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Meiselas: Nicaragua June 1978- July 1979

Susan Meiselas. *Nicaragua* June 1978–July 1979. Edited with Claire Rosenberg. New York: Pantheon, 1981. 31 pp., 71 ills. \$22.95 (cloth), \$11.95 (paper).

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Contemporary consciousness is characterized by historical amnesia. Not only do we know little about history, but too often we view what little we know in terms of either nostalgia—celebration of the past—or progress—celebration of the present. However, the recognition of historical amnesia has stimulated some to begin the necessary task of reconstruction of historical consciousness, which John Berger has defined as “the experience of seeking to give meaning to our lives, of trying to understand the history of which we can become the active agents” (Berger 1972:33).

The effort to reconstruct historical consciousness requires more than merely the provision of *more* historical knowledge; it also requires a re-examination of the way(s) in which historical knowledge itself is constructed and presented. Such an effort, then, cannot be the burden of the historian alone, for the consequences of historical amnesia are not merely academic: “A people or class which is cut off from its own past is far less free to choose and to act as a people or class than one that has been able to situate itself in history” (*ibid.*).

The reexamination of the way historical knowledge is constructed and presented has, among other things, generated further interest in the study of oral cultures, given rise to the literary analysis of historical texts, and raised the question of perspective in historical studies, i.e., from whose perspective is the history written? Offering much to such a reexamination and the consideration of such problems and issues are the writings of Walter Benjamin. Most helpful perhaps are his essays “The Storyteller” (1969a), in which he argues that the practice of storytelling has been displaced, both by the novel and perhaps more significantly, in terms of narrative as a form, by the newspaper and *information*; and “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1969b), in which he wrote: “Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy [the ruling class] if he wins. And the enemy has not ceased to be victorious.”

Very much informed by Benjamin’s writings is John Berger, who has for many years been concerned with and worked on the problem of historical consciousness. Most recently his work, alone and with the photographer Jean Mohr, has focused on the relationship among history, experience, memory, and storytelling in literature and photography. Specifically, with regard to visual communications, Berger has been anxious to contribute to the development of an alternative photography that does not merely reproduce the contemporary social order but rather, by contributing to the reconstruction of historical consciousness, opposes it (Berger 1980a and b).

By *alternative* photography, Berger is not referring to “photographs . . . used as a radical weapon in posters, newspapers, pamphlets, and so on” (of which he does, however, acknowledge the value), nor does he mean simply “aiming [the camera] at different targets.” Rather, he says, photography needs to change “its practice,” but “how?” He explains what he means by indicating the distinction between the private use of photography—“the context of the instant recorded is preserved so that the photograph lives in an ongoing continuity”—and the public use in which “torn from its context, [the photograph] becomes a dead object which, exactly because it is dead, lends itself to any arbitrary use” (Berger 1980a:56). And he argues that “the task of an alternative photography is to incorporate photography into social and political memory, instead of using it as a substitute which encourages the atrophy of any such memory.” The first principle of such a practice is that “the photographer . . . think of her or himself not so much as a reporter to the rest of the world but, rather, as a recorder for those involved in the events photographed.” In essence, what Berger goes on to urge is that the photographer understand herself or himself as a storyteller contributing to memory and historical consciousness (*ibid.*: 58–63).

I have discussed the issue of historical consciousness and noted the arguments of Walter Benjamin and John Berger as part of this short essay on Meiselas’s *Nicaragua* not merely in order to indicate the concerns which inform the review but, more importantly, because this work of Meiselas is the best contemporary example I have seen of the alternative photography Berger is calling for. On this point, it should be known that when I first read *Nicaragua* I was not very enthusiastic. Yet, upon closer examination of the work and of my own reading of it, I realized that it was not merely a photo-history, reporting on the Nicaraguan Revolution to me, a North American student of Latin America, but rather a visual record and narrative (story) of the revolution for those who fought it. Thus, we can understand Meiselas’s epigraph: “NICARAGUA/A year of news,/as if nothing had hap-

pened before,/as if the roots were not there,/and the victory not earned./This book was made so that we remember."

