

*The Origins of the
Peasant-Contra
Rebellion in Nicaragua,
1979–87*

Salvador Martí i Puig

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CONTRA REBELLION
IN NICARAGUA, 1979–87

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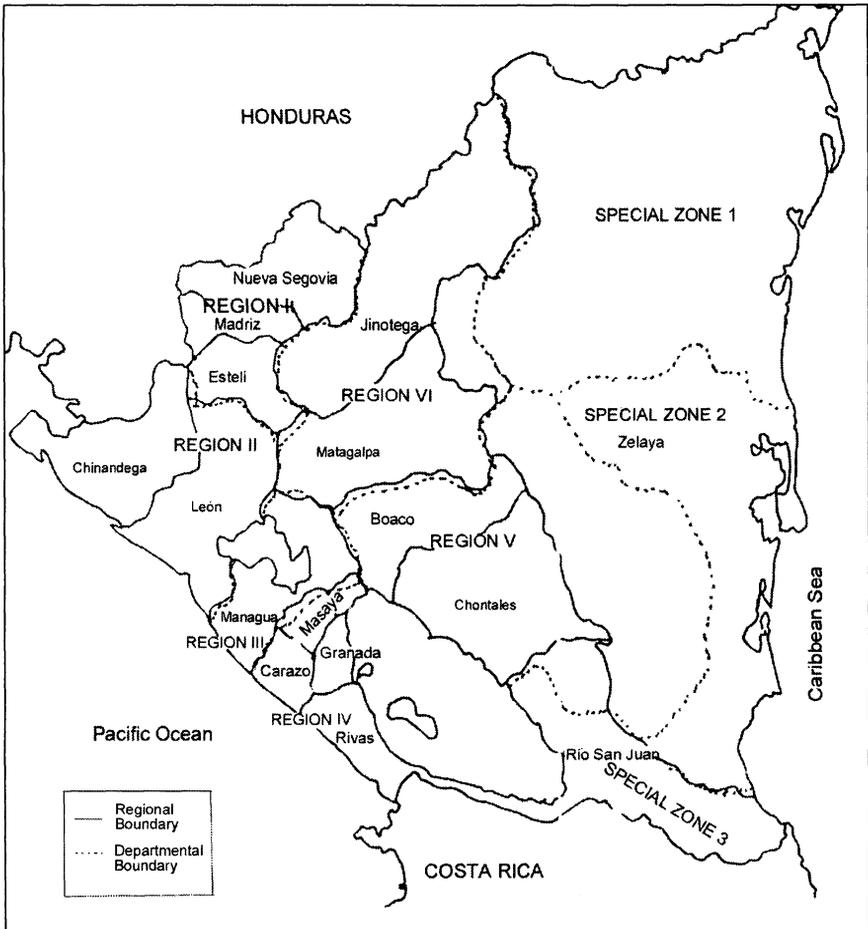
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Map 1: The Geography of Nicaragua



- | | | |
|--------------------|----------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. V. Cosigüina | 10. V. Maderas | 19. Ramal Pispis |
| 2. V. S. Cristóbal | 11. Cord. Los Maribios | 20. Cord. Isabelia |
| 3. V. Telica | 12. Cord. Dipilto y Jalapa | 21. Cord. Dariense |
| 4. V. Las Pilas | 13. Mts. Tepe Somoto | 22. Meseta Estrada |
| 5. V. Hoyo | 14. Mts. Ducualí | 23. Serr. de Huapí |
| 6. V. Momotombo | 15. Mts. Murra | 24. Cord. Chontaleña |
| 7. V. Masaya | 16. Ramal Kilambé | 25. S. Yolaina |
| 8. V. Mombacho | 17. Ramal Baba | |
| 9. V. Concepción | 18. Ramal Yeluca | |

Map 2: Nicaragua, Regions and Departments



Acronyms

- APP:** *Área de Propiedad del Pueblo* (People's Property Area)
ATC: *Asociación de Trabajadores del Campo* (The Landworkers' Association)
BND: *Banco Nacional de Desarrollo* (The National Development Bank)
BON: *Batallón* (Battalion)
CAD: *Cooperativa de Autodefensa* (Self-Defence Cooperative)
CAS: *Cooperativa Agraria Sandinista* (Sandinista Agricultural Cooperative)
CCS: *Cooperativa de Crédito y Servicios* (Credit and Service Cooperative)
CDS: *Comité de Defensa Sandinista* (Sandinista Defence Committee)
CIERA: *Centro de Investigaciones para la Reforma Agraria* (Centre for Research into Agricultural Reform)
CRD: *Comando Regional Diriangén* (The Diriangén Regional Command)
CRJS: *Comando Regional Jorge Salazar* (The Jorge Salazar Regional Command)
DGSE: *Dirección General de la Seguridad del Estado* (The Chief Executive Organisation for State Security)
ENABAS: *Empresa Nacional de Alimentos Básicos* (The National Basic Foods Company)
EPS: *Ejército Popular Sandinista* (The Sandinista People's Army)
ERA: *Empresas de Reforma Agraria* (Agricultural Reform Companies)
ETC: *Encuesta de Trabajadores del Campo* (Survey of Landworkers' Opinions)
FSLN: *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (The Sandinista National Liberation Front)
INRA: *Instituto de Reforma Agraria* (The Institute of Agricultural Reform)
JGRN: *Junta de Gobierno de Reconstrucción Nacional* (The Government Committee for National Reconstruction)
MICOIN: *Ministerio de Comercio Interior* (The Ministry of National Commerce)
MIDA: *Ministerio de Desarrollo Agrario* (The Ministry of Agricultural Development)
MIDINRA: *Ministerio de Desarrollo Agropecuario y Reforma Agraria* (The Ministry of Agricultural and Farming Development and Agricultural Reform)
MINT: *Ministerio del Interior* (The Ministry of the Interior)
MIPLAN: *Ministerio de Planificación* (The Ministry for Planning)
SMP: *Servicio Militar Patriótico* (National Service – obligatory military service)
UNAG: *Unión Nacional de Agricultores y Ganaderos* (The National Union of Farmers and Livestock Breeders)
UPANIC: *Unión de Productores Agropecuarios de Nicaragua* (The Nicaraguan Union of Agriculture and Farm Producers)

Introduction

Within the broad scope of the literature on peasant rebellion and resistance, this paper examines *campesino* reactions to Sandinista agrarian policy and attempts to explain the political organisation and support of the Contra rebels in the highlands of Nicaragua. The current discussion belongs to a revisionist literature generated in the wake of the Nicaraguan revolutionary process. This includes a number of texts which have critically re-examined the ways in which the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) attempted to transform the social and political reality of Nicaragua, above all with regard to the peasantry¹ and ethnic communities.²

The organisation of the paper is as follows: section one considers Sandinista agrarian policy and policy-making processes from a macro-analytical perspective. The transformation of land ownership, investment credit and revolutionary commercialisation policies are analysed and the earlier debate on agricultural reality as it developed within the Sandinista Party throughout 1979–80 is discussed.

The second section considers the impact of this early policy on the central highland agricultural frontier. Nicaraguan agrarian reality was not homogenous: although the macro-region of the Pacific was perhaps characterised by agro-export *latifundia*, landlords and proletarians, the agricultural frontier in the highlands was of a completely different nature. This agricultural frontier is referred to here as the *país campesino*, the Peasant Country. Its social structure and economic logic are considered here and located within a brief review of the relevant anthropological literature on the subject of the peasantry.

The third section focuses on the double aggression carried out in the Peasant Country by Contra troops and the Sandinista army and analyses how certain concrete factors incited this rural community to react by developing the Peasant-Contra. In addition, section three reflects on the different and contradictory socioeconomic interests that existed between the peasants enrolled in the Contra and the Contra elite, who financed, politicised and took advantage of the war.

The conclusion outlines a critical approach to analysing the impact of high-tech agrarian policies in traditional rural societies and the reactions of these communities to such policy initiatives. In this sense, the paper makes an original contribution to

¹ Castro (1990); Baumeister (1998); Bendaña (1991); Biondi-Morra (1990); Enríquez (1991, 1992); Horton (1998); CIAV-OEA (1999).

² Bataillon (1999); Hale (1994); Rizo (1999); Vilas (1991). The range of revisionist assessments of the Sandinista period in office is broad. First, there are the discussions generated by those party technocrats and politicians who were involved in developing the FSLN's agrarian policies, who, with the benefit of hindsight, have carried out a critical assessment of actions previously undertaken. Among these works the following are of particular importance: Orlando Núñez et al (1991); Eduardo Baumeister (1991; 1998); Peter Marchetti (1989); Luís Serra (1990, 1993), Carlos María Vilas (1991); as well as the considerable production of documents — many of them anonymous — examining rural development projects reproduced by the veritable galaxy of NGOs working in Nicaragua, which have been reproduced by many of the ex-technicians from MIDINRA who, in the 1990s, found employment in international cooperation. Second, certain academic research has also advanced a revisionist interpretation. The following works are of special importance: that of Lynn Horton (1998) concerning the impact of the Contra War on the *comarcas* of Quilali; the analysis by François Houtard and Genoviève Lemerrier (1992) of the cooperativisation of the peasant communities of Comején; the studies undertaken by Laura Enríquez (1992) into the Pacific cooperatives; the detailed analysis carried out by Jeffrey Gould (1990) into the emergence of a working-class consciousness in Chinandega; and that of Frank Keller (1986) in Wiwilí — as well as the multiple research projects undertaken as degree theses by social science graduates from the UNAN and UCA.

existing debates on Sandinista agrarian policy, on the failures of political organisation and on the symbolic dimensions of the Nicaraguan Revolution.

An interpretation of events in the Nicaraguan rural highlands throughout the 1980s requires, first, a knowledge of the material conditions in which the society in question developed and, second, an understanding of the ideological processes that were at play, affecting both the various levels of society and its many individual ‘actors’. In traditional agricultural societies (such as that of the Nicaraguan *frontera agrícola* — the object of this research), the peasants’ home territory represents the basic unit of production, of consumption and of reproduction and therefore provides the basis for their economic, social and political power. In this way, the strength of the bond between ‘home’ and ‘land’ — generally considered ‘family patrimony’ — and the way that this bond is experienced both by landowners and tenants, constitutes a very particular system of regulation and provides a wide margin of autonomy for peasants — both regionally and locally. The distribution and redistribution of resources are connected to the dynamics of family and social relationships.³ This creates a society based on its own system of principles, of peasant family unity, which in turn determines the behaviour and attitudes of the individuals of which it is composed. At the same time these are individuals who generally owe their origin and development to the phenomena of ‘marginal work’ and ‘self-exploitation’, as Chayanov indicates (1927, 1966), and who have built a particular world view referred to by E.P. Thompson (1979) and James Scott (1976) as the ‘moral economy’ of the poor or the peasant.

In order to understand how ideological processes affect the individual and collective view of prevailing social conditions, the approach set out by E.P. Thompson (1979) is particularly useful. Thompson asserts that ‘people find themselves in a society structured in a specific way (crucially, but not exclusively, in terms of production relations), experience diverse forms of exploitation, identify conflicting points of interest, begin to fight for these questions and, in the process of fighting, discover themselves through collective self-consciousness as social participators’. Precisely for this reason, there is no given model which can provide us with the ‘true’ formation and preparation of individuals, classes or consciousness. In contrast to the literature which attempted to answer the question framed by Skocpol (1982), namely: ‘What makes peasants revolutionary?’⁴ — my current interest lies in answering the inverse equation: Why did the peasants from the rural areas in Nicaragua’s interior form the social base of the counterrevolution?

The Sandinista insurrection of 1978–79 — which attracted attention as a result of the breadth and intensity of popular participation in the uprising — mobilised very specific groups of social subjects. Students represented the main force (30 per cent), followed by the so-called *gentes de oficio*, a category which included craftsmen, manual workers (for example from garages and workshops) and the self-employed

³ Scott (1985).

⁴ Most of the theoretical literature relating to the peasantry and its political expressions produced in the last two decades considered the rebellious character of this sector and its participation in the various revolutionary events that occurred in the twentieth century; see Barrington Moore (1966); Eric Wolf (1969); Joel Migdal (1974); Jeffrey Paige (1975); Gerrit Huizier (1973); James Scott (1976); Henry Landsberger (1978); Theda Skocpol (1982); and Timothy Wickham-Crowley (1991). Less attention has been paid to the question of why peasants in Latin America may resist leftist guerrillas or revolutionary governments and support counterrevolutionary movements; for consideration of the Guatemalan case, see Stoll (1993); for Nicaragua, see Hale (1994).

(22 per cent) and other workers.⁵ The common connection of the remainder of those involved was their preoccupation and uncertainty with regard to the future. Finally, there was also a small number of farm workers and farmers themselves, a fact that clearly indicates the principally urban nature of the uprising. The insurrection represented the upsurge of anger felt by an urban 'collective' born during the process of accelerated modernisation that took place in the years of 'unequal growth'.⁶ It was a group fighting against both the precariousness of a future that offered few, if any, hopeful perspectives and against a regime that, through its despotism, had provoked a generalised rejection of arbitrary police violence, corruption and political exclusion. The FSLN mobilised and encouraged this heterogeneous group which, following the murder of Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, had lost all confidence in the possibility of reforming the political system. It is not only the case that the pre-revolutionary regime fell because of the 'dictator's primitive character' or because of the 'errors of the imperialist enemy',⁷ but also because of the ability of popular forces to develop the strategies and means to articulate their struggle.⁸

The Frente Sandinista gave people the means with which to put forward their demands more effectively. And these very people, once they had taken to the streets, gave power to the FSLN. But they also provided the social and human base of the revolution, a political discourse, a set of demands and — above all — a 'face' for the revolution. Eminently urban, this gave substance to the Sandinista revolution, which in turn incorporated the people into its institutions and drew up public policies that would benefit this urban mass. However, the Achilles' heel of the revolution was the peasant collectives in the interior regions which, while certainly sharing in the poverty and hopelessness felt by their urban compatriots before the revolution, differed enormously in their attitudes and demands.

