>

The young people rejected strong leadership figures because they knew that they were not themselves representative in a traditional numerical sense and because, as they proceeded, they had had to deal with many local leaders that they could not and did not want to control. Their experience corresponds to Tarrow’s claims: “The transparent, bimodal claim that Olson saw between leaders and followers in economic associations is absent in movements, many of which do not have even a formal structure. To the extent that they are organized, movements are made up of a series of very informal relations among organizations, coalitions, intermediate groups, members, sympathizers, and crowds. Sociologist Pam Oliver writes: ‘It is a mistake to establish an equivalence between a social movement and any type of collective decision-making entity, no matter how vague its structure is.’”<sup>323</sup> Perhaps what most influenced the student leaders when they gave their statements to Confidential was their awareness of being immersed in a social force that they were never going to control, lead, or represent in the way that the revolutionary vanguards attempted to do.

The professor points out that “in the rebellion there was much talk about the myth of ‘heroic Nicaragua,’ but it is one thing to be a hero and another thing to be a leader, and it is still another thing to be able to run a project.” The social movement produced many heroic actions, but these had to do more with the culture of heroic Nicaraguans than with organizational structures. Anthropologist David Kertzer writes that general knowledge of the routines that characterize the history of a society can help movements overcome their lack of resources and communication. That is what happened in Nicaragua during the April rebellion. According to Kertzer, action is not born out of the brain of the organizers; rather, it is inscribed and transmitted culturally, as happens with religious rituals: “The acquired conventions of collective action form part of a society’s public culture.”<sup>324</sup>

Leaders are dispersed, and they emerge as such because they link collective actions “to themes that either are inscribed in the culture or are

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<sup>322</sup> Tarrow, 1997: 52.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid.: 45-6.

<sup>324</sup> Ibid.: 50.

invented instinctively; often they fuse conventional elements with new frames of meaning.”<sup>325</sup> In the case of Nicaragua’s April revolt, the terms of the struggle, in regard to propaganda and theory, are an amalgam of conceptions that ranges from the leftist language of the ’80s (or even earlier), through the terminology of the NGOs, and all the way to the language of Catholicism and its eschatology. As Gramsci would say, this discourse is formed by “‘spontaneous’ combinations of a particular form of material production, with the ‘chance’ agglomeration of disparate social elements.”<sup>326</sup> The leaders work on this material and are absorbed in it.

The myth of a heroic Nicaragua “guided” the forms the struggle took. Kertzer notes that power is based on rituals and is also at odds with rituals.<sup>327</sup> Consequently, social struggles cannot be measured only by the yardstick of cost-benefit calculations and effective management; they must be judged also by their style and their symbolic impact. Twitter and Facebook definitely helped, but there were also “‘identifiable symbols drawn from cultural frameworks of meaning.”<sup>328</sup> Certainly in Nicaragua there was an amalgam of symbols: religious (Catholic), political (revolutionary, Sandinista), and nationalist (the flag). The young people of the Coalition could not presume to control the great variety of initiatives that were making use of a panoply of symbols from diverse traditions.

## Spontaneity and Planning

In support of the argument of Bárcenas, we can repeat the affirmation of Gramsci: “Ignoring—or worse, spurning—the so-called ‘spontaneous’ movements—that is, refusing to provide them conscientious direction and failing to raise them to a higher level by inserting them in politics—can often have extremely grave consequences.”<sup>329</sup> Such a movement might, for example, end up allying itself with a right-wing reactionary movement because both are being adversely affected by an economic crisis.

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<sup>325</sup> Ibid.: 52.

<sup>326</sup> Gramsci, 1981: 328.

<sup>327</sup> Kertzer, 1988.

<sup>328</sup> Tarrow, 1997: 25.

<sup>329</sup> Gramsci, 1981: 329.

However, Gramsci was aware that that the “management” of a movement is not something that can be determined by the sheer will of a group of leaders. That is why he reflected on the dilemma of spontaneity versus conscious direction of social struggles and questioned the purists at both extremes. We should remember that Gramsci’s contention came after Lenin’s iron-handed conduct of the revolutionary process in Russia, without which, according to Tariq Ali, “a social revolution would not have been possible in 1917.” The party that Lenin had meticulously organized from 1903 on was still unable to spark a revolution, but Lenin “prevailed upon some Bolshevik leaders who were reluctant because of the difficulty of winning the support of the party bases or, more importantly, the support of the soldiers, who were extremely war-weary.”<sup>330</sup>

At the other extreme, Gramsci’s contribution also came after the Georges Sorel’s criticisms of rationalists and utopians. Renouncing “mysteries, nuances, and indetermination,” Sorel argued that the dark regions of reality had to “disappear with the progress of light, and that everything will end up at the level of *small science*.”<sup>331</sup> On the one hand, Gramsci attacked the “academic and scholastic historical-political conception for which the only real and worthy movement is one that is 100% conscious or one that is determined by a previously devised, highly detailed plan or (the same thing) a plan that corresponds to abstract theory.”<sup>332</sup> On the other hand, Gramsci rejects with irony the possibility of pure spontaneity: “The fact that there are currents and groups that consider spontaneity as a method shows indirectly that in every ‘spontaneous’ movement there is a primitive element of conscious direction and discipline.”<sup>333</sup> In practice, he argues, “reality is replete with combinations of rarities, and the theorist must identify the confirmation of his theory in those rarities; he must ‘translate’ the elements of historical life into theoretical language and not the reverse: demanding that reality conform to an abstract schema.”<sup>334</sup>

There was a degree of spontaneity in the groups that took part in the uprising against Ortega. Their acts were spontaneous, Gramsci would say, “in the sense that they were not the result of systematic educational activity on the part of an already conscious directorate; rather, they emerged from people’s

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<sup>330</sup> Ali, 2017: 15.

<sup>331</sup> Sorel, 2005: 200.

<sup>332</sup> Gramsci, 1981: 330.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid.: 327.