The struggle that culminated in the battles of 1978–1979 began more than 50 years ago. From 1912 to 1933 Nicaragua was virtually a protectorate of the United States. Except for a brief period in the 1920s, U.S. Marines occupied the country and U.S. financial agents directed Nicaragua's revenue system, national bank, and railways. This direct involvement by the U.S. government in Nicaragua was for the purpose of maintaining the country's political and economic stability and thereby protecting U.S. interests (which at the time included the real possibility of constructing a second trans-isthmus canal). It was during this 20-year period that the Nicaraguan economy was tied to that of the United States in a relationship that social scientists have termed "dependency." Also, in the late twenties, in order to prevent the possibility of a socialist or even Mexican-style revolution, the U.S. reorganized the Nicaraguan military into a National Guard to police the country. In 1934, this National Guard murdered the popular and progressive rebel leader Augusto Cesar Sandino. Not long after, the chief of the Guard, General Anastasio Somoza Garcia, became dictator (and sometime president) of the country. The regime he established was inherited by his sons. The Somoza dynasty ruled Nicaragua until the 1978–1979 revolution, which was led by a political and military force calling itself the Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional (FSLN)—the Sandinistas, in memory of the slain rebel leader.

In their 45-year rule of Nicaragua, the Somoza family put together a business empire worth almost \$500 million, the activities of which effectively controlled 60 percent of the nation's economy and included approximately 25 percent of the country's arable land (Harris 1981:4). At the same time, 50 percent of the population had an average annual income of \$90, unemployment was officially at 22 percent but affected 60 percent of the population, illiteracy was 50 percent nationwide (80 percent in many rural areas), and housing and health conditions were horrible. According to Meiselas, whose figures are derived from U.S. and U.N. agencies' statistics, "Of every 1,000 children born, 102 died. Of every 10 deaths, 6 were of infectious diseases, which are curable."

The Sandinista forces were recruited from among the peasants, the urban working class, and the semi-proletariat characteristic of Latin American cities. Also, there were middle-class students and intellectuals who joined to fight the Somoza regime. And, in the final stages of the armed struggle, the anti-Somoza forces consisted of a broad coalition of

classes and social groups, including elements of the upper class and Catholic Church (Jung 1979). Thus, the overthrow of the Somoza regime was truly a *popular* revolution.

Nicaragua is a work of 71 color photographs, followed by 31 pages of text, including a map of the country, titles for the photos, personal statements, prose and poetry by those who made and experienced the revolution, and a chronology of Nicaragua's history.

The photographs are presented in the form of a narrative of the revolution. Rather than breaking up the flow of the narrative into chapters, Meiselas (with her co-editor, Claire Rosenberg) indicates the temporality of what is to follow on a prefatory page (along with her note on the importance of remembering) dividing the photos into three sections: June 1978—The Somoza Regime; September 1978—Insurrection; and June–July 1979—The Final Offensive.

From the outset of the narrative, Meiselas records the experience of the Nicaraguan people. The photographs not only communicate the immediate experience but also incorporate and indicate the history that is present in that experience. Thus, the first photograph is of a traditional Indian dance mask which the rebels wore during the fight against Somoza in order to conceal their identities. Two photos later (the numbers in brackets indicate the number of the photograph in the book) we see a woman washing clothes in an open sewer-creek in downtown Managua [3]. The partially demolished buildings in the background recall the devastation of the 1972 earthquake and the corruption of the Somoza regime, which treated the international aid given to Nicaragua as a source of quick profits. There follows a photo of a farmworker harvesting sugar cane with a machete, his arm raised to slash—reminding one of a painting by Millet, and in the background stands one of Nicaragua's many volcanoes [4]. (According to historical legend, a Nicaraguan postage stamp, showing picturesque volcanoes, scared off the U.S. government from constructing a second Central American canal there.)