The aim of this analysis is, therefore, to focus on how and why the social, political and economic transformation that the Sandinista revolution represented had such a negative effect on the peasant farmer groups from the rural interior zones, so far removed from the insurrection movement, and to examine how this prompted a collective response which brought the farmers directly into conflict with the FSLN

For this reason, it is important to distinguish the reasons why peasants from the Central Highlands rebelled, the factors that influence the manner in which peasant discontent is expressed and to comprehend the often unintended outcomes of peasant rebellion. Scott (1985, 1990) argues that, as a subordinate class, peasants are generally unable to express complaints openly because of the 'dull compulsion of economic relations' and the 'realities of power', and instead opt to carry out everyday resistance, which may take such forms as pilfering, lying, gossip and work slowdowns. Along similar lines, Colburn (1986, 1989) argues that Nicaraguan peasants, who were 'nearly defenceless' under the revolutionary government and essentially rational actors concerned not with abstract ideology but rather with their individual wellbeing, expressed their discontent with Sandinista policies by employing the 'weapons of the weak' described above. Additionally, Horton's work on Quilalí suggests that poor anti-Sandinista peasants in particular recognised their own vulnerability, and many preferred everyday resistance as their first line of response.⁹ As will be seen, anti-

⁵ Vilas (1984), p. 151.

⁶ Dunkerley (1988), pp. 169–220.

⁷ Wickham-Crowley (1991).

⁸ Vilas (1984).

⁹ See Horton (1998), pp. 202–27.

Sandinista women and older men were partly successful in maintaining an outward appearance of neutrality, often while secretly collaborating with the Contras. However, the dynamics of militarisation in the war zones made it extremely difficult for young men to avoid taking up arms either with the EPS or the Contras.¹⁰

The research presented here is based on various publications produced throughout the second half of the 1980s; on reports and internal documents drawn up by institutions connected both to the agricultural reforms (CIERA, MIDINRA, UNAG) and to the Sandinista administration (MINT, DGSE); on discussions and interviews with former Sandinista activists who worked in Agricultural Reform, in the EPS and the DGSE and with former members of the Nicaraguan Resistance, and finally, on fieldwork specifically carried out in certain interior rural zones — particularly in the municipalities of Condega and Matiguás — during my stay with the Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua y Centroamérica in 1996.¹¹

The Sandinista Agricultural Reform or the challenge of modernisation

The transformation of land ownership

The Sandinistas' commitment to a radical transformation of social relationships in the countryside, to the benefit of the peasants, had already been made explicit in the 1969 *Programa Histórico del FSLN*. This document called for the immediate and full-scale handover of land to the peasantry; the elimination of all large estates; a development plan that would both diversify and intensify agricultural production; compensation for the *burguesía patriótica* affected by such agricultural reform; and the creation of schemes to generate work for the peasantry, thereby eliminating temporary unemployment.¹²

Many of the points set out in the above mentioned document were fully developed in the design for agricultural reform that was carried out from 1979 onwards. It is important to note the speed with which land redistribution and resource allocation took place.¹³ The initial tendency was very clear: to give priority to the Area de Propiedad del Pueblo (APP — expropriated land in the hands of the state) and to formulate food policy on the basis of this prioritisation. This is indicated by a 1980 Ministerio de Planificación (MIPLAN) report which stated: 'the strategy is not simply to increase the productive capacity of nationalised companies in the short to medium term; it is also to convert such companies into the *strategic sector* of the *New Economy*'.¹⁴

The revolutionary government placed great emphasis on agricultural reform. For example, the 1982 document drawn up by the Ministry of Agricultural and Farming Development and Agricultural Reform (MIDINRA) entitled *Estrategia de Desarrollo*

¹⁰ War zones which included the departments of Nueva Segovia, Jinotega, Matagalpa, Boaco and Chontales.

¹¹ Most of the classic literature relating to the peasantry and its political expressions examined the rebellious character of this sector and its participation in revolutionary events. As noted in footnote 4, the excellent works by Barrington Moore (1966), Eric Wolf (1969), Joel Migdal (1974), Jeffery Paige (1975), Gerrit Huizer (1973), James Scott (1976), Henry Landsberger (1978), Theda Skocpol (1982) and Timothy Wickham-Crowley (1991) are particularly noteworthy

¹² FSLN (1969), pp. 9–10.

¹³ Utting (1988), p. 3.

¹⁴ MIPLAN (1980), p. 45.

Agropecuaria y Reforma Agraria (Farming Development and Agricultural Reform Strategy) stated that:

Agricultural Reform is the sword that cuts through the obstacles to developing productive forces, the instrument by which cooperative formation and workers' participation are encouraged ... It is the principal tool of social and economic transformation in the Sandinista Popular Revolution. The process of transforming the social relationships involved in agricultural production will establish the foundations for a new model of acquisition and will determine the development of the New Nicaraguan Economy ... All of this points to the industrialisation of natural resources.¹⁵

In a revolutionary context the aims of the farming sector were threefold: self-sufficiency in food production; the provision of hard currency through agricultural exports; and the social (and political) organisation of farm production. In fact, the Junta de Gobierno outlined precisely these aims shortly after the revolution:

[We are referring to] the transformation of the structure of land tenure, to the elimination of land ownership without use and to the guaranteeing of access to such land by poor farmers. [We intend to] encourage associative relationships of productivity and to create a state sector as the axis of farming development ... to elevate productivity levels by means of dispersing technology and by the rational and intensive use of natural resources. [We aim to] create self-sufficiency in national food production and to increase agricultural exports. It is also our intention to promote agro-industrial development in order to increase the overall value of farming production, thereby improving both our intervention in the international market and the links between the primary and secondary sectors of our national economy.¹⁶

In order to carry out the tasks outlined above, the Ministry of Agricultural Development (MIDA) was combined in 1979 with the Institute of Agricultural Reform (INRA) to form MIDINRA. This allowed for more efficient management, within the farming sector, of the new APP companies, cooperatives and individual producers. MIDINRA grew rapidly, setting up regional, departmental and local delegations, increasing all of its administrative institutions. It became, in effect, a 'super-ministry' ('A state within a state' as it was referred to by many), with its own think-tank called CIERA (The Centre for Research into Agricultural Reform), directed by Orlando Núñez.

The Junta de Gobierno's first objective was to set up a broad-ranging state sector by means of confiscating the estates owned by Somoza and his allies. Nevertheless, a number of these estates had already been taken over by poor farmers during the uprising, who had formed cooperatives or divided the land into individual plots.¹⁷ However, at the end of 1979 the government decided to take control of these estates in order to create 'units of production' that would be directly managed by the state. The reasons given for such a decision were the need to maintain and take advantage of economies of scale, to channel all earnings to the state for development investment and to convert the proletariat into the 'majority class' needed by the revolutionary project, thereby avoiding the *re-campesinización* of the semi-proletariat.¹⁸

¹⁵ MIDINRA (1982a), pp. 4–5.

¹⁶ JGRN in Wheelock (1983).

¹⁷ Serra (1990), p. 78.

¹⁸ Deere, Marchetti and Reinhart (1986).

The response of the peasant movement to the government's measures was not long in coming. In February 1980 thousands of peasants, organised by the Landworkers' Association (ATC), demonstrated at various locations throughout the Pacific zone. Their demands were for land, the right to keep the estates already taken over, an improvement in the credit terms on offer and the cancelling of peasant debt.¹⁹ In spite of this, the government not only rejected the fundamental demand — that of land (although they did promise to address the issue in the near future by drawing up a new law related to agricultural reform), but also prohibited any further appropriation of land by peasants. The government additionally prohibited farmers from any further strike action. This move was aimed at keeping the peace with the middle classes and at maintaining a working relationship with international economic markets.

As promised, two years after the triumph of the Revolution, the Ley de Reforma Agraria was passed, beginning a new chapter in the process of property transformation and in the 'estate for life' use of land. The new law allowed for action to be taken against all property that was 'in ownership without use, inefficiently exploited or inefficiently leased', as well as guaranteeing ownership to efficiently cultivated land. The beneficiaries of this law were basically three groups: the units of state production (the so-called Agricultural Reform Companies, or ERAs), peasants without land who were organised into cooperatives and — to a somewhat lesser extent — individual producers.

MIDINRA was responsible for awarding land-owning certificates, *el título de reforma*. This certificate was non-transferable except by inheritance. As a means of avoiding the break-up of land into smallholdings (through sale or other means), the certificate was also non-divisible in any form whatsoever. This was rapidly challenged by peasants who insisted on 'true ownership' of the land. MIDINRA, however, had other plans. It drew up the *Marco Estratégico del Desarrollo Agropecuario*,²⁰ in which the 'precise objectives' for land distribution among the various productive sectors were set out. According to the Ministry, at the 'conclusion' of the Agricultural Reform in the year 2000, the APP would account for 27.4 per cent of the total farming area; the cooperative sector would take up 48.4 per cent (25.1 per cent for the Cooperativas Agrarias Sandinistas — CAS; 23.3 per cent for the Credit and Service Cooperatives — CCS); small and medium-scale producers would account for 18.2 per cent; and the large-scale producers would hold six per cent.²¹

The application of land transformation — a process referred to as 'afectaciones' — developed swiftly once the 1981 Ley de Reforma Agraria was passed. Between 1981 and 1984, 349 estates were expropriated. This represented a total of 467,228 *manzanas* of land. As Tables 1 and 2 below indicate, the chief beneficiaries were nationalised companies and the CAS cooperatives.²²

¹⁹ Kaimowitz (1986), p. 140; Serra (1990), p. 79.

²⁰ Strategic Framework for Farming Development (MIDINRA, 1983c).

²¹ MIDINRA (1983b, 1983c).

²² Cardenal (1987).

Table 1: Distribution of Land Affected by Agricultural Reform

Dates	APP	Coops	Individual Peasants
Oct. 1981 to Dec. 1982	70%	25%	5%
Jan. to Dec. 1983	65%	33%	2%
Jan to Dec. 1984	57%	40%	3%

Source: Serra (1990), p. 80.

Table 2: Evolution of the Structure of Land Ownership by Sector, 1978–84 in thousands of *manzanas*

Sector	1978 Area	1978 %	1984 Area	1984 %
Individual	8,073.0	100	5,125.2	64
> 500 mzs.	2,920.0	36	1,025.7	13
200–500 mzs.	1,311.0	16	1,021.0	13
50–200 mzs.	2,431.0	30	2,391.0	30
10–50mzs.	1,241.0	16	560.5	7
< 10mzs.	170.0	2	127.0	1
Cooperative	–	–	2,947.8	17
CCS	–	–	804.3	10
CAS	–	–	626.6	7
State (APP)	–	–	1,516.9	19
Total	8,073.0	100	8,073.0	100

Source: Chief Executive Organisation for Agricultural Reform, Wheelock (1986b), p. 119.

After 1982, the ‘certification’ for land of disputed ownership was also undertaken in the interior regions of the Atlantic Coast.²³ This aimed at attracting part of the peasantry to the ‘revolutionary policies’, and also at undermining the incipient counter-revolutionary movement. However, these aims were hardly successful at all, given the degree to which the Contra had already taken root and also the fact that the land certification on offer was non-negotiable. In the view of many peasants this simply

²³ Very little work has been carried out into the impact of the agricultural reform in the Atlantic coastal region. This is principally due to the great complexity involved in the management of communal lands, and to the importance of the historical demands made by the region’s ‘*pueblos originarios*’. Nevertheless, the work of Bulloven (1989) is particularly noteworthy.

denied access to true ownership. ‘The government didn’t give us any land: it only lent it out’ was a criticism often made of Sandinista agricultural policy.

Subsequently, with the worsening of the war in the interior rural zones (specifically in the eastern section of Nueva Segovia, Matagalpa and Chontales), a process of displacement of the population was carried out. This opened another chapter in agricultural reform (with the *Reforma a la Ley de Reforma Agraria*, passed in 1986),²⁴ in which the criteria of size and efficiency, established in the previous statute and applicable to the expropriation of estates, were eliminated. It also provided the government with greater scope for manoeuvrability in setting up cooperatives and settlements in the areas closest to the war. During the second half of the decade there was an observable shift in government priorities as the administration began to emphasise the political and defensive importance attached to the ‘transformation of the structure of ownership’.

The Sandinista administration’s policies: public investment, credit and commercialisation

Public investment in the farming sector was of particular importance in the 1980s, reaching levels of 40 per cent of overall investment and 7.5 per cent of GDP (see Table 3). The government was initially successful in adequately balancing investment between the agricultural and industrial sectors, and between exports and consumption. However, a bias towards ‘accumulation’ quickly developed in which consumption was regarded as less important than productive investment. Another observable tendency was that of favouring the modern over the traditional sectors.²⁵

Table 3: Evolution of the Investment in Farming Set against Total Investment, 1980–89 (in millions of cordobas)

Year	Investment in Farming/National GNP (%)	Investment in Farming/Total Investment (%)
1980	5.8	36.8
1981	5.3	32.1
1982	5.7	36.5
1983	7.1	33.9
1984	9.0	41.6
1985	8.5	37.9
1986	12.4	52.2
1987	12.5	53.1
1988	6.0	51.9
1989	2.4	23.0

Source: General Planning Division in CIERA (1989i), p. 366.

