

Comments on Central America

Fifth Estate Collective
George Bradford (David Watson)
Blueberry

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Fifth Estate:

I want to offer some criticisms of the latest issue. The Vietnam article [Web archive note: This article first appeared in FE #320, Spring 1985. With an added Introduction by Richard Drinnon it was reprinted in FE #346, Summer, 1995.] was a bit strange: even with the understanding that the author, George Bradford, used to be a supporter of the stalinists in Vietnam, it offered no analysis of “wars of national liberation” (much less of one that lasted so long), which formed an integral aspect of the war. Space limitations aside, at least an attempt to approach that aspect of the war needed to be addressed. (It also seems that Bradford still idealizes the NLF.)

The piece on Nicaragua (“Nicaragua & Reagan’s Big Lie”) is very unsatisfying. The theme is clearly summarized in this passage: “...one’s political stance should be that of only opposing U.S. aggression...” This is not good, and I think it’s incorrect from the standpoint of being an internationalist, a revolutionary, and an anarchist. If we (as just described) remain silent in our criticisms of Sandinismo, the public will see us as its supporters. Obviously, we are strongly opposed to U.S. aggression (does this exclude any other kinds of involvement, and what about from other sources?), as are most folks; but what distinguishes us (if it is indeed our desire to be distinguished) from generic leftists is our strong opposition to institutions based on hierarchy and domination. This needs to be an explicit part of any assessment of Central America (and the world).

As for everyone at the FE signing the “Pledge of Resistance” as a group, I am disappointed. The Pledge is totally unhistorical in its approach—especially toward affinity groups. It is bland, leftist, pacifist, and last but by no means least hierarchical: only on the orders of the National Committee can official actions take place, and the National Committee defines what escalated involvement in Nicaragua means. While it may radicalize some people who get busted for trespassing or blocking a public thoroughfare (heinous stuff!) by having them confront the legal system first hand, most people will probably get cited and released, immediately. Like most pacifist activity, it is tame and unencouraging

The No Business As Usual demos in San Francisco were dull except for street theatre accompanied by a radio presentation. That occurred on April 29th and 30th. Then there was the RCP inspired/ sponsored rampage downtown on the 29th, where the RCP, as usual, led (some) unsuspecting “rebel youth” into an arrest situation for the greater glory of the Party. The media, as usual, lied: no windows were broken, and the people knocked off sidewalks were pushed down by cops.

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George Bradford responds

I agree that a critique of nationalism and “wars of national liberation” is important, which is why we have discussed the theme in the FE. (Two articles come to mind—Fredy Perlman’s “The Continuing Appeal of Nationalism,” in the Winter 1985 FE [reprinted in FE #373, Fall 2006], and “Rival Gangs Battle in Angola,” in the FE #269, February, 1976.)

But that question was simply not the focus of my article on Vietnam. Rather, I was interested in looking at the lies now being perpetrated by the Empire concerning its involvement in Indochina in light of the horrible realities of the genocidal war of conquest it waged there. I tend to think that one can know all one needs to know about the U.S. war in Vietnam by reading histories of the Anglo-American conquest of the native peoples of this continent, which is why I relied so heavily on Richard Drinnon’s book, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire Building* in my approach.

Vietnam as a continuation of that conquest of the wilderness by a leviathanic, armored death-culture, as an example of the dehumanization of the Other, was my theme. The war was especially traumatic for imperial mentality and ideology because the U.S. was defeated by that Other—and to some degree by those of us within it who had come to identify with the Other, with wilderness, with the enemies of the Empire. That, despite our naivete at the time regarding the realities of anti-colonial wars and of the Indochinese situation in particular, was a positive step—even if a limited one—in abolishing all empires and exploitation.

America has yet to come to terms with Vietnam because it has not come to terms with its own history; I hoped to contribute to that effort. The same process is at work now in Central America—which is essentially a murderous “frontier war” to keep the restless natives down. Without glorifying the various state-capitalist, nationalist factions in that region; we can play a role in resisting this imperial war and aiding social revolution everywhere.

By the way, the point of the very passage you cited was precisely to distinguish ourselves from the Sandinista/FDR-FMLN supporters, and said that “a government that defines itself as ‘revolutionary’ (is) an impossibility to those who believe all nation states strangle authentic revolution...The Nicaraguan leadership’s policy of centralization and bureaucracy has been well documented enough to suggest that one’s political stance should be that of opposing U.S. aggression and leave the Christians and leftists to fawn over the Sandinista politicians.” Weren’t we clear enough there?

You are correct about the Pledge of Resistance, but we felt at the time that there was much interest in our own circle in having a public signing followed by our own autonomous activities as a general approach; we were not joining up under a national leadership. In fact, our actions caused great consternation among local “official” Pledge people. They’ve learned to live with us in a rather uneasy truce, and we with them, but we continue to work and define ourselves independently. The Pledge, and our own activities, may be tame, but we have often found that our vision goes far beyond what we can realistically accomplish concretely here at this time.

FE Note

All of us found Blueberry’s comments stimulating, and would like to take the opportunity to clarify our own perspectives on the Central American war and our response to it. We think it of the utmost importance to battle against liberal/leftist illusions about the resistance movements in Central America and about the Sandinista government in particular.