The next picture is of a laborer carrying a sack of coffee or grain up a gangplank to a ship destined for North America, or elsewhere [5]. Still another photo shows a young woman in a maid's uniform tending to two young children at a Managua country club [6]. Inequality in Latin America has been depicted visually in many ways (often such a photo, shot from a distance, shows us the shacks of the poor, sometimes standing next to a new "modern," luxury apartment building). But Meiselas is not merely indicating inequality and the labors of the poor. Rather, she is recording the lived experience of the people. Her pictures are close and at eye level. The people are the subject and the other elements in the photos support

the telling of their story. The narrative form is important, for individually the photos might be read quite differently (for example, the photo at the country club might have been taken by a relative of the children—except the maid's expression would have been different, perhaps, on the insistence of the photographer).

Thus, the photographs introduce the people of Nicaragua in relation to their past and present. However, the social and power structures are not yet complete. The pictures that immediately follow present the Somoza regime and its National Guard. One of the photos is a "graduation" picture at the Guard's elite infantry school [8]. The graduates are holding cans of Schlitz beer, reminding us both of the dependent relationship of Somoza's Nicaragua upon the United States and that the U.S. Marines originally organized the Guard.

The pictures of the Guard [8, 9, 11, 12] are defined by a photo [10] of a group of children standing before a bonfire and harassing guardsmen (who stand outside the picture). The terror and the tragedy of the Somoza regime are presented in a picture of a dismembered body on a hillside outside Managua [14]. The place, we are told in the text, was known as a site where the Guard assassinated those it viewed as a threat. The very next photo is of a wall on which is spray-painted the words, "Where is Norman Gonzalez? The dictatorship must answer" [15]. Such photos are not easily forgotten.

The 15 photos of the September insurrection show a people at war [23–37], "Events force us now to admit the courage of a people or a class; not the courage of a people as represented by their professional armies, but made manifest in the actions of the entire population, men and women, young and old" (Berger 1969:131). In Matagalpa, where many of Meiselas's photos were taken, the rebellion began spontaneously and encouraged similar uprisings elsewhere. The spontaneity of the insurrection and its rapid spread caught even the Sandinista forces by surprise. The photos Meiselas provides of the fighting shows "los muchachos" (youths) in baseball hats, faces covered with bandanas, armed with handguns and rifles, stationed by low piles of sandbags or moving through the streets. Other people stand in doorways observing. Los muchachos have control of the town but they are awaiting the Guard's counterattack. In the photos that follow the Guard is counterattacking with aerial bombardment and tanks. Buildings are destroyed; many are dead: "The strategy of total war recognizes that it is necessary to try to break the courage and resistance of a whole people" (ibid.). Looking through these photographs I recalled the novel *Reasons of State* by Alejo Carpentier (1977), which details the career of a Latin American dictator (such as Somoza). At one point, a long-time European acquaintance of the dictator makes excuses for being unable to have

dinner with him on his return to Paris after brutally suppressing a rebellion back home; then finally, regarding a report in the newspaper, he says, "I know there's a lot of exaggeration in it all. . . . They do extraordinary things nowadays in the way of trick photography . . . of course it's all false" (p. 85).

The defeat of the September insurrection did not diminish the struggle. The ranks of the Sandinista forces grew even faster, enabling them to expand the guerrilla war and prepare for the final offensive which came the following summer (Jung 1979:84–89). Meiselas's visual narrative shifts to the hills briefly [38, 39, 40], showing young men and women living and preparing to return to fight for the towns, and in the photographs that follow [41–46] she records the intensifying repression: schoolbuses are stopped and the children and young people are frisked by soldiers [42]; pregnant women are questioned at gunpoint by paramilitary squads [44].

The photos of the final offensive [47–64] and victory [65–71] are also well done and the experience well communicated. The photographs remain close to the experience, from behind the barricades to the liberation of town and city. In fact, even at those moments when you expect to view what is happening from a rooftop—for example, when the victory is being celebrated in the central plaza of Managua [68–69]—Meiselas continues to record the experience as it is being lived, that is, we see the celebration at eye level.