<sup>334</sup> Ibid.: 330.

daily experience illuminated by common sense, that is, by the commonly held conception of the world.”<sup>335</sup> But this conception of spontaneity is not entirely applicable because many of the young people belonged to or had belonged to organized groups—feminist or women’s collectives, NGOs, Sandinista Youth—where they had received ideological formation and organizational training for managing collective processes. The repetitive NGO discourse may in some cases have been automatic and unreflective, but in other cases—such as the feminist and LGBT groups—the discourse was based on real life. At the same time, affiliation with formal or semi-formal groups leaves another type of sediment. We should not forget that the April movement started not from zero but from preexisting social networks, that is, from an organizational infrastructure that made “possible the transformation of episodic collective action into social movements.”<sup>336</sup>

The young representatives of the five organizations of university students speak of spontaneity because such language is—as much now as it was in the time of Gramsci—“an energizing stimulant and an element of profound unification; it is above all a negation of the idea that the struggle is something arbitrary and artificial rather than historically necessary. It gives the masses a ‘theoretical’ consciousness that they are creating institutional and *historical values*, that they are founders of states.”<sup>337</sup> Gramsci decisively concludes: “That uniting of ‘spontaneity’ with ‘conscious direction’ or ‘discipline’ is precisely the real political action of the subaltern classes insofar as it is truly mass politics and not simply a ploy by political groups that limit themselves to appealing to the masses.”<sup>338</sup> I believe that the young people of the University Coalition, in the light of their experience of the April rebellion, have understood such “conscious direction” in a non-vanguard sense. They want to show that they are not only breaking with the old political culture but are creating a new culture more in line with their exercise of leadership. The notion of vanguard connotes control over the actions of the masses. Radical activists in the United States have also claimed that activists “should have a certain level of control over the flow of events.”<sup>339</sup> But, as the young student in the school of political formation made clear, that was not the experience of the young people who rose up in April because that is not the nature of a social movement.

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<sup>335</sup> Ibid.: 329.

<sup>336</sup> Tarrow, 1997: 56.

<sup>337</sup> Gramsci, 1981: 328.

<sup>338</sup> Ibid.: 328-9.

<sup>339</sup> Alinsky, 2012: 44.

## Nuances and Reflections regarding the Perception of Young People

The April revolt has revealed as much as (and perhaps more than) other epochs that have brought to light the best and the worst of human beings and societies. However, there is a need to be cautious with evaluations made in the heat of battle since they blend together projection, retrospective retrieval, and assessment made with anachronistic yardsticks. (When the bull has passed, there are plenty of prophets *ex eventu*, spouting their unfounded fallacies.) In this case the dangers are 1) taking the traits of a whole society and applying them to a specific age group and 2) supposing that what happened in April is what best represents a generation. The exceptional circumstances are quite revealing, but they also allow for exceptional types of behavior, where contingent elements play a major role that may be ephemeral. Perhaps the professor, when speaking about sudden change, is seeking to take account of those exceptional circumstances.

The professor nuances her statements but adds some criticism. The monthly meeting for analysis of the national reality attracts more and more students (is the involution being reversed? is this a significant indicator?), but perhaps the increased attendance is not something that will last. The professor identifies many positive signs, but she insists that they do not necessarily indicate that the young people have become political experts. She says that “while the NGOs criticize their excessive ‘adulthood,’ the young people don’t know everything because they have not experienced it and much less have they read about it. The beginning of the rebellion was heroic, but it then became stylish, and young people follow what is stylish. Some said, ‘How can I remain outside all this?’ I was afraid that it would be all marches and noise. I began to see that the young people were not going to know how to manage the problem of infiltrators. I believe in that saying of ‘Give someone power, and you’ll see who he is,’ and that’s why I think that giving power to a young person is enormously risky. Will he know how to manage it?” The professor and other critics were alarmed to see the young people meeting with politicians from the extreme rightwing party ARENA in San Salvador. The divisions were still another cause of alarm; they continued even after the repression and the formation of the Civic Alliance. The young people realized in the course of events that many of their errors made it impossible to continue the entrenchment in the Polytechnic University (UPOLI), where the proliferation of infiltrators had ruined the occupation. The young people have recognized,

more often than their adult critics realize, the poor communication and the competition for leadership among themselves. The same can be said regarding the reproduction of individualistic and patriarchal values.

Professor Karla Lara distances herself from other critics: “As regards the matter of responsibility, you can’t unload all the responsibility onto the young. The access they have to knowledge should make them more responsible, but apathy and individualism are general problems, not just of the young.” This commentary reframes the polemic by showing that adults have fallen into a fallacious way of thinking: they attribute to the young traits that are part of Nicaraguan culture.

On the other hand, it is possible that the young people have been rigorously evaluated by some adults because they did what the adults were hoping to have done themselves. In other words, according to the adult’s value system, which was obviously introjected into the young, what the young people did was what should have been done, and it was what was incumbent on the heroic youth. The young also heard reproaches, such of those of Bárcenas, when they did not do all that should have been or did not do it in the way that it should have been done.

The young people have, however, received praise for the aspects of rupture that were evident in their way of conducting or inspiring the struggle. Their pacifism—stressed so much by Madelaine Caracas, Valeska Valle, and Alfredo Ocampo—was given very high marks by Enrique Zelaya, who fought in the civil war of the 1980s and was a member of the general staff of the Nicaraguan Resistance. Now a representative of the resistance in the Broad Front for Democracy (FAD), he comments: “There’s nothing good about war. I spent years going through that experience, and I am more and more convinced that war brings nothing good. Today, thanks to what has been happening in Nicaragua since April 18<sup>th</sup>, we have an excellent opportunity, for the first time in our history, to bring about change without having recourse to arms, without shooting bullets. I hope we achieve it. And I tell you this, coming from the Contra. I say it from the heart, not from fear. When a sharpshooter killed Alvarito Conrado on April 20<sup>th</sup>, I was the first who felt tempted to take up a weapon. And sometimes my blood still boils when I see the repression ordered by this man. But no, let us hope that this revolution continues to be civil.”<sup>340</sup>

These filtrations of adult opinion, with its mythologies and projections, are perhaps inevitable. The ruptures with the old tradition have brought about something new, which perhaps will be incorporated into the political culture.

