

***"None of us are pure white doves, but we are all *compañeros*":
Corruption and the Remaking of Democracy in Post-Revolutionary Nicaragua***

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Anthropology.

Chapel Hill

2009

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ABSTRACT

MAYA C. PARSON: “None of us are pure white doves, but we are all *compañeros*”:
Corruption and the Remaking of Democracy in Post-Revolutionary Nicaragua
(Under the direction of Marisol de la Cadena)

This dissertation examines the meaning of “corruption” in the context of contemporary Nicaraguan political history, including the neoliberal economic and political reforms of the 1990s and early 2000s and the new “socialism” of re-elected Sandinista President Daniel Ortega. Based on ethnographic research with community and municipal leaders, “civil-society” organizers, and former and current Sandinista party supporters, I examine popular feelings, ideas, and practices about political “corruption.” I argue that Nicaraguan sentiments about “corruption” have resulted in a post-revolutionary redefinition of the meaning of “politics,” one that challenges historically constructed notions of leadership, participation and democracy.

I begin by examining how – in the context of the perceived “corruption” of Sandinista revolutionary ethics and the concomitant “corruption” scandals surrounding anti-Sandinista leaders – some Nicaraguans have come to reject party and other forms of “official” politics because they see such politics (“*la política*”) as synonymous with “corruption.” I then look ethnographically at how “anti-corruption” efforts and political reforms promulgated by neoliberal policymakers – which typically emphasize individual autonomy and responsibility, political pluralism, and non-partisan democratic participation – resonate for many Nicaraguans, including many Sandinistas and former Sandinistas. At the same time, however, I show how powerful tensions continue to exist between the ideals of revolutionary socialism and peoples’ experiences of post-revolutionary “neoliberalism.” I suggest that Nicaraguan community and political leaders, such as those I studied in the city

of León, are attracted to the “purification” of official politics seemingly offered by neoliberal policies, but have reworked and transformed – indeed, “corrupted” – such politics, creating at times paradoxical hybrid political cultures that simultaneously invoke and critique the spirit of the Sandinista revolution and the democratic liberalism of neoliberal ideology.

*Con mucho cariño al pueblo luchador Nicaragüense por compartir conmigo y con el mundo sus
cantos, historias y tantos sueños.*

Acknowledgements

This project was made possible through the support and generosity of many remarkable people, above all the many Nicaraguans who gave me their time, shared their stories, and welcomed me into their lives. My friends in Nicaragua, I hold you close to my heart. Many thanks especially to Luisa, Bismarck, Bayardo, Mayra, Angel, Luis Enrique and family, Lorgia, Nestor, Julio César, Chico, René, Alejandro, Marlon, Nubia, Gioconda, Silvia, the staff and city counselors of the León municipal government (2001-2002), the leaders of the León branch of the Movimiento Comunal Nicaragüense, and all of my friends in *mi querido* León. *Nunca se les olvidaré*. I am also grateful to the Thurston-Santo Tomás Sister County Association, my many friends in Santo Tomás, Chontales, and especially to Jean Eberhardt, without whom the many threads that tie me to Nicaragua might never have been woven. Thanks also to Rebecca Pearl and the other Greeners who shared my first trip to Nicaragua. I will never drink a *banano con leche* or see *un alacrán* without thinking of you. *Hay un barco...*

I am indebted to the kindness and hard work of my friend Doris María Velásquez Rodriquez and her husband Fernando for their help transcribing many of the interviews and other recordings that are the backbone of this dissertation. Many thanks also to the artist Daniel Pulido and his assistants for allowing me to reproduce their mural, "*El Gran Peto*." In Nicaragua, I would also like to thank the staff of the *Revista Envío* for their fearless coverage of Nicaraguan politics and the many Nicaraguan artists – especially the musicians/poets Luis and Carlos Mejía Godoy and Katia and Salvador Cardenal – who have so powerfully expressed in words and images the love for Nicaragua that so many of us feel.

I have been fortunate to work with many outstanding scholars at UNC-Chapel Hill and also at Duke University. Many thanks to the members of my committee: Dorothy Holland, Arturo Escobar, Michele Rivkin-Fish, and Orin Starn, and especially to my advisor, Marisol de la Cadena, for their insights and comments on my work. I would also like to thank Judith Farquhar, Terence Evens, and Greg Grandin for offering inspiration at various stages of this project and Donald Nonini and Peter Redfield for kindly helping me to navigate the red tape of graduate school bureaucracy. Thank you also to Ms. Suphronia Cheek for her hard work, warm smiles, and for sharing my love of her home state.

My work was also given life by the phenomenal mentoring of my undergraduate faculty at The Evergreen State College. My teachers at Evergreen taught me that critical thinking and a passion for social justice cannot be separate endeavors in our scholarship, in the classroom, or in our everyday lives. My admiration and profound gratitude go especially to Stephanie Coontz, Alice Nelson, Charles Pailthorp, and Peta Henderson.

I found in graduate school some of the best friends I have ever made, gifted and intrepid individuals who care deeply about what it means to live a good life and have made my life and work so much better through their kindness, commiseration and wit. Thanks especially to my dear friend Michelle Cohen, and to Sam Mordka, Carie Hersh, Dana Powell, Eric Karchmer, Tim Elfenbein, and Vinci Daro. Thank you also to Ginia Lindberg and family and to Vikram Dere for reminding me that life exists outside of graduate school.

My graduate study was made possible through the support of the UNC-Chapel Hill Graduate School. I am grateful to the UNC Royster Society of Fellows and especially to the Lovick Corn family for their generous support. Thank you also to the National Science Foundation and the NSF program on Democracy and Democratization for sponsoring my research. I was also fortunate to receive funding for summer research and conference travel from the Institute for the Study of the Americas at UNC. Teaching opportunities at The Evergreen State College and in The Thompson Writing Program at Duke University also

helped to fund this project and helped me to grow as a thinker and a writer. Thank you all so very much.

Equally invaluable was the support I received from Laura Mangones, Niria Hernández, and Mónica Mata – three women whose mind-boggling patience and sweetness has taught me a great deal about parenting. The writing of this dissertation – concomitant with the infancy and toddlerhood of Beau and Blaise – would have been impossible without you. I am so grateful to have all of you in our lives.

Last, but always foremost in my heart, I want to thank my family for their unending support and love. Thank you to my mother, Maria Savage, the first and best anthropologist I have ever met. Thank you to my father, Jefferson Parson, for always reminding me to see and create from the heart. Thank you to my stepfather, Proud, for just being himself. Thank you to my mother-in-law, Judy Ramsey, for her compassion and cultivation of all things beautiful, and to my father-in-law, Walter Ramsey, whose generosity, precision, and strength are unparalleled. None of this would have been possible without you. Thank you to my sisters, Miranda, Melissa, Fairley, Caitlin and Dakotah, for teaching me the meaning and value of sharing. Thanks especially to Fairley, Dakotah, Mom, and to Proud for making the trip to Nicaragua. Above all, thank you to my partner Grant, who showed me new ways of seeing a place I thought I knew well and whose photographs say more than all the words in this dissertation. Grant, without you, this project would never have begun and undoubtedly would never have finished. You are my anchor and my sea. *Muchísimas gracias mi amor.*

Preface

...transparencia Nicaragua, te está pidiendo el pueblo, te está pidiendo el mundo... [Nicaragua, the people and the world are asking you for transparency] - Duo Guardabarranco, "Transparente Nicaragua"

In 2007, the acclaimed Nicaraguan folk musicians *Duo Guardabarranco* recorded an album they called "*Transparente Nicaragua*" ["Transparent Nicaragua"]. The title song, a sweet and melancholic plea for "transparency" sung in the group's characteristic two-part harmony, linked poverty, suffering, child labor, political profiteering and violence to "corruption." Duo Guardabarranco, made up of brother and sister Salvador and Katia Cardenal, first rose to popularity in the 1980s as part of the *Canto Nuevo* [New Song] movement in Central America, a musical style with roots in South American struggles for social change and human rights. Along with other Nicaraguan folk artists such as the Mejía Godoy brothers, Guardabarranco infused their catchy and poetic compositions with powerful calls for love, dignity and humanity. Their song "*Guerrero del amor*" ["Love's Warrior"], an homage to the revolution's New Men released in 1985, forms part of the canon of Nicaraguan revolutionary song. On their new album, "*Transparente Nicaragua*," however, Guardabarranco step away from the romantic vision of "*Guerrero del amor*" and instead question the idolization of such warriors, insisting that history will be changed not by warfare and great men who "believe themselves to be God" and "betray themselves for ambition," but rather by each of us in our own lives.¹ The production of "*Transparente Nicaragua*" was sponsored by the Transparency Program of the USAID, the U.S. government development organization long seen by many leftists in Nicaragua as an arm of U.S. imperialism.

¹ Lines from the song "*¿Quién va a cambiar la historia?*"

When I began studying post-revolutionary Nicaraguan politics as a graduate student in the late 1990s, I was struck by the cacophony of cries against “corruption” and the calls for “transparency” I heard not only from politicians and the media, but from “everyday” people – sweat shop workers like my friend José or the countless taxi drivers who passionately derided “*corruptos*” like then President Arnaldo Alemán as we hurtled through Managua’s streets. Everyone, it seemed, talked about “corruption” as a significant problem, and their language was echoed and reinforced in the rhetoric of political leaders and policymakers who also targeted “corruption” as a major impediment to economic stability and even “democracy” itself – something I only later discovered was part of a hemispheric and global trend driven, in large part, by transnational financial and development institutions like the USAID, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and others. “Corruption” in the late 1990s was thus both a policy buzzword and a concept that, for many people I met, tapped into and expressed deeply felt emotions about Nicaraguan politics and history. State and transnational calls against “corruption” coincided with a widespread public sentiment of disillusionment with politicians and political leaders.

However, I found that while people I knew typically talked about “corruption” as a kind of social disintegration or breakdown, what exactly was broken or contaminated by “corruption” was less clear-cut. For some, “corruption” was a departure from the values of the past (i.e., from the ethics of the revolutionary era), while for others it meant being “stuck in the past” (i.e., in long-standing patterns of *caudillo* politics). Almost everyone I met seemed to talk about “corruption” as harmful to Nicaragua’s socioeconomic wellbeing, but there was little consensus why this was the case. For example, for some “corruption” was a problem because it undermined the free market, while for others “corruption” was synonymous with neoliberal capitalism. Even more perplexing, many of the same people who derided the “corruption” of political leaders and the state seemed to take pride in the notion of Nicaraguans as “deceptive,” as a nation of people that “lie all the time,”

implicitly rejecting the very notion of “transparency” promoted by so many transnational agencies. “Corruption” was obviously more than just a catchphrase or rhetorical tool, but what did “corruption” mean and why was it so important to so many people in post-revolutionary Nicaragua? How did it manage to bring together such seemingly odd bedfellows as the Duo Guardabarranco and the USAID?

My research examines the meaning of “corruption” in the context of contemporary Nicaraguan political history. However, my focus is not on how people define “corruption” per se, but rather on what peoples’ concerns with “corruption” tell us about post-revolutionary Nicaraguan politics – including the neoliberal economic and political reforms of the 1990s and early 2000s and the new “socialism” of re-elected Sandinista President Daniel Ortega. I examine how popular feelings, ideas, and practices – “discourses” – of what people call corruption in Nicaragua speak to how they are redefining their notions of “politics” and in the process rethinking and unsettling historically-constructed notions of democracy, leadership, socialism, and neoliberalism. In other words, I use “corruption” as an ethnographic and analytical lens through which to understand politics.

In chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation, I examine how – in the context of the perceived “corruption” of Sandinista revolutionary ethics and the concomitant “corruption” scandals surrounding anti-Sandinista leaders – some Nicaraguans have come to reject party and other forms of “official” politics because they see such politics (what they call “*la política*”) as synonymous with “corruption.” In chapters 4, 5, and 6, I look ethnographically at how anti-corruption efforts and political reforms promulgated by neoliberal policymakers – which typically emphasize individual autonomy and responsibility, political pluralism, and non-partisan democratic participation – resonate for many Nicaraguans, including many Sandinistas and former Sandinistas, such as artists like the folk musicians Salvador and Katia Cardenal. At the same time, however, I show how powerful tensions continue to exist between the ideals of revolutionary socialism and peoples’ experiences of post-

revolutionary “neoliberalism.” I suggest that Nicaraguan community and political leaders, such as those I studied in the city of León, are attracted to the “purification” of official politics seemingly offered by neoliberal policies, but have reworked and transformed – indeed, “corrupted” – such politics, creating at times paradoxical hybrid political cultures that simultaneously invoke and critique the spirit of the Sandinista revolution and the democratic liberalism of neoliberal ideology.

The equation of politics with “corruption” is a familiar one that extends well beyond Nicaragua. In the United States and elsewhere, the “corrupt” politician is a cliché. When I have described this project to some of my colleagues, I have often been struck by their presumptions that “anti-corruption” efforts are naïve or, worse, disingenuous; that they are a distraction or even a subterfuge on the part of foreign do-gooders or crafty bureaucrats. Such presumptions may, in some instances, be correct. However, a basic premise of this project is that our notions of “corruption” – including “anti-corruption” rhetoric and cynicism about such rhetoric – matter because they tell us a great deal about how we imagine the rules, boundaries, and actors that we believe or presume should constitute the terrain that we call “politics.”

In the Nicaraguan liberal and revolutionary socialist political frameworks I describe here, the problem of “corruption” is fundamental to the very existence of what is known as “la política” – the ideas and practices understood to be within the realms of “official” governing entities (state agencies, etc.) and “official” political actors (party leaders, elected officials, etc.). Empirically, but also theoretically, it seems, politics *is* “dirty,” but the struggle against “corruption” – which in its most general sense is a struggle to “clean up” or to purify – is also an essential feature of politics. Politics, I suggest, has something of a split personality. On the one hand, as Chantal Mouffe (2005) argues, politics are fundamentally antagonistic: they are spaces and processes through which we contest and define the social good and thus “always involve decisions which require us to make a choice between

conflicting alternatives” (10). Such decisions in Nicaragua have historically been imagined as battles between polar opposites: between the good and the bad, the friend and the enemy, the pure and the impure. At the same time, politics, especially as practiced within the imagined boundaries of the state, have functioned – or at least have been idealized as functioning – as ways of mediating and containing conflict.

What is remarkable about Nicaragua is therefore not that many Nicaraguans equate “politics” with “corruption,” but that cynicism about “la política” has become so profound, so entrenched, that many people no longer imagine “politics,” as it has historically been defined, as also capable of being purified and therefore of bringing to life its promises of the social good. One of the questions this dissertation asks is thus what happens to “politics” when people believe that “la política” is so corrupted that it can no longer be purified. How do people go about defining the social good when the spaces and actors through which such definition has traditionally been articulated are no longer imagined by many to be worthy of public respect, let alone faith or trust?

I suggest that neoliberal anti-corruption efforts to purify governance by eliminating “politics” (supplanting them with participatory “consensus” and “policy-making”) resonate for many who are often otherwise highly critical of the individualistic and market-centric “neoliberal” paradigm. However, this ethnography attempts to show how, at an empirical level, politics without antagonism – even if such politics are no longer imagined as “politics” – is an impossibility. I argue that the determination of the social good cannot simply be a matter of policy consensually determined by experts (be they technocrats or forums of community leaders), but are deeply personal yet collective decisions, decisions inextricable from our senses of self/group history and identity.

Brief Overview of Chapters

Chapter 1: Introduction

Provides a general introduction to the theoretical and ethnographic material covered in the dissertation.

Chapter 2: *Mística*

Historicizes the problem of political corruption in Nicaragua by describing and analyzing the guiding ethos of the Sandinista revolution, *mística revolucionaria*, which was imagined as a practice of spiritual purity embodied by the revolution's vanguard of "New Men." I contrast the ideal of the New Man with the story of a female revolutionary turned dissident to consider the causes and consequences of the crisis of *Sandinismo* for Nicaraguan discourses of politics.

Chapter 3: *Cavanga*

Describes how "official" politics in contemporary Nicaragua have come to be understood as synonymous with "corruption" and examines such notions of corruption through the lens of popular discourses of deceit ("*engaño*"). I argue that popular notions of corruption both critique an absence of purity in official politics and, at the same time, acknowledge the impossibility of total purity in politics.

Chapter 4: Corruption

Juxtaposes the widespread Nicaraguan notion of politics as deception with dominant transnational and post-revolutionary socialist discourses of "corruption." I argue that while concern with "corruption" is unequivocal, its meaning is not and attempt to show how the common call against "corruption" subsumes at times radically divergent understandings of what an elimination of such corruption might offer, particularly in terms of the meaning of "politics" and the imagined relationships between people and the state.

Chapter 5: Purification

Looks at how neoliberal tropes of citizen participation and state decentralization have been imagined as ways of purifying the corruption of politics and creating greater democracy in post-revolutionary Nicaragua. I consider the paradoxes such purification presents for community and municipal leaders in León, Nicaragua's second largest city.

Chapter 6: Remaking Politics

Considers how leaders from León's *Movimiento Comunal* (Communal Movement) are remaking their notions of leadership and democracy at the intersection of "neoliberal" and post-revolutionary socialist politics. I suggest that community leaders are rearticulating and linking neoliberal notions of participation, responsibility, and autonomy to revolutionary feelings of collective responsibility and self-determination and, in the process, challenging conventional notions of politics.

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1. Introduction

One has to receive something. No one gives without receiving something back. If they get nothing, they give nothing back. One always has to give something in exchange for something else.
Don Augusto, Communal Movement organizer

1.1 Introduction: ¿Cuanto le debo?

*June 21, 2002
León, Nicaragua*

I arrive at the *Alcaldia* [city hall] at 8:30 in the morning to meet my friend Silvio, a city counselor who has asked me to help him plan a municipal archive. After nine months in León researching municipal politics, I am a familiar visitor and the secretary, Margarita, greets me with a warm smile. I wait in the sparsely decorated reception area, making a mental note to bring some dried flowers for the basket on the worn coffee table. Like most days, the Alcaldia – a large Art Deco building on the city's central square – is busy with workers and citizens conducting all sorts of business.

Silvio arrives at 9 and we go into a large office shared by the counselors. He outlines his ideas for developing the archive. We agree that the initial goal should be modest: we can start with a notebook with basic information about each administration. Eventually, Silvio would like to include interviews and historical information about the city during each mayor's tenure. We make a short-term plan: First, to go to the libraries and see what information already exists. Second, to write a proposal for the project. Third, to meet with the mayor and seek his approval. I am excited about the project. Perhaps after many months of being described by my friends at city hall as a "cooperante" [volunteer] and "friend" of the Alcaldia, I will finally be doing something useful. The archive could also be helpful for my research and I am glad to have the chance to get to know Silvio better.

As I am leaving, Silvio thanks me again for my help. I tell him that it is I who should be thanking him for inviting me to participate in the project. I ask him if he and his wife might come over for dinner or drinks sometime. He seems to ponder my offer more than necessary and I feel awkward, as if maybe I've overstepped the bounds of our relationship by being too informal or offering too much. I try to make a quick escape, telling him that I need to get going because I am leaving for a workshop in the countryside in the afternoon. Silvio's response is a surprise. He tells me in a quiet voice that he wants to show me his appreciation for my help: he's got a truck available this afternoon – i.e., a truck that belongs to the Alcaldia – one that he's not going to be using. *Would I like to borrow it?*

I don't know what to say. I scramble for a polite excuse not to accept his offer. I tell him I am afraid of driving in the countryside because of the condition of the roads. He says there is a driver. I say the person who invited me to the workshop is expecting me to ride with her, that I'll probably interview her along the way. He says he doubts that she has a vehicle. I feel pressured to say yes, but the idea makes me uncomfortable. The Alcaldia can't afford to pay its phone bill let alone refurbish its office and I am

going to take one of its trucks? I say maybe I could think about it and get back to him. He says he will be leaving soon and needs to know *now*. I say I appreciate his offer, but that I think I'll say no since I'm uncertain about my plans for the afternoon. Silvio seems hurt that I turned down what is obviously a very generous favor. I wonder for a long time afterward if I did the right thing.

When I began my fieldwork in León – Nicaragua's second-largest city – I knew almost no one.¹ I went to León with the intent of studying post-revolutionary cultures of politics at the municipal level, but meeting and getting to know individuals involved in local governance without personal contacts was a challenge. My breakthrough was a meeting with the vice-mayor arranged as a favor by a woman who was renting me a room. (As it turned out, she had once worked in the Alcaldia and her husband was active with the local Sandinista party [FSLN], the dominant party in city hall.) At that meeting, I described my interest in politics and my training in anthropology and the vice-mayor introduced me to an organizer from the Office of Community Relations, my friend Faustino.² Over a period of months, one contact led to another and I gradually formed a network of friends and acquaintances involved in local governance inside and outside city hall. Ernesto, the Director of the Alcaldia's Office of Community Relations, in

¹ Since first traveling to Nicaragua in 1996 as an undergraduate and sister-city activist, I had cumulatively spent about five months living in the capital, Managua, and in a rural area in the center of the country. However, prior to 2001, I had spent little time in León. Despite my lack of first-hand knowledge of the city, I chose to live and work in León because of its history as a hotbed of politics – it is both the birthplace of the Sandinista movement and the cradle of the Liberal party (historically the main opposition to the Sandinista party). I also chose León because it is a dynamic and cosmopolitan city, home to major universities and, as I will describe, many foreign development organizations. I wanted to be in an urban area where I could meet and interact with people of diverse political orientations. I also wanted to live where I could easily and safely walk across town, something that is impossible in Managua. León, with its compact city center, its history of political activism, and a population of about 175,000, was a good fit.

² In León, the job of organizer [*promotor*] is something like being a social worker, although rather than working with individuals or families, an organizer like Faustino is the primary intermediary between the city and local communities (who are represented by leaders elected through the local Communal Movement, which I describe in Chapters 5 and 6). Faustino's job is to help the community organize itself, access resources from state and nongovernmental sources, and facilitate coordination between the city government and the Communal Movement. I describe more about this relationship in Chapter 6.

particular, became a close and much-loved friend. I also made several good friends who were part of León's Communal Movement (a local chapter of a national organization of community leaders who worked with the city government, described in Chapters 5 and 6), friends active with León's numerous sister cities, and friends who had little, if any, formal institutional connection with local politics. Most individuals I met were welcoming, though some were skeptical, and many seemed puzzled, about my presence at city hall and at the offices of the Communal Movement since I wasn't really a "cooperante" and I described my research as anthropology, which is generally understood in Nicaragua to be the study of folklore or archaeology. "Why do you attend the city council meetings?" friends and acquaintances would ask. "Because I am a masochist," I would joke before attempting to explain why a *gringa* ethnographer would sit through a sweltering three-hour discussion of municipal budget planning on a regular basis.

Despite my friendship with Ernesto and others in the Alcaldia, I was always surprised and slightly embarrassed when, during public events such as city government forums, municipal officials identified me as a "friend of the city government." Such naming was equally uncomfortable when it occurred in private conversations. At the time, it felt to me like a deception, though I wasn't sure who was deceiving whom. Ernesto, for instance, granted me a kind of fictive kinship with the Alcaldia staff. As he put it one day when I told him that I didn't think I was invited to a private meeting of the city council, "Of course you are. You are one of us now." I found this unsettling, though after my initial struggles to gain access, I was grateful to be positioned – rhetorically and, at such times, physically – as an "insider." Similarly, whenever I saw the vice-mayor, he would greet me with a flirtatious bear hug, kiss me on the cheek and chastise me for "abandoning" him (i.e., not coming to see him).

While flattering, I had learned to see that this naming, whether sincere or contrived – like the identification of foreign solidarity activists as “sisters” and “brothers” – had the effect of granting me a certain kind of insider access and obligating me in ways that, for the moment, remained unspoken. What kinds of obligations, I wondered, had I implicitly accepted through such friendship? When I said no to Silvio’s offer of the truck, the misuse of public resources was on my mind, but what loomed above that was an anxiety about what the acceptance of such an offer might imply in the future. Yet I was also discomfited by Silvio’s offer because Silvio was my friend and by declining his offer I was implicitly rejecting the idea that we were on equal footing. I had given him my offer of help and then naively upped the ante by offering him something more (dinner, drinks, etc.). By not accepting his counteroffer, was I claiming a “moral superiority” or implicitly accusing him of *amigüismo*? Worse, perhaps, was I denying a possibility for horizontality in our relationship?

The notion that friendship, like other human bonds, necessarily implies obligation is one that is routinely vocalized in Nicaragua with a standard and courteous phrase that friends and family (as well as acquaintances and strangers) ask each other after a favor or service is given: “*¿Cuanto le debo?*” (How much do I owe you?) or “*¿Le debo algo?*” (Do I owe you something?). One day, for instance, toward the end of my fieldwork, César, the brother of a friend, came with his truck to pick up my refrigerator, which his sister’s friend had purchased from me. The job turned out to be more of a hassle than either of us had anticipated, and feeling badly for inconveniencing him, I gave him a bottle of rum and some coffee that I had at hand. As he was preparing to leave, I remembered to ask, “Do I owe you anything?” I wondered what would he say. I had learned the necessity of acknowledging my obligation, but I was still trying to figure out what the parameters of such obligation might look like. Would a bottle of rum and a pound of coffee cover it? Did I owe him something else as well? “No.” He replied. “It’s

my sister who asked me the favor.” There was indeed an unfulfilled obligation – something more than my small gifts would cover – but it was his sister whom César saw as being in his debt.