²⁴ Law number 14, 11 January 1986, published in its entirety in CIERA (1989h), pp. 97–110.

²⁵ Kleiterp (1988).

According to the Strategic Framework for Farming Development,²⁶ the aims of agricultural transformation (planned to the year 2000) were to achieve self-sufficiency in food production, to develop agro-industry and to generate capital. In order to do this more efficiently, the concentration of all efforts on the public investment plan was considered paramount. Such efforts were essentially focused on the state sector, which accounted for 70 per cent of all investment; the cooperative and private sectors accounting for 25 per cent and five per cent respectively. This bias towards the state sector increased in 1983, when the bulk of public investment was channelled towards large-scale agro-industrial projects (the so-called *Proyectos del Programa de Inversiones Públicas*, outlined in Table 4). In 1985, eight of these projects alone absorbed 56.4 per cent of the total investment figure, with a promised maturity of 6.6 years.²⁷ The option to invest in advanced technology was also established and upheld by MIDINRA as the quickest and most efficient means by which to increase farming performance and output. This approach was expressed in the following way:

[In increasing milk production] ... We have two alternatives facing us: either we work with a herd of two million (as a national total), which is distributed in the most disorganised of ways and is in the hands of people who are not always open to new approaches ... which would be as difficult for us as the efforts made throughout the 'literacy crusade' ... or we go ahead with intensive farming methods ... And in the case of corn and bean production ... we are again faced with the same alternative ... the only viable option is to grow basic grain crops under irrigation and to use high technology farming methods.²⁸

Such a strategy — with its emphasis on mechanisation, the use of chemicals and irrigation — represented an investment in imports of capital and goods that was unequalled in Central America.²⁹ In 1978, a total of 2,850 tractors were in use, with 63,882 hectares under irrigation; in 1987, there were 5,484 tractors working the land, while 96,025 hectares were under irrigation. This development chiefly benefited the APP which, in 1987, was in possession of 42 per cent of the tractors, 60 per cent of the combine harvesters and 39 per cent of the agricultural tools in use throughout the country. This compares with respective figures of 13 per cent, two per cent and 17 per cent for the cooperative sector.³⁰ But in spite of this, overall production was less than hoped for; this was due to the worsening of the armed conflict, the irrational use of consumer and capital goods and the many technical and organisational limitations of the APP companies. In the second half of the decade, despite the implementation of programmes and policies aimed at agricultural transformation and the optimisation of resources, the profound economic crisis and the effects of the war wiped out most of the positive results that the new approaches had produced.

²⁶ MIDINRA (1983c).

²⁷ Serra (1990), p. 84; Utting (1988), p. 13.

²⁸ Wheelock (1986b), p. 48.

²⁹ Baumeister (1987, 1989).

³⁰ MIDINRA (1987c).

Table 4. Public Investment Programme Projects (in millions of US dollars)

Project	Region	Product	Market	US \$ inv.	Period
Farming projects				131.8	
–Fanor Urroz I	II	Grain	Domestic	33.4	1982–84
–Plan Contingente I	At national level	Grain	Domestic	21.5	1983–84
–Plan Contingente II	At national level	Grain	Domestic	29.9	1984–86
–La Vigía	I	Grain	Domestic	16.2	1984–88
–Jalapa	I	Grain	Domestic	13.0	1984–87
–Waslala	VI	Grain	Domestic	11.3	1982–86
–Contingente Jalapa	I	Grain and canned pro- duce	Domestic	6.5	1984–89
Dairy cattle projects				252	
–Muy-Muy /Matiguás	VI	Milk	Domestic	126	1985–90
–Chiltepe	III	Milk	Domestic	60	1982–86
–León Viejo–La Paz	II	Milk	Domestic	36	1985–88
–San Roque	IV	Milk	Domestic	21.3	1985–87
–Camoapa	V	Milk	Domestic	8.7	1985–87
Agroindustrial				499	
–Victoria de Julio	III	Sugar	External	210.6	1982–87
–Burley	At national level	Tobacco	External	127.8	1983–89
–Palma Kukra Hill	ZE II	Oil	Domestic	52.9	1983–92
–Palma El Castillo	ZE III	Oil	Domestic	40.1	1983–92
–Valle Sébaco	VI	Canned pro- duce	External	36.4	1983–87
–Ifrugalsa	IV	Canned pro- duce	Mixed	15.9	1983–86
–Cacao, Nueva Guinea	V	Cocoa	External	9.4	1983–88
–Cocotera	ZE II	Oil	Domestic	5.9	1983–86
TOTAL				883.8	

Source: Argüello and Kleitner in CIERA (1989a), p. 345.

Nationalisation of the banks at the end of 1979 allowed for new credit policies to be implemented. The Sistema Financiero Nacional was set up to oversee such policies and to control the money supply. As a result, bank financing of agriculture extended from approximately 30 per cent in 1979 to 75 per cent in 1988. The provision of credit to broad sectors of the peasantry allowed poor farmers to free themselves from the grip of moneylenders. Another clear advantage was their subsequent ability to buy consumer goods and tools. In 1978, only 28,000 peasants were in receipt of four per cent of the credit available, whereas in 1982

87,600 peasants were using 31 per cent of the short-term farming credit available. However, if one compares crop production financed by credit in the state, the large and medium-scale producers and peasant sectors, one can see that the peasantry accounted for a much lower proportion of the overall figure than the remaining two sectors. Within the peasantry, the cooperatives received the greater part of agricultural credit.³¹ Nevertheless, the use of credit — such as it was — in this sector represented a mechanism of control for MIDINRA. By receiving financial assistance, the peasantry became incorporated into the administration's overall plans and agricultural objectives. All cooperative production and investment plans had to be approved by specialists from the Banco Nacional de Desarrollo; the purchasing of consumer goods had to be carried out through state agencies and all commercialisation of products had to be directed through the state channels of the Empresa Nacional de Alimentos Básicos (ENABAS). ENABAS automatically discounted the credit previously supplied by the state from the purchase price given to farmers.

By 1985 the administration's aims were to rationalise access to credit (which had ended up acting as a subsidy to producers, as it had an interest rate inferior to the rate of inflation). However, by 1987, given the depth of the economic crisis, long-term credit was restricted and was channelled exclusively through 20 production development programmes. During the last two years of the decade, anti-inflation policies drastically reduced credit. This was aimed at trying to maintain the value of the currency, but also at promoting agricultural exports and investment.

With regard to commercialisation policies, the government nationalised all foreign commerce, thereby gaining control of all agro-exports. This was carried out by channelling exports through specific companies, each given over to a particular sector. Until the second half of the 1980s, the government also held the firmest of grips on national commerce. According to the views set out by Orlando Núñez in *Barricada* (9 December 1979) and *Poder Sandinista* (8 November 1979), these moves were aimed at the following:

The complete removal from the scene of all middle-men, cash lenders and traders, who grew rich in the past by buying cheap and selling dear ... All of the resources that are now in the hands of the state will go towards increasing our economy's agricultural and industrial production. We will sell abroad only what we need to sell and buy only what is strictly necessary. Our aim is economic independence.

In order to meet these objectives, the Ministry of National Commerce (MICOIN) set purchasing prices for producers with the aim of covering all costs and leaving a certain profit margin. Prices were also set for consumers, subsidising basic food products. These products were purchased by the use of a family card, known as the *cartilla*. As a result of this policy, referred to as *seguridad alimentaria*, there was also an increase in imports of basic foodstuffs: between 1979 and 1986, such imports doubled.³²

ENABAS, under the direction of MICOIN, carried out the storage and distribution of basic consumption goods by means of a national network of stores, warehouses and points of sale. It was also responsible for establishing quotas for products that could be obtained, at a district and family level, by means of ration cards. This network, just as Núñez had argued, undermined traditional private

³¹ Serra (1990), p. 143.

³² Biondi-Morra (1990).

commerce in the countryside. The problem was, however, that it was exactly this traditional commerce that tied country people to urban and regional markets. Such commerce had a number of different functions (related to supply, credit and commerce), all of which were based on personal relationships and an intimate knowledge of peasants' requirements. This could not simply be replaced by a national network of specialised institutions, situated far from where the peasants lived and run by urban administrative workers who knew little or nothing about their clients' reality or concerns.

In an effort to control speculation, the sale of basic grain produce to ENABAS was made obligatory and the transporting of foodstuffs from one region to another was prohibited. These measures were swiftly rejected by the majority of the peasantry, bringing about a fall in production after 1981 and the development of a black market in direct competition with the state network, whose markets were characterised by the scarcity of produce on offer.³³

Throughout almost the entire decade, the urban-rural exchange shifted to the detriment of the peasantry. In 1979, for example, the cost of a pair of trousers and a shirt was the equivalent of 49 and 22 pounds of maize, respectively. By 1985, this had risen to respective levels of 230 and 140.³⁴ But it was not only in the area of prices that rural collectives were affected: the national commercial network was clearly biased in the quality of supply offered to urban areas (which, in turn, reflected the better organisation of urban collectives). Meanwhile, in its inability to provide the peasantry with basic requirements such as consumption goods or tools it generated situations of acute shortage in certain rural areas by the mid-1980s.

The peasantry's demonstrations against the administration had some effect: from 1985 onwards national commerce policies began to be liberalised. By 1987 there was a completely free market in basic grain produce. Consumer articles began filling the shelves once again, new government policies aimed at tightening up commercial efficiency and rationing were ended. Nevertheless, most products were now beyond the means of the greater part of the peasantry.

The social organisation of production

The other principal dimension to the *Reforma Agraria* was the transformation of the social organisation of production, and the ways in which agricultural producers became politically 'linked' by means of guild organisations. Of particular importance was the creation of state production centres, the so-called *Empresas de Reforma Agraria* (ERAs), and the development of the cooperative movement. In the case of the cooperatives, there were a number of different types: production cooperatives (CAS), credit and service cooperatives (CCS) and agricultural 'defence' cooperatives (CAD), these last situated on the northern war fronts. The function of the CADs — in addition to that of agricultural production — was to respond to the attacks of the Contra. Other social collectives related to the agricultural world included the ATC, established before the revolution, and UNAG, (The National Union of Farmers and Livestock Breeders), founded in April 1981.

The ERAs were a central element in national food production. They played a significant role in distribution, production and processing. As extensions of the gov-

³³ Dore (1990), pp. 109–12.

³⁴ CIERA (1989i), pp. 373–80.

ernment administration, they were considered reliable political instruments. They were also seen as faithful to the new aims of economic and food production policies.

However, a report drawn up in the early years of the revolution claimed that ‘the state economic complex and its managers came up against a number of difficulties in carrying out their objectives ... they also committed a number of errors’.³⁵ In 1985, the difficulties alluded to increased, as indicated by the *Plan Económico de 1985*. This referred to the deterioration of the ERAs and mentioned a number of causes. One of these was the ongoing war, with its many direct and indirect consequences. Other factors were the 1985 trade embargo imposed by the USA, the decline in the terms of commercial exchange and the breakdown of the Central American Common Market. Not all of the causes were external in origin, however. The report also referred to important political and managerial errors, particularly underlining the persistent losses incurred by the ERAs. The inability to pay interest on their mounting debts, the insufficient use of plants and processing machinery and the indifference that characterised workers’ approaches to their jobs were also mentioned. Since these workers had been denied the right to own their land individually they exacted a kind of revenge by carrying out their duties in a ‘pianissimo’ manner — or, as the workers themselves put it, *al suave*. In effect, they took what was to be referred to ironically as ‘*la vacación histórica*’.³⁶

Henry Ruíz, Sandinista *comandante* and minister of planning, stated that the ERAs should ‘satisfy the growing needs of our people ... be the very heart of the new accumulation and — as a consequence of the *economía sandinista* — generate social investment funds that allow for a process of ‘autonomous accumulation’ ... creating economic surpluses that both strengthen the consolidation and expansion of the ERAs and also allow the people to share in the wealth created’. The problem was, however, that the ERAs almost never produced surpluses.³⁷

Table 5. Number of Cooperatives, Members and Land Cultivated in 1980

CAS	CT*	CCS	Pre Co-ops**	Total	Members	Area Cultivated
12	441	1,311	883	2,647	77,358	164,202 mz.

(*) CT= *Colectivos de Trabajadores* (Workers’ Collectives), an organisation which was similar to the CCS.

(**) Pre-Co-ops = units of productivity that were in the course of becoming cooperatives.

Source: PROCAMPO–MIDINRA in Serra (1990).

The cooperative movement developed at the time of Somoza’s fall, when spontaneous occupations of large estates took place (as had already occurred before 19 July 1979 in the *zonas liberadas* of León, Estelí and Chinandega). In the first few months neither the FSLN nor the state was able to assist the movement — in

³⁵ Austin, Fox and Kruger (1985).

³⁶ Biondi-Morra (1990), pp. 75–85.