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<sup>340</sup> Zelaya, November 2018.

In any case, both the filtrations and the ruptures are the material that sustains the intergenerational connection that made possible the April movement and that now inspires the gratitude and the hope of—among many others—the professor of oral and written expression: “No one could have imagined that there were going to be so many young people ready to die in the streets of Managua so that this [revolt] might begin. For this began because there were young people who confronted the anti-riot police. This was Nicaragua’s heroic culture, activated without knowing the consequences. There was a high degree of naiveté in the entrenchments, where they felt they were in charge. Still, now I know that Nicaragua was awakened by people who learned something from me about critical thought. I can die in peace. Even if I don’t see Daniel Ortega go out [of power], I saw the youngsters go out [in the streets].”





## 6. Conclusions and Comparisons: University Organizations and Social Movements in Nicaragua

The British historian Christopher Hill firmly believed that “history needs to be rewritten in every generation because, although the past does not change, the present does; each generation asks new questions about the past and finds new areas of resonance as it reviews different aspects of its predecessors’ experience.”<sup>341</sup> The April revolt, led largely by university students, can be illuminated by—and can throw light on—the revolts of earlier generations of university students who fought against the first two Somozas—Anastasio Somoza García and Luis Somoza Debayle—while leaving aside the third, who was confronted by a guerrilla organization and a popular insurrection. The presupposition of this reciprocal illumination is that the university students of today are reliving some important aspects of the experience of their predecessors and that the similarities and divergences can help us define better what is happening now.

The context of the earlier struggles was markedly different from that of the new ones. When Carlos Fonseca Amador—in April 1968, exactly one half-century before the April 2018 revolt—sent his message to students, encouraging them to stage vigorous protests that were more than wordy proclamations, he attributed the inertia among the students to capitalism’s penetration into the universities. By 2018 that penetration had become much more intense. In Nicaragua there are more than fifty universities competing for recognition in the educational marketplace. Some are doing all in their power to insert themselves into the international systems of accreditation, producing semiliterate doctoral graduates who help them raise their grades with the multinational accountants of academic worthiness. Quality is measured by the number of post-graduate scholars,

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<sup>341</sup> Hill, 2015: 4.

doctorates awarded, bureaucratic rules and procedures, publications, etc. A sphere that was previously “not for sale” has become totally commercialized. As a paradoxical counterpart, students are receiving degrees whose face value does not correspond to their real value because they are being ever more meagerly remunerated when they try to redeem the degrees in the labor market. As the university bureaucracy becomes ever more commercialized, its “products” are ever more devalued in the marketplace. The bureaucratic paraphernalia of the university is inextricably entangled with the market even as the degrees awarded become more and more disconnected from the market.<sup>342</sup>

The students play this game whether they like it or not, whether they understand it or not. No one is questioning the rules of the game. No student group has pronounced on the matter. Their present struggle has an immediate, tangible objective: putting an end to the dictatorship. Within this narrow but urgent horizon they coincide with the first anti-Somoza students of the 1940s and early 1950s, who tried to prevent the reelection of the first Somoza. Like the current adversaries of the regime, the opponents at that time were an absolute majority. But it was only when they began forming circles to study Marxist theory and liberation theology that their struggles intensified and became more ambitious, developing into a battle against the capitalist system.

This feature of the struggle reveals another important contrast: the anti-Somoza students of the '50s and, even more, those of the '60s and '70s, could point to a clearly visible horizon: the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and revolutionary Cuba. Their longings now had concrete materializations. They were not utopian but achievable.<sup>343</sup> Today's university students have to confect

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<sup>342</sup> This can give rise to a persistently explosive situation for the reasons Hobsbawm cites: “When a massive number of students are faced with unemployment or with jobs inferior to those they expected in view of their degrees or certificates, they can easily develop into a permanently discontented multitude, ready to support revolutionary (or extreme right-wing) movements and supply them with activists.” Hobsbawm, 1978: 372.

<sup>343</sup> This situation, which previously affected European youth, is now reaching this region. Hobsbawm observed in 1971: “There is a very notable difference between the new revolutionary movement and that of my generation in the years between the wars. We had high hopes, perhaps mistakenly, because we could see a concrete model of society offered as an alternative: socialism. Nowadays that faith in the great October Revolution and the Soviet Union has mostly disappeared—this is a fact, not a judgment—and nothing has taken its place. Although the new revolutionaries seek out models and objects of loyalty, neither the small, localized revolutionary regimes—Cuba, North Vietnam, North Korea—nor China itself are today the same as what the Soviet Union was in my time.” Hobsbawm, 1978: 363.

their utopia using limited, imperfect ingredients, such as feminist and ecological legislation in Europe, liberal political theories, and the vision and mission statements of the NGOs. Or else they have to be content with aspiring to have a representative democracy, an objective that would have appeared modest to their predecessors but unfortunately is not so in the present context. There is no ideological north star, so that the struggle is reduced to immediate, short-term goals. Or else the longed-for north star continues to be the imperial North with all its diverse academic, legislative, cultural, and even military ramifications.

Bereft of more expansive utopias, today's university students have had to confront not a bandit state like that of Somoza—whose National Guard, while being a family army, was a professional army in the end—but a criminal state that makes use of former (and until now forgotten) militants with military experience, gathering them from the gutters of history and giving them hoods, weapons, and a license to kill. The result is obvious. The National Guard exercised a certain constraint: not every excess was allowed against peaceful demonstrators. Today's students have suffered a bloodbath that has left perplexed even the most seasoned of analysts.