The previous day, I had given César’s sister a few bags of noodles that I had brought from the States for making Pad Thai but would be unable to use before leaving. (She had, on a previous occasion, enjoyed the noodles at my house.) When I gave her the noodles, she had asked me how much she owed me. Despite my familiarity with the question, I felt uncomfortable. Weren’t we *friends*? Why did she think she had to offer me money in exchange for a gift?

In the 1950s, Marcel Mauss (1990) challenged anthropological and sociological thinking about the exchange of resources by describing how the giving and receiving of gifts in “primitive” societies maintained and fomented social bonds by implicating the givers and receivers in cyclical networks of honor and obligation.³ Mauss rejected Malinowski’s claim of the existence of “pure gifts” (1984) – those Malinowski argued existed between immediate (nuclear) family members who were motivated only by love. Everyday practices of friendship and love in Nicaragua also dispel the notion of the existence of pure gifts. As my friend Don Augusto, a long-time Sandinista and member of the Communal Movement (whom I write more about elsewhere in this dissertation) put it, “One has to receive something. No one gives without receiving something back. If they get nothing, they give nothing back. One always has to give something in exchange for something else.”

This pattern of giving and receiving was familiar to me from my long-standing relationship with my friend Cristina, whom I met in 1996 through her sister-in-law. (Cristina and her husband José figure prominently in Chapter 4 of this dissertation.)

³ “Modern” societies, in contrast, for Mauss, were characterized by the impersonal exchange of commodities (1990).

Although we were strangers, Cristina and José agreed to store a suitcase for me at their home in Managua while I traveled elsewhere in Central America. This initial act launched a string of exchanges of favors and resources that both forged and emerged out of a deepening intimacy. For a long time, we have referred to each other as “sisters,” something that – as I have alluded – is both fictive and quite real in its material and emotive implications. Over the years, Cristina and José have hosted me when I come to Managua. I always feel as if I am coming home when I arrive at their modest but comfortable house. They have patiently answered my endless questions and shared countless stories and details from their personal-political histories that have shaped my feelings about Nicaragua and its revolution. I have given them money for food and expenses during my visits and sent them gifts from the States periodically for many years. My husband and I have helped pay the school fees for Cristina and José’s sons and have sent money for other expenses when needed. Cristina and I both look forward to our regular emails and occasional phone conversations to hear about each other’s everyday lives – the kids, work, our friends and neighbors. Our friendship – such exchanges affirm and reaffirm – is inextricable from our indebtedness to each other and the structural inequalities of our lives.

I recently asked Cristina to tell me about the custom of “¿Cuanto le debo?” because I was curious when the practice became commonplace. Cristina asked José and her coworkers about the phrase and its significance. None of them could remember a time when it hadn’t been customary. (They all agreed that it predated the revolution.) She described it as a Nicaraguan “idiosyncrasy” and explained the practice as follows:

We always ask, “How much do I owe you?” or “Do I owe you something?” No matter how good of friends you are. It’s a courtesy. To show the person that did us the favor that we recognize their effort and good will...I’ll give you an example. Our neighbor, Don Carlos, would say to [my husband] José, “Don José, do me a favor and help me put in this electrical connection.” And José would do it. After it was done, Don Carlos would say to José, “Don José, how much do I owe you?” and José would say,

“Nothing Don Carlos, nothing.” And when José would ask Carlos a favor, he would say the same thing to José...But...there are also times when you ask, “How much do I owe you?” and they say, “Give me something to get a drink.” That means that you need to give something, whatever you want to give, or whatever your conscience tells you. It depends on the particulars of the moment – what they’ve done for you or what affection or respect you have for the person.

She clarified that the same phrase, “How much do I owe you?”, is also sometimes used after a “business transaction” (such as a taxi ride), however, such costs are more typically either negotiated in advance or based on a shared knowledge of a fixed-rate.

As Cristina’s story alludes, the relationship between the neighbors Don Carlos and Don José was one of long-standing friendship and trust. They “freely” exchanged favors, yet they explicitly acknowledged their mutual indebtedness by asking how much they owed each other. They told each other that they did not owe each other anything, yet they both trusted that they would continue to receive the other’s help. (Sadly, as I describe in Chapter 4, this friendship was extinguished when Don Carlos was murdered in Cristina and Jose’s neighborhood in 2007.)

In the United States, when someone does me a favor or offers me something, good manners typically dictate that I focus more on the person’s “goodness” than on the gift itself, let alone what I might owe them in exchange. To maintain my relationships with my friends and loved ones, I must reciprocate, but not too quickly. I must pay attention to the obligation between us, but it must remain largely unspoken or else I am, at best, tactless, or, at worst, greedily concerned with the material object rather than the “pure” sentiment which presumably motivated its proffering. More than simply proper manners, this practice marks a boundary between those we consider friends or loved ones (i.e., people who trust that we will “pay them back” over time) and those with whom we perceive we have no relationship (i.e., people who don’t know us and

therefore cannot trust us).⁴ James Carrier (1995) has described this peculiar set of gift giving and receiving practices in the United States as characteristic of “modern” society, in which gifts – emotive, personal and socially meaningful – are idealized as the polar opposites of mundane, impersonal and individualistic commodities. This discourse of exchange mirrors Malinowski’s distinction between domestic, love-driven “pure gifts” and other less “pure” kinds of exchange (i.e., the Trobriand *kula*), which Malinowski saw as self-interested reciprocity between individuals.

Mauss rejected Malinowski’s notion of the pure gift, however, he stopped short of rejecting what we might think of as a Western liberal notion of the “pure commodity.” However, this notion is also put into question by popular discourses about reciprocity and exchange in Nicaragua – discourses that, at least in some incidences, implicitly call on a Marxist conception of human labor. For example, one day at the offices of the Communal Movement, my friend Don Augusto described for me two types of stealing he observed in Nicaragua: There was the stealing of material goods like chickens and there was the stealing inherent in a capitalist system. The first case was extraordinary, clearly a crime, and it was relatively easy to know who was at fault, at least in an immediate sense. The second case, however, was an everyday occurrence and less clear-cut. In this case, as Don Augusto described it, one person offered another a job, but one below the actual value of their labor. The worker typically had no choice but to accept in order to feed himself or his family. Was such an encounter exploitation, assistance or both? Don Augusto contrasted this dilemma with the practice of *trueque* [exchange] amongst *campesinos* [peasants], which he described as a carefully negotiated yet compassionate swapping of resources for mutual survival.

⁴ In contrast, strangers who are generous – something that always seems unexpected – are “kind strangers,” people to whom we owe our gratitude, but rarely imagine compensating in other ways unless money is already at stake, e.g., in the case of a lost wallet.

[The campesinos] say, look, if you have nothing to eat, come and help me to do whatever and I'm going to give you something to eat. So, the other man does because he knows that he has children and they have nothing to eat and the other, maybe he has his harvest... For example, if I am harvesting my corn and I'm doing it by myself with my son and I have two or three acres and Pedro's family has nothing, then I say to Pedro, 'Look, you don't have anything, things are hard for you right now. I can give you two or three sacks of corn if you come and help me harvest it. And Pedro knows that with three sacks of corn, he has a way to improve his situation and he helps me to harvest.

It may seem that Don Augusto (like Marx) romanticizes the campesinos in this story, but I think his point is not so much their inherent goodness as the impossibility of separating out the social relation from relationships of exchange. Man may be alienated from his labor by a capitalist system, but, for Don Augusto, there is no pure commodity, just as there is no pure gift.

This understanding of exchange – which “contaminates” the categories of friend as well as those of actors in market relations by explicitly acknowledging their inherent, internal relations of power – significantly complicates discourses of corruption in Nicaragua today. As I describe in Chapter 4, dominant “neoliberal” conceptions of corruption tend to understand corruption as an unacceptable intrusion of “private” (personal) interests into the “public” (political or economic) realms (Shore and Haller 2005, 5). Everyday practices of exchange in Nicaragua – as well as the politics of Sandinismo, as I will later discuss – challenge the possibility of a neat division between public and private life. A practice like “¿Cuanto le debo?” recognizes the power relations inherent in all relationships (whether “public” or “private”) and facilitates ongoing reciprocity to the extent that individuals participate and do so in a way that is satisfactory to the others involved. Those who do not participate, or who demand more or offer less than is perceived to be deserved, are no longer “friends” (or at least not “real” friends). This everyday negotiation can thus be read as both a push for horizontality (a movement against “corruption”) and as a privileging of personal

relationships (a type of “corruption”). The dominant “neoliberal” discourse about corruption, which seems to deny the everyday, material and emotive obligations between people while making those obligations ever more necessary by stripping the state of the institutional mechanisms through which people can meet their needs, that seeks to remove power from the equations of friendship and friendship from the equations of power, is what some might in fact describe as “corruption.”

Friendship is often situated outside conventional political debate except when it comes to discussions of problems like *amigüismo*. Yet Western philosophers and theorists have long recognized the importance of the friend relationship (and more broadly of feelings of love) to politics and the political. It is beyond the scope of this project to delve deeply into this rich and extensive literature, an endeavor already undertaken by others (e.g., Martel 2001; Derrida 2005; von Heyking, et al. 2008), however what this project offers instead is a historically and culturally specific examination of the political questions raised by the discourses of friendship and corruption I describe in this introduction: What do we owe each other and ourselves, how should we define the relationships between us? In other words, how do we and should we constitute ourselves as political beings?

1.2 Theoretical and Methodological Orientations

In Nicaragua, corruption is alternately – and sometimes simultaneously – understood as both a force to be resisted and a force of resistance, a consequence of the disappearance of the state and a consequence of an overbearing state, a separation of the political from the personal and the joining of the two. In this ethnography, I attempt to show how the meanings of corruption are manifold, specific to particular persons, places and historical moments, and fundamental to both our politics and our conceptions of the political. Shore and Haller (2005) point out that anthropology,

specifically ethnography, is well poised to grapple with the polyvalence of corruption through a disciplinary orientation toward examining the meanings and everyday practices of corruption in peoples' lives beyond the dominant and narrow definitions of transnational finance, governance and development organizations. As I describe in Chapter 4, what corruption means in the context of Nicaraguan political history is much bigger and more complex than the "misuse of entrusted power for private gain" that concerns anti-corruption efforts like those of Transparency International (n.d.). This dissertation thus contributes to an anthropological questioning of the meaning of corruption, however, as I have indicated above, my focus is not on how people understand specific acts that might or might not be labeled "corrupt" per se, but on corruption as a political discourse. This project asks what concern with corruption tells us about peoples' notions of the proper role and identity of the state, the meanings of democracy, and, more broadly, about the range of behaviors and types of relationships that are considered properly "political," that is, those which people come to feel and argue should or should not "organiz[e] our coexistence" (Mouffe 2005, 9). My focus is thus on how discourses of corruption – embodied and historically specific – shape and are shaped by peoples' sentiments about how we should configure and imagine the relationships between us.

This dissertation thus brings an anthropological focus to the study of politics, but is part of a growing body of work departing theoretically from political anthropology as it has historically been defined. Political anthropology, solidified as a distinct subfield in the late 1960s, initially distinguished itself from political science as the study of the "interstitial, supplementary, and parallel parapolitical structures and their relations to formal power" (Vincent 1994: 386). Until relatively recently, the study of politics within anthropology has, as in political science, tended to approach the cultural (i.e., the "parapolitical") as influential on, but separate from, politics. This

project, in contrast, is part of a movement toward an anthropology of politics, which builds off theoretical work begun in the 1980s at the intersections of poststructuralist, Marxist, feminist and post-colonial thought by imagining “the political” as neither distinct from, nor a “level” of, the social. My project takes as a starting point Laclau and Mouffe’s contention that the political is an *antagonistic dimension* “which is present, to a greater or lesser extent, in all social practices” (Laclau 1985; Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Mouffe 1993).⁵ However, as Mouffe (2005, 17) points out, what comes to be understood (empirically) as “political” can be differentiated from “the social” in that the political (as an empirical category) makes visible the struggles people engage in as they establish or disrupt the “sedimented practices” that characterize “the social.” Following Mitchell (1991; 1999) and Mouffe (2005), this project therefore rejects the notion of a predetermined political-social divide and instead looks ethnographically at how such divides are imagined to be constituted.

I understand “politics” to be those practices and institutions through which our struggles to define the common good – to “organiz[e] our coexistence” – take place (Mouffe 2005, 9). Collectively, those practices and institutions form what de la Cadena has called a “broad field of contention” (2009 personal communication), one that as anthropologists and other theorists have pointed out, following the work of Gramsci (1971), Althusser (1971) and others, is not limited to the boundaries of the state as it has traditionally been defined (e.g., by Weber [2004]) (Abrams 1988; Bourdieu 1999; Coronil 1997; Corrigan and Sayer 1985; Das and Poole 2004; Gupta 1995; Hall 1988; Hansen and Stepputat 2001; Nelson 1999; Joseph and Nugent 1994; Tausig 1994 &

⁵ Some political scientists have also begun to understand the political along similar lines, acknowledging, for instance, that the “dividing lines between the public and the private are not preestablished external givens” (Schedler 1997). However, in many of these analyses, people still play a secondary role in the production of the political: As Schedler continues, “Politics is a self-defining, self-constituting activity which delineates its spheres of competence on its own...people also discuss and decide what may legitimately be discussed and decided by politics” (4).

1997; Steinmetz 1999; Sharma and Gupta 2006). However, the struggles taking place within the field of politics, while not ever truly separable from “the social,” are, to greater or lesser degrees, constituted as such empirically (Mouffe 2005, 17-18). It is for these reasons that my field research was focused at the intersections of what people I knew in Nicaragua described as “*la política*”: the ideas and practices understood to be within the realms of “official” governing entities (state agencies, etc.) and “official” political actors (party leaders, elected officials, etc.) – what I refer to here as “official politics” – and the arenas that people I knew in Nicaragua tended to describe as outside of “politics”: local “civil society” or “nongovernmental” movements, as well as everyday interpersonal relationships (like friendships).

The specific post-revolutionary historical moment in which I conducted my field research⁶ – from the late 1990s through the beginning of the next decade – was one in which it seemed that Nicaraguans were actively and collectively debating and re-evaluating the state-society relationship promulgated by the ethical practices of the revolution. This was evident, for instance, in two critical narratives about the relationship between the revolutionary state and the people that I heard again and again: 1) during the revolution, the people were asked to “give and give” and did not get enough back in return; 2) during the revolution, the state “gave and gave” and the people did not give enough back in return. At stake in the tension between these narratives was a sort of ¿Cuanto le debo? exercise on a grand scale – a society-wide questioning of who owed what to whom and why. This questioning was not simply a theoretical debate, but one which mattered in the most material ways to peoples’ day-to-day struggles for survival and to collective and individual notions of identity.

⁶ Field research for this study was conducted between 1999 and 2004 (in Managua, in the summers of 1999 and 2000, and in Managua and León in the summers of 2003 and 2004). Between September 2001-September 2002, I studied municipal politics in León with occasional trips to Managua. I also spent an academic term in rural Nicaragua in a sister-city exchange in the spring of 1996.

The state model instituted under the Sandinista party during the 1980s imagined the state as existing for the moral, psychological and physical welfare of its citizens. Public and private life were perceived – not unproblematically, as I will discuss – to be inseparable. Politics were incorporated into peoples’ everyday lives through participation in collective struggles for education, health, food, security, and other needs. In other words, the revolutionary process saturated people’s lives with political significance, making notions of a political sphere distinct from personal life nearly unfathomable.

By the late 1990s, after a decade of state downsizing and privatization begun under economic duress at the tail end of the first Ortega administration and continued in earnest under the subsequent Chamorro and Alemán presidencies (Robinson 1997; Metoyer 2000; Deonandan 2006), the revolutionary state model had all but disappeared at the institutional level (though not, as I will describe, in peoples’ attitudes or feelings about politics and the state). In response to structural adjustment policies mandated by multilateral lenders like the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, the Nicaraguan state had increasingly withdrawn from its previous role as a protector of the public welfare. At the same time, forces of economic globalization such as the opening of new markets, the return of elites formerly exiled by the revolution, and the economic disparities between some government officials and much of the population, contributed to a growing sense of a returning class divide. Many on the “Left” (including solidarity activists like myself) accused those on the “Right” of instituting a “neoliberal” regime that valued the freedom of the market above the well being of the people.

In this context, a critical mass of “nongovernmental” civil society groups and social movements had emerged, some – such as the Communal Movement described in this dissertation – directly tied to the participatory practices of the revolution, others in response to the country’s increasingly dire socioeconomic conditions. Many of those

organizations, as I describe in Chapters 5 and 6, found themselves paradoxically “doing the work of the state” while also criticizing the absence of the state from peoples’ everyday lives. At the same time, transnational development organizations and lenders (e.g., the United Nations Development Fund [UNDP], the World Bank [WB], and others) increasingly expressed concern about “good governance” and “democracy,” which they sought to promote through programs and mandates emphasizing the role of citizens in auditing the state and determining its priorities (UNDP 1997; Huther and Shah 1998). In Nicaragua and elsewhere throughout Latin America and the “developing” world, everyone seemed to be talking about citizen participation and state decentralization as the paths to building “democracy” (Paley 2001; 2009).

When I began this research project, I set out to understand what I saw as the emerging political culture of “neoliberalism.” Drawing inspiration from Stuart Hall’s work on Thatcherism (1988), which uses Gramsci to think about not only the “regressive,” but also the “progressive” (i.e., productive) aspects of “neoliberalism” as a political project (Hall, 163-165), I wanted to understand how neoliberal values, shaped by practices like privatization, were transforming peoples’ ideas and feelings about the state and themselves as political actors. How, I wondered, was structural adjustment of the state linked to the “structural adjustment” of peoples’ feelings about politics and the political? (What I didn’t anticipate, which I will discuss briefly at the end of this chapter and again in Chapter 6, was that this project would ultimately turn out to be more about how peoples’ structures of feelings at the intersection of post-revolutionary and neoliberal state-making were re-imagining not only democracy and “politics,” but also the practices and values that had come to be known by their detractors as “neoliberal.”)

I thus chose to focus my field research on two interrelated groups central to debates within Nicaragua about the meanings and practices of governance: municipal state officials (like my friends Silvio and Ernesto) and local level activists involved with “civil

society” or “nongovernmental” movements (like Don Augusto). In the course of interacting with these groups, I also – by chance and by design – interviewed and conducted participant observation with national level state officials (such as National Assembly leaders) and the staff of transnational agencies (like the UNDP), however these interactions were less frequent occurrences. Finally, I continued to form relationships, as a neighbor and as a friend, with diverse people who had little – if any – regular direct contact with official state entities or social movements (such as my friends Cristina and her husband José).

As I have noted, many of these individuals (though not all) were or became friends, a claim that is not intended as a conceit, nor as a disclaimer about a lack of objectivity or transparency, but rather is intended to speak both to the methodological and political dilemmas of doing an ethnography of politics as constituted through peoples’ subjective/social emotions, thoughts, experiences, and practices. My identity in Nicaragua as a “friend” – constructed by myself and others within the discursive field of “friendship” – situated me in relations of power in particular ways. While always open to contestation, it generally provided me access to participation in cultural “dialogues” (Holland 1998; de la Cadena 2000) about politics and the political, as well as to more intimate understanding of the productive tensions within those dialogues, for instance, the feelings of my friend Faustino about the distance between municipal practices of citizen participation and the “real” democracy he imagined. It also necessarily obligated me to people in ways that I struggled and continue to struggle to negotiate because those friendships were, by definition, not only useful to me but also meaningful.

Of course, many people I met and worked with were not my “friends.” For a variety of reasons – sometimes because of politics or personality, sometimes because of happenstance – we did not connect in any sustained and significant way. I made a

conscientious effort to meet and talk with people whose politics (and by this I mean the values that they articulated in their “political” discourses as well as their everyday lives) differed considerably from my own, but building friendships with such individuals was difficult and is reflected in the absence of depth of their appearances in this narrative. In the course of my research, I did in-depth interviews with more than 50 people, but it is no coincidence that many of the people I write about here are those with whom my relationships went far beyond the interview setting; they are the people I came to know and care most deeply about and who made my fieldwork so rich and rewarding. I owe them my gratitude and so much more.

September 20, 2002
León

The morning I am leaving León to head back to the States, my friend Angel comes at 6 a.m. to say goodbye...I am happy to spend my last bit of time in León with him. The owner of my house has also come to see me off...She is cool to Angel and I have the feeling that she is wondering why someone like myself – a gringa and a professional – would associate with him. Her snub of him and the presumption of our shared class identity annoy me and I wish she weren't here as I say goodbye to this dear friend. Perhaps sensing my feelings, Angel thanks me for my friendship and tells me that it is not everyone who comes and makes friends with the poor. In my reverie about our bond and my love for this place, this reminder of the structural inequalities of our relationship is jarring. I ask if he thinks people always have a motive for forming a friendship. He says, “Sadly, yes.” What, I wonder, motivates us? I know what Angel has given me – a spark of energy that ignites each time I see him, illuminating the tender, comic and small beauty of our shared existence, if only fleetingly. I hope I have given him something as meaningful in return.

At 6:45 a.m. Ernesto arrives with Don Chepe, a musician and organizer from the Community Relations office, and Don Chepe's son. They come bearing guitars because Ernesto has asked Don Chepe and his son to serenade me. The men fingerpick the rhythm of a favorite folk song, transforming the silence of the empty entry hall momentarily to a dance hall. Ernesto insists that we dedicate a song to my mother (whom he has met) and the men play her a tune too, which I record on my tape deck. Ernesto gives me a necklace with a picture of Ernesto Che Guevara that says “*¡Hasta la Victoria Siempre!*” I know then that I will never wear it in public – my feelings about such iconography are too complicated – but I treasure it just the same. It will accompany me as I write this dissertation, a reminder of both Ernestos and of the dreams many of us have shared for a world that is more just.

In the week before my trip home, many people come to say goodbye. One community leader comes at night with her pastor so that he can bless my journey. I am already in bed and I feel ridiculous as I stand there in the doorway – an atheist in her nightgown – to receive his blessing, but it is an offering, like so many others, that I cannot refuse.

My friends, *¿cuanto les debo?* There is no simple calculus by which I can tally my debts.

1.3 Revolutionary Love and Loss

Friendship in Nicaragua can be profound, beautiful and heartfelt. It can also be fraught with tensions and contradictory emotions; it can be insincere, and it can be heartbreaking. But it is never external to the power relations between us; it is, as I have suggested above, a type of relationship through which those relations are negotiated. An FSLN (Sandinista party) militant who is also the coordinator of a sister city in León reminded me of this, for instance, when he described to me how he plans the visits of foreign activists: “They come here and they fall in love...It has to be a visit of love, with music and drinks...They are my friends...That’s how they treat me [when I go to their country]” His efforts were apparently a success: I watched young foreigners from his organization literally dance on the tables at a local bar one night as they chanted a Sandinista anthem with raised fists. (For some, at least, the romance of the revolution had not died!) While I found such antics embarrassing, the seduction of sisterhood was also admittedly effective on me: I first came to Nicaragua as a participant in a sister-city organization and I too fell in love. Like most long-term relationships, that love has transformed over time, from an initial romance to a more profound and more complicated commitment. What I write here emerges out of that love, that sense of friendship, that ongoing, imperfect and shared struggle for connection and solidarity.

Once during a visit to a coffee plantation in Nicaragua’s northern mountains, my American friend Jean and I met a manual laborer walking down the farm’s dirt road. Jean is a sister-city coordinator and is the person who first introduced me to Nicaragua in the mid-1990s. Jean possesses a keen sense of social justice and has been a solidarity activist since the time of the revolution. She is an openly gay woman in the States but only “out” to close friends in Nicaragua because of the intensity of homophobic

sentiment. Jean, the farm worker, and I chatted about the farm and its labor politics – sadly, organic coffee doesn’t necessarily mean fair working conditions – but what was truly unforgettable about our encounter was the pride with which the tired, older man spoke of the Sandinista revolution. “I *love* my revolution,” he declared, emphatically stressing the word “love.” It was one of those perfect moments of connection (always tenuous and fragile but palpable) when it feels like a few simple words travel directly from one heart to another and the many chasms that separate us from one another are momentarily bridged. We shared his smile and told him we too loved his revolution.

In Nicaragua, such feelings of connection have historically mobilized people – including solidarity activists like Jean and myself – to act politically. As I describe in Chapter 2, Sandinista revolutionaries in the 1960s and 1970s effectively articulated a discourse of revolutionary love in their struggle to overthrow the Somoza dictatorship. Friendship and love can be stratagems or rhetorical tools, but they are also, following Raymond Williams’s notion of “structures of feeling” (1977), social experiences of “meanings and values” that “are actively lived and felt” (131-132). I begin this dissertation by talking about friendship and love to situate myself as an ethnographer, but more importantly because such discourses are critical to understanding Nicaraguan revolutionary and post-revolutionary politics.

Revolutionary love, as deployed by the revolution’s vanguard, was fueled and circumscribed by Marxist-Leninist notions of class struggle and Christian and spiritualist ideals of sacrifice and divine communion. Together, they formed an ethos – *mística revolucionaria* – that was imagined to create a new and more just world. In the discourse of *mística*, the answer to the question, “¿Cuanto le debo?” was nothing short of “everything.” To be a revolutionary meant, as a city counselor from León described it to me, “thinking about others, fighting for others, giving to others...that *feeling* was what we did: share, share...[It] was an exercise, a practice, an obligation” [my italics]. It was,

he added, a feeling “so wide, so great, so full of passion, that to immolate ourselves, to sacrifice ourselves, was a great honor.” (It is no coincidence that the revolution’s dead heroes and martyrs were – and are often still – referred to as “saints” [e.g., see Baltodano Marcenaro 2009].) Such sacrifice was idealized as one in which individuals transcended not only the physical discomforts of guerrilla warfare, but also their previous sense of identity, to become the revolution’s New Men.