³⁷ A study carried out by MIDINRA in 1981 indicated that, of the 49 companies with recently completed financial accounts, 38 were already operating with losses (MIDINRA in Biondi-Morra, 1990, pp. 103–4).

fact, they slowed it down. However, by July 1980 there were already 2,657 cooperatives with 77,358 members. This provided the basis for official approval of what would be called the *movimiento cooperativo*.³⁸

With the passing of the 1981 *Ley de Reforma Agraria*, the cooperative movement was institutionalised. It was defined as ‘a higher form of work organisation, giving impetus to the spirit of solidarity and cooperation, facilitating the peasants’ active and organised participation, increasing production and helping in the development of education, health, housing and culture’.³⁹ According to the law, any cooperative farming organisation was obliged to receive authorisation from the state agency PROCAMPO. Such strict control was due in part to the FSLN’s hegemonistic intentions. But it was also due to the belief within the ministries that the cooperative movement needed to be subordinated to national planning and should form part of the services offered by the state. The movement was therefore assigned the role of producing basic grains and perishable foodstuffs and of providing a workforce for the large state companies within the area of agro-exports.⁴⁰ As for its social function, according to those responsible for agricultural policy the cooperative movement represented the overcoming of the ‘backwardness’ that characterised traditional units of peasant production. It is in this sense that the CCS or CAS were referred to as ‘higher forms of social organisation’.⁴¹

In spite of the attitudes expressed by UNAG,⁴² the strategy employed by MIDINRA until 1985 was to make the handing over of agricultural reform lands conditional on the formation of cooperatives. This violated the principles of *voluntariedad* and *gradualidad* set out in law. The institutional structure of the cooperatives themselves was reliant on external agents (technicians, professionals, political teams). This had the effect of limiting internal democracy and autonomy, as the following comments from a CAS cooperative worker in Comalapa indicate:

The cooperative movement has had no voice, no one to speak on its behalf. Along came someone from the *Reforma Agraria* and they did just as they pleased; the same with the man from the battalion; the same with the man from the *Frente*. They set themselves up as our bosses.¹⁵

In 1982, the first census of farming cooperatives was carried out. At this time the cooperative sector represented 50 per cent of the national peasantry, working on 22 per cent of the cultivable land in Nicaragua. The census indicated that peasants’ main motivation for participating in farming cooperatives was the chance of improving their family’s standard of living. Members felt that their organisation offered greater access to land, to credits and to the goods and appliances that would increase their

³⁸ See Serra (1990), who for years worked with UNAG, for a full analysis of the Nicaraguan cooperative movement from 1979 to 1990.

³⁹ CIERA (1989h).

⁴⁰ MIDINRA (1982a).

⁴¹ Caballero (1982).

⁴² UNAG was different from other Sandinista political and administrative organisations in that it fought hard to preserve a certain degree of autonomy for the cooperative movement and for the interests of peasant collectives. In time, UNAG’s characteristic defence of its members resulted in a number of conflicts with the administration. See Blookland (1992).

¹⁵ Serra (1990), p. 146: ‘El movimiento cooperativo ha estado sin cara, sin alguien que hablara por él. Llegaba alguien de Reforma Agraria y hacía lo que quería, el hombre del batallón también, el hombre del Frente también se imponía como mandador.’

ability to work the land. The possibility of keeping part of the surplus and the apparent stability of the work on offer were also key factors. Finally, the perception existed that the cooperatives were the best way in which individual members could satisfy their particular needs and that the state reserved a somewhat preferential treatment for such associations.

The greater part of the existing cooperatives were CCS (45 per cent), made up of farmers from the interior region, either tenants or in possession of their own land. Each cooperative had an average of 32.6 members. The CAS groups (20 per cent) were smaller. They averaged 14 members per association and were largely composed of poor farmers or agricultural workers cultivating the lands assigned to them by the Agricultural Reform. The CAS were essentially concentrated in the Pacific region. Basic grains were the main produce of the cooperatives (78 per cent of produce). Most of this was sold (53 per cent), especially in the case of the CAS cooperatives.⁴³

The political and guild activity of these collectives was based around the ATC and, later, around UNAG. The ATC promoted and represented agricultural workers (principally from the ERAs) on various bodies set up in 1980 by the government. These included the Legislative Assembly (the Consejo de Estado) and a number of sectorial production committees. In its first National Assembly, held in December 1979, the ATC approved its statutes and set out its priorities and tasks. Yet in spite of the ATC's composition, a large group of peasants — particularly from the country's central region — did not feel fully identified with the organisation. This was due in part to its composition and interests, but also to the political discourse that it expressed, appealing as it did to the agricultural proletariat, in clear detriment to those who owned (and wanted to keep) the little land that was theirs.

This discontent was seized upon by a section of the agricultural middle class unsympathetic to the revolution. Those who felt excluded by the attitudes that the ATC expressed were 'recruited' by guild groups such as the Nicaraguan Union of Agriculture and Farm Producers (UPANIC). UPANIC swiftly set up a coffee growers' cooperative in Matagalpa. In response, the government felt the need to create an organisation closely linked to Sandinismo (as well as to the cooperative movement as a whole) representing small and mid-scale producers, that would counterbalance the effects of UPANIC. UNAG was formed in April 1981 at an inter-regional assembly of farmers. Its motto was 'Motherland, Unity and Production', and it defined itself as a broad-ranging and pluralistic organisation representing small to mid-scale agricultural producers. It was also made very clear, however, that the organisation 'recognises the FSLN as the leader of our people'.⁴⁴

In spite of the competition between the two organisations, a considerable number of poor farmers unaffiliated to the cooperative movement remained on the fringes of both the ATC (which focused its attentions on the permanent salaried workers, in particular on the ERAs) and UNAG (which, from the outset, had given priority to the slightly better-off farmers and to the cooperative movement as a whole). Fierce debates took place from the beginning of the 1980s within both organisations. The arguments centred on exactly *who* should be responsible for organising, representing and protecting the interests of the impoverished sector from the interior rural zones. UNAG maintained that such a group could

⁴³ Serra (1990), p. 141.

⁴⁴ UNAG (1981).

not successfully be integrated into the same organisation as better-off cooperativised farmers. And the ATC argued that the *alianza obrero-campesina* should not include small-scale peasant farmers who, in general, held the most traditional of political and social views. In practice, both organisations effectively abandoned the poorer peasants. In time these very farmers, unwelcomed by UNAG and the ATC, became the social base for the Contra movement.

The grass-roots leaders of both the ATC and UNAG tended to be ‘natural leaders’ from the zones they represented, whose force of personality enabled them to weld together a group of peasant farmers unified by bonds of family. Such leaders voluntarily pursued their members’ demands within the various municipal organisations. They also passed on the ‘orientations’ and ‘lines of policy’ handed down by their superiors. Mass mobilisation was carried out only when required. Intermediate political positions were almost always filled by FSLN members nominated by the party, while national directors were put forward by the FSLN’s National Directorate. This undermined the development of internal democracy in local organisations, above all because the work plans pursued were adaptations of strategies adopted by MIDINRA at regional and national levels. Yet despite the tendency towards an ever-increasing bureaucracy and the concentration of power in the hands of the directors, considerable freedom of expression existed at the grass roots. In spite of the limitations, UNAG effectively doubled its membership between 1981 and 1985, from 45,498 members to approximately 75,000. The ATC managed to maintain its membership at about 40,000 throughout the 1980s.⁴⁵

Clearly the revolution — with all its limitations — implied a rapid move towards political participation and organisation for a sizeable part of the peasant-farming sector. However, this process was by no means lineal, but was rather characterised by highs and lows, contradictions and limitations and incomprehension on the part of certain members of the peasantry when faced with new developments.

From the perspective of the peasant farmers, the reproduction of old social structures ran parallel to the creation of a new society. If on the one hand a dismantling of the repressive governmental ‘apparatus’ that had characterised *Somocismo* occurred, on the other hand there was a marked increase in the political directives issued by the FSLN. In addition, for the first time in the nation’s history, state institutions had the necessary finance, technology and capacity to carry out wide-ranging policies. While it was certainly the case that cooperatives and other collective organisations were created primarily to represent the interests of the rural population, there were still many peasant farmers who kept up the fight to obtain their own plots of land and to gain access to the resources that remained concentrated in state and private haciendas. All of this within a political system that was run along vanguardist lines, albeit with cooperative traits. The FSLN essentially offered material goods and other symbols in exchange for control over local leaders, so reproducing the age-old secular client relationships between those who held power and those who were subjected to it.

Part of the cooperative and guild movement, especially UNAG, was efficient in communicating and representing the peasant sector’s demands and preoccupations. Yet state institutions responsible for implementing and overseeing agricultural policy confronted a number of problems. Specifically, widespread misunderstanding existed on the part of the administration both as to the characteristics of national agri-

⁴⁵ CIERA (1989f), p. 376.

cultural production and the nature of those involved in such production. This extended to a failure to comprehend the importance of farmers in crop production, and their capabilities and limitations.⁴⁶ The agricultural policies drawn up and implemented by the Sandinistas suffered from a number of diagnostic errors: overestimating the productive importance of the estates inherited from Somoza and his associates (which constituted the bulk of the state sector's farmland); an exaggeration of the rural middle-classes' economic importance; and underestimation of the productive importance of small to medium-scale farmers and livestock breeders.

To what can we attribute these errors? According to Bauermeister (1988a), three factors were critical. First, the political weight held by sectors of the rural elite that formed part of the Sandinista Alliance. These people were professionals, linked by family or work to the most technologically advanced sectors of pre-1979 Nicaraguan agriculture. As a result of their support for the revolutionary coalition during the insurrection they came to hold senior posts within the public sector. They were liberal professionals who had trained in North American universities and political activists schooled in the former Eastern Bloc (which was a considerable source of finance for many of the larger agro-industrial projects). Secondly, the ideological adherence to dependency theory and certain Marxist frameworks of explanation. This framework influenced interpretations of 'underdevelopment' and the need for the development of productive forces. Finally, the analyses undertaken to interpret both the general economic situation and the alliances with specific social sectors were over-politicised. This, in turn, created a distorted view of reality, above all with regard to the productive importance that was attached to various sectors.

From the very outset of the revolution, the formulation of public policies was practically the monopoly of professionals and technicians. This group encouraged a process of 'accelerated modernisation' based on the idea that the economic 'backwardness' of traditional Nicaraguan agriculture could only be overcome by creating a powerful state sector that would, little by little, absorb the old. The peasantry would thus become part of the nation's labour force, working in the large state companies, and the remaining units of production (above all, private concerns) would be marginalised. The abilities of autonomous, small-scale agricultural producers were wholly misjudged. Known in Nicaragua as *chapiollos* (something similar to 'plebeian', 'peasant', 'Indian', 'half-caste'), they were considered alien to the process of modernisation and progress, ignored by agricultural technicians and capital city dwellers alike.⁴⁷

The Peasant Country and the impact of the agricultural reforms

The Peasant Country

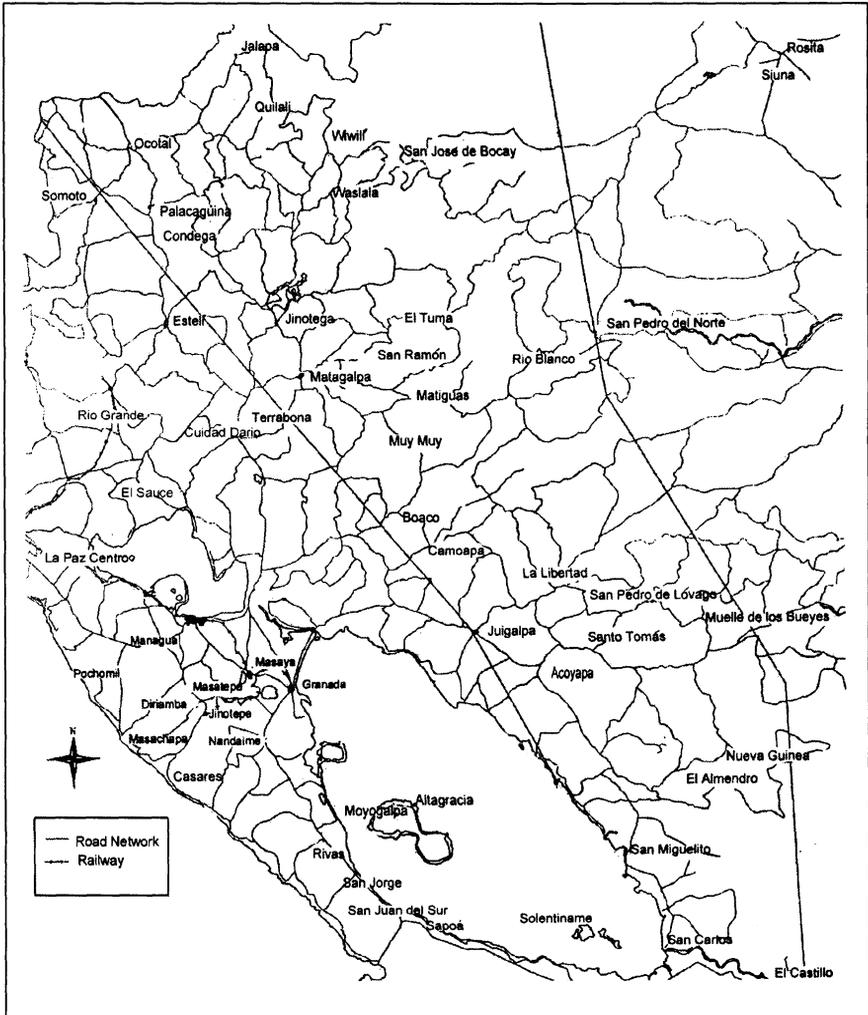
Ortega and Marchetti, two agricultural experts linked to the Sandinista administration, have both made the point that the triumph of the revolution was needed before peasants were able to participate economically, politically and socially at national level. For the first time in their history they were able to collaborate in

⁴⁶ Bauermeister (1988a, 1988c, 1989).