In his memorable message of April 1968, Carlos Fonseca called the roll of the students killed in the previous decade of struggle: a total of 23.<sup>344</sup> That figure included those killed in the traumatic massacre of July 1959, whose sixtieth anniversary is commemorated this year. In the afternoon of July 23, 1959, a squad of the National Guard opened fire against demonstrating students in León, killing a woman, a girl, and four students. The journalists at the time spoke about “mass murder.” In the rebellion of April 2018 there were 18 killed on Mother's Day alone. The Nicaraguan Association for Human Rights has registered a total of 448 dead, most killed by paramilitary groups or the National Police. How can we describe these massacres? “Mass murder” is not an adequate label. Ortega was disturbed by the popular revolt but for reasons quite different from the concerns of the demonstrators. He was worried rather about the uprising's effect on macroeconomic indicators and so decided to apply repression, reasoning the way Napoleon did two centuries earlier: “If the people reject what is for their own happiness, then the people are guilty of anarchy and deserve to be punished.”<sup>345</sup>

We cannot overlook this sharp contrast between the past and the present. The simplest explanation is that Ortega is more criminal than Somoza was. Certainly, individuals impose their influence on history when they are able to

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<sup>344</sup> Fonseca, 1985: 129.

<sup>345</sup> Rudé, 1985: 328.

decide the course of key events. Nevertheless, the success of Luther's doctrine cannot be explained apart from Germany's nationalist opposition to Rome's pecuniary exactions, nor can the popularity of Hitler be explained apart from a deeply rooted, widespread anti-Semitism. The context within which individuals operate explains much. Contrasting the context of earlier times and that of the present may offer us some answers.

In the present-day context, the international organizations seemed strangely capable of exercising a restraining influence, even though their power of intervention is held in high esteem in this era of legal and judicial globalization. Their functionaries saw the corpses accumulating almost at their feet and yet failed to stop the series of massacres that were carried out. The speed with which the news spread abroad should also have favored a quick intervention of the international bodies, but it failed to do so. And the reason was not that Ortega, like Somoza before him, tried to diffuse a different version of the events. As if wanting to justify those who were shouting, "Ortega and Somoza are the same thing," Ortega had recourse to the same accusations as the three Somozas: "I am a victim of terrorism." Only the most asinine leftists can swallow that story. There was no intervention because the international organizations are still working with the same parsimony as they did in the pre-digital age, but the criminals are working with less restraint, greater speed, and fewer scruples. If we want clear evidence that we are not dealing just with isolated cases of lack of restraint and desire to keep the old order, we need only count the number of journalists and ecologists that have been murdered in our neighbor Honduras.

Those crimes, however, have been committed one by one, while in Nicaragua there was a succession of massacres. Why? The internal context can help us understand better the reasons for the excesses of Ortega and the restraint of the Somozas. I offer three explanations, without claiming that they are exhaustive. First, the FSLN is both party and church. The students who confronted the Somoza dictatorship were not dealing with a personality or a party that inspired intense veneration. Membership in the FSLN is a cult in which the worshipers sacrifice their capacity for judgment on a smoking altar. This is moral capital that the less scrupulous members of the FSLN have known how to exploit. The confessional character of the FSLN convinces the high priest and his priestess that they are infallible; it allows them to act as judges and to pass draconian sentences, as they have done already through the figureheads in the courts, who have condemned several of the students in the April insurgency to decades in prison. The Secretary General of the OAS, Luis Almagro, fell victim to this religious sorcery in the first weeks of the protests

and, worse still, during his visit to Nicaragua in December 2016; if at that time he had applied pressure to bring about electoral reform, perhaps he would have saved many lives. It was not the OAS that removed Roberto Rivas from the presidency of the Supreme Electoral Council; it was the Global Magnitsky Act.

Second, there is a fear of large numbers that we should not underestimate. Panic produces drastic reactions. In 1950 there were scarcely 494 students attending university; they were a very select group in a population of 160,658 young people between 18 and 25 years of age. Five years later that group had doubled in size: in 1955 there were 840 university students. Even so, they continued to be *rarae aves* among the 174,487 young people of similar age. Barely one out of every 200 youngsters between 18 and 25 years of age could study at a university.

In contrast, by 2014 there were 123,220 university students out of a total of 1,283,174 persons between 15 and 24 years of age<sup>346</sup> (the age range closest to the 18-to-25-year-old group in the current official statistics). University students are now numerous, making up nearly 10% of that age group. The struggle against Somoza required the support of many secondary-school students in order to reach significant numbers. In the April 2018 revolt, a very small percentage of university students, willing to risk their lives, was able to upend a country as small as Nicaragua.

The numerical relationship favored the students also with respect to the “forces of order.” In 1956, the year when Anastasio Somoza García was assassinated and three years before the July 1959 massacre, there were only 970 university students.<sup>347</sup> That same year the National Guard had 4,391 members, meaning that there were 4.5 guards for each student and 349 guards per 100,000 inhabitants.<sup>348</sup> Six decades later, there are 242 police officers per 100,000 inhabitants, according the annual report of the National Police for 2016.<sup>349</sup> If we include the number of soldiers in the army, then we have 454 soldiers-plus-police per 100,000 inhabitants, a combined coercive force greater than that available to the first two Somozas.<sup>350</sup> However, the proportion with respect the university students is the reverse: now there are 4.4 university

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<sup>346</sup> Duriez González, 2016: 10; National Institute of Information Development (INIDE), 2015: 32.

<sup>347</sup> Ramírez, 1997: 119.

<sup>348</sup> Walter, 2004: 342; Bulmer-Thomas, 2011: 476.

<sup>349</sup> National Police, 2017.

<sup>350</sup> The Ministry of Defense consists of some 14,059 persons, of whom 1,003 are civilians, leaving 13,056 soldiers. The estimated population of Nicaragua was 6,150,000. Ministry of Finance, 2016: 159.

students for each soldier/police officer. It is this demographic reality and the much greater size of the student population compared to the coercive forces that has produced panic in the Ortega government.

Third, the social networks act as magnifiers and intensifiers of events, relationships, alliances, and conflicts. Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and the thousands of blogs are far more rapid, massive, and economical than the mimeographed flyers and booklets produced by the university students confronting Somoza. The digital images and words are indestructible and reach a far wider public. They are also more difficult to repress than the speeches of leaders standing on soapboxes in the public square. Today's students can—and in fact do—continue to use the older means of communication, but they are no longer limited to them because the social networks allow young people to overcome the limitations of space and time. Flyers can be confiscated and burned, and mimeo machines can be demolished, but WhatsApp accounts cannot be destroyed by the government. The messages sent on social media have already crossed cities, countries, and continents before reaching the shadowy offices of state security.