Saldaña-Portillo (2003) observes that the New Man, like the imagined subject of other twentieth century Latin American revolutionary projects, bears a remarkable resemblance to the imagined subject of twentieth century discourses of development: a masculine, risk-taking “agent of transformation” capable of surpassing his “pre-modern” particularity (indigenous, peasant, feminine, etc.). As I describe in Chapter 2, the idealized purity of the New Man existed in tension with the everyday lives of the Nicaraguans that emulated or who were urged to emulate that ideal. And the New Man’s mandates of revolutionary love were undercut, in many instances, by a perception of hypocrisy on the part of party leaders who at times failed to embody such utopian ideals in their own lives.

In Chapter 3, I write about the sense of nostalgia and betrayal (“*cavanga*”) that many Nicaraguans today express when they talk about the Sandinista revolution and Nicaraguan politics. I describe how peoples’ feelings about politics in the post-revolutionary era have transformed such that dominant narratives about politics are no longer rooted in notions of solidarity and sacrifice, but in notions of contamination, selfishness, and deceit. What caused the central narrative of the revolution – a story of heroic individual sacrifice for the common good (one that is hard not to love despite its flaws) – to implode? How is it that the structures of feeling that fomented and sustained the revolution have been “lost” or at least destabilized at a societal level? When I asked people these questions, they generally articulated several often

overlapping explanations, which I describe in Chapters 3 and 4: the psychological and socioeconomic toll of the Contra war and/or the political culture of “neoliberal democracy,” the hypocrisy and selfishness of individuals within the revolution (especially some party leadership), and the “natural” tendency of Nicaraguans to be deceitful and self-serving. Almost everyone, including political officials, also described the very practice of politics as a “corrupting” activity, both a cause and a consequence of the loss of *mística*.

For many, as I describe, these narratives make sense at profound emotional as well as sociohistorical levels. At the same time, my research suggests that there is another, less explicit but perhaps more significant discourse about the loss of *mística*: an understanding that absolute purity – at an individual or societal level, in private or in public – is an impossibility; that a lived practice of solidarity rooted in the denial or even sacrifice of the self is untenable. More than simply an acknowledgement that everyone is sometimes “corrupt,” this is a challenge to the very purity/corruption dichotomy. This discourse forms a central tension in this ethnography: the tension between ongoing desires to purify politics of its corruption and the recognition of the impossibility of such a task.

In describing this tension, I am rather freely drawing inspiration from Latour’s (1993) notions of “translation” and “purification,” which he uses to describe practices by which we “moderns” imagine the world as divided into “two distinct ontological zones,” the human (cultural/political/social) and the nonhuman (nature). (I am not, however, following Latour’s model. Rather, I am using his notions of purification/translation to think about politics as they take place in “the social.”) For Latour, what we think of as modern life inevitably proliferates hybrids and networks between such zones (both ontologically and epistemologically) yet our identity as modern (progressive, enlightened) beings is premised on a desire to extirpate ourselves

from such networks. And the harder we work to purify ourselves, the more translations we collectively embody.

I find Latour's notions useful for thinking about the relationships between the discursive (yet real, lived, felt) "zones" of the social and of politics. "Politics," as I have previously mentioned, are the practices and institutions (e.g., *Sandinismo*) through which our struggles to define the common good – to "organiz[e] our coexistence" – take place (Mouffe 2005 9). The political, as a kind of relation (one characterized by conflict), is inseparable from the social. They are mutually constitutive, the boundaries between them are "unstable" and require "constant displacements and renegotiations" (Mouffe 2005, 18). Liberalism, as the kind of modern project Latour describes, seeks to separate out the tension and emotion (understood as a kind of contamination emanating from the social) from politics, and thus, as Mouffe would have it, the possibility of identification and collective action (2005). Sandinismo, in contrast, understood tension and emotion as inseparable from politics, but insisted on "purifying" those feelings (and thus everyday life) in particular ways, ways that were unsustainable hegemonically, as I will discuss. (As many have pointed out, Sandinismo was, in some aspects, a modernizing, liberal project.) Politics in the liberal framework is thus reduced to an apolitical (because it is perceived to be "asocial") set of procedures (e.g., the rule of law), which is thus imagined to prevent "corruption."

Rancière (2001) argues that liberal notions of the political, which seek to eradicate its antagonistic dimension (an impossibility), thus reproduce a dichotomy between pure or "proper" politics (the realm of "the good" determined by experts) and "mere living" (the realm of the masses) – a dichotomy that is reified as the "frontier" between the domestic (or social) and the political (1). Rancière's observation suggests that if we subscribe to this dichotomy, "corruption" – the tension between "pure" politics and "mere living" (which is, of course, never "mere" living, just as the politics of

“the good” are never truly “pure”) – is inevitable and we are caught up in the translation/purification cycle that Latour describes.

However, in this dissertation, I consider how despite substantive differences in their politics, people who might be identified as liberals *and* critics of liberalism have articulated a need to “depoliticize” or “purify” politics, which they see as necessary to the construction of a new society and greater democracy. As I describe, what such “depoliticization” actually means to them varies considerably. Some, I suggest, are attempting to depoliticize in the liberal sense of undoing the fundamental antagonism inherent in politics. Others contend that this antagonism cannot be undone, but nonetheless desire a culture of politics free of the powerful feelings of animosity and distrust that have historically been aspects of Nicaraguan politics. People I knew in León and elsewhere attempted to purify politics in different ways – through the discourse of *mística*, and, as I will also describe below, through neoliberal calls against corruption and what I call a post-revolutionary “politics of friendship.” All of these purifications have in common a subscription to a distinction between “pure politics” (a politics of the common good) and mere living (in the sense of “making do”), but they have also – in their own ways – intentionally disrupted the presumed boundaries between pure (official) politics and everyday life. In other words, I attempt to show ethnographically how their calls to purification all share a paradoxical obfuscation of relationships of power at the same time as they foment politics – politics which are only sometimes explicitly antagonistic but are always about real living (and thus real tensions between people) as much as the horizon of the “common good.”

1.4 The Politics of Friendship

The mayor of León from 2004-2008, Tránsito Téllez, was a journalist and long-time party militant of the Sandinista party (FSLN).⁷ Prior to his election, I interviewed Téllez and asked him to tell me about himself as a candidate. He described what he saw as a need to change the “political culture” of Nicaragua and he began explaining his intentions by referring to his personal history of participation in the Sandinista revolution as a young boy. For Téllez, being a part of the revolution had instilled in him a strong sense of “*compromiso social*” [social responsibility], one that as a politician he felt compelled him to try to bridge what he described as the gulf between political words and deeds. Like many Nicaraguans I knew, he expressed frustration with politicians’ lying and making false promises. His administration, he said, would be different. “We’re not going to lie to the voters. We’re not going to tell them that we’re going to do one thing and then not do it.”

The political culture Téllez said he hoped to build was rooted in a particular vision of the role of the state, which he described as being like a neighbor and a friend:

When a person has a problem, the first thing that he does is go to his neighbor: his friend closest at hand. We want to be like that neighbor, that friend that is closest to the community. When they have a problem – or when we [the Alcaldia] have a problem – we need to be there for each other...That’s how the mayor needs to be. He has to be like a neighbor, the closest friend.

This ideal was reiterated on his campaign stickers, which read: “*El alcalde es mi amigo*” (The mayor is my friend).

Téllez described this politics of friendship as a movement away from the corruption of “la política.” Through friendship, Téllez imagined that the state could enact a more honest, dependable and supportive system of governance. The idea of

⁷ The FSLN has lead the municipal government in León since the 1979 Sandinista revolution. León is known in Nicaragua as a Sandinista stronghold.

friendship as a model for the relationship between people and the state may be anathema to dominant liberal notions of governance⁸ – some might say it sounds like institutionalized “*amigüismo*,” but Téllez and others, such as current and former President Daniel Ortega, imply that it articulates the positive notions of reciprocity and social solidarity contained in the revolutionary ethos of *mística*.

Unlike *mística*, this politics of friendship also, I think, implies (rhetorically at least) a more horizontal relationship – i.e., one of friendship rather than paternalism – between people and the state. However, the primary difference between *mística* and the politics of friendship is the identity of the recipient of solidarity. In the ethos of *mística*, the recipient may be linked to the giver only by physical proximity (if that), whereas the recipient of solidarity in the friendship model is already a “friend,” a condition that necessarily implies at least some degree of intimacy. Contrast, for instance, Téllez’s description of the politics of friendship with the similar but different description of *mística*, from León’s National Assembly Representative (Congresswoman) and FSLN militant, Gladys Báez. Báez says: “Maybe I’ve never even said ‘Good morning!’ to my neighbor, but if he has a need, I’m going to be there for him...” As Báez describes it, the solidarity of *mística* extends even to those with whom we have never actually spoken. In theory, the practice of *mística* does not depend on a pre-existing relationship other than a shared “humanity,” nor expect reciprocity from specific individuals. For practitioners of *mística*, as I describe in Chapter 2, the “payback” from *mística* is imagined to be the practice itself. A politics of friendship, on the other hand, presumes a specified reciprocity and thus implicitly acknowledges that people are motivated, at least in part, by self interest (which may or may not be “selfish”). Such an understanding blurs the

⁸ I use the term “liberal” here and elsewhere in this dissertation to refer to discourses of liberalism as a branch of political thought rooted in Enlightenment notions of individual autonomy, rights and equality. Unless otherwise indicated, by liberal I am not referring to Nicaragua’s Liberal Party, which has only at times subscribed to historically dominant discourses of liberalism.

lines between the politics of “mere living” and the politics of the “common good,” highlighting how the distinction between them, like that between the individual and the collective, cannot easily be compartmentalized and is always politically constructed (and constructive of politics).

For this reason, the politics of friendship seems equally – if not more – prone to accusations of corruption (e.g., charges of *amigüismo*). For example, one community leader in León, Yolanda, described such friendship to me as a kind of tool for maintaining *mística* but at the same time explained that those who didn’t think she still “had *mística*” were “jealous” of her friendship with local city officials:

Maya: So you haven’t lost your *mística revolucionaria*?

Yolanda: No...The majority of the other [community] leaders are jealous [of me because] I speak with the mayor with authority. Others don’t. They are jealous of my power, of my friendships. Because it’s more important to have friendships than money...I have a great friendship with Vicente (city counselor), with Ricardo (the Coordinator of the Communal Movement), with the vice mayor, with the Office of Community Relations. I haven’t had problems with them...If I’m going to say something about them, if I’m going to complain, I’ll say it to their faces, I’ll say it in the moment.

In Yolanda’s narrative, a conflict exists between Yolanda and her fellow leaders because of her friendship – her “power” – with local officials. Yolanda’s relationship with her fellow leaders is interesting (it is, I think, a good example of the tensions that cannot be eliminated from friendships), but I am more interested in this instance in the lack of friendship of the other leaders with the local officials. What is the character of their relationship? They are not (at least by this account) friends, but they aren’t exactly adversaries or enemies. This is a problem for them because Yolanda has access to resources that they do not within a network to which they also belong (though apparently more peripherally in this particular aspect). What would be the politics necessary to reconstruct such relationships, to more widely propagate a politics of

friendship – or to try to eliminate it? These are questions that are articulated in the politics of the new Ortega administration, and in the efforts of some transnational development organizations, as they try to purify politics of its seeming corruption.

In his radical critique of liberal political philosophy, Carl Schmitt (1996) argued that the political relationship is one that makes a fundamental division (but one that is always existential in its particularities) between friends and enemies. For Schmitt, real (i.e., not liberal) democracy was a form of sovereignty determined by the collective will of the people (Bielefeldt 1998), which was constituted by the homogeneity of the people in opposition to their common enemies. Schmitt opposed his vision of democracy with liberal constitutional democracy and its universal notions of equality, which, he argued, was a pacification of the inherent antagonism of the political in the economic and political interests of the bourgeoisie. Mouffe (2005) and others (Bielefeldt 1998) have rejected Schmitt's total dismissal of liberal notions of democracy and the rule of law, but have drawn from Schmitt the notion that the political always includes adversarial – and, at times, antagonistic – relations.

The politics of friendship of the new Ortega regime (described in Chapters 5 and 6), which perhaps would better be called a politics of friendship / animosity, is constructed through the antagonistic divisions Schmitt imagined to define the political, but it is also, simultaneously, a liberal project in its particular articulation of those divisions. Revamping the language of the revolutionary era, the Ortega administration has attempted to (re)divide Nicaraguans into friends – “*el pueblo*” [the people], who are sovereign and synonymous with the state – and enemies – “*vendepatrias*” [traitors]⁹ and “enemies of humanity,” who are external to it. Identification as friends is contingent on homogeneity: the support of – or at least acquiescence to – the politics of the regime, but

⁹ Literally those who “sell out” the country, which I think is a particularly provocative notion given the usage of this term in the context of accusations of neoliberal class warfare.

that homogeneity is proclaimed to be rooted in a discourse of human equality, justice and rights, enacted through policies that offer a “preferential option for the poor.”¹⁰ (In this regard, at least at a rhetorical level, the administration has much in common with earlier Sandinista politics – and the ethos of *mística* – that both embraced and rejected aspects of liberal political thought.)

The Ortega administration’s articulation of the friend/enemy distinction points to a significant difference between the implications for politics of the notion of the political as defined by Schmitt and that notion as it is rearticulated in the works of political theorists like Mouffe. For Mouffe and others, who remain committed to key elements of liberalism as a political project, the antagonistic dimensions of the political relationship means that, despite – and because of – their differences, diverse actors all have an inherent “right” to political engagement. For Mouffe, the central problem of democracy is not how to overcome such difference, but how to effectively organize the we/ them opposition in a society that is inevitably pluralistic. We need, Mouffe argues, to structure our politics such that we treat our opponents as “adversaries,” people worthy of debate against whom we can define ourselves rather than enemies whom we must extinguish (2005, 14). For Ortega, as for Schmitt, a fundamental opposition between friends and enemies is necessary to political practice, but – seemingly paradoxically – such opposition means that the enemy must be situated (both rhetorically and structurally) outside politics. The enemy must be made into that which is totally Other, an individual or group that by virtue of its difference is dehumanized. (Ironically, some discourses of liberalism – which can only imagine those who disagree

¹⁰ The notion of a “preferential option for the poor” in Nicaragua and elsewhere is rooted in the history of liberation theology. Priest and theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, one of the most salient proponents of liberationist Christianity, coined the term in 1967. The notion initially gained currency as a controversial Marxist interpretation of Catholic teachings in the context of the Latin American Bishops conferences in Medellín and Puebla in 1968 and 1979, respectively, but later came to be widely regarded by church leaders as a cornerstone of contemporary Catholic faith (Twomey 2005).

with them as outside the bounds of humanity – have reached the same conclusion.) Schmitt apparently circumvents this paradox by his disbelief in any permanent (i.e., liberal) notion of homogeneity – homogeneity for Schmitt is always politically constructed and not rooted in notions of universal, static rights (or differences) – and therefore the constitution of the friend/enemy relationship (who is “inside” and “outside” politics), is not fixed. However, Schmitt’s support of the Nazi regime raises serious questions about this as actual political practice.

In the case of Ortega, the politics of friendship / animosity have meant squeezing his adversaries out of official political processes since at least the mid-1990s and, some would say, since his first administration. Interestingly, in terms of Schmitt’s contention of the existential dimension of the friend/enemy distinction, much of this has been done by consorting with those who were at least at one time identified by Ortega as “enemies,” such as former President Arnaldo Alemán.¹¹ In the late 1990s, as I discuss in Chapter 3, Ortega and Alemán began making pacts to consolidate political power between their two parties, significantly narrowing the ability of other parties to participate in official political processes. More recently, in 2008, Ortega’s main critics, a party of FSLN dissidents, the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS), along with the historically important Conservative Party, were denied legal status by the FSLN-controlled Supreme Electoral Council, voiding their rights to participate in the nation’s municipal elections, an action that was met by protests from civil society groups and a hunger strike by former FSLN Commander and now dissident, Dora María Téllez

¹¹ I think the best description of the relationship between Ortega and individuals like Alemán is captured by the concept of the “frenemy,” a colloquial neologism in the U.S. that signifies a person with whom one is officially a “friend,” but with whom one has underlying and sometimes quite explicitly antagonistic relations. (Alemán might even more appropriately be called an “enemend” – an enemy who is also a friend, though this term has little usage.) Of course, the distinction of frenemies from other friends, while seemingly challenging the friend/enemy dichotomy, still problematically remains locked into an ideal of friendship as fundamentally free from tension.

(Nítlápan-Envío 2008e). Again embodying Schmitt's philosophy, the Ortega administration has also vehemently attacked civil society groups and activists, characterizing them as uncivil and therefore external to official political processes.

This arrangement is problematic not simply because it situates – or attempts to situate – such groups and individuals outside “politics,” but also because of its concomitant “depoliticization” of those who remain within it. That is, the notion of friendship as inherently (and exclusively) purifying depends on an obscuring of the political dimensions of friendship. As I have pointed out, the very category of friend is determined by relations of power and thus it is always in tension, always in flux. As the practice of *¿Cuanto le debo?* makes explicit, it is something that must be continually negotiated, rearticulated. In contrast, the politics of friendship/animosity as articulated by Ortega is one that rests on a dichotomous and relatively static understanding of the relationships between people (i.e., friend or enemy), which can only be possible through a flat reading of identity, and, it seems, agency.

In the rhetoric of the new Ortega administration, the FSLN and the state are united with “the people” against “savage capitalism” (i.e., “neoliberalism”). Poverty is undeniably a real and very serious problem in Nicaragua, but the deep divisions in Nicaraguan politics that cross class divides suggest that any predetermined or homogeneous notion of “the people” is unlikely to be substantially meaningful as a political force. Historically, class consciousness played a significant role in the political mobilization of countless Nicaraguans in the fight against the Somoza dictatorship. However, as Gould (1990), Lancaster (1988), Hale (1994), and Saldaña-Portillo (2003) point out, such consciousness was never distinct from peoples' lived histories and multifaceted identities, which included ethnic, religious and other elements that at times helped to coalesce and at times existed in significant tension with their revolutionary identification as workers or peasants. (And, significantly, the final victory over Somoza

was only made possible by a general insurrectionary strategy – one in fact advocated by Ortega – that mobilized Nicaraguans across the class spectrum.) Such insights suggest that a notion of identity fundamentally rooted in class interests was already problematic – as I also contend in Chapter 2 – during the revolutionary era and is arguably even more so today in the wake of the rise of New Social Movements and the politics of identity throughout Latin America and elsewhere (Laclau 1985; Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar 1998).

Ortega's politics of friendship/ animosity is thus paradoxically both politicizing in the Schmittian sense – it stirs up existing tensions and is fomented through the creation of new antagonisms – and also radically depoliticizing (in its intent) in the sense that it attempts to flatten politics by reshaping people and their relationship in the image of ideology. What the outcome of such compression will be remains uncertain, however if the current antagonisms between Ortega and the dominant feminist movement in Nicaragua are any indication (see Chapters 5 and 6), Ortega's efforts will result in greater, not less, "corruption" of the kind of political purity he seeks.

In my field research, I found that some transnational development groups and social movement networks also wanted to "purify" politics by reformulating the relationship between friendship and politics. Their call, however, was to situate friendship (as well as animosity) outside, rather than inside, politics, effectively attempting to undo the antagonistic dimension of the political. This idea, as I discuss, was greeted with resistance by some and embraced by others. For instance, Becky, an American friend of mine who was the on-site coordinator of a sister city group in León described to me how her organization and some other sister cities in the area were trying to formally make a transition from models of development based on "solidarity" to models based on "sustainable development." I asked Becky to explain what she understood as the difference between those terms. She told me that the solidarity model,

which originated in the 1980s, was based on friendship and humanitarian aid. The sustainable development model, in contrast, was based on the idea that nongovernmental organizations like her own would eventually be able to leave Nicaragua altogether. They would be working so that “there is not always a need for us.” This change, in Becky’s view, also meant a greater emphasis on participation and training for local people. For her organization, this would be put into practice using a process of “micro planning,” which would involve the community in identifying their needs and training leaders (a process not coincidentally similar to neoliberal mandates of transnational lenders and development organizations, which I discuss in Chapter 5).

Becky revealed, however, that there were “hostilities” amongst participants in the sister-city network to this idea because many individuals felt that “their friendships were being taken away.” For example, she said, there was the case of a Nicaraguan member of the network in a small town in the greater León area who was the coordinator of a food program for children funded by the American sister city. The woman was a friend of some of the organizers of the sister city and they depended on her to help them coordinate the project. However, only after considerable investment of time and money did they realize that their friend had failed to reveal that the project was not something that was broadly supported amongst the population – a necessary criterion for funding from the network. The upshot of this was that the sister city administrators in Nicaragua (Becky as well as her Nicaraguan counterparts) decided that correspondence pertaining to the organization should be channeled through them, that is, through “proper” bureaucratic channels instead of through informal networks as had previously been these case. Perhaps needless to say, the food program coordinator and her sister city friends did not look positively on this change. The problem, as Becky put it, is that “there is no clear line in their minds between the organization and friendship. So they feel that we’re taking away their friendship. I would say that we’re making the

organization healthier.” Becky and her fellow administrators did not want to eliminate friendship from the sister city model per se, but wanted to separate out friendship from the administration of the organization. They imagined that friendship and politics should – and could – peacefully but separately co-exist.

The elimination of a politics of friendship is a particularly problematic endeavor for groups like Becky’s. Historically, the Nicaraguan sister-city movement has been rooted in the cultivation of transnational solidarity through people-to-people connections (Seagle 2003). As I know from first-hand experience as a sister-city organization member, as well as from spending time with sister-city organizers and activists in León, the discourses of friendship in the sister-city movement can unite people across diverse subject positions, creating powerful forces of collective action at local levels and also at the intersections of local-global politics. Yet I have also seen how such groups often struggle to reconcile their goals of equality and fairness with a political practice that is sustained through personal relationships.

The idea that friendship should be separate from the actual practice of politics (while nonetheless undergirding it) is, of course, a well-known strand of contemporary liberal thought. This idea was encapsulated by a poster I saw one day in León in the office of a local social service program jointly run by the state and a civil society group. The poster depicted the cartoon character Tweety Bird dressed in a police uniform. He held a sign with a crossed-out picture of Sylvester the Cat. The poster read “*Amigos seremos...pero la ley es la ley*” [“We may be friends...but the law is the law”]. Tweety Bird (*Piolín*) is a remarkably popular cartoon icon in Nicaragua and the message is one that resonates with local people who have experienced frustrations with meeting their needs and/or those of their communities through a politics of friendship. For instance, when I asked my friend Lucía, a community leader, about her opinions on Nicaragua’s Law of Citizen Participation (discussed in Chapter 5) – a law that attempts to eliminate the

politics of friendship, she told me that she found it empowering because she had previously felt uncomfortable going to city hall to seek assistance because she had thought of her behavior as “asking a favor.” In the next election, she told me with satisfaction, she would vote for a particular council member, not because he was a friend, but because he had done his job.

The paradigm that imagines that it is necessary and possible to eliminate friendship (as well as tension and conflict) from politics, is articulated, in this instance, as a discourse that offers people a possibility of greater agency – the possibility to more freely express their needs and desires. Such autonomy is not simply rhetorical, but neither is it directly transmitted from such mandates. As I describe elsewhere in this dissertation, Lucía knows that eliminating “politics” (tension, etc.) from “politics is an impossibility, but she nonetheless tirelessly participates in efforts which aim to purify politics by incorporating actors like herself into processes of governance. The separation of the politics of friendship from politics is thus paradoxical, both appealing and problematic.

1.5 Paradoxes and Possibilities of “Neoliberal” Democracy

My friend Ernesto is a lawyer by training and was the Director of León’s Office of Community Relations during my fieldwork. He is also the former Sandinista mayor of a small city near León. Ernesto is middle-aged and dark skinned (he would sometimes refer to himself half-jokingly, half-disparagingly as a “*negro*”), with fingers stained yellow from many years of smoking cigarettes. He has a calm demeanor and slow way of talking that belies his quick wit and sharp mind. Like many people I came to love in the course of my fieldwork, he is humble and compassionate about his work but also tired and cynical. Although he has a relatively high-status job, Ernesto’s background is not one of class privilege. He was raised by a single mother in a rural area and became a

lawyer only by his own sheer determination: He simply kept showing up at the university until the professors agreed to let him attend class even though he could not afford the tuition. One day in 2004, Ernesto and I were chatting over coffee after work at a local café about politics, corruption, and his work as a lawyer. I asked him how he defined politics. He told me,

Politics is the art of finding the common good, of being in power, but not in order to deceive. It *shouldn't* be the art of deception...Some people think that the *políticos* are smart, that they are smarter than the rest. But they [*políticos*] should be aiming for a politics of pure thought for the people [*una política de pensamiento puro para el pueblo*].

I asked what he meant by a politics of pure thought for the people. He said, “Pure thinking is to think of the well being of everyone...We have to find a way that everyone can be part of politics [*que todos pueden ser políticos*]...as it is now, only those that lie rise to the top.”