The struggle and victory over the Somoza regime "left 40,000 dead (1.5 percent of the population); 40,000 children orphaned; 200,000 families homeless . . ." (Meiselas). Somoza fled with his family to Miami, but a year-and-a-half later he was killed in Paraguay, which is still after 30 years under the rule of the Stroessner dictatorship.

Reading Meiselas's *Nicaragua* I was reminded of another book of photographs which I acquired about 12 years ago. It is a collection of pictures from the Mexican Revolution, 1910–1917 (Arenas Guzman 1969). There is a variety of photos in the two works that parallel, if not almost replicate, each other: the dictators taking part in ceremonies; the people in the streets carrying banners; cannons/tanks in the streets and the destruction wrought; young women rebels carrying rifles alongside the young men; a body being burned in the street to avoid epidemics; and so on. And there is a series of photos in the Mexican collection that does not appear in the Nicaraguan book, and hopefully will never need to be added: that is, photos of U.S. troops landing in and occupying Vera Cruz (a happening that Nicaraguans have already experienced this century).

In addition to its historic parallels to the Mexican Revolution, Meiselas's work, however much it is the telling of the Nicaraguan experience, draws our attention to the contemporary struggles elsewhere in Central America, specifically in El Salvador and Guatemala.

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Sarah Graham-Brown. *Palestinians and Their Society*. Boston: Quartet Books, 1981. \$25.00.

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Quoting out of context is essential to the photographer's craft, says Szarkowski; a photograph's sense can be modified by the context in which it is published, says Barthes. Sarah Graham-Brown's photographic essay is an interesting example of a reconstructed context. Arab Palestinian inhabitants were often photographed since the late nineteenth century, posing for biblical allegories produced for the Christian foreign-and-pilgrim market. Graham-Brown analyzes some examples of such genre photographs to demonstrate the distortions of contemporary life they display. She suggests a new documentary reading of these and of other photographs to illustrate Arab social and economic realities in British Mandatory Palestine before 1948. Colonized societies were

all too often misrepresented in photography. They have been, and sometimes still are, both subjects and objects of a colonialist photographic discourse. The need for analysis is urgent. I therefore welcome Graham-Brown's effort and attempt, although her work is uneven.

The explication of life and society in Palestine through the careful reading of photographs from various sources is not a new endeavor. Professor Gustaf Dalman, head of the German Evangelical Institut, accompanied his monumental seven-volume work *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina (Work and Custom in Palestine)* by more than 500 photographs, quite a few of which are identical to those used by Graham-Brown. His work proves that biblical-scholarly reading of photographs—if scholarly it is—is not necessarily contradictory to the search for ethnographic authenticity. Some of his own photographs taken since 1900 and subsequently published in his books, of which the last volume appeared in 1942, would enrich Graham-Brown's essay.

In 1976, Shmuel Avitsur, Professor of Historical Geography at the University of Tel Aviv, published *Man and his Work: A Historical Atlas of Tools and Workshops in the Holy Land*. The atlas relies mostly on photographs, about 500 in number, many identical to those used by Dalman and by Graham-Brown, and on additional drawings. It also includes photographs of modernization and innovations introduced to Arab and Jewish society at the turn of the century.

There were early precursors not only in re-editing of photographs. Straightforward and unbiased documentary photographs were produced in the Holy Land since 1867. Bonfils himself, the French photographer in Beirut, Lebanon, whose typical studio output is criticized (with full justification) by Graham-Brown, produced such photographs of Palestinian Arabs and Jews since the 1870s. But the prominence of Bonfils's potpourri-portraits, consisting of "oriental" and "exotic" elements mixed with western-bourgeois photographic conventions, is due to publishers and buyers who preferred them to his more authentic photographs. The latter, more lifelike and less colorful, remained forgotten. The publishers often "adapted" many of Bonfils's already seasoned captions to improve sales or charitable donations. Graham-Brown sometimes reads captions more than images, and she does not sufficiently account for the difference—does not make the distinction between the photographers' original straightforward captions and the publishers' modifying ones. Sometimes she ignores the former even when they are visible in her reproductions, considering instead the latter ones that fit her thesis.