The power of the new media for convoking people could be appreciated in the multitudinous demonstrations that the presidential couple saw from their bunker in El Carmen. The fact that the vice-president referred to the self-convoked masses as miniscule, tiny, sparse, dregs, and “small souls” is evidence of the panic she felt at their size.<sup>351</sup> The word “miniscule” appears in five of the first nine paragraphs of her speech on April 19<sup>th</sup>.<sup>352</sup> The social media's amplification of the rebellious outbreaks provoked the terror of the powerful, who feared being crushed by a throng whose dimensions were readily measurable in the streets. The murderous reaction of the mighty was proportional to the panic they felt. They called terrorist everything that provoked in them terror.

The university students of today, though greater in number, face great demands than those of yesteryear. History has laden them with more than 400 dead. They confront a dictatorship that has proven to be more bloodthirsty than they imagined and that is now seeking to identify them, pursue them, and punish them. At this time the students must respond to an ordeal that will test their commitment and their creativity. They have already proved that they have courage. They have proved that they can combine resources ingeniously

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<sup>351</sup> Álvarez, 17 August 2018; Chávez, 13 August 2018; El 19 digital, 27 August 2019.

<sup>352</sup> Murillo, 19 April 2018.

and use opportunities wisely. Tarrow argued that social movements form when ordinary citizens, sometimes encouraged by leaders, respond to changing opportunities that reduce the costs of collective action; they discover potential allies and learn where the elites and the authorities are vulnerable.<sup>353</sup> The young people, some of whom came from the feminist movement, achieved what the feminist movement and campesino movement did not achieve, and their success was due to political opportunities, good networking, alliance with COSEP, moderate use of violence (barricades, occupation of universities, energy, daring), and overcoming of fear. This approach enabled them to transform rage and compassion into indignation and hope and to inspire actions that broke with the established order, defied authority, and showed its inherent weaknesses.

The social networks will continue to be the students' instrument, one that their predecessors lacked. And though nothing is technologically determined, the social networks expand the horizon of possibilities. While we know that they can magnify events, we need to investigate also whether they can accelerate processes. In the course of the rebellion, from April to October, the social media favored speed, diminished some risks (while adding others), expanded international reach, and cheapened communications while increasing people's involvement in communications activity. The social media also fostered democratization because they helped many sectors take part in the uprising, they provided some feedback, they wrested exclusive control of the production of "thought" from the cultural elites, and they established a type of horizontal communication that broke with the unidirectional schema of a vanguard that "lays down lines" for the bases. Such an instrument was essential for the struggle; it functioned very much according to the theses of Manuel Castells.

Democratization did not result only from what we might call technological determinism; it was something actively sought. It could not crystalize in the form of representation through electoral means because conditions made that form of legitimizing leadership unviable. Still, a certain democratizing will was operative in the struggle (or was at least on the horizon as an ideal) because the university organizing sought to be performative: it aimed to achieve what it proclaimed. Organization was not postulated simply as a useful instrument for designing, coordinating, and executing of strategies. At least one of the organizations sought to give its program immediate expression in everyday activity. Other organizations expressed their democratizing will by

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<sup>353</sup> Tarrow, 1997: 49.

maintaining contact with the many initiatives of the rebels and by speaking of “spokespersons” rather than “leaders.” Such decisions were not made for demagogical reasons, with the hope of winning applause. In fact, they often became the targets of sustained “friendly fire” from supporters of the University Coalition who were voicing the views of earlier generations.

Another aspect of democratization derived from the essentially collective nature of the great protagonist of the April rebellion: a social movement. The “bases” had great autonomy and could display creativity. This was especially evident in Carazo and Matagalpa, but certainly not only there. Any attempt to create a pyramidal structure would have collided with the diversity of initiatives and the many instances of local leadership. As we noted earlier, Saul Alinsky thought that “describing any procedure as ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ is the sign of a political illiterate.”<sup>354</sup> We saw that dispensing with the old-style leadership—vertical and vanguardist—can be a strategy to reduce vulnerability. We saw also that such lack of leadership, which at first sight might appear to be an abandonment of strategy, is itself a strategy. The lack of a highly structured organization is closely related to the power of crowds, the creativity of the people, and the possibility of landing blows and staging events at many places at the same time or sequentially.

However, the wheat and the weeds are all mixed together. What the self-convoked achieved was a certain level of horizontality. People could call themselves a group, blockaders, or even leaders. The price was chaos, divided initiatives, and infiltrations. We could cite the old accusation that Marxist historian Eric J. Hobsbawm made against Spanish anarchism: “Anarchism flourished so well because it did nothing more than provide a simple label to the customary political habits of Spanish rebels.” Applied to the April rebellion, this accusation would mean that the university students had once again taken up the traditional habits of insurrection. But Hobsbawm immediately nuances his view: “Political movements, all the same, are not obliged to accept the historical characteristics of their environment, though they will be ineffective if they fail to take them into account. Anarchism was a disaster because it did not attempt to change the primitive style of Spanish rebellion but deliberately reinforced it.”<sup>355</sup> The students probably took up much of the old tradition while introducing new elements, such as the use of communicational technology. They also introduced ideological arguments against the old forms of authoritarian leadership, a discourse that unmistakably echoes the anarchism of Bakunin.

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<sup>354</sup> Alinsky, 2012: 54.

<sup>355</sup> Hobsbawm, 1978: 112-113.

But while there is not necessarily a direct connection between Bakunin and the university students of today's Nicaragua, there is a connection between these students and Nicaragua's tradition of revolts. If the students had completely neglected that tradition, their rebellion would most likely have lacked impetus; that is, it would have been unable to convoke the masses and to terrify the regime.

In this aspect of democratization as in others, some of the differences between today's university organizations and those of times past are due to the fact that the latter were university affiliates or offshoots of large political organizations. In contrast, today's university organizations were born when the drums throbbed and the marimbas sounded, that is, during the struggle itself. They are at once the fruit and the sowers of a social movement. Even so, the social movement was only one of the three democratizing factors: technological determinism, the proactive impulse, and the character of the social movement.