For Ernesto, as for many people I engaged with during my research, the very notion of politics was synonymous with corruption. Ernesto believes that politics should be “pure” – a *mística*-like solidarity in which leaders “think about the well being of everyone,” but the reality is that politics is “the art of deception.” Ernesto argues that political leaders are not smarter – they are just less honest – than other people, and that politics can be decorruped by incorporating everyone, ideas that Ernesto had linked earlier in our conversation to both a need for the rule of law and a more equitable structuring of class relations. Why, I asked Ernesto, did so many people in Nicaragua seem to talk so much about the law? He explained that it was because Nicaragua was “highly politicized” and therefore “legally unstable.” He compared the Nicaraguan Constitution to that of the United States: “You have a Constitution that has moral, legal and social integrity...here the law is limited, the Constitution is loose. The people want the rule of law because they want laws that will protect them, laws that will be

effective...Here in Nicaragua the *system* is corrupted. Here if you rob a *nacatamal* [a kind of tamale] you go to jail, but if you rob millions, you don't. Every individual, society, everyone wants justice..." I asked Ernesto why the system was corrupted. He replied that corruption was inherent in the system. How then, I asked him, could people deal with corruption? Could they do anything about it? Surprising me, he said that change had to begin by changing oneself, by changing one's values. But where, I wondered aloud, do our values come from? Ernesto replied, "Society. I'm a big believer in society. If you alienate yourself from society, you lose your ability to speak, to think...Without society we cannot exist." "It is," he said, "a great paradox" how society shapes us and yet we can shape society. What, I asked him, was the relationship between "society" and the "system" he was describing? Ernesto responded by drawing me a little triangle on his napkin that represented "the system." The top 10 percent of the triangle he described as the realm of the owners of capital, where the political and the economic system was organized. The bottom 90 percent was "society." Ernesto turned the triangle upside down. "It should be like this. With those who have the most – the *padres de la patria* [the country's fathers] – at the bottom, ruled by the majority." Who, I asked, are the *padres de la patria*? Ernesto laughed, "The corrupt!"

What I find remarkable about this conversation is how – like so many parallel comments I heard about politics and corruption – it defies simple definition as either a Sandinista or "neoliberal" discourse. Ernesto identifies as a Sandinista (and was formally identified as such in his jobs as a politician and bureaucrat), however, in defining politics and the relationships between politics, economics and society, Ernesto has articulated a set of ideas that include elements of political discourses that are typically situated by theorists (and by political rhetoric of "Left" versus "Right") as at odds – such as the combination of a critique of class relations with an emphasis on the role of the individual in changing his or her own life. But these strands of thought are not

only expressed in tandem, they are also conjoined and made into something new, for instance in Ernesto's understanding of the law. The law is described by Ernesto, not – as in Marxist analyses – as a tool of “repression” or “legitimation” of the class system (Milovanovic 2003), nor as, as many liberal theories would have it, an entity that exists external to class relations (and therefore to specific persons or groups of persons), but as way of protecting people from the abuses of the powerful (the state and its leaders).

Citizen participation in governance and the rule of law, among other tropes, are often described as discourses of neoliberal governmentality (Rose 1996; Burchell 1996; Paley 2001) and are certainly key mandates of transnational lenders and development agencies in recent times (e.g., World Bank 2008). However, as Ernesto's comments reveal, “neoliberalism” – or socialism for that matter – is not prescribed or created in a historical or cultural/ political vacuum. (To presume so would be to make the same error that compelled proponents of the New Man to imagine such politics could ultimately and totally supersede already existing aspects of identity.) In Chapters 5 and 6 of this dissertation, I consider how such mandates for the purification of politics are translated into being – and therefore “corrupted” – through the relationships of people and political discourses in León. I pay particular attention to how neoliberal critiques of corruption resonate for people and are interpreted through the lens of a revolutionary history that, for many, both made possible a politics of participation and circumscribed it in ways that felt both liberatory and oppressive. What I have tried to do ethnographically in this dissertation is to look beyond simplistic notions of resistance or accommodation or domination to consider how people are actively engaging with and remaking such mandates in their everyday articulations of politics and the state.

Hall (1988) notes that neoliberal politics in Britain during the rise of Thatcherism were able to insert themselves into peoples' lives, “not because they're dupes or are blinded by false consciousness,” (167), but because such politics spoke to peoples'

experiences as complex beings who were not – as he notes that Gramsci points out – reducible to class positions. There is a strong parallel here with my argument about neoliberal politics in post-revolutionary Nicaragua, although precisely because of this point, I am less convinced about the possibilities for “neoliberalism” to enact the “reversal of ordinary common sense” that Hall saw Thatcherism as undertaking (163-165). “Neoliberalism” as a politics – if we can identify one – is remarkably slippery because, unlike an ethos like *mística*, which could be said to have become hegemonic despite the tensions that remained central to it, neoliberal “common sense” is paradoxically predicated on a heterogeneity of individual and collective common senses, which may include ongoing feelings of class consciousness as well as the rejection of top-down politics. As such, “neoliberalism,” as Rose (1996) correctly points out, “disturb[s] the political logics of Left and Right within which judgment is easy, within which it appears easy to be ‘for’ or ‘against’ the present” (61).

To point to such “slippages” is not to say that “neoliberalism” is “smooth” – i.e., without knots and rifts and constant tensions. As ongoing accusations of corruption attest, tensions are necessarily at the core of any politics whose purification is enacted through the insertion of people (who are never just citizens or consumers, just as they are never just workers or peasants) into processes of governance. As I describe in Chapter 5, neoliberal mandates in León, such as citizen participation and personal responsibility, both make sense to many local leaders and exist in conflict with the realities of everyday struggles for survival or historically-embedded notions of political behavior. The politics that I describe as emerging at the intersection of such neoliberal mandates and the post-revolutionary lives of people in León offered local leaders both possibilities and paradoxes.

In *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It)*, Gibson-Graham (1996) argues that critics of capitalism have unintentionally conceded to capitalism too much control by

essentializing “the” capitalist system as unified, omnipresent and dominant. Gibson-Graham, in contrast, seeks to “queer” our understanding of capitalism, to consider capitalism (and class) as it is actually lived rather than how we have historically theorized it. Following Gibson-Graham, this project challenges the tendency of critics of neoliberal reforms to situate “neoliberalism” as a fixed and almost all-powerful enemy, to imagine “it” as able to reconstruct even our very senses of our selves and our relationships with others even as our lives bear testimony everyday to the myriad ways that we, as people, do not and cannot live like commodities or markets or laws. “Neoliberalism” is neither coherent nor homogeneous as a practice or institution, but a set of discourses capable of encompassing vastly distinct positions and interests and as such, the outcomes of neoliberal shifts are uncertain (Castells 1997; Phillips 1997; Giddens 1998; Paoli and Telles 1998; Schild 1998; Gwynne and Kay 2000). Ironically, it seems, it is “neoliberalism’s” critics more than its proponents who construct “neoliberalism” as “pure” (unified and without constant internal tensions) in order to attack it, to show that it is, in fact, “false.” Neoliberal politics are not pure, but not because they are false, but rather because, like any other politics, they are constituted by people in their everyday lives. Despite our intents to purify them (whatever that might mean depending on where we situate ourselves politically), they are hybrids all the way down.

Borrowing again from Gibson-Graham, this dissertation asks whether we might imagine the end of “neoliberalism” as we’ve known it by looking more closely at neoliberal discourses of politics and the political as they are embodied in specific places and in specific moments. Rather than see “neoliberalism” as a given or as an inevitability, I attempt to look more closely at the discourses through which neoliberal mandates are given life (Bourdieu 1998). In Chapter 6, I look at how leaders from Nicaragua’s Communal Movement in León have translated neoliberal calls for

participation and responsibility into their own understandings and critiques of socialist revolutionary practices, rearticulating them to create new ways of thinking/feeling about democracy, leadership, and our obligations to others and ourselves. What I find hopeful about such politics is how it is both driven by an ongoing sense of “pensamiento puro para el pueblo” and an awareness of the hubris of any politics that claims to embody purity in its everyday practice. Latour (1993) suggests that “as soon as we direct our attention simultaneously to the work of purification and the work of hybridization, we immediately stop being wholly modern, and our future begins to change” (11). For the community leaders in León that I had the privilege to interact with and in some cases develop friendship with, purity at the intersections of neoliberal reforms and revolutionary politics remains a horizon, an idealized common good, but real living and real struggle means, as the Coordinator of the Movement in León so poetically put it, that, “none of us are pure white doves.” Such thinking may enable us to rethink the oft-repeated lament in Nicaragua that, “the only pure revolutionaries are dead.”

I think this research is important to anthropology and to political theory more generally because – like Ernesto – it sees people, in their everyday lives, as political actors whose feelings, thoughts and practices while shaped by social structures, are also productive of those structures. To me personally and thus politically these ideas matter because they suggest ways of thinking and feeling beyond what Touraine (2001) calls *la pensée unique* (the neoliberal mantra that “there is no alternative”) and *la contre-pensée unique* (oppressively statist or reactionary socialisms). In other words, they offer the possibility of seeing hope where many see only despair and therefore alternatives where many see only inevitabilities. Some theorists and activists have criticized such post-structuralist understandings to be politically immobilizing, but as I hope I have convincingly argued in this dissertation, such an assessment remains rooted in a notion of politics that privileges obvious antagonisms (i.e., politics articulated through a

friend/enemy distinction) over the seemingly smaller, everyday, and, I think, ultimately more important relationships that are continually renegotiated as we struggle to move toward our visions of the common good while also living. As Williams reminds us, these relationships and the identities they configure are not “small change,” but meaningful political encounters, and, I think, where the greatest challenges and hope lies.

2 *Mística*

Today people find this hard to believe, but in the time of the revolution I found thousands of dollars and returned them all without taking a penny for myself...We were so full of honesty and conviction, we didn't think of ourselves first. Sandra 2002

I remember that we would share a piece of bread amongst all of us and I don't know if it was the gesture or the hunger, but when we were in prison a tiny little piece of bread was so delicious...a cracker shared between us was so delicious that it killed our hunger, it filled us all... Oscar 2002

2.1 *Mística Revolucionaria*

July 15, 2002

Office of the Communal Movement, León

The tiny office is dingy and damp, brightened only by a single window opening onto a small green courtyard. The mosquitoes attack my ankles like heat-seeking missiles and the sweat sticks my legs to the metal folding chair. It is 9 a.m. I am chatting with my friend Don Augusto, passing the morning as we often do, like teacher and student, Don Augusto behind his large desk, interrupting his paperwork to offer me lessons on the history of the revolution and the struggles of the Communal Movement.

As usual, Don Augusto chastises me for not coming to see him more often. *I am so busy!* I tell him. The truth is that the Communal Movement is only one of many places I routinely “hang out.” There are so many people and places to visit and every day it seems someone invites me to another meeting to which I find I simply cannot say no.

Yet Don Augusto's admonishments remind me that I may not be doing enough to maintain our friendship. I feel guilty for the privilege that I have to come and go from the Communal Movement office as I please – for my privilege to weigh the pleasures of Don Augusto's company against my own physical discomfort in the sauna-like room where he spends his days. I also feel worried that I am taking something from him that I cannot repay. I am indebted to Don Augusto – and to so many other friends and acquaintances – and wonder what I am really offering in return. If I come to visit Don Augusto more often, will my “debt” be lessened or even greater?

My concerns in the notes above reflect to some degree a disciplinary training that insists on an ethnographer's reflexivity about the relations between the researcher and her interlocutors (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fisher 1986). But, more importantly, they also speak to what I have learned from my friends in Nicaragua about

the importance of paying immediate and explicit attention to friendship as a process of continual negotiation and exchange. To be Don Augusto's (or anyone else's) friend, means asking "¿Cuanto le debo?" aloud, but also *inside*, in my head and in my heart.

This kind of heartfelt questioning of what we owe each other is one that Don Augusto believes should go beyond the boundaries of our relationships with those we already know and love. For Don Augusto, such sentiment should be bigger and more encompassing than the narrow parameters of friendship as a relationship between specific individuals. It should be a sentiment that extends to all of those around us and beyond. Don Augusto's notion of such obligation is rooted in revolutionary notions of solidarity – something Don Augusto and many others like him lament has been lost in the post-revolutionary decades.

Don Augusto and I are joined in the closet-sized office by his friend and Communal Movement *compañero* Don Wilfredo. Both in their mid-to-late 60s, the men's skin is gray and deeply wrinkled with brown spots from the sun, but where Don Augusto is rotund and jolly (his thread-bear *guayabera* barely closing across his belly), Don Wilfredo is thin and frail, a shadow of a man. Today we are talking about the early 1980s, when both men were still in their prime and active Sandinista militants in the armed struggle against the Contra rebels.

With pride, Don Augusto recollects the feeling of camaraderie amongst the militants in the early days of the Contra War when the two men were stationed along the river at the nation's border: "It was pure fraternity!" Agreeing, Wilfredo explains, "If the [supply] boat came with packages for you and you got a few cartons of cigarettes and your friend didn't get any, you always gave him one." Augusto quickly adds, "The guy that didn't get anything from the boat always got the most in the end because everyone else gave him something. He would end up with the most." "Yeah," Wilfredo

concurs, “but seeing that he had more he would redistribute it back out to everyone else so that everyone had something.” We all laugh, imagining this scenario.

Then, suddenly serious again, Don Augusto resumes our lesson:

Maya, it’s like you and I were talking about, it’s not the same anymore. That’s what’s been lost....Things have changed....Our elected leaders think that we’re going to show up asking them for things. It’s like a family. A family in which one part has turned its back on the other.

The story Don Augusto and Don Wilfredo told me is familiar and, at the same time, like a story from another world. The soldiers in the story, like many people I knew during my research, paid careful attention to what they owed each other. But what makes the tale humorous and bittersweet is their seemingly exaggerated prioritization of others’ needs over their own. Their focus seems to be not on the self, but on the wellbeing and happiness of their comrades. In contrast, when Don Augusto says that, “things have changed,” he is referring to a widely lamented notion that in the post-revolutionary era “people think only about themselves.”

This powerful sentiment of loss and nostalgia for revolutionary values or spirit is one that is central to contemporary Nicaraguan debates about the politics of *Sandinismo*, “neoliberalism” and post-revolutionary democracy. Don Augusto’s comparison of the “pure fraternity” of the revolution with the current sociopolitical context (in which our leaders “think that we are going to show up asking them for things”) speaks to contemporary conflicts among Nicaraguans and others about the obligations and roles of the state, political leaders, and citizens like Don Augusto. In this context, the question of what we owe each other is a profoundly political question. To situate such concerns historically, this chapter examines the notion of *mística revolucionaria* [revolutionary mysticism] – the ethos of solidarity that was created through and guided the Sandinista revolution. I examine the concept of

mística in depth here to highlight the radical contrast between revolutionary and post-revolutionary notions of politics, but also to consider how Nicaraguan revolutionary ideology and practice contained within it powerful tensions that contributed to the popular loss of faith in politics and political leaders that came to the fore in the 1990s. I begin my examination of mística by tracing the concept and its genealogy vis-à-vis the ideology of the Sandinista revolution as it emerges through several key texts. I describe how mística was idealized in such texts to be embodied in the revolution's "New Man." I then contrast the ideals presented in those texts with the lived experience of a friend who was a Sandinista militant but is now a dissident to highlight how the ethos of mística was both profoundly transformative and yet untenable in many ways as an embodied practice.

Mística revolucionaria is a seemingly simple concept – so simple, in fact, that there has been very little said about it in academic work on the Nicaraguan revolution. However the concept of mística is quite complex and significant to understanding the profound sense of *cavanga* [nostalgia and betrayal] that many individuals I knew described when they talked about Nicaraguan politics. As I will describe, it has its roots in diverse strands of spiritual and political thought and practice, including the mysticism and anarcho-communism of Nicaraguan revolutionary hero Augusto César Sandino, Christian spiritual teachings (especially liberationist Christianity), and Cuban and Nicaraguan Marxisms.

Mística, in the most basic sense, is typically described as an *actitud* [attitude] of social solidarity or "revolutionary love" enacted through self-sacrifice. That attitude is summed up in a pamphlet published by the National Secretary of Propaganda and Political Education in the early 1980s called *What is a Sandinista?* (Fonseca et al. 1982) which describes mística as an "everyday attitude of permanent sacrifice...; of respect towards...leaders and compañeros, of fraternity,

humility, simplicity, [and] of constant striving to do better.” *Mística* is the defining characteristic and philosophy of the revolutionary, not only in party propaganda, but also in the hearts of many who identify themselves as Sandinista revolutionaries. As Oscar, a city council member and party militant put it in 2002 when I asked what it means to be a Sandinista,

Each day that I live, I live intensely as a revolutionary. If I cannot serve my community – when I use the word “serve,” I mean give something of myself – I am not content. How can I put it? If someone seeks my services...immediately he or she has my hand, my voice, to help, to respond, to contribute to that which he or she desires.

More profound than an “attitude,” *mística* is *una forma de ser* – a way of being – in which ideals and action are inseparable (Fonseca et al 1982). To be meaningful, *mística* cannot simply be rhetorical, delegated or impersonal; it is accomplished through person-to-person interaction in which those expressing revolutionary solidarity or love actively, selflessly, and conscientiously give their personal resources – emotional, intellectual, physical, material, etc. – to the other. As FSLN co-founder Tomás Borge put it in a 1979 speech, “It is not enough...to express [revolutionary] love with words. It must be expressed with deeds” (Borge 1979, 18). For Borge, who understood *mística* as rooted in liberationist Christian teachings, an exemplar of this praxis was St. Francis who “went beyond *preaching* love to *practicing* love; beyond *preaching* humility to *practicing* humility; beyond *preaching* identification with the poor to *sharing* their poverty” (Borge 1982a, 113, emphasis in original).

The marker of true *mística* is not the temporary alleviation of another individual’s struggle – such as might be accomplished through a charitable donation – but the sharing of a collective struggle for greater humanity. In a 1982 speech to the Third Conference of the World Congress of Christians for Peace in Central America and the

Caribbean, Borge distinguished between traditional charity, characteristic of the Somoza era, and the *mística* of the revolution:

Charity means love, but the charity that has been preached here is the charity of alms and bread crusts. It's the charity of *nacatamales* on anniversaries and weekends;¹ It's the charity of feeding the hungry and perpetuating their hunger; it's the charity of the elegant lady who extends her freshly manicured hand to deposit a coin in the portal of the church; it's the charity of the powerful who make last-minute phone calls to create local support groups and to collect some blankets and clothes cast aside by their members because they are already out of style... (Borge 1982b, 102).

In contrast, *mística* encapsulates what for Borge is the true meaning of charity, that of neighborliness or *compañerismo*: the sharing of what one has and values, as opposed to the giving away of what one no longer needs. "Compañeros are those who give of themselves, who are capable of sharing their love, their charity, even to the point of giving their very lives" (1982b, 102). As Sandinista Congresswoman and revolutionary Gladys Báez similarly described in an interview with me:

Maybe I've never even said 'Good morning!' to my neighbor, but if he has a need, I'm going to be there for him...If my neighbor has a problem and I don't give him the time to stop and ask [what's wrong] or even to keep him company...and tell him that he can count on my solidarity, [to say,] 'here I am to stay with you for two hours because that's all I have to give you,' to lose that is to lose *mística*.

The experience of *mística* goes beyond mere camaraderie or even fraternity because, as I have noted in the introduction to this dissertation, it is a feeling that extends even to those whom we do not actually know. Reding points out that the name given to those who embody *mística*, "*compañero/a*," is rooted in the sharing of bread (the *pan* in *compañero*), "an act of the most profound Christian significance" (96). This sharing is real, material and immediate, but, like the Eucharist, it is also symbolic of the

¹ *Nacatamales* are Nicaraguan-style tamales traditionally made on weekends and special occasions.

sentiment that undergirds and motivates it, one based on principles of universal love and humanity that are understood as profoundly spiritual. As Sandra, a Sandinista militant/dissident described at length later in this chapter, put it:

It was beautiful to see the people at four in the morning, going happily, singing, to the harvest.² There was a *spiritual richness*: the people were happy to live, to help. They did it with so much emotion, with so much enthusiasm, above all with so much happiness. They went singing, whistling, talking, looking at each other happily. That is something that was lost. The people had so much faith, so much hope, and so many reasons to live.

Like other kinds of mysticism, *mística* entails a powerful sense of moving beyond the self. The word *mística* in Spanish literally means “mysticism”: “the indescribable union of man with the divine” (Diccionario Español Nicaragüense 2002). Mystic practices, while spanning diverse faiths, generally take the form of a discipline, such as meditation, through which an individual seeks to commune with the divine by “turning inward,” transcending the self and the superficial reality of everyday life. This communion is “indescribable” because it is achieved “through intuition, faith, ecstasy, or sudden insight rather than through rational thought” (Encarta World English Dictionary n.d.).

The meaning of *mística* in the Nicaraguan context, however, is fundamentally qualified by the word “*revolucionaria*” [revolutionary], which imbues and transforms this otherwise strictly spiritual concept with a Marxist materialism and rationalism. For the Sandinista vanguard, the social solidarity and revolutionary love essential to building a new popular morality required the application of Marxist analysis to the “concrete reality of Nicaragua” (Borge 1983, 117). As Reding puts it, “Marxism...[served as] a genuinely scientific methodology...by which to facilitate the incarnation of [what are

² In the early 1980s, volunteer brigades of young Nicaraguans (as well as internationalists) harvested coffee and cotton in response to Contra attacks on peasant communities.

essentially] Christian...values" (108). *Mística revolucionaria* is a transcendence of the self and a form of spiritual union, but unlike other mystical practices, the divine communion in *mística revolucionaria* occurs through Marxist discipline – through the rational, collective and “outward” engagement of the revolutionary with the concrete realities of class exploitation.

2.2 Historical Roots of Mística

The notion of the spiritual as inextricably linked to the social is common to both Sandinista revolutionary ideology and Christian liberation theology (Lancaster 1988). In his study of popular religion in revolutionary Nicaragua, Lancaster points out that individualism or alienation from community was perceived by many during the revolutionary era as synonymous with estrangement from God (Lancaster 69-73). *Mística revolucionaria*, like Sandinista ideology more generally (Randall 1983; Reding 1987; Lancaster 1988; Chow 1992; Lowy 1996), is profoundly intertwined with the teachings of liberation theology, which emphasize solidarity with the poor in their struggles for liberation against the injustices of capitalist exploitation (Lowy 35) and for salvation through human equality and interdependence (Lancaster 136). While not all practitioners of *mística* were or are religious or associate the spiritual elements of *mística* with God per se – indeed, some amongst the Sandinista party “vanguard” were avowed atheists – it was the “dynamic dialectic interaction” (Lowy 68) between liberationist Christianity and the Marxism of the revolution’s leaders that made possible the new morality of the revolutionary era (see also Borge 1983, 121-122).

The Sandinista revolution was the first socialist revolution – and the first revolution in the world since 1789 – in which Christians, including clergy members, played key roles (Lowy 94). Although not all Nicaraguan Christians supported the Sandinistas, many clergy and lay Christians were active in the pre-revolutionary struggle

against the dictatorship, at times as guerrilla collaborators and even as armed combatants, as in the case of the martyr-priest Gaspar García Laviana (Randall 1983). Beginning in the mid-1960s through the 1970s, Christian youth groups and Christian base communities transformed religious practice through the active participation of the poor in the reading and interpretation of scripture (Lowy 95), thereby challenging the hierarchical, elite and centralized structure of the church and serving, in the words of Tomás Borge, as “umbilical cords” between the FSLN and the people (Borge 1983, 122; see also Lowy 94-98). Immediately after the Sandinista triumph in 1979, the revolutionary government strategized to foment links between priests and sectors of the Church receptive to the revolution’s goals (Chow 1992). Christians subsequently held significant positions within the Sandinista state: during the 1980s, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Culture, and the Ministry of Foreign Relations were all led by Catholic priests.³

Liberationist Christianity – the precursor of liberation theology, which Lowy defines as the body of literature emerging out of the social movement – arose as the result of a convergence in the late 1950s of internal changes within the Catholic Church characterized by increased receptivity to the insights of modern philosophy and the social sciences and the opening, with the Cuban Revolution in 1959, of a “new historical period...in Latin America characterized by the intensification of social struggles” in response to deepening social and class divisions in the region (Lowy 40-41).

According to Lowy, however, there already existed between Christianity and socialism certain key structural affinities that were brought into what Weber terms

³ While the Catholic hierarchy in Nicaragua and elsewhere initially supported the revolution, tensions quickly arose over the role of religious leaders in government positions, the draft, and other issues. Cardinal (then Arch Bishop) Obando y Bravo became an outspoken critic of the regime, accusing the Sandinistas of Marxist-Leninist imperialism (Booth 1985).

“elective affinity” by these historical conditions (Lowy 68). Those areas of correspondence included, among others: a rejection of the individual as the foundation of ethics; concern with the alienation and selfishness of modern capitalist society; an emphasis on the importance of communal life; an understanding of the poor as the victims of injustice; and the anticipation of a “future kingdom of justice and freedom, peace and fraternity among humankind” (Lowy 69). In his ethnographic analysis, Lancaster similarly argues that the rise of liberationist Christianity in Nicaragua and the corresponding emergence of revolutionary class-consciousness were made possible by pre-existing popular Christian religious practices which, he argues, incorporate social “leveling mechanisms,” thus “lay[ing] the groundwork for socialism’s appeal...” (54).