Sandinismo is a vague political expression which is claimed by all sorts of factions and which can resemble whatever they like. (Sandino was a mystic, a romantic, a radical and egalitarian nationalist whose army carried out, at best, a reformist, bourgeois social policy where it had any at all.) The Sandinistas today, on the other hand, do have a social program based on national unification, reform and statism, like many other such military-political formations throughout the Third World.

They want to create a state-managed, private capitalist economy less dependent on and less servile to the Yanqui Empire, which has historically dominated and exploited Central America for U.S. corporate profit. The Sandinistas emphasize that 60% of business in Nicaragua is privately owned; in any case, even state-owned business is

just that—profit-based enterprises based on hierarchic management and wage labor geared to produce commodities for the world market, rather than autonomous projects created for a communitarian, libertarian, subsistence culture.

An Ideology of Productivism

The ideology of the Sandinistas, like that of the other Central American rebels (and indeed, of many revolutionaries in Latin America, anarchist and authoritarian alike), is one of national development and technological modernization. For the Sandinistas, of course, being marxist-leninist authoritarians, the ideology takes the form of economic planning by experts, economists, government bureaucrats and private entrepreneurs. Theirs is an ideology of productivism in order to improve Nicaragua's balance of trade, of work, sacrifice and austerity (for the workers, that is, not for the comandantes, who have inherited the suburban mansions of the former Somocistas and who reward themselves with the limousines and the other perquisites that statist bureaucrats do everywhere). Their ideology of national development caused the original conflict with the Atlantic coast Indians and has led to war, forced deportation and relocation of the Indians in that region.

Despite the obvious popularity of the Sandinistas among the Nicaraguan people, their program is one of statification and hierarchic party rule. Though the final fall of the Somoza dictatorship came about through a general uprising of the entire society, the Sandinista guerrillas were able to capture the revolution and to consolidate military and police power for themselves. The central economic institutions, the police and the army all answer directly to the Sandinista Front leaders; this power—despite the parliamentary politics and the ostensibly “pluralistic” features of Nicaraguan society—they are not likely to surrender to anyone.

The police apparatus, under the direct command of the sinister, hard-line marxist-leninist Interior Minister Tomas Borge, is becoming increasingly sophisticated and organized with the aid of Cuban security advisors. This has led on the one hand to more effective intelligence operations against the contra mercenaries, and on the other, to deeper penetration and manipulation of popular organizations, labor unions, and political life in general. Popular organizations and neighborhood committees have become transmission belts for hierarchic command, rubber stamps for top-down directives. And because such committees generally control rationing and patrol their own neighborhoods, they are used as auxiliaries of the police apparatus to weed out and isolate labor and political dissidence. Official Sandinista trade union organizations function in the same manner, serving to organize increased production campaigns, no-strike pledges, labor discipline, and austerity measures—including in private capitalist enterprises—for the progress of “The Revolution.” And political opponents or critics, be they Somocista groups or simply independent labor unions, often find their offices attacked and ransacked by government-coordinated turbas (“mobs”) organized to appear as simultaneous actions against these groups.

When so-called “popular” or mass organizations, official unions, and government agencies control rations of food and other necessities, when they are used to advance “cadres” along the ladder of political and social power, a process of racketization and corruption is inevitable. And where unruly workers and peasants act on their own to seize workshops or lands owned by capitalists with whom the state has a popular front, that is “anarchy” (in the words of Comandante Jaime Wheelock, who has also called for the reinstitution of the death penalty), and these workers and peasants must be forced back into line, the property returned to its former owners—all for the good of “the Revolution,” for the sake of national security and better investment conditions. In Nicaragua, the party is the vanguard—those who act for themselves or outside the aegis of this vanguard, represent “anarchy,” are outside “the process.” As the Chief of the (Secret and Public) Police, Tomas Borge, remarked: “The Revolution will act with a strong and firm hand, because it cannot allow counter-revolution in the name of revolution.” As usual, only the comandantes decide what is genuine revolution.

Many of the defenders of the Nicaraguan junta, answering the right-wing propaganda of “communist revolution,” point out that the Sandinista Front is politically more akin to the one-party state in Mexico than to those in Eastern Europe, which is a valid observation, but which should put them on their guard about glorifying the Nicaraguan state. In Mexico a popular social revolution brought statist bureaucrats to power after the most radical elements (agrarian Zapatismo and the anarcho-syndicalism of the Flores-Magon brothers) were suppressed. Capital became partly statified (such as the petroleum industry) or collectivized (the ejido land cooperatives), while the bulk of the economy remained in private hands. What remains today is a bureaucratic capitalist party-police state where privilege and poverty are rampant. It appears that rather than forging an authentic social revolution free

of authoritarian state rule and the horrors of the market economy, the Sandinistas are creating a Mexican-style system.