It appears to me rash to predict the future of the five youth organizations, but we can offer some conjectures. Should they follow the pattern of their immediate predecessors, their existence will be ephemeral, and they will eventually dissolve. It is also possible that they will be transformed into other organizations through fusions and purgings. In both cases, some of their leaders may reappear as leaders or operatives of the traditional political parties or of new coalitions that will rise on the foundations of the April struggles. What are Lester Alemán, Valeska Valle, Harley Morales, Madelaine Caracas, and so many others? They are promises. And they are also mysteries. But they have an undeniable present: they are proof that a new form of doing politics was put into practice. This can be shown by comparing the functioning of their organizations with that of the organizations of earlier decades.

To make such a comparison easier, the table below gives a synthetic view of some of the differences between the university organizations of the past and those of today, as these differences were reflected in the conclusions of this work or are found dispersed in its pages.

A Comparison of Some Characteristics of Rebel University Organizations and their Context.<sup>356</sup>

<b>Categories</b>	<b>University students of the '50s, '60s, and '70s</b>	<b>Millennial university students</b>
Number of university students	840 (1955)	123,220 (2014)
Proportion of university students to population of university age	0.5%	10%
University Autonomy	Recent conquest	Nominal, nil in practice
Legal organization of students in higher education	University Center of the National University (CUUN)	National Union of Students of Nicaragua (UNEN)
Naming of leadership	Democratic	Centralized
University organizations	Single pattern: organic, formally constituted (FER, FDC)	Diverse: debate groups, radio programs
Sponsors	FSLN, Social Christian Party	None, sometimes NGOs, professors
Cohesion	Ideological (closed, solid)	Networks of friends (open, liquid)
Birth	Programmatic	Through events
Organization	A means	A means and an end (for the Coordinating Committee)

<sup>356</sup> Other organizations have existed. The comparisons made here are between the organizations that opposed the Somoza dynasty and those that arose to challenge the regime of Daniel Ortega, which began in 2007.

Categories	University students of the '50s, '60s, and '70s	Millennial university students
Persistence, duration (solidity, liquidity)	Long term, decades: FER, FDC	Intermittent, weeks or months, <sup>357</sup> <i>ad hoc</i> : Movimiento Puente (2008, ten years), Plataforma de Incidencia Estudiantil (PIE), Nicaragua 2.0, Movimiento No, Prendo, #OcupaInss, #SOSIndioMaíz, Paro, Junta frente a la problemática nacional, Pueblo autoconvocado, the five organizations of the Coalition.
Representation	Elections or by designation of the organization's leaders	By deeds, by events, by participation "in the heat of combat"
Decision-making	Centralized	Dispersed (two, three simultaneous actions)
They hit the streets whenever....	... they are summoned by their leaders.	... they convoke themselves.
Ideology	Marxist-Leninist, social democratic	Feminism, ecologism,

<sup>357</sup> More than four decades ago Hobsbawm had concluded that student movements "are by nature impermanent and discontinuous. Youth and student status are the preludes of adulthood and the need to earn a living: they are not in themselves a career. ... Consequently, political movements of young people or students cannot be compared with movements whose members can belong to them all their lives, such as working-class movements, most of whose members continue to be workers until their retirement; or the movements of women and blacks, whose members belong to their respective categories from birth until death." Hobsbawm, 1978: 369. However, in the cases cited here, the life cycle of each group is much shorter than the period of youth of its members. The groups' ephemeral character contrasts with the youth gangs, some of which have existed more than two decades, thus exceeding the period of youthful life of several generations.

Categories	University students of the '50s, '60s, and '70s	Millennial university students
Mission, Objectives	In the Revolutionary Student Front (FER): Liberation and justice	Mission of Movimiento Puente: Contribute to the transformation of political culture in Nicaragua through the formation of a generation of young people committed to integral development of the country. "In PUENTE we want to promote and strengthen youth leadership in order to generate process of change in the political culture of Nicaragua. At the same time, we develop initiatives oriented to strengthening freedom of expression and respect for the diversity of ideas." <sup>358</sup> In the University Coalition and the Civic Alliance: Justice and democracy
Means for winning members	"Raising Consciousness"	"Increasing Sensitivity"
Leitmotiv	Revolution, social transformation, preferential option for the poor, internationalism, solidarity	Culture, diversity, multiculturalism
How the relation between tactical actions and strategic objectives is decided	Mechanical instrumentalization, rational cost-benefit calculation	Staged blows, theatrical politics
Way to and relation with power	Armed conflict, seizure of power	Peaceful protest, promoting elections

<sup>358</sup> Movimiento Puente, [https://es-la.facebook.com/pg/movpuente/about/?ref=page\\_internal](https://es-la.facebook.com/pg/movpuente/about/?ref=page_internal).

<b>Categories</b>	<b>University students of the '50s, '60s, and '70s</b>	<b>Millennial university students</b>
Financing	Robberies, funds of the (CUUN)	Donations from individuals and institutions
Relations with the Catholic Church	Ideological inspiration (social doctrine), distance from the hierarchy	Institutional support, cooperation with the hierarchy
Relations with the business sector	Conflictive, <sup>359</sup> family ties	Convergent tendency, different social stratum
Technology	Mimeograph	Internet
Communication, mass appeal	On site oratory, flyers, marches	Social network, marches
Pace	Slow	Accelerated
Ideological production	Elitist: vanguard, intellectuals (Ventana, El Estudiante)	Democratic: many contributors (memes, video, analyses, opinions, ...)
Financial and physical costs of production and dissemination of ideas	High and risky, so that there was limited involvement	Low and relatively less risky, so that there was massive involvement
Structure of interactions between leaders and bases	Arborescent structure, pyramidal tendency	Rhizomatic structure, <sup>360</sup> tendency to horizontality (encompassing the multiplicities)

<sup>359</sup> A key aspect at the theoretical level was the confrontation with big capital, an essential element of the Marxism-Leninism that members of the FER studied and professed. At the level of practice, many different businesses were assaulted by members of the FSLN, some of whom were also members of the FER; this was a regular manner of obtaining financial resources. Among their victims were the Bank of London, the dairy business La Perfecta, and the Banco Nacional. Medina, 2018: 39, 45, and 51.