The founding of the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (Sandinista National Liberation Front) in 1961 in opposition to the Somoza dictatorship took place in the context of the historical conjuncture between social struggle in Latin America and liberationist Christianity. Nicaragua’s young revolutionaries drew inspiration, as well as financial support and training, from the revolutionary regime in Cuba (Zimmerman 2000), which promulgated a “New Marxism” merging the scientific socialism (i.e., historical materialism) of Marx and Engels with an emphasis on revolutionary affect. For Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, socialism as previously constituted was insufficient. People needed “non-rational,” emotional incentives to make the revolution (Fernandéz 2000): “If a revolutionary happens to be one who arms himself with a revolutionary theory but doesn’t feel it, he has a mental relation to revolutionary theory but not an affective one – not an emotional relation. He doesn’t have a really revolutionary attitude...” (Castro cited in Hodges 1986: 176). Breaking with the ideology of established communist states, Castro and Guevara asserted that what mattered most was the emotional connection of the masses to the revolutionary struggle.

The New Marxism of Cuba and Nicaragua provoked Eastern European communists to deride the phenomenon as “tropical communism, a communism of the passions instead of scientific thought” (Hodges 1986: 179). While indicative of the New Marxism’s deviance from communist orthodoxy, such criticisms downplayed the on-going significance of the Marxist-Leninist paradigm to both the Cuban and Nicaraguan revolutions. In both cases, the New Marxism was a hybrid: revolutionary feeling was paramount, but a materialist rationality was its bedrock. The struggle against class oppression was fundamental but possible only through a new revolutionary morality based in both reason and emotion. For Sandinista party co-founder Carlos Fonseca, for example, socialism was “the people’s only hope of achieving a profound change in their conditions of life...[and] the fundamental guide must be the principles of scientific socialism” (cited in Hodges 1986: 173), but those principles could not simply be applied like a formula. Rather the Sandinista needed a “profound [spiritual or emotional] identification” with revolutionary principles rooted in the praxis of collective consciousness (Fonseca et al. 1982): that is, *mística revolucionaria*.

Castro, Guevara and possibly Fonseca⁴ drew inspiration from the works of early twentieth-century revolutionaries such as Antonio Gramsci and José Mariátegui, who combined Marxism, liberalism, anarchism, and classical republicanism to forge political philosophies that valued the emotive and asserted the inseparability of revolutionary theory and practice (Hodges 1986, 179-184). Mariátegui, whom Lowy credits with developing a concept of revolutionary mysticism in the 1920s, was particularly pivotal in linking the revolutionary and the spiritual: “The force of the revolutionaries does not lie in their science; it lies in their faith, their passion, their will. It’s a religious, mystical,

⁴ Zimmerman (2000) contests whether Fonseca was inspired by Mariátegui and attributes this argument to an error on Borge’s part (60).

spiritual force...The revolutionary emotion...is a religious emotion" (Mariátegui cited in Lowy 17).

Key among these influences for both Nicaragua and Cuba was Nicaraguan general Augusto César Sandino, who combined notions of universal love and fraternity, rational communism, human rights, and nationalism to wage a guerrilla war against U.S. imperialism and the Somoza dictatorship in the 1920s and 1930s (Hodges 1986). Following Mexican anarchist Ricardo Flores Magón and Basque spiritist Joaquin Trincado, Sandino fought not only to rid Nicaragua of "Yankee" interference, but also to achieve a "New Age" of "universal love" and the development of the "complete man" – "the Communist Spiritist" – through a revolution of consciousness (Hodges 1986: 24). According to Navarro-Genie, Sandino's spiritual practices are best characterized as a form of millenarianism, belief systems which seek "to rid the world of its imperfections" and "to create or re-create some form of heaven on earth..." (xxii).

Such movements, Navarro-Genie points out, exist at the intersection of religion and politics and are led by charismatic prophets with messianic-like powers who are believed to channel the divine for their followers (142-159). For Sandino, who was alleged to have magical powers and presented himself as a Christ-like figure in his struggle for the redemption of his people (Navarro-Genie 155-157), the spiritual was not separate from the political, nor was it irrational; rather it was central to political struggle and was based, like modern science, on reason (Hodges 1986).

Sandino's struggle was crushed by his assassination by Somoza's National Guard in 1934, but was resurrected in Nicaraguan popular memory through FSLN co-founder Carlos Fonseca in the 1960s and 1970s (see Fonseca 1982). Fonseca urged his fellow revolutionaries to include Sandino's name in their organization – originally simply the "National Liberation Front" – famously describing Sandino as "a kind of path" for his generation to emulate and study (Hodges 165-167; Zimmerman 72-74). Fonseca

wrote and disseminated an anthology of Sandino's political thought, the *Ideario político del General Augusto César Sandino* [*Political Ideology of General Augusto César Sandino*], amongst the Sandinista "vanguard" in the early 1960s. He also later wrote a biography of Sandino, *Sandino, guerrillero proletario* [*Sandino, Working-Class Warrior*]. However, as the second title suggests, Fonseca selectively resurrected Sandino, culling from his letters and writings that which supported the emerging Sandinista revolutionary project, particularly the Nicaraguan struggle against imperialism and class oppression and bypassing Sandino's more extreme spiritist assertions (Hodges 1986, 166-167; Zimmerman 2000). Sandinista intellectual and writer (and later FSLN vice-president) Sergio Ramírez similarly omitted Sandino's more outlandish mystical beliefs from his 1974 anthology of Sandino's writing, constructing, according to Hodges, a falsely coherent and "sanitized" image and message (Hodges 1992, 181-186). As a result, Hodges points out, Sandino is largely remembered today as a nationalist and populist and not as a communist, a prophet or philosopher of the occult.

Given the significance of the concept of *mística* to the Sandinista struggle, why would Fonseca and Ramírez effectively suppress aspects of Sandino's mysticism? While Hodges criticizes Ramírez and others for censoring Sandino, he acknowledges that the material omitted by Ramírez from Sandino's correspondences is – even to a Sandino scholar like himself – cryptic and seemingly bizarre (1992, 181-186). One such censored letter, for instance, concerned the transmigration of souls from other planets. Amongst the paragraphs Ramírez covertly edited out are lines such as the following: "Humans were born of the fifth essence of nature on Earth. A tree enclosed the fifth essence. From it the spirits who had received their judgment on coming of age, the same that had been exiled from other planets (NEPTUNE), took on human bodies" (Sandino cited in Hodges 1992, 182). Fonseca, Ramírez and others had a vested interest in promoting an image of Sandino that could politically mobilize the Nicaraguan people, and the success

of their depiction depended on a politically intelligible and coherent Sandino. Despite the continuing presence of what might be labeled occult beliefs amongst many Nicaraguans (Navarro-Genie, for instance, notes the unionization of witches in Nicaragua), Sandino's political-spiritual philosophy went beyond what the Sandinista leadership perceived to be useful and credible.⁵

Thus the mysticism of Sandino is not the same as the *mística* of the Sandinistas, yet within the dominant narratives of Sandinismo they are fundamentally and productively linked. For example, when I asked Oscar, the municipal official quoted earlier in this chapter, about the significance of *mística* in the revolution, he immediately linked the "golden era of the revolution," that time characterized by *mística* revolucionaria, with the path of Sandino followed by Fonseca:

It was the golden era of the revolution...all of this was transmitted from the era of Sandino, followed by Carlos Fonseca...From Sandino comes this trajectory, this flame, this fire – right? It comes and it is our generation's turn to live it, that element of thinking about others, fighting for others, giving to others, giving what we have to others, that feeling was what we did: share, share...This was an exercise, a practice, an obligation.

In this standard but moving narrative, the torch of *mística* was passed to the Sandinistas by Sandino via Carlos Fonseca, inspiring a revolutionary love that, in Oscar's words, "was so wide, so great, so full of passion, that to immolate ourselves, to sacrifice ourselves, was a great honor."

⁵ For Hodges, who interprets Sandino's seemingly fantastic assertions as coherent in the context of his overarching philosophy of communist spiritism (185), the Sandinistas not only misrepresented Sandino, but also misunderstood him. According to Hodges, the Sandinistas did not even recognize Sandino as a communist because he did not subscribe to Marx and Engels' scientific socialism. They failed, in Hodges view, to realize that Sandino – unlike the Sandinistas themselves – stood for a pre-Marxist, genuinely communist revolution: one that brings about real egalitarianism through the abolition of class distinctions and a new spiritual consciousness (Hodges 1992, 1-14). Hodges's critique comes shortly after the Sandinista loss of the 1990 elections, which, as I discuss later in this chapter, was partly the result of verticalism within the Sandinista party and ideology and a time of great disillusionment with the FSLN.

Similarly, the *mística* of Sandino is seamlessly depicted as the forerunner to contemporary Sandinismo in a speech given by Sandinista militant and intellectual Alejandro Bendaña commemorating the 61st anniversary of Sandino's death in 1995:

For Sandino, the country's liberation comes about through the liberation of the individual, through abandoning vices, through love for the community that is also identification with other people in struggle...Sandino exalted the importance of personal energy, of faith, optimism, will, of ethical conscience, of youth and new generations: in a word, the revolutionary *mystique*.⁶ *Sandinismo thus entails the possibility of moral, spiritual and material betterment* (Bendaña 1995, emphasis added).

For Bendaña, the *mística revolucionaria* of Sandino – and consequently of Sandinismo – necessarily combines politics, ethics and spirituality. However, like Fonseca and others, Bendaña is emphatic in his separation of the concept of *mística* from those aspects of spirituality that might be deemed irrational or supernatural: “*Mystique is not the same as mysticism; Sandino's ideas were rationally based*” (Bendaña 1995). Mirroring the story of the Sandinistas themselves, Sandino is depicted as a modern thinker, inspired not in Bendaña's retelling by practitioners of the occult, but by the rational political philosophies and nationalism of an earlier revolution:

It was Sandino who brought to Nicaragua the most advanced and revolutionary social ideas of that epoch, tailoring them to suit Nicaraguan reality. He had assimilated them in Mexico during the Mexican revolution, not in literary salons or in universities, but as a mechanic in oil fields owned by U.S. firms; an organized worker who got a political education in syndicalist ideology, also known as anarcho-syndicalism, libertarian socialism or rational communism (Bendaña 1995).

As this brief genealogy of *mística revolucionaria* suggests, the concept of *mística* emerged at the intersection of a variety of distinct but overlapping ideologies, political projects and historical circumstances. Despite the tensions

⁶ It is unclear whether the translation of *mística revolucionaria* as “revolutionary *mystique*” is that of the English language editors of *Envío* or of Bendaña himself, however given his distinction between *mystique* and *mysticism*, the word seems appropriate.

within and between them, the political-spiritual philosophy of *mística* effectively tied together Sandinismo's potent mix of liberationist Christian teachings, scientific socialism, New Marxism, and the FSLN's mythic resurrection of Sandino. More than simply an attitude, *mística* was a way of thinking, acting and, perhaps mostly importantly, feeling, at the heart of Sandinista identity and ideology. The embodiment of and path to such revolutionary praxis was the idealized "New Man," a disciplined and self-abnegating revolutionary militant motivated by his love for humanity.

2.3 The New Man

In his writings, Tomás Borge describes two interrelated forms of the resurrection of man taking place in revolutionary praxis. One is the symbolic resurrection of the revolution's heroes and martyrs through the on-going presence of their teachings in the lives of the living. This is the resurrection at stake in the circulation of images and slogans of Guevara, Sandino, Fonseca and other icons and the ubiquitous cries of "*¡Presente!*" after the names of such heroes at political gatherings. The other, less familiar notion is what Borge calls the "resurrection of the living." For Borge and others, this rebirth is the fundamental political agenda and praxis of the revolution (1982b, 103): a resurrection of man from a condition of misery, exploitation and selfishness to one of human solidarity, justice and liberation, that is, a return of man from a condition of alienation to one of humanity (1981a, 40). Borge is emphatic that he refers here to life and rebirth not in figurative terms but "in historic," that is Marxist, terms (1982b, 103): "How can one feed the hungry without freeing them from tyranny and foreign oppression? How can one feed the hungry without developing the means of production for the benefit of the people?" (1982b, 104).

The resurrection of the living described by Borge is led in Sandinista ideology by the party's militants, a "vanguard" of revolutionaries who have themselves been transformed from ordinary men to revolutionary New Men through their "courage, selflessness, and audacity" (1981b, 53). Borge, along with scholars and liberation theologians, traces this resurrection of man to St. Paul, who describes a rebirth of man possible through his embrace of the teachings of Christ (Hodges 1986, 262). For Borge, the Christian origins of the concept speak to the shared ideals of liberationist Christianity and the Sandinista revolution, both of which he describes as an "agenda of life" or the "reign of Christ" and which he juxtaposes with the "theology of death," "the reign of Satan – that is to say, the reign of oppression and slavery" (1982b, 103).

However, both inside and outside of Nicaragua, the ideal of the New Man is primarily associated, not with Christ, but with Che Guevara, whose revolutionary trajectory effectively embodies a profound, Christ-like love of the people purified and sustained by Marxist conviction and sacrifice (Guevara 1970, 384, cited in Hodges 1986, 262). For example, describing in an interview the core values of the Sandinista struggle, Gladys Báez referred to Guevara as the archetype of the New Man and his *mística*: "Che Guevara gave us many lessons, [among them] that we need to have firm convictions and a concrete ideology that doesn't distance us from our people...[what] we called *mística revolucionaria*."

In his memoir, *Fire from the Mountain*, Sandinista militant Omar Cabezas describes how the ideal of the New Man, symbolized in the figure of Guevara, motivated the Sandinista guerrillas to surpass their own physical and emotional limits (1982a). In the story, the guerrillas have been marching for two grueling days through the mountains in search of food. Finding an abandoned cornfield, they load up their packs and begin the difficult journey back to camp. The men are exhausted and have to stop every hundred yards to rest and adjust their eighty-pound bags. Eventually they give up and

refuse to go on. Their commander is furious and begins to yell. Then, changing his authoritarian approach to one that calls on the emotional drive behind the struggle, he asks the men to consider the revolution's New Man:

Compañeros...you've heard talk of the new man...You know where to find the new man? The new man is in the future, the man we want to create with the new society, when the revolution triumphs...Do you know where he is? He's there on the ridge on top of the hill we're climbing. He's right there; go get him, grab him, look for him, take hold of him. The new man has gone beyond the normal man. The new man has gone beyond his tired legs. The new man has gone beyond hunger, beyond rain, beyond mosquitoes, beyond loneliness. The new man is there, in that super effort. There where the average man starts to give more than the average man...When he starts to forget he is tired, to forget himself, to put his own self aside – that's where you'll find the new man...We're going to start creating the new man right here; right here the new man is going to be formed. Because the *Frente* has got to be an organization of new men, men who, after the triumph, can generate a whole society of new men...

At first the guerrillas scoff at the commander's words. However, by the end of his monologue they are both shamed and inspired and resume their marching with renewed vigor, mentally repeating to themselves, "*Hay que ser como el Che*" ["One has to be like Che Guevara"] (Cabezas 1982a 93-94).

Like those of Christ, Guevara's lessons are more than simply edicts or philosophical musings: they are embodied in Guevara's life, in his literal resurrection as a New Man and in his symbolic resurrection as a hero and martyr. For example, like the guerrillas described in Cabezas's memoir, Guevara is himself "purified" and transformed from the "average" man to the New Man through physical suffering in the mountains of Cuba, the *Sierra Maestra*.

We walked through difficult terrain, suffering attacks by swarms of mosquitoes that made the rest periods unbearable, eating little and poorly, drinking water from swampy rivers or simply from swamps. Each day of travel became longer and truly horrible. We were hungry, thirsty and could hardly advance because our legs were as heavy as lead and the weapons were enormously heavy. We continued advancing... (Guevara 1970, 401. Cited in Barrio and Jenkins, 105).

In the mountains, Guevara moves away from his bourgeois identity as a doctor, choosing to carry ammunition instead of medicines (Guevara 1970, 11. Cited in Barrio and Jenkins, 83), and is resurrected as a revolutionary, a maker of a new world for mankind: “We have climbed the Sierra Maestra and we have known the dawn; and our minds and hands are full of the seed of dawn. And we are ready to sow it on this land and defend it so that it may bear fruit” (Guevara 2001, 42. Cited in Barrio and Jenkins 111).

In Nicaraguan vernacular, to say that someone “*anduvo en la montaña*” (was in the mountains) is to say that they were active militarily during the revolutionary era, even if that mobilization took place in the flat jungles of the Atlantic coast or along the level floodplain of the Rio San Juan. More than simply a geological feature, “the mountain” implies “*monte*,” the kind of difficult, uncultivated terrain – geographic but also psychological – described by Cabezas and Guevara. The Spanish title of Cabezas’s book, *La montaña es algo más que una inmensa estepa verde* [*The Mountain is More Than an Immense Green Steppe*] (1982b), refers to the symbolic and literal significance of the mountain to the guerrillas’ transformation; the mountain is more than just a mountain, it is the locus of the New Man’s resurrection. By the time the guerrillas in Cabezas’s story reach their camp after the incident described above, the men have become New Men: “We felt like we’d given birth to ourselves...[t]hat was the end of the first period of adaptation, the development of that physical indestructibility in the face of the environment, and that moral indestructibility as well” (1982b, 95).

The significance of the mountain is similarly present in the story of Sandino, who commanded his guerrilla war and preached his spiritual communism from the Segovias, mountains he considered to be a kind of sacred, holy land from which man could commune with the divine (Navarro-Genie 2002, 92-93). Thus, in Sandinista narratives, the mountain signifies and is the location of a rebirth of man made possible by a return

to and triumph over a pre-civilized, primal nature, a kind of rewriting of the modern social contract made possible by a return to the state of nature. The mountain is home to wild creatures, including peasants and Indians, who are idealized by Sandino and subsequently in Sandinista ideology as uncorrupted, heroic, and deeply spiritual, qualities that are transmuted to the revolution's "vanguard" through their struggle. The guerrillas, mostly educated young men from respected – if not well-off – families, are forced in the montaña to abandon their former privilege and self-importance and, in exchange, gain seemingly mystical powers as New Men:

But gradually you are mastering the environment...It's as if very gradually this mass of men was becoming one more element, a few more creatures of the mountain – intelligent, yes, but like animals...This...was what helped to forge in each of us the steel that was needed to overthrow the dictatorship. Our skin was weathering, the look in our eyes was hardening, our eyesight sharpening, our sense of smell keener. Our reflexes – we moved like animals. Our thoughts were hardening, our hearing was more acute, we were starting to take on the same hardness as the jungle, the hardness of animals; we were growing a half-human half-animal hide. We were like men without souls. We were tree trunks, snakes, wild boars, fleet as deer, dangerous as cobras, fierce as mountain lions in heat. And so a spirit was forged that enabled us to endure all the mental and physical hardship. We were developing granite will in the face of the environment...Still, and this is another mysterious, contradictory thing, though we were extremely tough and hardened, we were tender...very gentle; we were very loving too (Cabezas 1982a, 84-85).

In the depictions of the New Man drawn by Carlos Fonseca, Ricardo Morales and Oscar Turcios and published in the pamphlet "What is a Sandinista?" the New Man is capable, as a practitioner of *mística*, of surpassing the contradictions that limit the average man (Fonseca et al. 1982). Like Cabezas and his *compañeros*, he is hard as granite and yet tender. Like Guevara, he is rational but passionate, realistic but romantic. Like Sandino, he is scientific but also spiritual. Like Jesus, the New Man is both a teacher and a disciple of the masses; he sacrifices himself, but through that sacrifice gains eternal life in heroic martyrdom. The New Man's solidarity is so profound

that his sacrifice is transformed into a privilege and source of joy. He knows “the happiness of fertilizing the sacred ground of the homeland with [his] blood” (Fonseca et al. 1982, 17).

In this rebirth as a New Man – and particularly in this willingness to make the ultimate sacrifice for others – the Sandinista can and should achieve a spiritual and moral superiority akin to saintliness (Borge 1980, 29, cited in Hodges 1986, 258-259; Borge 1981b, 57-58). The notion of the New Man as saintly or Christ-like reverberates in Nicaraguan popular art and song. In a poster at a gallery in the city of Granada, the face of Carlos Fonseca with his telltale blue eyes and glasses replaced that of Jesus on the body nailed to the cross. Images of Guevara, including his eerily Christ-like post-mortem photograph, similarly show up on religious altars or on the walls of peoples’ homes alongside pictures of Christ or the Virgin Mary. Fonseca – whose tomb in Managua is lit with an eternal flame – is hauntingly commemorated in a song by Carlos Mejía Godoy (1979), *Comandante Carlos Fonseca Amador*, taken from the writings of Tomás Borge, as “one of the dead that never dies.” One verse effectively links the New Man’s sacrifice, saintliness, revolutionary love, and firm conviction.

A bullet in the forest of Zinica
penetrated your strong heart of a saint
and exploded your blood into our lives
like a giant contact bomb.
Bursting with love for your fellow man,
your naked breast a red *trinitaria* [a type of flower],
your generous blue eyes
firmly fixed on the future.

A similar depiction is found in the chorus of another popular revolutionary song by the Duo Guardabarranco, “Guerrero del amor” [Love’s Warrior] (1985), the first line of which succinctly, poetically – and without a hint of today’s cynicism – captures the essence of the New Man as a humble re-creator of the world.

Anonymous author of the dawn
silent deer in the mountain,
love’s warrior.

Son of this turbulent time
Poor child born in pure wilderness,
In order to reach the final victory.

In the revolutionary imaginary, the saintliness of the New Man extends to such a degree that even Christ himself aims to be a guerrilla. In the well-loved Nicaraguan song "*Cristo ya nacio en Palacagüina*," [also known and recorded as "*Cristo de Palacagüina*"] also by Carlos Mejía Godoy (2000), Jesus has been reborn in the Segovias, Sandino's holy mountains. In this retelling, Christ is the son of a humble laundress and a poor day laborer. The wise men that come to see him – including an Indian named Joaquin – bring not incense, myrrh and gold, but cheese, candies and yucca doughnuts traditional to other regions of Nicaragua. In the rousing climax of the song, the Virgin Mary dreams that someday her son will be a carpenter like his father, but the young Christ instead replies, "Tomorrow, I want to be a guerilla fighter."

The ideal of the New Man requires practitioners of *mística* to embody many contradictions, but perhaps the most challenging of all is the simultaneous call to humility and the near sanctification of the revolutionary. For Carlos Fonseca, modesty was essential to "facilitating collective life" and is referred to repeatedly as a key characteristic of the Sandinista in his section of the pamphlet "What is a Sandinista?" (Fonseca et al 1982). Fonseca admonishes that the Sandinista must avoid vanity and personal desire, subsuming his personal interests to those of the collective. "...[H]e must be "characterized by his absolute and supreme disinterest in cruel ambition" (10). At the same time, he must be a leader of the masses, an exemplar of revolutionary virtue. He must, as Borge put it in 1981, be "at the head of the people in their spirit of sacrifice, in self-denial, in revolutionary modesty, in unaffectedness, and – if necessary – in readiness to die..." (Borge 1981b, 39).

The problems inherent in such a mandate go back far beyond contemporary notions of a breakdown of moral authority within the party. They have, in fact,

challenged the Sandinista struggle since its inception. In the late 1950s, for example, Fonseca and his fellow revolutionaries modeled their initial strategy for overthrowing the Somoza dictatorship on Guevara's *foquismo* – the formation of guerrilla cells “to serve the people and orient them ideologically” (Hodges 1986: 219-225, Zimmerman 2000). Their almost total lack of success led them to implement a strategy of “prolonged peoples’ war” inspired by the Viet Cong, Maoism, and the guerrilla tactics of Sandino. Under this configuration, “the vanguard” strove to connect itself to “the masses” through living, working, and even becoming kin with rural families. This strategy was successful in establishing solidarity across class lines, but by 1975 a significant faction of the FSLN “vanguard” advocated in its place a Marxist-Leninist proletarian resistance focused on urban workers. They also rejected the possibility of dialogue with elite opposition to the dictatorship (Hodges 1986). Only after two failed attempts at overthrowing Somoza did FSLN leaders reconcile their differences and agree upon a strategy of general insurrection that included both rural and urban populations and mobilized the nation’s anti-Somoza elite.

As FSLN President Daniel Ortega – an advocate of the insurrectionalist (*Tercerista*) strategy – commented on the failed 1977 and 1978 overthrows, “to win, we had to mobilize the masses and get them to participate actively in the armed struggle” (cited in Hodges 1986: 247). He was right. Only after Nicaraguans in general – and not a prescribed revolutionary subset of the population – began actively revolting against the dictatorship was the 1979 insurrection possible. Ironically, the Sandinistas had struggled for twenty years to make a revolution whose ideology emphasized the centrality of popular participation while effectively proclaiming only the “vanguard” – unlike the masses – capable of applying theory to practice. The revolution was impossible without the direct, widespread and heart-felt participation of the people, but, in the Guevarist

model of the FSLN, the action and emotion of the people had to be channeled and filtered through the reason and superior morality of the “vanguard’s” New Men.

It is in this sense that Hodges describes the New Man ideal as “profoundly elitist” (1986, 263) and concludes, “If there is any worship in this new humanism, it is not of the person regenerated in the image of God, but created in the image of the vanguard” (264). However well-intentioned, the ideal of saintliness is not only difficult to live up to, but seems itself to be hubristic. This powerful tension has not, as the founders of the FSLN hoped, been surpassed by the “vanguard’s” New Men, but, as I discuss at greater length later, has embroiled the FSLN in crises of authority and contestations over the meaning and ownership of Sandinismo.