It can certainly be argued that as in all nationalist revolutions, some material gains have been made in Nicaragua. No one should denigrate these gains—particularly some basic medical achievements such as the battle against dysentery, malaria, polio and other poverty diseases. (The “literacy campaign” seems more dubious, since it has been employed as a form of indoctrination by the government, and the libraries are filled with stalinist rubbish printed in the Soviet Union and Cuba.) But similar advances have been made in Libya, Algeria and China, among nationalist regimes, and in Taiwan and South Korea, to name two industrialized U.S. client states. Such regimes can be said to be making their own bourgeois, or capitalist-industrial revolutions, and such development tends universally to bring in its wake some medical and educational improvements.

The character of the Salvadoran and Guatemalan resistance movements appears to be essentially the same. The particularly authoritarian character of the Salvadoran resistance should come as no surprise when one considers the summary executions of rival political militants like Roque Dalton and Melida Anaya Monyes, forced recruitment by the guerrillas, tax collection and the call for inclusion of certain military officers of the present regime in a coalition regime built upon negotiations. Events in El Salvador confirm that the leadership of both the right and the left comes from the upper and middle classes, and that the civil war is essentially a battle to decide which faction of this elite will make policy for the country as a whole. Neither will abandon capitalist market relations, wage labor, or the standard model of industrial-agricultural development for the world market. What is going on is not a radical social revolution but a crisis in neocolonial development.

Nevertheless, the outcome of this crisis is not a matter of indifference to the poor, the workers and peasants of the region. There is a marked difference between Nicaragua, where elements of social revolution co-exist momentarily with the statist consolidation of the party which has ridden a wave of social upheaval, and Guatemala and El Salvador, where the oligarchy and the fascist political parties prevent even the most modest social reform with death squad mass murder.

It is also important to point out the lack of an authentic, radical libertarian tradition in Central America. Even given the authoritarian character of the Sandinista state, the organized Nicaraguan opposition groups—a spectrum of marxist-leninist parties, social-democratic unions, parliamentary conservatives, and contra fascists—do not present much of an alternative for the average Nicaraguan. There appear to be few if any examples in Central America of autonomous, libertarian workers and peasants movements; there are only fragmented aspects of social revolution where people are cooperating to create their own subsistence and defense. Hence, calls from the outside (such as those from left-communists and some anarchists) for workers militias to resist both the governments and the guerrillas of the region are formulaic and abstract. The political history of the region and the recent decades of barbarism render such a development a very remote possibility. What libertarian revolutionaries might do there if they were an actual force, as they were in Spain and Russia, is one thing; reality is another. Everything depends on the relation of forces, and libertarian revolution does not presently appear to be a factor. In any case, we are not there, but on the outside, and therefore cannot formulate specific “calls” to which Central American people can respond. That is done by political parties with an instrumental program for revolution. That is not what a handful of refractory communities of conscience can or should do.

In Central America the social terrain has been devastated, and we think that this makes a liberatory outcome, for the present, unlikely. In an interview with *Socialist Review* in 1981, historian John Womack (who wrote the excellent biography of Zapata) said that in El Salvador, “The murderous disorganization of the Army and the thuggery of the (fascist vigilante) ORDEN are not intellectual problems but terrible, threatening facts, which the left doesn’t have to explain but simply try to prevent...The tendency of poor, tired, terribly frightened people on the run is to look for somebody stronger just to protect them. The political work of the left is to induce an understanding among them that only by organizing themselves can they even run in the right direction...” This, I suspect, is the level that political discourse has reached in Central America.

Nevertheless, we don’t believe that the consolidation of bureaucratic state-capitalist regimes is inevitable. And it is of the highest importance to criticize the leftist fronts and nationalist-statist “libertarian struggles” in the neocolonial world. But we should not forget our privileged position here in the U.S. to attack the imperial ideology which legitimates the hidden holocausts in Central America and elsewhere, and to physically resist its war drive.

Our resources are limited, but we can play the role outlined by the Situationist International in 1967, when they wrote:

“It is obviously impossible to seek, at the moment, a revolutionary solution to the Vietnam War. It is first of all necessary to put an end to the American aggression in order to allow the real social struggle in Vietnam to develop in a natural way; that is to say, to allow the Vietnamese workers and peasants to rediscover their enemies at home: the bureaucracy of the North and all the propertied and ruling strata of the South. The withdrawal of the Americans will mean that the Stalinist bureaucracy will immediately seize control of the whole country: this is an unavoidable conclusion. The point

therefore is not to give unconditional (or even conditional) support to the Vietcong, but to struggle consistently and without any concessions against American imperialism. The most effective role is presently being played by those American revolutionaries who are advocating and practicing insubordination and draft resistance on a very large scale...The Vietnam war is rooted in America and it is from there that it must be rooted out.”

And so, as in the Vietnam war, it is imperative to make massive resistance against the North American war in Central America while maintaining no illusions about the forces there. It is on this level that we can make a difference. Our liberatory vision of revolution has nothing to lose and everything to gain from such activity.

(Two excellent critiques of leftist fronts in Central America are “Socialism (In Quotation Marks),” by Keith Sorel, and “Where is Nicaragua Going?” by Tom Wetzel, in the Fall 1984 / Winter 1985 issue of *No Middle Ground*, available for \$2.50 from Fifth Estate Books.)

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