<sup>360</sup> Castells, 2015: 150. On the rhizomatic as opposed to the arborescent structure, Deleuze and Guattari write: "Principles of connection and heterogeneity: any point of the rhizome can be connected with any other, and it should be. This does not happen in a tree or a root, which always fix a point, an order. A Chomsky-style linguistic tree begins at a point S and proceeds by dichotomy. In a rhizome, by contrast, features do not necessarily refer back to any linguistic feature: semiotic links of any kind are connected with very diverse forms of codification, with biological links, political links, economic links, etc." Deleuze y Guattari, 2002: 13.

Categories	University students of the '50s, '60s, and '70s	Millennial university students
Trajectory of the messages	Unidirectional, little exposure to feedback	Multiple interactions, much exposure to feedback
Number killed in the movement	23 in ten years (1958-68)	More than 400 in six months
Proportion of university students/ coercive forces	4.5 guards for each student	4.4 students for each soldier/police

While it was receiving assistance from the government of Venezuela, the FSLN governed Nicaragua with relatively few disturbances. The financial fuel provided by the Chavistas was the cornerstone of business support for the government because it freed business from burdensome taxation and maintained the macroeconomic stability that paved the way for an influx of external investment. The dramatic decrease in that aid created objective conditions that allowed for the burgeoning of latent or repressed discontent. Social outbursts occur in a setting of economic depression, unemployment, and shortage of basic staples.<sup>361</sup> Even so, the outbursts in April caused great surprise, and that surprise offers us clues about what was novel in this uprising, namely: the moment, the subject, and the resources. The university students were able to make good use of the conditions causing discontent. No sooner had they managed to forge a multi-class alliance than the repression—which *was* class-based—stirred up a wave of empathic imagination and solidarity in favor of the “kids” who were being massacred.

Nicaragua has clearly entered into a “cycle of protest,” and it is one of those cycles of conflict and realignment that, once begun, has the virtue of reducing the cost of collective actions.<sup>362</sup> “The new movements that arise in such contexts do not depend so much on internal resources as they do on the generic

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<sup>361</sup> Rudé, 1979: 226.

<sup>362</sup> This reduction of costs refers to the fact that every revolt that happens, once the cycle is initiated, benefits from human capital that is already trained and that knows how to organize itself, how to keep the rebels supplied, how to convoke marches, how to form and maintain networks, etc.

opportunities characteristic of cycles of protest.”<sup>363</sup> The Charter movement in England had various peak moments and then long periods of lethargy. The first outbreak occurred in 1837, and it revived with vigor in 1839 and 1842; then, after apparent extinction, it flared up again in 1848, stimulated by economic depression and revolutionary events in France.<sup>364</sup> Central America at the present time has diverse social movements that exercise a sort of mutually multiplying effect, as in the interplay of mirrors where some reflect and kindle others: the April movement in Nicaragua, the movement against the “*pacto de corruptos*” in Guatemala, and the social movement that creates caravans of Honduran and Salvadoran migrants.

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<sup>363</sup> Tarrow, 1997: 27.

<sup>364</sup> Rudé, 1979: 187.



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## AFTERWORD

A Note by *Javier Nart*,  
*Catalán Writer, Journalist and Member, European Parliament*

I have profound admiration for the Nicaraguan people. My admiration is a consequence of the experience I had in that now long distant month of June 1979, when I joined with the Sandinista *compas* (or *chavalos*, as you say) in the Benjamín Zeledón Southern Front during the war of liberation against the Somoza dictatorship. And when I speak of the immense dignity, the immense courage, and the great bravery of the Nicaraguan people, I do so not simply to be nice or to be gracious with my words; I do so because that was the reality I witnessed.

I was born too many years ago in Spain, and for that reason I had the bitter experience of living under the Franco dictatorship. In the remote year 1965 I began my studies in the Law Faculty of the University of Barcelona. In the Spain of that time, people lived (barely) in a freedom-killing situation of repression and persecution at the hands of the dreaded Sociopolitical Brigade. Spending time in the dungeons of that Brigade on the Via Laetana in Barcelona was more than a possibility for those of us who believed in and fought for liberty. But all that was nothing in comparison with what Nicaragua signified, yesterday with the Somozas and now—I say it with the greatest regret—with the similar repression that sullies that most worthy red-and-black flag, which has

been the banner of the struggle for national dignity and of respect for the rights of the person in a free nation, in a democratic society. All that has disappeared in today's Nicaragua, ruled by a president who still claims to be a Sandinista but has betrayed his companions and their cause.

So when I was 18 years old, in the year 1965, I took part in the creation of the Democratic Students Union at the University of Barcelona. It was a subversive act since the only official and obligatory organization was the pro-Franco Spanish University Union. My joining the DSU meant for me a police record with the Sociopolitical Brigade and an order of expulsion from the university. But all that is nothing compared to what it means in Nicaragua to be under a hail of bullets, submitted to the most brutal repression, detained in inhumane prisons, and even torture and death—the present reality of Nicaraguan students.

When I read José Luis Rocha's book I experienced once again the same profound admiration for the courage of the youth of Nicaragua, those young men and women who, with no other motive than their noble spirit of rebellion in the face of injustice, decided in that month of April 2018 to go out into the streets to demand, invoke, and defend the people's freedom and dignity. And they did so with the disorganized organization that bit by bit was dialectically structured by the groups that spontaneously arose in the different universities of Nicaragua. They were young people who, besides making demands, were risking their lives. And many of them perished.

The author documents the protagonism of those valiant young people, a protagonism that greatly resembles that of the anti-Somoza struggle which I personally joined. He seeks to answer important questions about the origins of the rebellion and its immediate antecedents, and he shows how that the heroic struggle resulted from important cultural changes. These are all fundamental topics for understanding what is happening in Nicaragua, and Rocha's treatment of them is one of the great merits of this book.