The paradoxical combination of elitism and populism inherent in the New Man ideal is most starkly revealed along two axes: those of gender and, ironically, as the previous example illustrates, of class. In the next section of this chapter, I share the story of the emergence of *mística* in the life of one woman militant and her eventual distancing of herself from the Sandinista party to examine how issues of gender and class raise challenges to the dominant narratives of *mística*. The story of Sandra that follows is significant both in how it speaks to the experiences of other Sandinistas of her generation and in its departures from official narratives of Sandinismo.

2.4 A New Woman

Like many Nicaraguans, my friend Sandra first became active in the Sandinista struggle through her involvement as a student in a Christian organization, in her case the *Movimiento Cristiano Revolucionario* [Revolutionary Christian Movement or MCR]. Her participation in the MCR fused her already strong Catholic faith and personal dedication to helping others with a radical exegesis of Biblical teachings:

In the MRC, we would read the Bible and study its meaning, applying it to real life. We didn't just read the Bible and pray. I liked this possibility of going further, not just leaving things as they are. This made a lot of spiritual sense to me...and I wanted to *do* something for others and so I wanted to fight.

Sandra joined the clandestine struggle against the dictatorship, transporting arms and recruiting others to the cause. She later served in the Sandinista army and government after the triumph of the revolution. Over the years, however, Sandra has turned from militant of the FSLN to a party dissident, but one – like many – who still deeply loves the revolution and strives to embody *mística revolucionaria*. In this section, I contrast Sandra's story with the New Man ideal to highlight how the tensions inherent in the revolution's ideology contributed to a fracturing of that ideology along class and gender lines.

Readers may be surprised by Sandra's candid discussion of her personal history. Sandra is a friend, but much of the material below emerged in the context of an interview for this research before we knew each other well. Sandra is exceptional in her willingness share – almost an inability to conceal – her stories and her emotions, a characteristic I find endearing but also bittersweet because Sandra is unable to publicly reveal one of the most fundamental aspects of her identity – her homosexuality – to all but her closest friends. For Sandra, this deception is an oppression. (She has been given a pseudonym here and some key characteristics about her identity have been changed to protect her anonymity.)

Before I begin with her story, let me tell you a few other things about Sandra. She cries easily and often in response to the suffering of others. She laughs from her belly, sings with gusto, and is at times frightfully, almost recklessly, full of bravado. (She thrilled and terrified me, for instance, with stories of scaring away neighborhood troublemakers with a pistol.) Sandra drives like a demon, drinks too much, and is absolutely devoted to her extended family. Middle aged, petite and extremely sensitive,

she is also incredibly tough. I hope it is apparent in what I've written that I admire her tremendously.

Here is her story:

I am the sixth of nine siblings and my mother took in laundry to make a living. She had nine children from different husbands...my mother tried to take care of us without any help [from them] and we grew up in a situation of extreme poverty in which many times we went hungry. We didn't have food...

My mother was very sick when I was young and...her work was very hard and in that time there wasn't the modern technology that we have now...I remember that she ironed with an iron made of solid metal...and later she suffered from rheumatism and arthritis.

As she was ill, we kids left home really young, like seven years old, to live with other people, because she was always going to the hospital. So I grew up very sad and I suffered a great deal and I cried a lot each time I was separated from my mom.... I lived with a brother of my mother and this was really awful for me because this man abused me from the time I was a little girl... I was seven or eight years old... He abused me and I lived full of panic because he was a man that drank a lot...when he drank he became violent and he would grab things, throw things and break the windows in the house. He was so violent that I was always nervous because of the constant abuse and this marked much of my life from that point forward.

I was frightened and I suffered a lot. Later, other uncles abused me. Because of all this, I grew up really insecure, fearful, shamed, and sad. I cried a lot. I cried a lot because I couldn't see my mother...

Sandra's mother died when she was still a young woman and Sandra was devastated by the fact that she had never had the opportunity to talk with her mother about the sexual and physical abuse she had endured as a child and adolescent. Sandra turned to alcohol to suffocate her feelings and developed a drinking problem, which she still battles to this day. During this period of crisis following the death of her mother, Sandra felt increasingly uncertain about her sexual identity and began to secretly have sexual relations with women. She now considers herself a lesbian but remains closeted to all but close friends and family due to extreme prejudice against homosexuals. It was

during this period of crisis that Sandra became involved in another kind of covert activity: clandestine efforts to overthrow the dictatorship.

Sandra's trajectory as a revolutionary was made possible, in her view, by a feeling of *mística*, which she describes as an essential part of herself harkening back to her childhood: "I have always had...[the desire to do things for others]...as an intrinsic part of me...I'm not one of those high-up people who feels satisfied giving a donation. I have to go beyond that...[It] is something that is inside of me, the way I like to be." According to Sandra, this feeling predates her participation in the Revolutionary Christian Movement and collaboration with the FSLN. For Sandra, the genesis of her *mística* can be traced to her own experiences of poverty and the combination of strength and sensitivity that she learned from two very different women: her mother and her "grandmother" (the mother of the father of some of her siblings).

My grandmother was a person really different than my mother. She was illiterate but with a great intelligence, incredibly smart. She had a fantastic memory and maybe she'd never read a book or gone to the university, but she was an innate feminist. She spoke with me often about Nicaragua's history and she told me about Sandino. She was a very strong woman and not so sensitive like my mother. My mother was never strong. She was very, very sensitive. My grandmother never cried...She was very strong and very political and she liked to talk about politics. She detested the Liberals [the party of Somoza] and she called them *ladrones* [thieves]. She called the Conservatives *vendepatrias* [traitors]. Her strength influenced me a great deal. The influence of my grandmother is something that helped me to understand Sandinismo even though the rest of my family were Liberals. My mother was born into a Liberal family and therefore was a Liberal herself. I was the only one involved in the revolutionary movement. I became involved because I wanted to *do* things for others, I wanted to fight...

On the other hand, [my mother's] sensitivity [was also influential] and is something that ran in my blood... I was always a very sensitive young person, very sensitive. *Everything* made me sad. When I would see a child in the street without shoes and I would

see that he had nothing, I would become so sad even though it [poverty] was my own experience as well.⁷

Here Sandra depicts her grandmother and mother as polar opposites. Her mother is weak (psychologically as well as physically), overly sensitive, and politically passive. (She is a Liberal because her family is Liberal, not because she actually supports the dictatorship.) Sandra's grandmother, in contrast, is strong, intelligent, and passionate about politics and social injustice. However, it is the *combination* of these traits, in Sandra's narrative, that makes possible Sandra's *mística*. The sensitivity Sandra learns from her mother is extreme and potentially debilitating – *everything* makes her cry – but when combined with her grandmother's reason, strength and political analysis, that sensitivity takes the form of a revolutionary empathy. Sandra is not simply compassionate about others' suffering, she is determined to *do* something about it.

However, Sandra's revolutionary consciousness, seeded by the strength, intellect and sensitivity of her grandmother and mother, also has a particular moment of catalyst. Sandra describes this moment of transformation as follows:

My mother had relations with many men, one of whom was especially crazy, very aggressive. He beat my mother and he would beat up whichever of my brothers or sisters came to the house...When I was fifteen I told this man that I didn't care if I had to kill him, I was not going to be abused by him in my own home. I don't know where I got the strength, but I chased him with a gun and I shot at him. After this moment of fury and courage, I began to change...I have never lost my sensitivity, my ability to identify with others, but that experience made me stronger, made me brave and gave me the courage to go forward.

Successfully chasing away this abuser of her family, Sandra claimed her own sense of self worth, which allowed her to move beyond simply sympathizing with other victims of class and gender oppression to acting on their and her own behalf.⁸

⁷ I have rearranged the order of a few sentences in this interview excerpt for the sake of clarity and continuity.

2.5 Pure Fraternity

I want to contrast Sandra's narrative with the story told by Sandinista revolutionary Omar Cabezas in *Fire from the Mountain* of how and why he joins the FSLN. Cabezas and Sandra grew up in the same city. (She is his junior by about a decade, but her participation in anti-Somoza activities began when she was still in high school whereas his did not begin until college.) Like Sandra, Cabezas was raised in a poor neighborhood, but his family was working-class. Because of an existing sense of class-consciousness and the fact that his family belonged to the opposition party, Cabezas found himself attracted to the anti-Somoza protests and activities of his fellow students. His participation in the FSLN was initially established, however, by a desire to seem like a man in the eyes of a friend. In Cabezas's story, his friend Juan José – a judo and karate expert whom he admires for his great physical strength – asks Cabezas if he is willing to make a “greater commitment to the people.” “Blood of Christ!” thinks Cabezas. “I know what this shit is, where this guy is going.” Cabezas mistakenly believes that Juan José is asking him to join the Federation of Revolutionary Students (Federación de Estudiantes Revolucionarios or FER), an organization linked to the FSLN.

⁸ Interestingly, Sandra's description of her political awakening parallels in some ways the narrative of Zoilamérica Narváez Murillo (Ortega's stepdaughter), described in Chapter 3. In her testimony, Narváez Murillo describes how her sexual abuse at the hands of Ortega denied her right to complete personhood. Through standing up to her abuser, Narváez contends that she reclaimed her own humanity and her control of her physical, emotional and political life. Going public with her story for Narváez was a “transcendental” moment. “It signified for me something like my baptism...It was the farewell to a previous life and the opening of a new one. So I began the road of my own liberation” (1998, 28).

...I had heard it said an infinite number of times...don't get involved with the FER or with the CUUN (Student Council of the National University) because they were sympathizers of the Russians and of Fidel Castro and, what's more, communists were atheists. Don't get involved with the CUUN or the FER because they were mixed up with the Frente, who were communists...and sent people to die like fools in the mountains. That the kid who got mixed up with the CUUN ended up in the FER, and then in the Frente, and then they sent him to the mountains...I imagined that if I said yes they were going to send me to plant bombs...and later to the mountains...I imagined many things and the more I imagined the more frightened I became.... (Cabezas 15, 1982b).

Despite his anxiety, Cabezas acts cool.

Of course, I was totally serious and serene in front of Juan José because I didn't want to seem like a coward...Remember that I didn't have firm convictions. I wasn't a theorist...What's more, I had serious doubts about whether Marxism was a good thing or a bad thing. So, more out of confidence in Juan José than out of conviction, I said, 'Sure man, definitely' *because it was basically a question of manhood*...I knew what I wanted – I wanted to fight against the dictatorship, but I wasn't certain...about carrying out such a commitment to its final consequences (1982b, 16-17, emphasis added).

As this narrative reveals, Cabezas agrees to join the FSLN out of a perceived need to conform to gender expectations – the need to seem tough, like a real man. The theme of manhood is central to Cabezas's memoir and although his political-spiritual motivations ultimately become the driving force behind his struggle as a revolutionary, they are never in tension with the goal of manliness. Quite the contrary, Cabezas's journey is one from putting up the appearance of manhood in this initial encounter with Juan José to becoming a real, New Man as a guerrilla in the mountains, that is, a journey from deception to authenticity. In this regard, his tale conforms neatly with Sandinista rhetoric of the relationship between manhood and revolutionary praxis. Ricardo Morales Aviles, for instance, in the pamphlet "What is a Sandinista?" posits that, "the Sandinista, with his revolutionary practice – making of his words a weapon, filling them with explosive force, putting on his boots and showing them how to destroy the tanks of the dictatorship – is closer than anyone to being a Man" (Fonseca et al, 1982, 17). The

three images of people in the pamphlet represent the Sandinista holy trinity: worker, peasant and, most importantly, guerrilla, all of whom are male.

At both the beginning of Cabezas's story and at its climax when Cabezas becomes a New Man, the denial of the self plays a key role in establishing his masculinity and his authentic status as a revolutionary. That self-denial is characterized by a cultivation of particular kinds of feelings, or at least the appearance of those feelings (toughness, self control, brotherly love) and a repression of others (fear, selfishness, homoerotic love or desire):

The Frente Sandinista was developing...a spirit of steel, a contingent of men bound with granite solidity, a nucleus of men that was morally and mentally indestructible and capable of mobilizing the entire society against the dictatorship...Because as the Christians say, *we denied our very selves*... Still...though we were extremely tough and hardened, we were tender...very gentle; we were very loving too...it was as if we had stored up all the affection that we couldn't express to each other as we would to a child or a mother or a woman. It was all stored up, accumulated, until we had a well of tenderness, of affection, within us. As if the lack of sugar had created a great inner sweetness, which made it possible for us to be touched to the quick, to make our hearts bleed for the injustices we saw...

We transformed our loneliness into a brotherhood among us; we treated each other gruffly, but actually we loved each other with a deep love, a great male tenderness. We were a group of men in a single embrace, as brothers, a group of men bound by a permanent kiss. We loved each with blood, with rage – but it was a brotherly love, a fraternal love...There was no selfishness among us (1982a, 85-86, emphasis added).

Cabezas does reveal his anxieties and fears in his memoir, but he is able to do this because they function as a contrast between his pre- and post-New Man self and thus show the depths of his struggle and eventual triumph.

In contrast, Sandra is empowered to join the revolutionary struggle through her *rejection* of gender norms, in her case those that permit the abuse of women and children by men. Sandra breaks free of such norms by turning the tables on her aggressor, a behavior she subsequently repeats within the FSLN as well (described below). Her

mística is not something learned from revolutionary ideology or even from revolutionary praxis. Unlike the guerrillas in the mountains, her transformation takes place not through self-abnegation, but through an act of self-preservation. As a child who goes hungry and a victim of abuse, Sandra already intimately knows what it means to suffer physically and psychically. She does not, like the revolution's New Men, need the experience of the mountain to make her selfless. Rather, she finds her strength, her ability to "go beyond" her suffering, *through claiming and defending her self* and, by extension, her family.

In Cabezas's depiction, the selflessness of the New Man is possible due to the powerful fraternal love that binds them as a result of their shared struggle and suffering. (Fonseca describes such selflessness as necessary to the generation of collective consciousness, but in Cabezas's description, it is selflessness that emerges out of such consciousness.) It is also possible, it seems, through an ideal of masculinity that equates the sacrifice of the self as the ultimate act of manliness. In contrast, for Sandra, as a woman whose life has been characterized by poverty and abuse, the selflessness of the revolutionary is innate, but something which can only be tapped effectively through a claiming – rather than a denial – of the self. For women – especially for mothers – self sacrifice is not pinnacle of womanliness; it is the expected norm. (I will return to this idea in Chapter 6 when I discuss Nicaragua's recent ban on abortion even when the life of the mother is at stake.) Borge, for instance, articulates this neatly when he says,

Compañero is the one who shares; compañeros are those who give of themselves, who are capable of sharing their love, their charity, even to the point of giving their very lives...Compañera is the mother of her children; compañeros are brothers – although at times there are brothers who are not compañeros: Carlos Fonseca and Fausto Amador weren't compañeros, and Cain and Abel weren't compañeros... (1982, 102-103).

In other words, women can be compañeras merely by virtue of being mothers (i.e., self-sacrifice is a "normal" condition of women), but men are compañeros only by resisting their inherently selfish natures through conscious, rational choice. While the

former is worthy of admiration, it is the latter that is truly revolutionary because it is genuinely transformative and possible only through determined struggle.

The contrast between Sandra's and Cabezas's stories also suggests that the selflessness of the New Man is premised on a presumption of equality amongst those who constitute the brotherhood. In Cabezas's narrative, selflessness amongst the revolution's New Men is possible because the hardship of the mountain reduces all the men to a primitive, animal-like state, making them equals: "...[A]s time passes your hair starts to get long...Washing so little roughens your skin...Callouses form on your hands. And you belch right in front of everybody...It's as if very gradually this mass of men was becoming one more element, a few more creatures of the mountain..." (1982a, 84). However, for Sandra and other women revolutionaries, even the experience of the mountain cannot truly make them equals with the men. The men have returned to a state of nature and redefined the spiritual and political terms of the social contract, but like the previous liberal contract, it is one that is still, as Pateman has famously put it, fraternal (1988). This is illustrated by Sandra's experiences in the montaña:

In 1981, Sandra helped to form a company of soldiers fighting the Contra in the jungles of northern Nicaragua. Although she had extensive combat training and had several years of experience conducting dangerous clandestine missions like transporting weapons in urban areas, Sandra found her time in the mountains to be frightening and frustrating. She was terrified, in particular, by her own physical limitations: smaller and slower than the men in her troop, she feared that she would fall behind the group as it marched through the cloud forest and then be captured by the Contra or bitten by a poisonous snake. Amongst the men, Sandra was ashamed to reveal her "unmanly" emotions. She struggled to keep her feelings of fear and inadequacy controlled and hidden.

I found it very difficult and sometimes I would cry when I was alone. When I was alone in my bed I would cry and say to myself

that I couldn't stand it. I felt like the life in the mountains was too difficult for me...The silence, the darkness, my limitations, they suffocated me and made me really sad.

Her situation seemed particularly unbearable because her feelings were, in part, triggered and reinforced by the treatment she and another woman received from many of the men in her troop.

We were only two women and the rest were all men. So it was always very difficult because there was a tremendous devaluation of women and, well, I do have my weaknesses. I can't carry lots of heavy stuff... Many times the men would do things to bug us, macho guys would say things to us, or underestimate us and tell us that we didn't do things right. They would laugh at us a lot and make fun of us...

Ironically, despite the great sense of brotherly love Cabezas describes, the men's "pure fraternity" condemns both the women and the men to a sense of isolation and loneliness "that stings you more than always being wet and being hungry" (Cabezas 1982a, 83). For Cabezas, that loneliness takes the form of sensual longing, both for the outside world – its people, colors, tastes, smells, sounds – and also for physical affection:

The feeling of loneliness is indescribable...the lack of a whole series of things that traditionally the city man is used to having right at hand...Loneliness is starting to forget the sounds of cars, the longing at night for electric lights... The loneliness of not being able to kiss anybody, of knowing what it is for a human being not to be able to caress something, the loneliness of never being smiled at, never being touched. Even the animals caress each other...But we couldn't; we were strictly male, and we couldn't say affectionate things (1982a, 83).

However, although the loneliness Cabezas describes is profound, the struggle against loneliness is ultimately one more aspect of the denial of the self that makes possible the men's transformation. The men are lonely, but they can find solace in their shared struggle. They are lonely together and thus resurrected together as New Men.

We transformed our loneliness into a brotherhood among us...As if the mountain and the mud...and...the rain and the loneliness, as if all these things were cleansing us of a bunch of bourgeois defects,

a whole series of vices; we learned to be humble, because you alone are not worth shit up there...You learn to appreciate the strictly human values that of necessity emerge in that environment. And little by little all our faults faded out (1982a, 86).

Sandra and her compañera, in contrast, are lonely alone. For the women, the deprivation of the mountain does not function as the kind of leveling mechanism and builder of solidarity Cabezas depicts (except perhaps amongst the women themselves). The women struggle to emulate the New Man ideal while being excluded from the brotherhood that is its prerequisite.

Class is also at play in the contrast between the loneliness Cabezas describes and Sandra's account of her time in the mountain. In Cabezas's account, the guerrillas are cleansed by the mountain of their "bourgeois defects": their desires for the "whole series of things that traditionally the city man is used to having right at hand." Those things include items and activities commonplace to the urban working, middle and upper classes (electric lights, going to the movies) and not to the urban poor or to those of any class from the countryside. In contrast, Sandra's "defects" are seemingly innate and physical, specific to her condition as a woman amongst a brotherhood of men. As a poor woman, she has few – if any – "bourgeois defects" to eliminate. While the men Cabezas describes make conscious decisions to renounce their class privilege, they remain privileged in their ability to make such choices. Selflessness, for them, is an intentional and idealized condition. For Sandra, and other women and men of her class, in contrast, the experience of suffering and deprivation likely holds little romantic appeal.

Ultimately, Sandra finds the strength she needs to survive the experience of la montaña not through fraternity or through self-denial, but by standing up for herself by deceiving and ridiculing one of her harassers. One night, when the company was temporarily stationed at a military base, Sandra decided to get her revenge against one man who was always making fun of the two women:

I was assigned to keep watch along with this *compañero* who was always messing with me. ...[A]ll of the sudden we heard some loud noises that sounded like lions roaring. Loud. Really loud. I said, "What was that?!" even though I knew they were howler monkeys. (When they roar together and it echoes in the mountains at night, it's a terrible sound.) So this guy begins retreating with his gun cocked and I see that he's retreating in fear and so I say to myself, 'this is my turn [to get back at him].' I was in the opposite corner and he was coming towards me slowly, backwards. When he was right up next to me, I stuck my gun in his butt and said, 'Boo!' He screamed. I said, "What's the matter? What are you so afraid of?"...He was dying [of embarrassment] for about a month and I would always joke him about it to get back at him. I felt really good when I could get back at the men.

There is something richly satisfying in Sandra's use of deception to exact revenge on her aggressor. To "get back at the men" and to claim her own dignity, Sandra emulates the men's behavior, frightening and shaming the man in question for not conforming to the male ideal. In this incident, the man's out-of-control emotions are particularly shameful because they are triggered by and revealed to a woman. And she is not just any woman, but the very woman he has harassed for her own inability to conform to the male ideal. Sandra's ridicule of him draws attention to the power relations between them and reconfigures them, if only temporarily.

Sandinista revolutionary praxis insisted on a transcendence of personal, private life for the greater good. In the revolutionary ideology of the "vanguard," that transcendence – revolutionary purity – was imagined possible through the self-sacrifice of revolutionary subjects who were implicitly and, at times, explicitly, imagined as heterosexual males. The revolution was made through a blurring of the boundaries between public and private life, but only to the degree that private life could be made to conform to the subjectivity necessary to create the revolution. While the revolutionary struggle incorporated women and homosexual individuals, such as Sandra, the meanings of selfhood and sacrifice and the experiences of *mística* in the lives of such individuals often existed in tension with dominant revolutionary discourses.

2.6 What's Been Lost

After six months of active military duty, Sandra returned to the city to work within the Sandinista government. Despite her experiences of *machismo* within the party (and Nicaraguan society more generally), over the following nine years Sandra held positions of considerable responsibility in government offices at the municipal, regional and ministerial levels. Her hard work allowed her to support her extended family as well as two adopted children as a single mother, but more than simply putting bread on the table, Sandra's work during the revolutionary era provided her with spiritual sustenance and a corresponding sense of personal worth.

In contrast to negative stereotypes of bureaucratic labor in which the means of state making become ends in them selves, Sandra depicts her work and that of others in the Sandinista government during those years as primarily motivated by and generative of *mística revolucionaria*. As she puts it, "Participation in the revolutionary process gave us great spiritual enrichment and the joy of doing things for others: that collective participation, that solidarity, that love between people." Beyond the calculable benefits of the revolution for the poor (such as the eradication of polio in Nicaragua and dramatic improvements in literacy rates) Sandra counts social solidarity, such as that developed through the interchange between Nicaraguans of different ages and classes during the national literacy campaigns, as amongst the most significant accomplishments of the revolution. Although she struggled with the contradictions of Sandinista ideology, Sandra saw the revolution as a living example of a "golden dream" of a new society for the rest of the world and especially for Latin America.

Like many Sandinista party members and supporters, Sandra was surprised and devastated by the Sandinista loss of the national elections in 1990 to Violeta Chamorro's U.S.-backed UNO coalition.

It was a profound impact, a shock that I suffered. I remember that I felt out of control. I went out into the streets crying...and my friends had to come and take me home to their house. I didn't stop crying all night. I couldn't go home because I felt so bad and I cried and I cried all night. The next day I returned to my house and everyone came to see me and no one said anything...they just hugged me to try to console me.

For Sandra and others in the city, the loss of the elections was a collective, spiritual loss. Sandra compares the reaction of herself and others in the city to the sorrow of Good Friday, the day when Jesus is crucified and dies on the cross:

The reaction of the people...was the same that I felt. The people cried in the streets. You could see the disillusion in their faces, the deception. It was a profound pain, a national wound...Some people couldn't even speak because their pain was so great...It seemed like a Good Friday, but a Good Friday from the time of my childhood. In that time, no one drove cars [on Good Friday], no one yelled or even talked. The day of the elections was like that kind of Good Friday.

In the view of Sandra and many other Sandinistas, the loss of the elections in 1990 was primarily the result of the aggression of the U.S. government's Reagan administration against the revolutionary state. Beginning in the early 1980s, Reagan began funneling millions of dollars into the training and arming of counterrevolutionary – Contra – forces within Nicaragua (Sklar 1988; Walker 1987; Walker 2003). From the mid-1980s to the end of the decade, the United States government, overtly and covertly, poured over 40 million dollars into counterrevolutionary warfare and other anti-Sandinista political activities in the name of “democracy” and the fight against communism (Sklar 1988). The Contra waged a campaign of terror, targeting civilian infrastructure including schools, medical facilities, buses, and cooperatives. By 1984, the direct economic cost of the Contra war is estimated to have been between 300 and 500 million dollars. Indirect costs are estimated to have been in the billions (Booth 1985; Fitzgerald 1987). Shortages and rationing became routine and a constant source of frustration. The poorly managed Sandinista economy went into a tail-spin and the

revolutionary government eventually resorted to austerity measures, eliminating subsidies, reducing social programs and laying off state workers (Walker 1997; Metoyer 2000). To fight the war, the state implemented a tremendously unpopular national draft. Under the weight of the Contra war, by the mid-1980s, the golden dream of the revolution was turning into a nightmare (Walker 1997; Close 1999).

Given such circumstances, it now seems almost unfathomable that Sandra and indeed much of the country were surprised by the loss of the elections. Some individuals cynically believed that the Sandinistas would not accept defeat regardless of the results of the vote. Many on the Left, however, simply believed that the revolution had such a popular mandate that the Sandinista party could not lose. They presumed that despite the war and the draft and the shortages, the peoples' sense of *mística* was still strong enough to prevail. The revolution was built, after all, on an ideology of sacrifice.