⁴⁷ The technicians, in turn, were referred to as *cheles*. This word (perhaps an inversion of 'leche': milk) is used to designate all fair-skinned people, but it also has very clear social connotations given that the 'white' population in Nicaragua accounts for only 7–9% of the total. Most Nicaraguan *cheles* come from the traditional economic elite, the so-called 'pigmentocracia'.

projects that did not ‘belong’ to landowners or priests. With the coming of the revolution, other advantages also arrived: young men and women from the city to help in the tasks of literacy, school for the children, health conferences and workshops, the union, the cooperative, credit and land. Nevertheless, great though these opportunities were, they were often under-exploited and even misinterpreted. This was due largely to the fact that the authorities failed to appreciate the importance of two basic factors: the local area, *la comarca*, the fundamental element in peasant civil society and the network of intermediation that the rural world represented.

Map 3: The Peasant Country



The *comarca* was the basis of peasant society, the area within which land, production, the family, the individual and the community were connected. In contrast to the

view of peasant society as isolated and marginalised, the *comarca* was the area in which a rich fabric of relationships and connections were inter-woven. These included family links, but also guild groups, economic organisations and organisations given over to political solidarity. Isolation was not an obstacle to community life; indeed precisely because of their isolation, peasants were obliged to construct a more cohesive society, through networks of intermediation.⁴⁸

In Nicaragua, the Peasant Country was created by eastward expansion within the departamentos of Estelí, Jinotega, Matagalpa, Boaco and Chontales — and also within the enclaves of Nueva Guinea. This had occurred either through the penetration of traditional haciendas in areas previously inhabited by poor farmers who subsequently became colonists or through the arrival of waves of immigrant peasant workers who conquered marginal territory and virgin mountain lands in order to produce grain, coffee, cocoa and livestock.

Both of these phenomena involved an extensive exploitation of land, steadily progressing towards the agricultural frontiers. In the process a new social subject was created: the *finquero* of peasant origin. From the 1950s onwards, a stream of poor farmers expelled from the lands around the cities of Boaco, Juigalpa, Darío and Terrabona, moved up into the mountains, forcing back the agricultural frontiers by sheer force of labour. Fifteen or twenty years' hard work by some of these workers resulted in their transformation from *campesino* to *finquero*. Another way to social and economic stability was the transportation of goods by mules from the larger cities to the *comarca*. Savings were then used to buy the rights to own land and livestock.

Peasants who had by these means become *finqueros* or livestock breeders nevertheless remained very much part of peasant life. They lived in the country amongst the peasant population, worked from sunrise to sunset with everyone else and ate under the same roof as the others. In this way, their importance was not simply limited to that of mediators in the economic life of their community: they were also seen as 'models to follow', as 'leaders' of their *comarca*. It is also important to note that, unlike the large landowners, such figures rarely allied themselves to Somoza's regime. Their links to the government before 1979 were basically administrative. The *finquero*, or 'the rural middle class', was a central feature of life in the region. Another important element in the social structure of the Peasant Country was the *colono*, that is, the peasant farmer without his own land or house. Moving from estate to estate, offering his labour as he went, the *colono* was able to grow food for his own needs. This group was almost wholly dependent on the *finquero*. There was, in fact, a strong measure of paternalism in the relationship between the two, the *colono* hoping for the day in which his *finquero* might allow him to buy a plot of land — in instalments — and so become a landowner himself. In general, the *colono* could be largely assured of the *finquero*'s help as labour was in short supply, and so his labour was an important commodity. This strengthened the client-worker links between the two groups. The 'agricultural proletariat' and the 'masses of semi-proletarianised peas-

⁴⁸ Theodor Shanin points out the essential 'duality' present in peasant life: on the one hand the peasant belongs to a social class which is considered subordinate to the majority and, on the other, the peasant belongs to a 'closed world with its own codes and autonomous social relationships'. This is reflected in the ideas of 'brotherhood versus economic competition' (Maize); 'societies based on the family versus societies based on the individual' (Coulange); '*Gemeinschaft versus Gesellschaft*' (Tönnies); or 'mechanical societies versus organic societies' (Durkheim). See Bastiansen (1991), p. 49.

ants' to whom the revolution made its appeal simply did not exist, or if they did they were an insignificant minority.

This was an isolated and closed society, poorly supplied with basic services and largely ignored by state institutions.⁴⁹ The Peasant Country was a society of relationships based on mutual need in which power lay in the hands of those who held the most land and livestock and the greatest access to the market. This power was in turn based on the idea of personal sacrifice as a central element in personal progress. The conditions under which migrants established and developed their farms on the agriculture frontier reinforced their peasant identity and distinct way of life; in particular their ties to the land and values of hard work, autonomy, patriarchy, paternalistic ties and extended family and community loyalties. While this peasant identity appears to have been particularly strong on the agricultural frontier, several studies suggest that elements of this culture were more generalised throughout Nicaragua's mountainous interior.⁵⁰

This social milieu was also marked by a belief in destiny and divine justice. The *finquero's* 'favour' was the action that solved the *colono's* difficulties (land distribution, a share in the profits or access to the market). And it was the *finquero* who acted as the mediator between the urban world and that of the peasants. Three institutions controlled mediation between the community and the world beyond: the 'patrón', the market and the church. Each of these exercised control through systems of mediation, but in every case the personal dimension of control was of most importance. The *colono* dealt with the businessman, the *finquero* and the *cura* (and later, the 'delegate of the word'). These were relationships of subordination, which, nevertheless, were not openly antagonistic. They were based around loyalty, a respect for the strongest and a paternalistic assistance for the weakest. What counted in the Peasant Country was the 'identity of occupation', in opposition to class identity, as E.P. Thompson (1979) observed in his characterisation of the class struggle in pre-capitalist and clientelistic societies.⁵¹

Even increased rural stratification did not necessarily rupture cross-class community ties, but rather led to adaptation of a complex web of clientelistic relationships between well-off and poor peasants. Patron-client ties and mutual aid between peasants of relatively equal status in the central highlands were not simply ideological remnants from an earlier era, but instead continued to serve the economic and social needs of the population, even as market forces increasingly penetrated the zone. As Horton suggests, for poor peasants such relationships had both an affective dimension and represented a means to mitigate the growing economic insecurity they faced.⁵² As Kaimowitz stated, 'the exchanges involved were typically unequal but were the only available source of land, support in times of crisis and scarce commodities, and were cemented by an elaborated ideological foundation based on kinship and dependence'.⁵³ In a study of the neighbouring

⁴⁹ In 1976 in Matiguás/Muy Muy, a municipal district in the Matagalpa district, with a total area of 2,008 km², there was no electricity, no drinking water, no postal services, no telephone, no telegram services, no hospitals nor any institutional services of any kind. And there were only 18 schools with a total number of 20 teachers. This in a town with a population of 47,104 inhabitants.

⁵⁰ CIERA (1989f), pp. 284–7.

⁵¹ There is little bibliography on clientelism and pre-capitalist societies in Central America, but the work of Segundo Montes (1987) is useful.

⁵² See Horton (1998), pp. 55–61.

⁵³ Kaimowitz (1988), p. 118.

municipality of Wiwilí, Keller also identified a complex chain of clientelistic ties in which, for example, a middle peasant might be the client of a *finquero* and at the same time serve as a *patrón* for poorer peasants in his community.⁵⁴ According to Quilalí residents, clientelistic ties were particularly strong between *colonos* who often lived on the same farm for a number of years and the *finquero patronos* with whom they worked. In the words of poor peasant Noris Pardo: ‘People respect their *patróns*. They were like your family, your father. We were the same, all on the same level. And no one spoke out or complained. He [the patron] told you, “I’ll give you this much”, and no one ever complained.’⁵⁵ As this comment suggests, many poor peasants depended on local elites not only in a concrete material sense for access to land, loans and services, but also as transmitters of ideals and values.

The FSLN and its revolution

The agrarian character of the Peasant Country can be resumed in three principal traits: its isolation; the presence and attitudes of the *colonos*; and the area of the *comarca*, in which social and economic developments were acted out. It was a place characterised by a strong individualism (based on the perception of one’s own strength as central to personal progress) and an equally strong neutrality towards events beyond the rural world.

The only external institution with a marked and continued presence in the region was the Catholic Church. In the second half of the twentieth century, the Church began to develop its structures within various *comarcas*. The first phase of this development was the construction of chapels, followed by the introduction of Catholic Action during the 1950s and ’60s and finally, the organisation of peasants into groups such as the delegates of the word.⁵⁶ In this sense it was almost always the parish that initiated and encouraged development schemes, building bridges, roads and schools, or encouraging education and health initiatives. One of the most important results of these Church activities was the formation of local leaders, the ‘delegates of the word’. Once established, they tended to control access to the community. This created yet another level of mediation, one that was accepted by the inhabitants who looked to the delegates for guidance. It was precisely because of these networks that the FSLN guerrillas were able to survive in certain rural areas during the 1960s and ’70s.

Prior to the revolution the FSLN developed a network of supporters, which, in turn, allowed the guerrillas to perceive the codes of conduct within peasant society. Although the guerrillas were from the outside world, many of them from the larger towns, their relationship with the local inhabitants was always respectful: they worked with the peasants, shared their accommodation and their concerns, and — above all — established strong affective links with their hosts. While there were never any promises of material benefits for those who helped the FSLN, there was a tacit expectation on the part of the collaborators that some kind of reward might be at hand. The day that the revolution finally triumphed, they thought, would be the day

⁵⁴ Keller (1986), p. 189.

⁵⁵ Cited in Horton (1998), p. 56.

⁵⁶ Little systematised information exists about this process, which varied from one municipal department to another. The work carried out by CIERA (1985) into the peasant movement in Matiguás provides some data.

that a share in running their own lives might finally come their way, as the following comments indicate:

I joined up without expecting anything in return ... but one day Comandante Víctor Tirado said to me ... 'when we win, you'll be mayor'.

I was really poor, and I was hoping that, with the revolution, there'd be a change, and things would get better for me.

Carlos Fonseca told us that when we had won, there would be no peasants without land and no land without men to work it.⁵⁷

However, when victory came, the peasant collaborators — *los colaboradores históricos* — were effectively abandoned. The deception was all the greater as it went against their basic code of mutual help. The leaders with whom they had shared so much — men and women who were now famous and could be heard speaking on the radio — would never again return. In their place came another 'breed' of outsiders:

When the revolution won, we knew then that our brothers, our sons, were leaders, would never come back again. Others came to the area to give orders and to run things. They were younger and it was as if they spoke another language; they were different ... and they simply didn't take us into account.⁵⁸

Initially this change brought about a strong sense of disappointment and, in some cases, resentment. Many peasants were later to see their economic circumstances undergo progressive deterioration, frustrating their hopes for a better life.

However, the triumph of the revolution was followed by an initial phase of euphoria. Local church leaders joined the revolutionary organisations operating at a local level, such as the Sandinista Defence Committees (CDS). Peasants would come down from the hills to attend municipal meetings and lent out their mules to the new authorities. Their houses also provided shelter for the literacy brigades. Young men and women participated as health brigade members. The *colonos* continued to work, now on the lands from the confiscated former estates. And in certain areas, indigenous peoples began to claim their historical territories. This did not last long. The CDS and the municipal committees enabled a direct link to be forged between the new administrative power and the peasantry. Yet these organisations had been drawn up by the Sandinistas to act in the same fashion as in the cities and towns: they were groups given over to political and social mobilisation. The peasants, seeing that few concrete answers to their problems were forthcoming, quickly stopped attending the meetings. Within a short time, the only peasant members involved were the presidents who increasingly began to question their role:

At the beginning of the revolution we worked far more happily and enthusiastically. We met other peasants, holding meetings in our houses: we felt fulfilled. In those days, we had no idea what a CDS was. There was a meeting where Mario Amador ... came to see me with three soldiers. They began telling us that we had to form a group, some kind of organisation ... They said: 'You're going to form a CDS'. I had no idea what that was, so I said that they would have to explain it to me first. But they replied: 'Look, if you accept it, your people will get help'. So of course I said yes. They sent

⁵⁷ CIERA (1985), p. 105.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

me off to Matagalpa to find out just what this thing was. Someone there from the Frente Sandinista explained it all to me. I backed out of it immediately and went home. I didn't like it because they told me that I'd have to be 'the ears and the eyes of the revolution'; they said that it was a way to keep control of the people in the area. So it wasn't anything to do with getting help at all. I reckoned that it was all a mistake and that it was better to get away from there.⁵⁹

I took part in the uprising. I was young. My brother and me took our rifles and slogged it out with the *guardia*. And when we won, it was something very sweet ... but when the party members came up from the city and started to tell me what I could or couldn't do, well, that began to get my back up. Nobody ordered me to fight against Somoza, and nobody's going to give me orders right here on my very own *finca*.⁶⁰

Revolutionary institutionalism in the Peasant Country operated through two organisations: the National Development Bank (BND) and the distribution agency for public supplies, PROCAMPO. However, neither of these organisations took the *comarca* or the family unit as their base. Instead, they were founded on the cooperative, which simultaneously linked them to the new state apparatus centred in the local towns. Leaders of the ATC, arriving from the Pacific, were disconcerted to find that the field workers and *colonos* had no wish to become members of the proletariat, preferring — on the contrary — to work as farmers. It also came as a surprise to learn that their demands were for their *own* land to cultivate their *own* produce, and that the land they preferred was that belonging to the state, not to the 'patrón'. Another area of discrepancy came about when representatives of the agricultural unions limited their support to the cooperatives and the ERAs. The 'members and workers' of these groups were far from satisfied with this attitude, as the comments below indicate. These workers had not received their promised plots of land from the FSLN:

I stayed on as a *colono* in Jobo, where I had my little piece of land to earn a living from ... When I was in the State Company, the administrator said that we were all employees and that if we used the land for ourselves, we would destroy the pasture when we burnt it ... but we had always worked that way...