Some say that the rebellion arose from the scandal of the forest fire in the Indio-Maíz Biological Reserve, or from the repression

at the Camino de Oriente commercial center, or from the police beating of the old people in León. I say no. I say that it was the people waking up to the reality that Nicaragua cannot continue under the yoke of the Murillo-Ortega matrimonial oligarchy. It was people saying that in order to live they have to breathe fresh air, a fresh air called freedom.

In the book Rocha refers to the indignation of the young people as “fuel that had long been awaiting a spark,” and he quotes the youth Alfredo Ocampo of Matagalpa: “The indignation has been longstanding, but for me it was especially decisive when they began to attack the old folks again in León and Managua. That was the last straw for me, and it was what most aroused me. The other thing was when they killed the first students at the UPOLI.”

The darkness of night still covers Nicaragua. A corrupt oligarchy, in the name of a betrayed revolution, defends material interests: the business of power and money. However, a people who continues to resist, a people who neither knows how nor wants to surrender in the face of repression, is an invincible people for it is impossible to maintain power against the people or without the people.

It is the reality, not my willpower, that makes me an optimist. There will soon be an end to this nightmare in which the fundamental principles of freedom and dignity have been betrayed by the corrupt oligarchy of Ortega and Murillo. Their days are numbered in the homeland of Sandino, “General of free men and women.” Both of them will end up in the waste bin of Nicaragua’s history.

In Nicaragua, my Nicaragua.



**A Note by *Marc Zimmerman*,**  
Director, LACASA Chicago Books

As Director of LACASA Chicago, I wish to express my pride and humility that we herewith present this important book by José Luis Rocha. As an academic and activist, I have for many years been involved with, and written and edited several books about, Central American concerns; under my directorship, LACASA Chicago has extended that commitment with a modest series of books and CDs on Central American themes, even as we have lacked the financial resources and energies to do more. Certainly, the situations in Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala and the refugee crisis of the past several months has been a major preoccupation; but no less so has been the unfolding crisis in Nicaragua, where large sectors, and of course the students in many parts of the country have been stirred to the breaking point by the abuses of a government that supposedly represents a revolutionary tradition which many of us have defended for years.

Here then, the humility I mention above takes a nasty turn, for how is it that the abuses of today are those of the same party that fought against similar abuses some forty years ago? How is it that the Sandinista tradition so evolved into the monster that it has become? How is it that Daniel Ortega who suffered in the Modelo prison now sends protestors to the same prison to rot? How is it that he who fought against a horrendous dictatorship has now come to mirror that dictatorship in his own government?

How is it that this supposed figure of the left has come to betray almost every tenant of democratic socialism? What are the inner sources of Nicaragua's repetition syndrome where power corrupts those who have sought to fight corruption?

In Ortega's case, there is also the wife who, no Gioconda Belli, has accrued power through her husband's status and her own manipulations, whose love of designer glasses placed her on the same level as Imelda Marcos and her shoes. Surely, she is one of the great Third World Lady Macbeths. She rose to power in the cultural sphere by running roughshod over the cultural sector and ousting the country's revered poet-priest in the process; she then won political power as her price for supporting Daniel and seeking to discredit her daughter's credible claim that she had been a victim of her stepfather's sexual assault.

There seems to be a socio-psychological pattern mixing sex and power that helps explain part of what has happened: As Somoza victimized Daniel and Nicaragua, so he came to victimize his wife's child and now, the whole country. As mother betrayed her daughter, now she betrays everyone who seeks to oppose her and her beloved husband.

There are or course deeper, structural reasons for the Sandinista failure, as there are for countless left failures throughout Latin America. There are questions of a colonial heritage involving deep structures of racism, sexism, and machismo which seem untouched or perhaps even stirred up as power accrues. Early abuses of power, early shows of corruption grew into a general pattern; every effort to maintain the revolution involved compromises and yes crooked deals that buried the revolution day by day. The racism, eurocentrism, ladino-centrism, classism and sexism that undermined so much of what the Sandinistas sought to accomplish were as much the reasons for their failure as any amount of U.S. intervention, as their modernization models and projects clashed with the traditions and values of peasants and other groups in whose name the revolution was supposedly fought.

All of us old-timers who tried to win support for the revolution among countless students and readers—what do we feel

now in the face of the Ortegas? What did our analytic models lack? Did we mislead our students? What theories are fully adequate to explain what has happened?

Now, a new generation and whole social sectors are trying to continue the struggle for justice and equality. Rocha chronicles and analyzes the student movements as a key dimension of the renewed struggle, as he seeks to find at the least the seeds for a more viable future for the long-suffering people of Nicaragua. As Elena Poniatowska and others point out, he tells his story with great depth and perception. He paints a grim picture of the abuse of power, but he goes to great lengths to point to the possibilities he sees shining through the students' actions and values. We can only admire the results of his work and join him in hoping for the best, even as we fear the worse, for the social processes unleashed in the recent and current struggles in the land of Sandino.



## About the Author

**José Luis Rocha** is Senior Researcher at the Universidad Rafael Landívar in Guatemala and Universidad Centroamericana “José Simeón Cañas” in El Salvador, and associate Researcher with the Brooks World Poverty Institute at the University of Manchester. He holds a PhD in Sociology from the Philipps-Universität Marburg, Germany. His work focuses on issues relating to youth gangs, social movements, political analysis, and migration. He is a member of the editorial committee of the academic journal *Anuario de Estudios Centroamericanos* (Costa Rica) and the magazine *Envío*. His last publications include the books *Autoconvocados y conectados. Los universitarios en la revuelta de abril en Nicaragua* (UCA publicaciones y UCA editores, 2019), *El debate sobre la justicia maya. Encuentros y desencuentros del pluralismo jurídico en la Guatemala del siglo XXI* (EDUSAC, 2019), *La desobediencia de las masas. La migración no autorizada de centroamericanos a Estados Unidos como desobediencia civil* (UCA Editores, 2018), and *Expulsados de la globalización* (IHNCA, 2011).