However, the revolution was also built on an ideology of social solidarity and it had become painfully apparent to many Nicaraguans that the sacrifice asked of them was not shared equally across society. In contrast with official descriptions of the New Man – “his generosity is boundless, his interests as an individual are subordinated to the collective interest...” (Fonseca et al 1982, cited in Hodges 1986: 257) – Nicaraguans observed FSLN leaders living in the confiscated mansions of the elite and driving expensive cars while the nation struggled to find cooking oil and other basic necessities. It seemed to many that the class structure of Nicaraguan society had been transformed by the overthrow of the nation's oligarch only to be replaced by a new system of hierarchy. What, many wondered, had happened to the *mística* of the revolution's leaders?

In such circumstances, even supporters of the revolution resented the cooperation demanded of them by the state. As one man lamented to me, “If you had meat, grain, you had to share it. Hand it over... I'm a supporter of the Sandinistas, but they made

too many errors by being Marxist-Leninists. They tried to make another Cuba here, but Nicaraguans are a very rebellious people.” Sandra describes a similar response to the perceived intrusions of the state into peoples’ lives:

...[W]e had some organizations that were very aggressive and very intervening. They got into peoples’ lives. There was a Communal Movement that was horrible...They intruded into the most minimal aspects of peoples’ lives...into the distribution of things. Or, if someone didn’t participate in the cotton or coffee harvests, they weren’t looked upon well by the Communal Movement, and then they would have problems. Logically, in a society not everyone is in agreement, but...the romanticism of some and the fanaticism of others...[caused them to] intervene in peoples’ lives and the people didn’t like that.⁹

The revolution, which had capitalized on – and fomented – a desire for horizontality and a rebellious sense of national identity was also, paradoxically, premised on a top-down, vanguardist model of authority. The loss of the elections revealed not simply the burden of the Contra war, but a popular loss of faith in the revolution inseparable from its own internal tensions.

As Sandra puts it:

[T]he principle causes [of the electoral defeat] were external, but with time, of course, I can also say that internally we were having problems...which contributed [to the loss] because the people weren’t happy...The leadership of the Frente was very vertical – there wasn’t horizontal leadership to speak of – the decisions that were made were the decisions of those at the top...[And] there were many leaders that began to become corrupt, that began to abuse their power, and that...did us tremendous harm. That, together with the political destabilization of the United States, that’s what caused the loss of the 1990 elections...internally we began to have problems of corruption, of [the] abuse of power...

Despite her awareness of and dissatisfaction with the ethical lapses of her compañeros, Sandra continued working within the party prior to the election loss

⁹ By 1989, the Nicaraguan Communal Movement (as I discuss in Chapter 6) was officially no longer part of the Sandinista state, however, like many popular organizations established during the revolution, it was popularly known in the post-revolutionary decade preceding my fieldwork as a Sandinista organization, a “*brazo politico*” [political arm] of the party.

because she valued the positive accomplishments of the revolution and felt committed to her convictions as a Sandinista. However, as she became increasingly outspoken about the loss of *mística*, her frustrations were compounded by the unwelcoming response of her fellow Sandinistas to her criticisms:

I was someone who began to strongly criticize this history of abuse and corruption...I criticized the attitude of some of the members of the Frente who had lost the *mística*. That capacity to relate to the people, with the people. [I criticized] those benefits that they had obtained for being in their positions...[their] corruption. For example, I [sometimes] had good salaries and...the...possibility of buying milk for my daughter. But many times I didn't have it. But I had a position from which I could have used my influence, influenced someone – 'look, what I want is that you give me a crate of milk...' – but I never did it and other people, yes they did, they used those privileges. No, they *took* those privileges. There were *compañeras* that were *diputados* (members of Congress), friends of mine, and they didn't ask for a vehicle to get to work. They went on the bus while others went in private vehicles and didn't even offer them a ride. So I criticized a series of things, the privileges that certain leaders enjoyed and that had distanced them from the people. So they began to put me in a corner and corner me there.

Given the tendency for verticalism within the party, the response Sandra encountered to her critiques was not unanticipated. However, the alienation Sandra felt in response to her complaints stung not only because of all that she had given to the revolutionary struggle, but also because such disregard for sincere and well-intentioned criticism – especially concerning the question of *mística* – went against the official values of Sandinismo. Giving and receiving constructive criticism, the revolutionary practice of *autocrítica*, was imagined to be central to Sandinista identity. Fonseca, for instance, in his list of the 31 characteristics that comprise a Sandinista, included four separate entries emphasizing the importance of such criticism to revolutionary practice (Fonseca et al. 1982), such as number three, which posits that, "Constructive criticism permits us to overcome our weaknesses and errors, [and] greater knowledge of our national, local and individual struggles" (Fonseca et al. 1982, 7).

However, as Sandra's story suggests, criticism that was unwelcome could be cast as counterrevolutionary. FSLN leaders proclaimed their openness to criticism, but also silenced their critics, e.g., through censorship of the press. In a conversation with writers from the newsmagazine *Envío* in 1987, Borge, for instance, defended such censorship by distinguishing between constructive criticism and counterrevolutionary activity:

Whoever wants to criticize the Nicaraguan revolution has that right. Anyone can confront us with our mistakes. And we're the first to face up to them. But no one [e.g., *La Prensa*] can become an apologist for the crimes committed by the US administration against Nicaragua...It's a question of national dignity (Envío 1987)

In Sandra's experience, however, even constructive criticism was silenced, in its own way. Close friends within the party began to distance themselves from Sandra when she continued to publicly and privately denounce "corruption." One friend, for instance, threw her out of her house and refused to speak with her.

Many years passed in which we didn't speak to each other...It was very sad and something very painful. When [it is] someone that you truly care about, that you see as an example, that you love, it's difficult to deal with...these kinds of contradictions...I had a hard time with that.

Sandra was initially protected from such recriminations by her trajectory of revolutionary militancy and her close friendships with individuals in powerful positions within the government.

I had a history of fighting for the revolution. That wasn't up for debate. But when I made my critiques, it really bothered them that it was coming from someone who had been on the inside... They didn't like it...

Eventually, however, she crossed a line that marked her as a dissident, someone no longer inside the party. Just as Sandra's *mística* was catalyzed as a teenager by a confrontation requiring tremendous courage, in her narrative the emergence of her voice as a dissident centers around another, in some ways similar, pivotal event:

I was at a party assembly. The most important leaders from the region were there. And I'm not one of those people who speak a lot in public. All my life I've been afraid to talk in public, in a microphone. I remember that this was really hard for me. My friend was speaking and I said to myself, 'Damn it! I want to say something because I'm fed up already.' Finally my friend said to me, 'Get up. You have the ability to speak and the people respect you.' So I got up but my hands were frozen, frozen and I was burning up inside as if I had a fever. I don't know how I did it. But I began to speak about *mística*, and of the separation of the leaders [from the people], of the corruption [in the party]...

The television cameras were filming what I was saying and so the people hated me, they wanted to kill me. But afterwards, some people came up to me in the street and said, 'Damn! You have courage! Congratulations!'...A member of the city council whom I still run into from time to time reminds me of that day. 'Look *compañera*, I learned to respect you that day,' he says to me. 'That time that I saw you get up and speak with such great courage. That's strength. I respect you for that.' But just as some respected me and appreciated me for what I had done, others hated me.

Today, Sandra sees herself as standing up for the true values of Sandinismo. She continues to be actively involved in community development work and has worked since the early 1990s for sister-city and women's rights organizations, which I discuss briefly in Chapter 5. She feels that she is a Sandinista and deeply loves the revolution. However, almost twenty years after her split with the party, Sandra remains a controversial figure amongst Sandinista leadership in her community and at a national level. She is one of many feminists and former party militants actively persecuted by the new Ortega administration. Unfortunately, I cannot explain the specifics of these tensions without jeopardizing her anonymity, however I can say that they are rooted in the fact that Sandra's embodiment of *mística* continues to challenge dominant Sandinista narratives of revolutionary subjectivity in the domains of gender and sexuality.

Since she was a teenager, Sandra has literally risked her life again and again for others. Today, she is no longer clandestinely transporting weapons or marching through

la montaña, but she continues to dedicate herself to what she and many of her fellow activists understand as struggles for equality and justice out of a profound sense of social solidarity rooted in her personal identification with victims of oppression, especially women and girls. What has changed, however, is that Sandra no longer feels “guilty” about also taking care of her self. In the past, Sandra had, to some degree at least, internalized the notion that feelings that fell outside the parameters of the New Man ideal – such as self doubt or homoerotic love or even a desire for good food or other kinds of physical comfort – were signs of her own weaknesses. However, as the fissures inherent in revolutionary notions of purity became apparent to her as a soldier and party militant, Sandra began to reevaluate and again reclaim her own sense of herself. She stopped drinking so much and began treating herself and her body with the same respect she had so long given to others. Sandra explained this to me one weekend when we took a short trip together and, at her suggestion, stayed at a very comfortable and beautifully decorated resort – a place only a small percentage of Nicaraguans would ever enjoy. She said she still felt sad that not everyone could visit such places or partake of the other small luxuries that she now permitted herself, but she also knew that she could not sustain her *mística* without also nurturing her own spirit. More than ever for Sandra, “mere living” and the “common good” were not distinct, but intimately intertwined.

3. Cavanga

3.1 Introduction

In 2003, former Nicaraguan President Arnoldo Alemán Layaco was sentenced to 20 years in prison for “money laundering, fraud, embezzlement, association and instigation to commit a crime and electoral crimes” (Nítlápan-Envío 2009). Alemán was convicted for stealing over \$100 million dollars from the Nicaraguan state, using those resources to pay for vacations and luxury goods, such as a \$13,755 stay at the Ritz Carleton in Bali and \$68,506 on hotels and shopping in India (Chamorro 2004; Oppenheimer 2002). The extent of Alemán’s crimes earned him a place on a list of the world’s 10 Most Corrupt Leaders compiled by Transparency International, a multinational non-governmental organization dedicated to combating corruption (Transparency International 2004). By the time of his sentencing, Alemán’s party – the *Partido Liberal Constitucionalista* (PLC or Liberal Party) – was in shambles and the right wing was split into several factions, some of whom still supported him. In January 2009, however, with the apparent help of the new Ortega administration, the Nicaraguan Supreme Court overturned Alemán’s sentence because of an alleged lack of evidence (Nítlápan-Envío 2009; Ibarra 2009; Cruz 2009). Alemán is reported to intend to run again for president in 2011 (La Primerísima 2008).

Some observers believe that what Alemán actually seeks is more than simply the presidency. In January 2009, staff writers from *Envío* – the independent newsmagazine of Managua’s *Universidad Centroamericana* (UCA) and arguably the most rigorous and

critical periodical in Nicaragua over the last three decades¹ – observed that the day that Alemán’s sentence was annulled was also the same day that President Ortega gained unprecedented control of the National Assembly through the votes of Liberal legislators, something the *Envío* writers contended was “facilitated” by Alemán (Nítlápan-Envío 2009). (Alemán is purported to maintain control over Liberal politicians in the Assembly, despite his jail sentence and corruption charges.) The writers at *Envío* described this “coincidence” as just one more development resulting from a decade of pact making between Ortega and Alemán and said that Alemán and Ortega intend to collectively force constitutional reforms that will institute a parliamentary system in Nicaragua that will permit them indefinite leadership and further legitimize the exclusion of third parties from official political processes (Nítlápan-Envío 2009). They also reported that there are rumors that Alemán helped to orchestrate electoral fraud in Ortega’s favor in the 2006 elections that brought Ortega back to power in order to make possible his own exoneration and future political aspirations.

Accusations of such kinds of “corruption” abound in Nicaragua: Not only Alemán and Ortega, but also ex-President Bolaños (who depicted himself as “anti-corruption” and put his former boss, Alemán, in prison) and Eduardo Montealegre, the U.S.-backed Liberal opposition candidate in the 2006 elections, have come under recent fire for alleged fraud and money laundering (El Nuevo Diario 2008; Prensa Libre 2007; Nítlápan-Envío team 2008b; Envío team 2008b). Historically, such incidences of the abuse of public resources for private gain in Nicaragua – for instance in the case of the Somoza dictatorship – are well documented (Walker 1991; Walter 1993). However, those accused of “corruption” and their supporters point out that such accusations are

¹*Envío* was launched in 1981 to support the revolutionary project through analysis of its politics (Envío n.d.). *Envío* describes itself as “committed to a project of justice that opens space for all peoples and keeps alive the hope of such a world” (n.d.). In advancing this goal, *Envío*’s writers are unfailingly critical of politics and politicians across the political spectrum. In my research, I have found *Envío* to be an invaluable source of political analysis and news reporting.

“politically motivated,” (just as exonerations from them, e.g., in the case of Alemán, undoubtedly are), which questions the ability of the courts, the public, or other bodies to effectively sort “fact” from “fiction.” In this context, some Nicaraguans, like the writers from *Envío*, continue to push for evidence and accountability while others seem resigned to what they understand as “politics as usual.” What such mudslinging at least seems to make clear for nearly every Nicaraguan I discussed politics with, however, is that official politics – ideas and practices understood to be within the realms of “official” governing entities (state agencies, etc.) and “official” political actors (party leaders, elected officials, etc.)² – is a “dirty” endeavor.

In this chapter, I describe how official politics – what people I knew referred to as “*la política*” – have come to be understood as synonymous with “corruption.” I examine such notions of corruption through the lens of popular discourses of deceit [*engaño*], which rub up against, and, at times, reinforce the equation of “*la política*” with corruption. In doing so, I argue that popular notions of corruption in Nicaragua both critique an absence of purity in official politics and, at the same time, acknowledge the impossibility of total purity. Such discourses, I suggest, have increasingly supplanted previously hegemonic notions of politics, such as those articulated through *mística revolucionaria*, and, as I discuss in Chapters 4 and 5, pose considerable challenges for contemporary liberal notions of “transparent” and harmonious politics.

3.2 *Engaño*

During a conversation in her office, a leader of a nongovernmental organization in León told me a joke. “What do you get if you have five Sandinistas and five Liberals?”

² I use the term “official politics,” described above, to refer to what people in Nicaragua (and elsewhere) commonly think of as “politics.” This is a notion that is bigger than party or state politics because it includes politics that may or may not be understood as partisan or part of the state.

Doña Flor asked. Her answer: “*Un chancho*” [a pig]: someone who is dirty, greedy, and hides the truth. I wasn’t sure whether to laugh or grimace or nod knowingly, although I suspect some combination of all three was the expected response. Her joke reminded me of graffiti I had seen over the years in Nicaragua depicting Arnolando Alemán’s flabby face atop the body of a pig, or, at other times, a horse or devil. Alemán was occasionally ridiculed by people I knew as *Gordomán* [Fatman] – a sort of larger-than-life cartoon whose corpulent body was a metaphor for his rapacious consumption of the public larder.

Doña Flor was a one-time Sandinista supporter from a historically Liberal and upper-class family. In her 60s at the time of my field research, she had broken her ties with the FSLN during the revolutionary era because of her personal experiences with what she described as the party’s top-down style of governance. Although her critique of the parties was structured as a joke, her tone and words were tinged with bitterness. She was cynical, angry and distrustful of all politicians. Her work with her NGO, which was only peripherally linked to the local city government, allowed her to fulfill what she saw as her social duty – helping the poor –without getting involved in “politics.” Her model was predominantly one not of revolutionary solidarity, but of charity mixed with a dose of neoliberal self-responsibility. Some Sandinistas I knew, for instance, criticized her for giving out free food from foreign donors (including USAID genetically-modified corn) – but such behavior made her office a popular destination for individuals seeking aid, whom she offered training programs to help them become more “self-sustainable.” Doña Flor – irreverent, sardonic, but also kindly and regal in a grandmotherly sort of way – was an unusual character, but her attitude toward official politics was commonplace. Her comments were the kind that I heard again and again during my fieldwork.

My friend Ernesto, for instance, the Director of Community Relations in León's Alcaldía and a former Sandinista mayor, told me that, "People see politicians as liars, as people that live from lies. Politics is like a sphere above us in which it's possible to live without really working." His words were similar to those I later saw in an editorial in *Envío* written by León Nuñez, a former member of the Liberal Party (PLC):

Today, all politicians are on the make. The only thing they talk about, the only strategies they develop and tactics they deploy are aimed at ensuring they keep their post in the next government. The most important thing for them is to make a living without having to work (Nuñez 2005).

My friend Cristina, a working-class Sandinista (whom I describe in detail in Chapter 4), put it more succinctly, "Politics is the dirtiest thing there is."

The force of this sentiment is made possible by its implicit contrast between contemporary official politics and the idealized purity of politics of the revolutionary era (described in Chapter 2). Politics, for Doña Flor, Ernesto, Cristina, and many others – despite their diverse relations to Sandinismo – was once felt (or at least idealized) to be inseparable from ethics and even spirituality. At the time of my research, individuals I knew – including state officials like Ernesto – expressed a common sense of anguish and betrayal when talking about official politics. "La política," as they described it, was synonymous with "corruption."

Such distrust in politics and political leaders was concomitant in the lives of many of my friends and acquaintances with a more general distrust in other people. In the perceived absence of the idealized generalized reciprocity of the revolutionary era, many people I knew seemed to expect the worst of others even as they simultaneously expressed the idea that they should be able to trust others (and that others could trust them). During my fieldwork, friends often warned me, "You can't trust people. Everyone lies all the time." Now and then, someone would warn me not to trust anyone because, as a gringa, I would not be able to sort truth from fiction. I felt, at times, as if I were

inside the brainteaser in which everyone tells you that everyone else is a liar. There were undoubtedly instances when individuals tried (and at times succeeded in) deceiving me. But what I found particularly intriguing and unsettling about my friends' warnings was that, to the contrary, I did feel that I could trust most of the people that I encountered most of the time. In fact, there were surely countless opportunities for individuals to take advantage of my naivety as a foreigner, but as far as I knew, this rarely happened. What, I wondered, was the significance of peoples' widespread sense of distrust and the supposed prevalence of lying? How did it relate to the sense of corruption that so many people equated with official politics?

One aspect of these narratives that struck me as particularly peculiar was that there seemed to be a tension between, on the one hand, a deep distress on the part of many people I knew over the apparent loss of *mística revolucionaria*, and, on the other hand, a sort of casual and commonplace, at times even flippant, observation (often by these same individuals) that Nicaraguans – especially political leaders – were liars. People seemed at once jaded and heart broken, at once aloof and profoundly disturbed by what they observed going on around them. A popular song, recorded in 2003, epitomized this phenomenon:

When I returned to Nicaragua in 2004, it was impossible to ride a bus or go to a public gathering in Nicaragua without hearing one of the last year's biggest hits, a song popularly referred to as "*El Reggaetón*." The song (actually three overlapping but distinct songs) was a satire of Nicaraguan political leaders recorded by a young comedian with a prodigious talent for vocal imitation, Dávid Yubank and his sidekick DJ Mauri. However, the genius behind the song's lyrics and production was the former vice-mayor of Managua (FSLN) and current Sandinista member of the National Assembly, comedian and television personality Evertz Cárcamo (Sovalbarro and Vega Gamboa 2006). Cárcamo is the host of a popular television program, the *Cámara*

Matizona (a lewd version of Candid Camera that ridicules political leaders as well as others), broadcast on the Sandinista-run television station (Arévalo Alemán 2009; Sosa Meléndez 2000).

Yubank and Mauri imprinted 600 copies of their CD, however their caricatures of the country's political elite are estimated to have sold more than fifty thousand pirated CDs (Cortes 2004).³ Cárcamo promoted the song on his television program and live performances of the song were widely attended (Sovalbarro and Vega Gamboa 2006). Children hummed the tune as they played in the streets.⁴ Political and even religious gatherings I attended featured young people lip-synching the lyrics. "Put on 'El Reggaetón!'" people would demand of any disc jockey that failed to spin the song. By 2006, "Reggaetón Político" referred not simply to the original songs of "El Reggaetón," but to a genre of Nicaraguan music launched by Cárcamo and Yubank (Sovalbarro and Vega Gamboa 2006).

The immense popularity of "El Reggaetón" was the result of a mix of factors, not the least of which was a tremendously catchy reggaetón beat.⁵ However, a major force behind the song's success was the clever and lewd way it made fun of the corruption and debauchery of Nicaragua's leaders. (Graduate student researchers from Managua's Universidad Centroamericana, Linda Mejía Sovalbarro and Lissette Vega Gamboa [2006], found that 78 per cent of "The Reggaetón's" listeners identified "*burla*" [ridicule]

³ This is proportionately similar to a U.S. album selling almost 3 million copies without the backing of a major record label or publicist.

⁴ A video of children performing part of the Reggaetón is viewable on YouTube.com. The picture and sound quality is poor, but the video gives an idea of the popularity of the song. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ko0DOCx5AEg] Yubank and Mauri's version can be heard on YouTube on several different postings, for instance: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ENDMUjIZpzQ&feature=related]

⁵ Reggaetón is a form of music that mixes reggae and hip-hop with Latin styles like bachata, salsa, merengue, etc.

of political leaders as its most appealing quality. They also found that of 149 young people, only 3.25 per cent of those aged 15-25 said they were unfamiliar with the song.)

“The Reggaetón” depicts the nation’s former presidents Violeta Chamorro (UNO) and Arnaldo Alemán (PLC), as well as former and current president Daniel Ortega (FSLN) and Sandinista party co-founder Tomás Borge, engaged in a bawdy bacchanal, jovially patronizing, abusing and robbing the public and each other. The “voice” of Violeta Chamorro, for instance, raps “Let’s keep dancing, let’s keep drinking, let’s keep taking advantage...[W]e’ll dance with the people, together, like we have ants in our pants⁶...How many of you want to see Daniel [Ortega] dance and sing?...Come here little boy, come and dance and sing...” Ortega takes a turn at the mike, calling the audience “faggots” and “gang bangers,” then rapping, “Long live the gang bangers, long live the thieves, long live the whores!”

The first part of “El Reggaeton,” “*Políticos de Cavanga*” [Romantic Deception of the Politicos] is a mock romantic ballad in which the leaders declaim their love for each other and, in Ortega’s case, for his publicly disliked wife, Rosario Murillo. A drunken Borge sings to his one-time enemy, Arnaldo Alemán, “imprisoned” on his private hacienda for stealing from the public coffers. Borge croons, “I’ll never forget you again, although you are far away. My dear Arnaldo, with your sad eyes...you went away and I’ll never see you again.” Alemán responds, as if singing about their love, “[R]emember, I can steal tomorrow, and I will always steal.” The song juxtaposes Borge’s well-known militant and florid declarations of love for his Sandinista brethren with his apparently perverse consorting with the once rabidly anti-Sandinista Alemán. (In the song, when Borge uses his characteristic address “*mis hermanos*” [my brothers], the words are blended together so that he seems to be saying “*mierda*” [shit].) The ballad later ridicules

⁶ The literal translations here is, “as if we had *pajuelillas*” – a kind of parasite that lives in the anus, which, though cruder, means roughly the same things as “ants in the pants.”

Ortega's self-portrayal as an advocate of peace and reconciliation in light of his numerous, apparently self-serving political negotiations with Alemán. Ortega tells Alemán, "We'll talk about our pact...Inside of me there is no hatred or resentment. We are birds of a feather..."⁷ Alemán sarcastically replies: "You made me cry Daniel."

"Cavanga" (sometimes also spelled "cabanga") is a Nicaraguan term meaning a romantic deception or a romantic sadness (i.e., nostalgia) resulting from some sort of betrayal. "El Reggaetón" plays upon this double sense of "cavanga" by ridiculing both the deception and nostalgia of the Nicaraguan political arena. In the song, the politicians use the rhetoric of love, harmony and nostalgia to deceive and manipulate one another and the public. Everyone is deceived and knows it. The trope of the cavanga is particularly resonant because of the way it is implicitly juxtaposed in the song, as well as in popular consciousness, against the discourses of revolutionary love and purity articulated by the Sandinista party (described in Chapter 2). The song and the notion of cavanga reveal the irony of the disjunctures between political rhetoric and the day-to-day actions of Nicaragua's political leaders. The song's author, Dávid Yubank, says that his intention with "El Reggaetón" was to satirize "the voices of the dinosaurs that play politics, that make pacts and more pacts in the name of the people, while the people struggle in an economic crisis that each day beats us further down" (Cortes 2004).

For Yubank and, I think, many of the song's fans, the trope of cavanga is meaningful because it speaks to peoples' feelings about politics in the post-revolutionary era. As Yubank's comments highlight, the song encapsulates the popular sentiment that official politics in Nicaragua has been corrupted – it is something that is "played" for personal gain or pleasure by politicians while people go hungry.

⁷ Literally, "you will be a parrot, I will be another parrot" [*un loro que seas tú, otro loro que sea yo...*], which is also a play on words in the sense that a parrot speaks or "parrots" without much apparent understanding of its words.

At the same time, the song and the politics it lampoons – not unlike Doña Flor’s joke – are also intended and widely perceived to be funny and entertaining.