All of the work collectives fell apart within a year of starting up because the financing was cut and we got into debt. We had to sell off part of our produce just to pay our credit bills. It was all the fault of bad organisation ... there was no coordination, no support from the state and — to be honest — I never really understood what the cooperative was all about anyway.

In the first months of the revolution no encouragement was given to the peasant movement. Instead efforts were directed at grouping the peasants into organisations that were directed from the city and the state. Within this framework, certain Sandinista members — generally young and urban — limited their activities to the centres of the towns, their discourse largely unconnected to the specific problems encountered by the peasant communities surrounding them. Unsurprisingly, a number of peasants criticised these 'urban' Sandinistas, claiming that 'many of them learned

⁵⁹ Taken from an interview with Pedro Turín Blandón who was later to join the Contra (Bendaña, 1991, pp. 129–62).

⁶⁰ Evidence given by a *finquero* from Matiguás who had joined the FSLN in the period immediately following the successful outcome of the revolution, but who subsequently distanced himself from the movement at the beginning of 1980. He was later to leave the country altogether, returning only in 1990.

a lot about writing detailed reports, but not a thing about getting to grips with the problems that faced us in the places where we lived'.⁶¹

While in rural Nicaragua there was widespread euphoria and celebration at the defeat of the 40-year Somoza dictatorship, the many demands on the new revolutionary government limited the material and human resources available to the municipalities. The power vacuum created by the collapse of the political and economic structures of *Somocismo* in the central and northern highlands was largely filled by inexperienced personnel, many of whom were outsiders to the zone. Soon after taking power, FSLN departmental authorities appointed a number of political secretaries to head the party in these areas. Most were young people from the Pacific coastal cities, committed to the revolution, but unfamiliar with the culture of Nicaragua's rural interior. Keller describes, for example, an urban ATC official who arrived in the municipality of Wiwilí in 1980 and gave long speeches punctuated with jargon and political slogans that promptly put the assembled peasants to sleep and who eventually alienated the population with his domineering attitude.⁶² Horton provides a further example from Quilalí, where the person who served as FSLN political secretary in early 1980 was originally from León; he came to the northern mountains for the first time as part of the 1980 literacy campaign and was only later assigned to Quilalí.⁶³

The decision taken by the FSLN to give priority to party loyalty by placing inexperienced activists in certain zones, rather than taking advantage of the existing network of local leaders, proved a serious miscalculation. Activists needed to be able to talk the language of the *comarca*, to speak easily about *frijoles*, farm animals, types of corn and the difficulties of each passing season. Many party members, however, closed themselves off from the reality of the rural world and focused instead on demanding politically 'correct' behaviour and attitudes. After losing the 1990 elections, a good number of Sandinistas came to realise — far too late — just how badly they had run things at the time.

However, by far the most negative measures to affect the farmers were the confiscation of land and the commercial policies adopted. Both had serious consequences for every individual involved in the complex chain of agricultural and commercial connections, and ultimately brought about the first breakdown between the revolutionary project and the peasants.⁶⁴ The confiscation of lands was directed at those who had been 'part' of the old regime. The problem, however, was that a good number of people who had held positions within the local administration (justices of the peace, presidents of the regional election bodies) were not necessarily connected to *Somocismo* or its history of repression. Many of the 'victims' of confiscation were simply the intermediaries between their society and the former government. Naturally, large landowners and the middle-classes had their estates confiscated, but so too did the *finqueros*, to whom everyone owed a favour. MIDINRA applied a policy of confiscation across the board that paid no attention to social context.

At the same time, news of questionable confiscations spread rapidly amongst the townsfolk, causing great consternation. People would gather to talk over the latest details in the town square in hushed tones. This is how *doña* Celia recalled

⁶¹ Mendoza (1990), p. 36.

⁶² Keller (1986), p. 228.

⁶³ Horton (1998), p. 78.

⁶⁴ CIERA (1985), p. 117.

the confiscation of the farmstead and lands belonging to a local, elderly *finquero* who, with no family of his own, had given support to a considerable number of poorer people, often helping to pay for the education of the peasants' children.⁶⁵

That's all anyone talked about that week: they've taken away *don* Facundo's lands. 'Facundo! But he's always helped us out!' we all said. But, you know, the *Frente* authorities weren't around at the time, and anyway, we didn't dare say anything against them. But it was a great shame, and we all felt the same way about it.

After three or four confiscations, the *finqueros* felt themselves to be under threat and the cry went out that 'the revolution is communist, they're taking everyone's land; it's all going to end up in the hands of the state'. These measures effectively disarticulated peasant society, generating a widely-felt sense of resentment which proved a godsend to the counterrevolutionary coalition.

The other area of policy that had a negative impact was that of commerce. The Sandinistas wanted to eliminate the figure of the intermediary — the 'middle-man' — who, according to MIDINRA's world-view, represented the exploitation of the peasant farmers. This ignored the fact that such people were, more accurately, the central figure around which the entire commercial process was built. The intermediaries were not obscure figures of exploitation, nor were they the strongmen of the *comarca*; they were — simply but crucially — the people who bought the mountain produce, who put the peasant family in contact with the *comarca*, the *comarca* in contact with the municipal region and the municipal region in contact with the outside world. Once ENABAS had set up its purchasing and sales monopoly, the traditional networks of commerce that crossed the mountain regions were broken, constituting a severe blow to the peasant economy. On the other hand, however, government clerks and administrators — above all those employed in security services — were accustomed to acquire foodstuffs and other products, which were then passed from one department to another without the slightest difficulty, free from the need to report to anyone and from the fear of confiscation. Years later, a former member of the Dirección General de la Seguridad del Estado (DGSE) who was working in Region V recalled how these practices caused considerable indignation amongst the local peasant population:

I spent months wandering from one department to another, and I always carried things around with me: eggs, cheese, vegetables ... Because I was in the DGSE and I was *working*, I had no problems. No one ever asked me what I was doing walking about with all that stuff. But if any of the peasants had tried to do the same, I'm absolutely sure that they'd have had the whole lot confiscated at an army checkpoint. That's the way it was ...⁶⁶

In this way the community began to identify the state as responsible for the undoing of mountain commerce. The free sale of coffee was prohibited, so too was that of cocoa and basic grains. Traditional traders felt themselves to be persecuted. Worse, however, was the fact that in many areas of the country the state was unable to replace what it had so effectively undone. The chain of supply and commerce was frequently incomplete and the position of the mediator was left unfilled, since its

⁶⁵ Taken from an interview with *doña* Celia Porras León (1992).

⁶⁶ Taken from a conversation in 1996 with a former teacher of sociology at the UCA who had worked in the Ministry of the Interior (MINT) between 1979 and 1990.

importance had never been recognised or understood. This provoked an acute sense of insecurity and anxiety among the peasants, who were now unsure about how to sell their crops and how, therefore, to support their families. The traditional mechanisms had been swept away, but nothing had replaced them:

One day the guys from MICOIN came along and they told me to sell the crops to them, and that I couldn't sell anything in town anymore. 'Come off it! That's just stupid,' I said. 'Look, it was me who bought the seeds, me who planted them and me who grew all this stuff. Nobody gave me anything for free. So I reckon I've got the right to sell to whoever I want, wherever I want.' I've seen how these guys make a fortune in a couple of minutes, while we're sweating our backs off here, month after month, just to get by. And now here's those *jodidos* from MICOIN telling me to sell to them...⁶⁷

The disruption of pre-existing commercial links contributed to a worsening of peasants' living standards, supply links were broken or inadequate and inflation began to soar. Discontent began to grow. The general feeling among the peasants was that it was the local people, poor and now unable to support themselves, *su-friendo con esta revolución*.⁶⁸

The situation put the peasantry into an absurd, almost Kafkaesque situation, as Marchetti pointed out:

A peasant wants to buy a pair of trousers. He has to go to the BND, on the day that his CCS tells him, to get some money. The bank tells him that there's no money for trousers, only money for sowing maize. The peasant accepts the deal: he says that he'll sow maize, although he really only wants the trousers. But when he gets to town, he finds out that they're too expensive, and anyway, they don't fit him. So off he goes to the parish to see if Padre Antonio has brought some clothes back from Italy. There aren't any. So then he goes to PROAGRO to get some things he'll need to sow the maize. They don't have a grinding file for his machete, so he goes back home and sharpens his machete with another, older file. Two hours later, it breaks because it hadn't been properly sharpened. But in the end, he harvests his maize only to find that, instead of having two or three traders fighting to get it from him at a good price, he has to borrow a donkey to take it to ENABAS. And when he's there, they pay him a ridiculously low price. The clerk tells him that grain prices are kept low so that inflation in the towns doesn't get out of hand; this way they can make sure that the price of trousers doesn't keep on climbing. The peasant asks if there are any trousers in town now. ENABAS tells him that he'll have to ask Señor Bartolo, in the MICOIN store. Bartolo tells him that the trousers cost 1,600 a pair and that they'll be in the store in about two month's time. The peasant puts his coins in his pocket, decides not to cancel his loan with the BND and sets off for the bar to drink a little *guaro*.⁶⁹

Rural people viewed the state with increasing suspicion: in addition to confiscating land from 'innocent' people and provoking inefficient and insufficient commerce, it was directly undermining the 'logic' of peasant life. There was also a clear reticence and fear on the part of the administration to move into the interior regions. Consequently, in certain rural areas, the Contra filled that space.

⁶⁷ Taken from a conversation with peasant farmers in the area of Copalar.

⁶⁸ Taken from a conversation with the manager of the supply point in Las Limas, Matiguás.

⁶⁹ A report in CIERA (1985), p. 205.

Peasants on the agricultural frontier: the build-up of the Peasant-Contra

Peasants situated on the agricultural frontier never referred to the counter-revolutionaries as ‘Contras’. Instead, from Wiwilí to Nueva Guinea, the peasants called them ‘la otra gente’; the ‘other people’.

The arrival of the revolution and the subsequent emergence of the Contra movement brought abrupt changes to peasant life. In setting up its line of defence, the Sandinistas disrupted the peasants’ economy even further. After the first Contra attacks, the administration made efforts to incorporate a broad band of ‘collectives’, including the peasants, into the defence of the revolution. However, the way in which this mobilisation occurred had the effect of distancing the peasants still further from the Sandinista government and the revolutionary project.

One of the great failures of the ‘defence policy’ was its systematic undervaluing of the nature of peasant life, of its particular forms of production. Peasant fighters, many of whom had initially volunteered for service, came to feel themselves to be at odds with the Sandinistas. The main elements in this ‘distancing’ process were the Sandinista’s recruitment system, the work carried out in the rural areas by the Contras and the treatment meted out by both the Sandinista People’s Army (EPS) and the Ministry of the Interior’s Chief Executive Organisation for State Security (DGSE), the so-called ‘seguridad’.

The recruitment of peasants, ‘para defender la revolución’ (and this in areas characterised by the non-implementation of the revolutionary project) was carried out without any prior preparation. Quite simply, Sandinista representatives present in the area were contacted and given the order to recruit men for immediate mobilisation. This was the case with battalion 50/83, recruited from the peasants of Matiguás, Muy-Muy and Pancasán. Sent to Puerto Cabezas in the Costa Atlántica region, it was famous for the counterproductive effect that it had on the Sandinista revolution:⁷⁰

The leaders said: ‘We’re going to mobilise you all, but only for two weeks’... They put us in a truck and sent us off. We didn’t have any uniforms and most of us had no idea how to use a rifle ... They said that things were a little tough out on the coast and that we had to go and defend the revolution from imperialism ... well, you know, things like that.

But they said that our families would be looked after, that they wouldn’t need anything. And they told us that we could come and look after our allotments ... but none of that was true, it was all a big trap, a trick. And it was a great loss for all of us, a loss for us peasants.⁷¹

As one of the leaders of battalion 50/83 pointed out, by not informing the men of their true destination or of the time that they were expected to fight, the peasants felt themselves to have been deceived. Their reaction was simple: desertion.

The displacement of peasants to areas far from their homes constituted an attack on their collective sense of belonging and their system of production. The desertion of battalion 50/83 was merely a first step in a chain of reactions which saw many peasants put down their rifles, leave their battalions and walk out of their cooperatives, never again to take part in any institution or activity related to the revolution. Some went further still, setting aside part of their produce for the Contra. The heightened sense of dissatisfaction and distrust towards Sandinista political and military

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 132–7.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 131–4.

structures was swiftly seized on by the Contras. Fear was another dimension, especially after the wave of desertions had taken place:

When we got back home, there was no help at all for us ... it was just the opposite: we started getting threats from the *compas* (the Sandinista soldiers). They said: 'I bet you're hanging around with the Contra, now that you've deserted the army ... well, you're going find out what happens to deserters' ... So we were scared of coming up against them, scared even to go down into town...⁷²

However, despite the reasons behind the desertions, there was no attempt by the Sandinistas to rectify recruitment policy until well into the second half of the decade. The mobilisations were kept up, later, the Self-Defence Cooperatives (CADs) were set up, and, from 1984, the highly unpopular obligatory military service — known as the Patriotic Military Service (SMP) — began to take its effect. Following a number of successful Contra attacks against certain supply and cooperative organisations, and increasingly aware that the EPS mobilisations were not obtaining the required results, the state began to try a different approach. The peasants were now 'oriented' towards the organisation of Self-Defence Cooperatives, the official emphasis being on peasants defending the lands they had received. It was hoped that this would create a ring of protection around the agricultural frontier. The effect, however, was that the peasants began to think that the revolutionary administration as now, in effect, charging them for land originally distributed for free!

The CADs failed economically, largely due to the constant mobilisations that their members were subjected to, creating yet further debt. From the peasants' point of view, this simply confirmed their already negative opinion of cooperatives. It seemed that while participation in these groups brought no clear advantages, it certainly brought disadvantages:

If you said that you were waiting to harvest, they said that you were one of those people who didn't want to collaborate with the revolution. And then you were a marked man ... it was better just to go and keep out of trouble ... those *compas* could really screw you up ...

It was like being in the EPS full-time ... but we had our obligation to the bank, and the bank wanted its money back ... The bank doesn't understand when you talk about mobilisation ...⁷³

The final blow came with military service. This fatally disrupted the peasants' economic system, sending away its young men, generally for periods of two years, thus depriving peasants of the labour force required to sustain their economy. Furthermore, by sending the men far from their local areas, the link between the peasant and the *comarca*, so intensely felt and of such vital importance, was cut. Fear drove a great number to run away and hide in the forests. Together, these developments finally convinced the peasants that the revolution was against them, against their families and their economy. Soon they began to react:

People began to act much more 'together' in the *comarcas* ... permanent watch posts were set up to keep an eye on the SMP operatives ... we saw the *compas* out

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

and about on recruiting drives, but when they got to the villages, there were no men to be found ...⁷⁴

The implementation of the SMP was a disaster for the Sandinistas. After 18 months it had achieved no substantial military advances in the zone. Worse still, the ratio of peasants who had gone over to the Contra compared to those who were recruited by the revolutionary forces was five to one in favour of *la otra gente*.⁷⁵ And the upshot of all this, as a woman from Matiguás observed in 1996, was that there were simply no young men left in the *comarcas*:

The towns and *comarcas* were sad places during the war ... there were no young men around, only women, children and old folk ... The young men were away with the army and *la otra gente*. And those who weren't had left the country ...

Little by little, the EPS became the only aspect of the revolution that the peasants were left with. Commerce had largely disappeared, loans from the BND were few and far between and there was no education or health service available. As a clerk from MIDINRA stationed in Region IV commented: 'the Contra got rid of us step by step'.

A large number of cooperatives were dismantled after various incursions by the Contra. Other governmental institutions and guild organisations, as well as FSLN party members, also retreated to the towns. What remained was an armed presence, and only that. Naturally this reinforced the idea that the revolution was somehow the 'enemy' of the peasants' world. If it is true that military misconduct was initially directed only at individuals, it is also the case that, with the increasing success of the Contras, this misconduct became more general. It was at this time that the Sandinista forces began to be called the 'piris' (from 'piricuaco', a synonym of 'hunting dog'). Such were the abuses committed that the leaders of the FSLN, the EPS and the DGSE were later forced to recognise with regret what had been carried out in their name:⁷⁶

The *seguridad* arrived at a peasant house late at night, and they took away the father because someone had said that his son had gone over to the other side.

The *compas* came and surrounded the church. They came inside during the mass itself and took away a man at gunpoint; they said he was a deserter ...⁷⁷

As Horton documents, in the municipality of Quilalí it is not the Sandinista army but the state security apparatus that anti-Sandinistas remember with most fear and hostility.⁷⁸ The overall mission of Sandinista state security was to gather intelligence on the Contras and counterevolutionary activities in general. In Quilalí and other conflict zones, state security employed double agents who joined the Contra troops or collaborator networks, as well as a series of more casual informants who exchanged information for ideological reasons, money or liquor. Once the security forces had gathered sufficient information on a collaborator

⁷⁴ Taken from an interview with a former Contra member in Matiguás.

⁷⁵ According to reports carried out by CIERA specialists on behalf of the EPS and the MINT (CIERA, undated).

⁷⁶ See the document written in the FSLN Members' Assembly, El Crucero, at the beginning of 1990. This document discusses the reasons for the Sandinista electoral defeat and provides a rigorous list of errors committed, principally in the Peasant Country. It was later published in the magazine, *Envío*: FSLN (1990).

⁷⁷ Taken from various CIERA reports written in 1984 for the MINT.

⁷⁸ Horton (1998), pp. 211–14.

network, authorities carried out arrests of up to a dozen peasant suspects. An Americas Watch investigation (1987) found that mass arrests were common practice in rural areas where Contras were active.

The Sandinista forces frequently acted in ways that were violent and overbearing. News of their misconduct spread rapidly throughout the peasant communities. Many people lived quite literally in terror of the soldiers, fearing for their lives even in daily activities such as going to town. The war meant that the peasants' traditional neutrality was increasingly undermined. Soldiers would often use violence or threats to try to extract information about the Contra. People were indiscriminately accused of feeding and supplying the 'enemy'. Some peasants were even the victims of the EPS policy of confiscating goods and property from those alleged to have contacts with the Contra. By all accounts, the Sandinista forces were often successful in identifying and partially dismantling dozens of collaborator networks, but at a heavy political cost.

At the height of the conflict the EPS began to use long range rockets — BM-21s, more popularly referred to as 'Katiuskas' — against the counterrevolutionary forces. Many fell close to the peasants' houses, or into the middle of their corn fields. The communities were panic-stricken. When sociologists from the University of Central America (UCA) asked a peasant if these bombings were dangerous, he replied:

Are they dangerous? Not for the Contra they're not ... they never even hit them, do they? But they're certainly dangerous for us ... the innocents are paying for the sinners ...

Brutality, however, was certainly not the monopoly of the Sandinista forces. In the initial stages of the conflict, the Contra acted in the most violent ways on arrival in the peasant communities. At this time its members were still largely former soldiers from Somoza's army, and their actions were wholly indiscriminate. Anyone could be accused of helping the Sandinistas.⁷⁹

'La otra gente', seeing that the peasants didn't share their views, began to torture and humiliate us. They raped our daughters and wives. They stole our cattle. And after that, they left their linkmen in place.⁸⁰ So if someone took a cow and ate it, you couldn't complain to anyone, because a linkman would hear you. Next time the Contra were around, they might kill you. When their soldiers came here we all got out of the way, and they stole our pigs and other things ...⁸¹

Stealing was the least of the problems that the peasants had to put up with. Many people, innocent of any particular 'association' with the Sandinistas, were tortured and killed:

There was a 15 year-old boy, mentally retarded and epileptic [in the cooperative installation that had just been attacked]. When we got back, we saw that he'd had his throat slit. They'd cut open his stomach and left his bowels spread out across the floor,

⁷⁹ A great number of testimonies to the Contra atrocities exist: for example, Pax Christi International (1981); Chomsky (1988); the confessions of an ex-Contra (Reimann, 1987); and the reports from the US NGO 'Witness for Peace'.

⁸⁰ Linkmen (*enlaces*) were peasants connected to the Contra who provided reports on EPS movements and informed on other peasants who were giving help or support to the Sandinistas.

⁸¹ From Mendoza (1990) p. 27.

like a rope. They did the same to Juan Corrales. He was shot in the fighting. They cut him open from top to bottom, took out his intestines and cut off his testicles.⁸²

The message of such brutality was clear: anyone assisting the Sandinistas in any way became a target for the Contra. Between 1982 and 1984 in Region IV alone, the Contra tortured and killed more than 400 peasants for having belonged to cooperative organisations. This message was quickly understood.

The armed conflict between the Contras and the Sandinistas was prejudicial to peasant life as a whole, even if individuals were loyal to one or other side in the struggle. Peasants found themselves kidnapped by the Contra, taken prisoner by the Sandinistas, and their lands destroyed by both sides. The social organisation of their lives was systematically violated by forces external to the *comarca*. However, throughout the conflict the peasants gradually came to give their support to the Contra, withdrawing it little by little from the Sandinistas. While both sides treated the peasantry badly, the majority came to feel that it was the government that had most clearly harmed their interests. This was reflected not only in the elections of 1984 and 1990, in which the peasant vote went largely against the Frente Sandinista, but also in the progressive incorporation of peasants into the Contra.

From 1983 onwards, the Contra took advantage of the errors of the revolutionary administration and its forces. Local leaders were incorporated in the same way that the FSLN had incorporated them before 1979. In this way the Contra was able to dismantle a number of cooperatives, to encourage boycotts of Sandinista proposals for the local area and — above all — to organise the massive recruitment of young peasants as fighters for the counterrevolution. In 1983, the Contra contingent directed by Field Commander ‘Quiché’, the CRJS (Comando Regional Jorge Salazar) was able to leave its base in Honduras and establish itself permanently in Zelaya Central, between Region VI and the San Juan river. New recruits soon surpassed all expectations, prompting the reorganisation of five distinct command groups. These were led by men who were, largely, of peasant stock: Emiliano, Franklin, Capulina, Dumas and Fernando. Guerrilla activity in Regions V and VI changed its characteristics; fighters were no longer mercenaries and *ex-guardias*, they were now the soldiers of a peasant army which received its orders from its former ‘patrons’. In this area, the Contra resistance was essentially headed by the *finqueros* leading thousands of *colonos* and other agricultural workers who had been impoverished by MIDINRA’s policies. Throughout the greater part of the 1980s, these men received their instructions from former colonels of the Guardia Nacional and agents from Washington.

An analysis of the composition and structure of the CRJS’s five command contingents and the Regional Command of Diriangén (CRD) reveals a striking similarity with structures present in the Peasant Country before 1979.⁸³ The responsibilities and obligations of the contingents mirrored the pre-existing social stratification of those involved. As can be seen in Table 6, the ranks of political or military chief in the task forces (the combat divisions into which the Contra was divided) generally corresponded to *finqueros* or their sons. The troops were drawn from *colonos* and other workers of a similar social level, the *mozos* and

⁸² Witness account of an attack on cooperative installations in 1984, Chomsky (1988) p. 22.

⁸³ CIERA (1985, pp.172–4; 1986; 1989f, pp. 231–340); Núñez et al (1991), pp. 401–4.

parceleros of the rural world. Collaboration networks were organised along the lines that had operated in the traditional estates.⁸⁴

Table 6: Composition of the Comando Regional Diriangén

Social Level	Military Rank	Nature of Collaboration
Poor peasant	Trooper	Runner or linkman
'Middle' peasant (Between <i>finquero</i> and <i>campesino pobre</i>)	Trooper, JFT, JD.	Collaborator
Livestock breeder or <i>finquero</i>	Non-combatant	Network head
Rich peasant (father)	Non-combatant	Network head
Rich peasant (son)	JD, JCR	Usually combat only
Wife of insurgent	Non-combatant	Collaborator

JFT: Jefe de Fuerza de Tarea (Task Force Head)

JD: Jefe de Destacamento (Head of Detachment)

JCR: Jefe de Comando Regional (Head of Regional Command)

Source: Interviews with captured soldiers from Plan Llovizna, 1985, in CIERA (1989f) p. 268.

The interests and aims of the different social groups were diverse. The *finqueros* and their sons had joined up to recover their lands and possessions, the *colonos* and other workers because of the impossibility to work as they had done in the past and also in response to the treatment received at the hands of the Sandinistas. Finally, the collaborators were with the Contra because of the hopes they held out for a return to the past, to the ways of working and trading that they had known before. They also desired the disappearance of the regime that had taken their sons from them and had left them all impoverished:

When we beat the Sandinistas, everything's going to change ... there'll be no more rationing ... the traders will all come back, we'll be able to buy clothes just like before ... no more repression, no more military service ...

Additionally, joining up with the Contra represented the chance to stay in the same *comarca*. This was in stark contrast to the SMP. With the Contra, the peasants could see their family from time to time, work in the fields at harvest time by day and join the task forces by night. This gave rise to the name — coined by

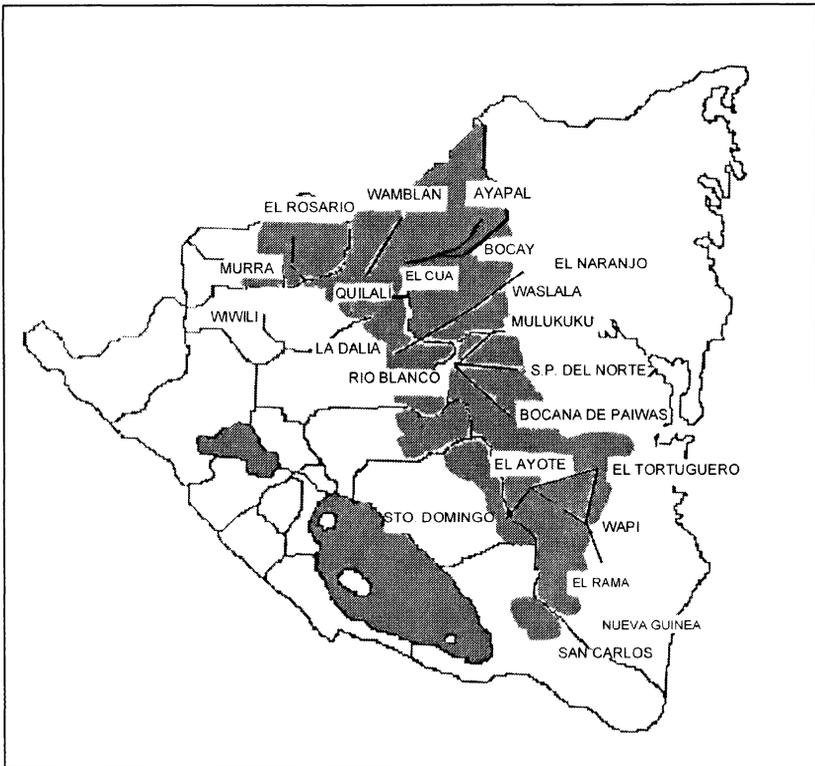
⁸⁴ The collaboration network was a civilian structure that protected, fed and provided information to the Contra's military units. It was established by recruiting a key member of the community who had sufficient economic resources to allow mobility and at the same time the capacity to remain free from suspicion. In general, the people used were farmers, traders, delegates of the word and even presidents of certain cooperatives. This person would then become the head of the network. The 'runners' were civilian recruits who acted as subordinates and who were responsible for specific tasks such as carrying messages or acting as sporadic guides for the Contra.

the Sandinistas — of ‘part-time peasants’. Quite simply, for farmers faced with the SMP, the Contra was the lesser evil of the two options.⁸⁵

In the second half of the decade, when the FSLN had revised its policies in an attempt to recover its social base in the Peasant Country, many peasants, enrolled in the Contra, simultaneously took advantage of the assistance offered by the administration. Mendoza outlines this situation in an article questioning the Sandinista’s intervention in this area:⁸⁶

They wouldn’t have left, even though they would probably have remained the social base for the others (i.e. the Contras), working for them, they still wouldn’t have left. But, given our policies, they thought: ‘Well, I’ll go, I’ll leave the family and get out of the way. Meanwhile, they’ll give my wife some kind of loan.’ And that’s what happened. And what was the result? That many, many men joined up with the Contra while we gave help to their wives and families ...

Map 4: The Contra Line



Between 1985 and 1986, several Contra command groups remained permanently in the Nicaraguan interior. Their leaders only returned to their Honduran bases in order to refresh supplies, receive new orders and — in certain cases — to see their families.

⁸⁵ CIERA (1985), p. 132.

⁸⁶ Mendoza (1990), p. 41.

There were seven main areas in Nicaragua in which the Contras were based: in Batistán Mountain; Zelaya Central; the Almendro and Cerro Musún; Region V; Copalar and the Río Blanco; Region VI; and Waslala and the Bosawás Reserve on the east of the Atlantic coastal region. In this way, the Contra was able to count on a social base among the peasants that covered the entire agricultural frontier, and which allowed for ease of movement within a very broad range of territory. Stretching from the north, close to the Honduran border at San José de Bocay, passing through El Rosario and Wamblan, el Cuá, Wiwilí, el Río Tuma, la Dalia, Río Blanco, to the east of Matiguás, San Pedro del Norte, Bocana de Paiwas, to the east of Boaco, el Ayote, el Tortuguero, Wapi and Chontales, el Rama, Nueva Guinea right down to the San Juan River (running into Costa Rica).

Given this situation, the EPS and MIDINRA displaced a great number of peasants in settlements,⁸⁷ organised into cooperatives (usually self-defence groups), with the aim of creating a cordon of security around the Sandinista enclaves. This cordon became, de facto, the Sandinistas' agricultural frontier, in which — according to the specific area — various projects were set up to combat the Contra and to win over the enemy's support base.⁸⁸

The reply given by a captured Contra fighter to the question of whether the Contras intended to kidnap men for combat clearly illustrates the way in which the Contra had captured the Sandinistas' support base: 'Why should we kidnap anyone? Nowadays it's the people who come looking for us.'⁸⁹ If the Contras were guilty in the first few years of coercing people to join up by force, threats, kidnapping and extortion, by the middle of the decade their methods had changed. From this point on, members were largely volunteers who joined up by means of a ritual process: the leader of the local command group would arrange a place and time with the would-be fighter. He would then wait for the group to arrive, letting it go a full kilometre past him. The man would then run to catch up with the column. Once he had done so, the leader warned him that he was now with the Contra and that this meant leaving father, mother and family *hasta la victoria*.

By these means the Contra was able to become a combative force far in excess of the small army supplied by the USA and limited only to the north of the country that many have described. It was 'an army composed of peasants who were fighting against a regime that threatened their mercantile identity and their traditional axiology; a regime that had committed the error of undermining the authority of peasant leaders and of restricting freedom of movement; a regime which, through its military service, took away these people's sons, their most

⁸⁷ Settlements were concentrated in Regions II, V and VI, and in the Northern Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAN). In Region I, there were 39 settlements distributed throughout various areas; in Region V 66, concentrated in the zones of Rama, Muelle de los Bueyes, Boaco, Juigalpa, Villa Sandino, Acoyapa, Santo Tomás, Camoapa and Nueva Guinea. Others were located around the Río Blanco, Jinotega and Cuá-Bocay. In the RAAN, there were 92 settlements distributed between the Prinzapolka River and the borderline River Coco. See the document by Barry and Serra (1989) and published by CRIES, for an analysis of the refugees, repatriates and displaced population during the 1980s. This information was later complemented by reports from the Comisión Internacional de Apoyo y Verificación de la Organización de Estados Americanos (CIAV), the institution responsible for overseeing the demobilisation of the Nicaraguan resistance.

⁸⁸ This was the *Plan General Único* (FSLN, 1985), incorporating economic, social and defence characteristics, implemented with very unequal results in Regions I, V and VI. See also Horton (1998), pp. 229–40.

⁸⁹ See also the text 'Contra Recruitment Tactics', in Horton (1998), pp. 180–3.

precious asset and their main source of work'.⁹⁰ It was this, later Contra that so successfully provided the men, the force and the sacrifice that characterised the subsequent conflict with the Sandinistas.

Table 7: Population Totals Displaced, by Region (1981–88)

Region	Number of families	Number of people	% of displaced people with respect to total population
I	14,000	84,000	23.6
II	3,028	18,172	2.8
III	–	–	–
IV	183	1,100	0.7
V	16,451	105,093	31.5
VI	14,166	85,000	18.7
RAAN*	7,216	43,300	26.8
RAAS**	950	5,700	8.5
RSJ***	2,000	12,000	30.2
Total	57,994	354,365	

(*) RAAN refers to the northern zone of the Atlantic Coast, known — from 1987 onwards — as the Northern Atlantic Autonomous Region.

(**) RAAS refers to the southern zone of the Atlantic Coast, known — from 1987 onwards — as the Southern Atlantic Autonomous Region.

(***) RSJ refers to Río San Juan special region.

Source: Regional government reports into the displaced population, Barry and Serra (1989), p. 42.

What has come to be called the Peasant Contra, headed by field commanders from the peasantry, had the objectives of recovering lost territory, defeating the Sandinista regime and achieving the satisfaction of peasant’s demands. Its contact with the other forces of the counterrevolutionary coalition (in which the US administration played a crucial role)⁹¹ was always carried out through intermediaries. And differences were experienced with these intermediaries not only in the ways in which the conflict was interpreted, but also in the way it was experienced, directed and — finally — ended. Although a range of interests had joined the Peasant Contra to the other forces of the Contra coalition, their objectives — as well as the price paid for obtaining them — were substantially different. However, the manipulation and use made of the peasant troops, and their subsequent betrayal by the Contra ‘elite’ and the USA, is beyond the scope of this essay.

⁹⁰ Núñez et al. (1991), p. 44.

⁹¹ See Chomsky (1988); Gutman (1988); LaFeber (1993); Kornbluh (1987); Núñez et al. (1991); Walker (ed.) (1987), Yeves (1991).

Towards a conclusion: the last peasant rebellion?

In attempting to assess why peasants on the Nicaraguan agricultural frontier formed the social base of the Contras, this paper has focused on local, ‘micro’ events, in contrast to the macro-structural studies more usually undertaken. Part of the explanation lies in the construction of the ‘new order’ managed and overseen by the Sandinistas. The revolutionary project was built around a vanguard whose points of reference were the Cuban Revolution, Liberation Theology and dependency theory.⁹² In addition to a bias towards the urban proletariat, this led to the systematic undervaluing of the particular socioeconomic and cultural characteristics present in Nicaragua’s interior⁹³ and Atlantic regions.⁹⁴

The construction of an institutional ‘environment’ by means of official policies, of a symbolic world that excluded peasants, the growth of a state apparatus that penetrated the intimacy of the family group and the implementation of highly modernising agricultural policies served to separate the Peasant Country from the administration. From the peasants’ point of view, the creation of a ‘new society’ simply brought about the re-introduction of the old ways. While on the one hand the repressive regime was dismantled, on the other the FSLN steadily increased their political impositions on a group which was almost never able to choose the policies applied to them. While it is certainly true that, for the first time in their history, the peasants were able to enjoy the benefits of education and health programmes and access to financial credit, it is also true that the corresponding control over the group as a whole intensified. Evidently many peasants benefited from their organisation into cooperatives. Nevertheless, there remained a great number of peasants without land who were obliged to keep up the struggle for access to farming plots and to the agricultural resources that increasingly came under state control.

These developments, and the fact of finding their traditional neutrality undermined by being trapped between two warring armies, resulted in the violation of the peasants’ economic, social and cultural identity. In addition, the application of modernising farm policies, with the expansion of the state’s role in the agricultural sector, led to the dismantling of historically reciprocal connections, the network of intermediation that had always characterised relations between the land workers known as the *finqueros*, the *colonos* and the *mozos*.

Such traditional intermediation was effectively destroyed by the Sandinista regime, which undermined the three institutions crucial to this system, namely, the *patrón*, the market and the Catholic Church. Although these were powerful institutions, their links were essentially personal, rather than institutional. It was the trader, the *finquero* or the priest in person who dealt with the peasants. Certainly, these were relations of subordination, but they were generally not antagonistic, they rather were based on a network of loyalties. The factor that weighed uppermost in the mind of the peasant farmers was that of the ‘identity of occupation’ in opposition to ‘class identity’.⁹⁵

⁹² Martí (1997b), pp. 78–102.

⁹³ Bugazski (1990); Núñez et al. (1991); Rizo (2000).

⁹⁴ Hale (1994); Nietschmann (1989); Vilas (1991).

⁹⁵ E.P. Thompson (1979), p. 15.

In addition to such 'objective' factors, the Peasant Revolution was the product of the peasants' perception of the new order. Protest was also directed against the 'new' forms of coercion that were imposed by the revolution. This feeling, based on a collective notion of right and wrong, on what is acceptable and unacceptable from the productive point of view, is what E.P. Thompson (1979) defines as the 'moral economy of the poor', or what James Scott (1976) calls the 'moral economy of the peasant'. It was this feeling of impotence and fury at seeing their world dismantled that was one of the principal detonators in the peasants' reaction to the Sandinista administration. 'We'd simply had enough' was a common reply to the question of *why* the peasant revolution took place. This backs up Jeff Goodwin's (1994) observation that social scientists often miss one of the key interpretative elements of revolutionary phenomena by overlooking factors of anger, moral indignation, repulsion and fury against established power.

In addition, the peasants also felt they were 'between a rock and a hard place', as David Stoll (1993) observed in his analysis of Ixil communities in Guatemala, and as Mark Danner (1994) notes in his assessment of the El Mozote massacre in El Salvador. This was one of the main factors in the peasants' decision to join up with the Contra. It is important to recognise that such a decision was frequently motivated by the need to save their own lives, and not by political inclination.⁹⁶ Pressurised by opposing forces, both of which were far from the values common to them, the peasants were obliged to 'define their position'.⁹⁷ Both the Contra and the Sandinistas acted violently towards the peasants, but the scales eventually tipped in favour of the Contras.

Skocpol asserts that, precisely through the process of revolution, the state becomes ever more centralised, bureaucratic and powerful.⁹⁸ To this observation we should also add that modernising processes such as the agricultural reforms designed by the Sandinista administration generally have a negative impact on the peasants' world. Such was the case with the attempts at modernising Nicaraguan agriculture. Commercial exchange was considerably broadened (a new and confusing factor for the farmer) under the control of the administration, subsistence crops were gradually replaced with others intended to satisfy the needs of external demand and generate hard cash and farmers were organised into productive groups that did not correspond to traditional methods of organisation and work. On the other hand, the revolution required the peasant collective to become, in effect, members of a political movement. Such a situation, and the establishment of a specific 'public order', violated principles of peasant neutrality. As in many other revolutions, small to medium-sized peasant producers in Nicaragua had great difficulty finding a place within this new society and ended up in opposition to it.

The peasants' response was not particularly 'counterrevolutionary', although it did imply an alternative to the revolutionary society being constructed. It should be understood, quite simply, as opposition to the undermining of the 'old order' present in the Peasant Country and, above all, as opposition to the transformation of the rural world carried out by the revolution. For these peasants, the loss of the old order did not, in any way, represent 'progress'. What it *did* represent was the prolongation of subordination and inequality. Subsequent develop-

⁹⁶ Scott (1985, 1990).

⁹⁷ Stoll (1993), p. 20.

⁹⁸ Skocpol (1979), p. 441.

ments, leading to the post-1990 neoliberal society, produced the deepest feelings of frustration and betrayal.⁹⁹

Paradoxically, such feelings also became characteristic of the urban sector of the population. The paradox here lies in the fact that, despite the clash between these two spheres, the urban and the rural, which characterised Nicaragua throughout the 1980s, important sectors on both sides remained unsatisfied. One group was defending its only opportunity to bring about a fairer society, a society which was its 'own'; the other was reacting against the destruction of the world on which their very subsistence, individually and collectively, depended. It remains to be seen if these collectives can successfully reincorporate themselves into a harmonious society. This certainly demands that the process of reconciliation originate from below, and not be imposed 'from above'.

⁹⁹ See, for example, the testimonies of CIAV–OEA (1999) report.

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