Understanding how these two discourses operate together means digging into the complexity of a notion that links the sense of *cavanga* and the practice of ridicule: “*engaño*,” which means “deceit” or “deception” both in the negative sense of fraud or dishonesty, but also in the more ambiguous sense of fooling or tricking. As I describe below, *engaño* is frequently talked about in Nicaragua not simply as a practice, but as a Nicaraguan character trait, one linked in complicated ways in popular imagination and in Nicaraguan literary and oral traditions to the nation’s history and sense of cultural identity. *Engaño* has historically been both a point of pride and a source of shame, a source of resistance and something to be resisted. It has also, I suggest, produced (and been produced by) “structures of feelings” (Williams 1977) of belonging, of survival, of defiance at the same time as it has produced those of bitterness, betrayal and sadness.

In 2003, I was talking with my friend Héctor, a Ministry economist, about bribes and how to offer them. With a twinkle in his eye, Héctor proudly explained to me that in order to understand “corruption” in Nicaragua (in this case, practices of bribery and government fraud), I needed to understand that Nicaraguans – himself included – were “liars.” He said, “*Somos bien güegüense, siempre engañando...no decimos la verdad. Somos muy mentirosos.*” [We are real tricksters, always fooling...we don’t speak the truth. We are really deceitful.] Héctor explained that since bribes are often necessary but are also understood to be considered wrong or offensive (at least to some), the most important thing in offering a bribe was to do it without appearing to do it. (I will describe how Héctor did this himself in the following chapter). I found Héctor’s advice disconcerting at a practical level and worried – rather obsessively I am sure – that I would find myself facing a similar dilemma and lack the cultural and linguistic prowess to negotiate it. Like Héctor, other Nicaraguans I knew prided themselves on their use of slang, word play,

body language and other linguistic subterfuge, both to manipulate circumstances to their advantage, but also to communicate and have fun while “making fun.”

Nicaraguan Spanish is loaded with double and sometimes triple entendres, particularly about activities or body parts related to sex, but also about other kinds of “illicit” acts such as bribing, stealing or lying. Ernesto once sympathetically told me that as a non-native speaker I could never really know what people were saying. His point was not that my Spanish skills were poor, but rather that Nicaraguans’ use of language was so full of hidden references, subtle jokes and jabs, words that never appear in any dictionary, that getting at the “truth” of someone’s meaning in any given circumstance was far more complicated than I might think. As I argue below, his lack of linguistic “transparency” fools and makes fools out of people, but it also creates a shared sense of self, one with political implications.

Héctor’s comments, on the surface, were strikingly similar to those with which the Nicaraguan intellectual and poet, Pablo Antonio Cuadra – widely regarded as one of the fathers of Nicaraguan literary and social thought – begins one of his essays on Nicaraguan national identity in *El Nicaragüense* [The Nicaraguan] (1993, originally published in 1967): “*Somos un pueblo mentiroso*” [We are a lying people], a notion that he links to Nicaragua’s indigenous past.

Cuadra’s essay, “*Nuestro obsceno símbolo de engaño*” [Our obscene symbol of deceit], centers on the “*guatusa*” (literally “agouti” – a large rodent) – a vulgar but popular hand gesture (also known as the “*higa*”) that indicates deception, hypocrisy or lust. For Cuadra, who traced late 20th century sociopolitical conflicts in Nicaragua (e.g., between “democracy” and “caudillismo”⁸ during the Somoza regime) to the characteristics of Nicaragua’s pre-Colombian tribes (1993, 105-110), the notion of

⁸ Strongman or party-boss politics.

Nicaraguans as “*guatuseros*” (hypocrites, cheaters, or liars) begins long before the contemporary era. Cuadra points out that the Spanish in the colonial era described the indigenous population of Nicaragua as “false” and “deceitful” and links this description to the legendary resistance of indigenous leaders to their colonizers (204).

Cuadra understood this tendency for deception as a positive characteristic to the degree that it offered the possibility of resistance, but he argued that it was ultimately detrimental to society because it “corrupted” the link between language and reality and signified a breakdown of Nicaragua’s social and political bedrock:

If we go deeper into the significance of this corruption of language as a corruption of human relationships, if we enter the cave of the *guatusa*,⁹ we see how Nicaraguan deceit has undermined our entire social and political foundation. ‘Here, no one understands anything,’ a young politico said to me, summing up our situation. Has language lost its truth? [*¿Se terminó el crédito de la palabra?*] (205, my translation).

This claim, which implies a direct link between language and truth, is a particularly interesting one to come from a poet, especially one known for his use of satire. (Poetry, in my reading, flourishes in large part because of the ambiguity and fluidity of the meanings of words.) However, Cuadra’s overarching concern in the essay is a political one, not simply one of semantics. Born into a prominent upper class Conservative family (and cousin to both Sandinista poet and priest Ernesto Cardenal and martyred anti-Somocista newspaper editor Pedro Joaquín Chamorro), Cuadra was initially a supporter and later a vocal critic of the Somoza regime. Under the Sandinistas, his newspaper, *La Prensa*, was the main voice of the Sandinista opposition and was censored by the government in the mid-1980s (Envío team 1982; Envío team 1987). Cuadra eventually left the country in self-imposed exile (Booth 1985). For Cuadra, it seems, the power of language – its capacity to “speak truth to power” – was

⁹ This is itself a play on words. The word *guatusa* is also a regional name for the agouti, a large burrowing rodent, and Cuadra seems to be referring to Plato’s allegory of the cave in which shadows are understood as reality.

threatened by practices of deception despite deception's possibility as a practice of resistance.

Cuadra's reading of deceit in the aforementioned essay runs counter to – and cautions against – the pride evident in my friend Héctor's description of Nicaraguans as “liars.” Héctor's description of engaño is a dominant narrative about Nicaraguan identity and is also understood to be rooted in the cunning of indigenous Nicaraguans in the face of colonization. The notion of being “*muy güegüense*” [real tricksters] is a reference to the iconic Nicaraguan folklore character, the Güegüense (also known as the *Macho Ratón*), a mestizo (some say indigenous) trickster who deliciously manipulates and makes fools of the colonial authorities in the 16th or 17th century play of the same name through the use of word play and other chicanery (Mántica Abaunza 1998a & 1998b). *El Güegüense* is one of the oldest pieces of indigenous American literature and was purportedly originally performed in the now extinct Mangué, an indigenous tonal language (Field 1999). (Field notes that our knowledge of the true extent of the wordplay in the earliest versions of the *El Güegüense* is thus greatly limited.) The play was later translated to Nahuatl, then to a mixture of Spanish and Nahuatl, and finally into Nicaraguan Spanish (which contains many words of Nahuatl origin) (Field 1999; Mántica Abaunza 1998b).

Reichhardt (2007) provides this synopsis of the play:

The title character (the name may or may not derive from *huehue*, the Nahuatl word for “elder”) is an older man brought before the colonial governor on various minor charges. In a series of comic exchanges, El Güegüense, who deals in contraband items, pretends not to understand the governor and twists his words around to insult him. Eventually the old man fools the authorities into thinking he's rich and arranges for one of his sons to marry the governor's daughter, the Lady Suche-Malinche (La Malinche was the Nahua woman who acted as interpreter to the Spanish conquistador Hernan Cortes). Meanwhile, a number of masked mules—perhaps representing the Native population oppressed by colonial rule—dance but never speak. As the play ends, El Güegüense has gained the upper hand and has navigated around the authorities' rules through trickery. Yet he remains wistful for

bygone days...when life was better. “Let me recall old times, that I may console myself with that,” he says in one of the play's closing lines.

Music and dance from the play – though often not the play itself – is routinely performed throughout Western Nicaragua. In 2005, *The Güegüense* was designated a masterpiece of the “Intangible Cultural Heritage of Mankind” by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

The character of the Güegüense is a Nicaraguan folk hero and to be “muy güegüense” in colloquial terms is to be clever and cunning in a way that ridicules and undercuts the authority of those in power. To be güegüense is widely understood in Nicaragua as a central and long-standing aspect of national identity (Arellano 1985; Mántica Abuanza 1968-69; Mántica Abuanza 1998a & 1998b). In his ethnography of the significance of *The Güegüense* to Nicaraguan national identity, Field (1999) describes (and critiques) how the figure of the Güegüense was promoted by Sandinista intellectuals such as Dávila Bolaños (1974) as a symbol of Nicaraguan mestizo nationalism, which was imagined as linking and subsuming indigenous struggles against European colonialism to 20th century Sandinista struggles against U.S. imperialism.

Nicaraguan writer and intellectual Sergio Ramírez (the former FSLN Vice President and now dissident) described in an interview with Gentile (1988; cited in Field 1999) how he viewed the rebellious character of the Güegüense as synonymous with Nicaraguan identity. Of particular note is his insistence on the positive role of humor and deceit in shaping and defining that identity.

The *Macho Ratón* [*The Güegüense*] helps to explain an aspect of the Nicaraguan character, the Nicaraguan sense of humor. The Nicaraguan puts on an armor of humor when facing difficult situations. Life here is incomprehensible without humor, without irony...I think the *Macho Ratón* illustrates three things: the pride of the subjugated before the oppressor; humor as a means of defense, a kind of shrewdness; and a tremendous ability to improvise when confronted with difficult situations. These three things have emerged in the historical situations of being unequal to the

superior forces we were up against...Intelligence and shrewdness have developed in this battle of the strong against the weak. Without that sense of national pride, we would not be able to defend ourselves. The synthesis of these three elements constitutes for me our national dignity (128-29).

Nicaragua's preeminent folk musician Carlos Mejía Godoy (2003) reifies this vision of national identity in his song "*Soy Nicaragüense Güegüense*" (I am Nicaraguan Güegüense) and album of the same name. The song belongs to a genre of popular songs such as the ubiquitous "*Nicaragua Mía*" ("My Nicaragua") by Tino López Guerra and "*Nicaragua, Nicaraguita*" ("Nicaragua, Little Nicaragua"), also by Carlos Mejía Godoy, in which the singers extol the beauty of Nicaragua and their pride at being Nicaraguan. However, in "*Soy Nicaragüense Güegüense*," Mejía Godoy departs from the earnest (if enthusiastic) tone of those anthems, playfully using a simple rhyme to link Nicaraguan patriotism with güegüense-ness. In the song, Mejía Godoy changes the familiar refrain, "*Soy puro pinolero, Nicaragüense por gracia de Dios*" (I am a pure pinolero,¹⁰ Nicaraguan by the grace of God), originally from the lyrics to "*Nicaragua Mía*," to "*Soy Nicaragüense Güegüense, Nicaragüense por gracia de Dios*," (I am a Nicaraguan Güegüense, Nicaraguan by the grace of God).¹¹

For the writers at the newsmagazine *Envío*, the ideal of the güegüense is personified in Carlos Mejía Godoy and his brother and fellow musician Luis Enrique (who were themselves recently designated a "national treasure" when they received

¹⁰ A pinolero is a drinker or maker of *pinol*, a quintessentially Nicaraguan beverage made of corn and cacao. "Pinolero" is used colloquially, however, to mean a Nicaraguan.

¹¹ Though he is now a Sandinista dissident, Mejía Godoy's song reinforces earlier Sandinista visions of the inclusive but mestizo nationalism described by Field, which obscures ethnic conflict in the name of a unified Nicaragua. This can be seen, for example, when Mejía Godoy sings "*Soy Nicaragüense Güegüense, dueño del Coco y del Río San Juan*" (I am Nicaragüense Güegüense, owner of the Coco and San Juan Rivers): both rivers are located in the eastern half of Nicaragua – the region that is home to the country's most sizable indigenous populations. The San Juan has historically been a space of conflict between Nicaragua and foreign powers, first the Spanish and more recently the government of Costa Rica. (Note: the English "owner" does not exactly convey the meaning of "dueño" in the song, which is more about belonging than possession. Dueño here is akin to the sentiment of Woody Guthrie when he sings, "This land is your land, this land is my land...")

Nicaragua's highest cultural distinction, The Order of Rubén Darío). According to *Envío*, the humor, joy and dignity of the Mejía Godoy brothers in the face of power and authority "provokes us to think critically, to share and to live with feeling" (Dec. 2005) (my translation).

No one else has so universalized Nicaraguan music or presented us with so many dearly loved figures of popular culture through words and music. Nobody more than they, proud of being "from a small town, small like a sparrow, with half a century of dreams, hope and bravery,"¹² gave the anti-Somoza insurrection and the Sandinista revolution such a novel seal of beauty, with their unforgettable songs about war and about peace. Sons of Sandino and the embodiment of true Sandinismo, they have achieved widespread and impassioned national consensus due to their passion for Nicaragua. Their music is now the nation's heritage and remains very much alive in the collective memory of all who struggle for justice and sovereignty in Nicaragua and the rest of Latin America.

However, although being a güegüense can be a source of national pride, the meaning of güegüense-ness depends a great deal on the politics that motivate the güegüense's deceptions. As the staff of *Envío* also put it in the same article,

What does it mean to be Güegüense? Is it indeed the essence of being Nicaraguan? There is constant debate between those who reject the Güegüense as a vulgar, irresponsible and cunning liar, and those who embrace him as astute, roguish, a leveler and a rebel against authority. Although we fall on the side of the more positive reading of *El Güegüense's* verbal, dancing and political juggling, we also recognize both types of Güegüense in Nicaragua: the shameless scoundrel [*sinvergüenza*] and the anarchistic rebel. One confuses to benefit from the lie and the other to mock and defeat the powers that be.

In other words, there is, on the one hand, the güegüense *par excellence* like the Mejía Godoy brothers – a clever man of the people who shrewdly uses humor in his struggle against oppression – and the güegüense *sinvergüenza* [shameless scoundrel], embodied by the politicians in "El Reggaetón," who deceives at the public's expense.

¹² Lines from the song "Yo Soy de Un Pueblo Sencillo" ("I am of a Simple People") by Luis Enrique Mejía Godoy (1983).

To be a güegüense can be either an offense against the nation or a feat of great civic duty.

For Field, *The Güegüense* is not about the nation, rather the polyphony of *The Güegüense* “confounds [nationalism’s] totalizing discourses” (74). He argues that, at its core, *The Güegüense* is heteroglossic and thus anarchistic (45, 74). I agree and disagree with Field. I think *The Güegüense*, like “The Reggaetón,” is indeed anarchistic, but I think both works are successful precisely because they create a profound sense of popular unity through subversion – not unlike the revolutionary struggle itself. I think, for instance, that “The Reggaetón” was so popular because it gave life to a sense of collective resistance through satirizing the negative güegüense-ness of Nicaragua’s political leaders. In other words, it turned the elites’ deception on its head a la Güegüense by satirically *haciendo burla* [making fun] of the leaders. The song’s writer and performers and the song’s audience engaged in a Güegüense-like deception in which the in-authenticity of the politicians was mirrored back at them, subverting their authority through an exaggerated but undeniably convincing mimesis of their voices and personas.

In his travelogue about Sandinista Nicaragua, *The Jaguar Smile* (2003), the writer Salman Rushdie observes that masks, such as the folklore masks he finds on display in the home of Sergio Ramírez, are not simply about deception, they are also about transformation. This insight is not lost on many Nicaraguans, including elites, who recognize the productive power of güegüense-ness and attempt to use it to their advantage. As Field (1999) argues in his ethnography, *The Grimace of Macho Ratón*, both the “Left” and “Right” in Nicaragua have historically claimed *The Güegüense* as an allegory depicting mestizaje as the basis of Nicaraguan national identity, obfuscating ongoing indigenous struggles in Nicaragua (see also Gould 1990) and thus advancing

political projects – such as Sandinismo – dependent on a modern sense of identity rooted in a shared *but transcended* indigenous past.

It is this version of *The Güegüense* that is often replicated in the frequent performance of the play as a piece of feel-good, colorful and seemingly apolitical national folklore in popular venues, such as the streets of the capital city during Managua's new annual carnival.¹³ I observed one such performance of dances from *The Güegüense* at a public meeting to discuss the results of León's process of participatory budget planning, their Multi-annual Investment Plan (PIM) (discussed in Chapter 4), at León's city hall in 2004:

It is 8:30 a.m. and the event is just beginning. There are perhaps 110 people seated in 10 rows of white plastic chairs. At the front of the room there is the table for the city counselors, but only a few of the counsel members have arrived. The event begins like so many other public forums and political events with a series of dances by dancers from the *Casa de Cultura* [local center for the arts]. Behind the stage is a huge banner: "¡360 Works of Progress Made Reality with Honesty and Transparency! Alcaldia Municipal de León."

One of the dances is a fragment from *The Güegüense*. I ask one of the staff from the Alcaldia for an explanation of the costumes but he says he doesn't know. "I've never read it," he tells me. He asks the director of the arts center about the performance and

¹³ Footage of a carnival performance featuring masked "mule" dancers and pretty "indian" maidens, can be seen on YouTube [<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TFR5jHO2DMU>]. Interestingly, in the comments section of the clip, someone has observed, "Yes, our *Güegüense* is very pretty, but I don't know what those *inditas* are doing there. In the dance of *The Güegüense* there are no *inditas*, only Suche Maliche..." Someone else has responded, "[They are there] for a simple reason. This is not the original dance of the *güegüense*. It's a carnival performance." The presence of the *Inditas*, is indeed not part of the original *Güegüense*, but conforms to modern idealizations of the nation's indigenous past. Women in "traditional" Indian costumes (white flowing skirts and blouses, braided hair) are often featured in Nicaraguan folk dances.

after the dancers are done the director tells those of us in the audience that the dancers with the white masks are the *Espanoles* [Spanish] and the horses [mules] are the *Macho Ratones*. He explains that it is a traditional and anonymous performance piece, which they are presenting, “so that you all know a little more about our cultural heritage.”

In this instance, *The Güegüense* functions as a narrative of belonging and identity, but the tensions in it have been reduced to a quaint and non-threatening dance between the long-ago enemies who ultimately form the nation.

Yet the *Güegüense* as a trope of Nicaraguan identity – a trickster, a survivor, a fighter, a deceiver, a hero – is not so easily pacified. Practices of *engaño* – like the actions of Sandra in the previous chapter when she had her revenge on the man in her military unit – still stir up powerful feelings, political feelings, of belonging, survival, defiance and well-being, which cannot easily be teased apart from the sentiments of bitterness and betrayal that, at times, motivate them and at times result from them. *Engaño* revels in the impossibility of total purity, but nonetheless offers resistance against the “corruption” of individuals, of politics and of politicians.

3.3 The “New” Ortega

The power of *engaño* helps to explain a seemingly odd incident I observed in my fieldwork. Every year in July, hundreds of people in León commemorate the liberation of a prison on the outskirts of the city, *El Fortín* [The Bunker], where the dictatorship held and tortured Sandinista collaborators, many of whom were never seen again. El Fortín is a gruesome reminder of the horrors of the dictatorship and the cold grey bunker has an eerie feel that hordes of celebrants do little to diminish. Still, the atmosphere every July is joyful, with music, dancing and drinking in anticipation of the formal *acto* presided over by distinguished Sandinista party leaders. In 2004, the headliner was Daniel Ortega.

A march to the Fortín begins in the center of the city then winds west and south through the historically indigenous neighborhood of Sutiava. As I made my way that year with the rest of the multitude through the muddy backstreets of León, the sound of “El Reggaetón” reverberated up and down the street. The source of the music was revealed when a pickup truck loaded with enormous speakers pushed its way through the crowd, blaring the song at a head-splitting volume. From their front steps, onlookers waved Sandinista flags and smiled and danced to the familiar rhythm. Given its critique of the FSLN, I wondered if everyone was enjoying the music. Imagine, then, my surprise when, after the bulk of the crowd had finally reached El Fortín, the highlight of the evening’s musical entertainment was an energetic lip-synced performance of “The Reggaetón.” As the young men sarcastically berated their leaders, the crowd went wild. The FSLN party officials and militants on the periphery of the stage smiled and rocked to the beat. Everyone, it seemed – except perhaps me – was in on the joke.

How could a song that ridicules Ortega and Tomás Borge be chosen to precede an Ortega speech at such an event? In retrospect, I think that given the explosive popularity of “The Reggaetón,” the FSLN organizers attempted to appropriate the joke and position themselves as fellow tricksters, i.e., as “part of the crowd,” possibly destabilizing the serious aspects of the satire. In other words, they attempted to defuse the critical power of “The Reggaetón” by playing along, not unlike the political elites whom Field documents promoted *The Güegüense* as a story of shared national identity despite the narrative’s more fundamental celebration of political “subversion, disorder and confusion” (Field 74). In an interview with researchers Mejía Sovalbarro and Vega Gamboa (2006), Dávid Yubank reported that he had received no negative response from the leaders he ridicules – rather Ortega and Alemán, he said, had sent for copies of the CD. FSLN National Assembly member Evertz Cárcamo, the writer and producer of “The Reggaetón,” similarly describes himself as on good terms with Ortega and Murillo

despite his critiques of the party (Arévalo Alemán 2009). That evening at the Fortín, however, as Ortega pontificated, at least some people refused to concede him the power of engaño. Throughout the crowd there were jeers and shouts over his rhetoric of “¡Put on the Reggaetón!”

In the second verse of “The Reggaetón,” “Políticos de Cavanga,” the voice of Daniel Ortega sings to his wife Rosario Murillo, referring to her by her nickname, Chayo: “Chayo, my love! My love, love, I love you truly. Chayo, my love, a crystal ball...” The lyrics are funny because they ridicule Ortega’s devotion to a woman widely disliked (indeed, ridiculed) by the public (even by self-proclaimed *Danielistas*) and, by extension, implicitly suggest a lack of earnest revolutionary love. The crystal ball (“*bola de cristal*”) refers to Murillo’s rumored interest in the occult – some say she is actually a witch – but is also a play on words: A “bola” is a hoax – a lie disguised by artifice – in this case a pretty, shiny lie made of glass.

For both his critics and his supporters, a bola may be an apt metaphor for Ortega. In my conversations with people, I found that there was little disagreement amongst both groups that Ortega has strategically reinvented his public persona in the post-revolutionary period (as I will describe below) in ways that proclaim his own revolutionary purity at the same time as he makes “spiritual” and “political” alliances with his former and current foes. This self-depiction is understood by many as an embodiment of engaño, and in and of itself, such a seeming contradiction, by the logic of the discourse of engaño, would not be enough to merit a dismissal of Ortega. However, what pushes Ortega into the realm of “corruption” as it is understood vis-à-vis engaño, is his failure to *also* embody that purity. In other words, engaño does not see deception (or “corruption” as the case may be) and purity as irreconcilable, but the embodiment of “true” *güegüense-ness* means that that impurity must be articulated as purity, that is, in the interest of resistance against those in power. In popular terms, it must not (at least

not directly) “speak truth to power,” rather it must defy and reconfigure power by not doing so.¹⁴

In 2000, and again in 2006, Ortega’s presidential campaign, managed by Murillo, cast aside the FSLN’s traditional black and red color scheme in favor of a tropical rainbow of pink, turquoise, orange and lime green. A popular shade of pink – known as *chicha rosada* (an electric pink used to tint chicha, a corn beverage) – was the official color of the 2000 campaign. Campaign rallies and propaganda featured pink and red hearts. Ortega’s clothing underwent a similar transformation: In public appearances, a billowy white shirt replaced customary olive-drab fatigues. A shift in Ortega’s rhetoric completed the makeover. In speeches and campaign slogans, Ortega recast himself as a promoter of peace, replacing traditional revolutionary slogans like “Free Homeland or Death!” with proclamations like, “Love is Stronger than Hatred!”¹⁵

In 2004, Ortega and Murillo publicly reconciled with the Catholic Church and with their long-time foe, former Archbishop and now Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo. (They later also married officially in a ceremony presided over by Obando y Bravo.) On the morning of July 19, 2004, the 24th anniversary of the revolutionary triumph, Ortega and Murillo took communion in Managua’s cathedral at a public “Mass of Reconciliation and Peace” given by Obando y Bravo prior to the annual festivities commemorating the revolution’s anniversary. The historic event was well attended by the media, but the pews of the cathedral were noticeably empty at the start of the mass. Ten minutes into the ceremony, the cathedral was loosely packed with Nicaraguans in FSLN bandanas, t-

¹⁴ Of course, I am not suggesting that Ortega does not engage in power relations, but rather that the “power” he defies, in the minds of many of his critics, despite his claims, is the wrong power, i.e., the power of “the people.”

¹⁵ This slogan is remarkable in that it simultaneously casts Ortega as an advocate of “love,” while also positioning him in an antagonistic relationship with his opponents, those who are “hateful.”

shirts, and black and red clothing. One woman I noticed wore an Ortega t-shirt proclaiming, "He's still my leader."

After an introduction by the Cardinal, Ortega ascended the altar, applauded by the crowd. He asked forgiveness for his sins and said that he accepted God. Obando y Bravo told the crowd that Ortega had requested a mass of reconciliation and peace and that God was forgiving. "We are all," he said, "sinners...One cannot be a prisoner of the past."

Later, at the Plaza of Faith,¹⁶ the second public performance of the day, the *acto* [ceremony], was officiated by an enthusiastic Murillo, who had also organized the event. A pastel rainbow of colored flags fluttered in the breeze above the stage and marimbas cheerfully tinkled traditional folk songs. Tomás Borge and others were awarded honors for their heroism. Ortega spoke for over two hours, venerating the revolution and critiquing the "corruption" of Nicaraguan politics. He compared the current state of "savage capitalism" with the revolution's socialist state, which, he said, "gave everything to the people." He lamented that the government and the country's non-governmental organizations were stuck within the logic of capitalism and argued that the system itself – what he called Nicaragua's "so called democracy" – was rotten. Power, he proclaimed, needed to be "democratized" through the participation of Nicaragua's citizens. Corruption, he said, would only cease with the "democratization of power." The "new" Ortega was tender and repentant, full of love and joy, but characteristically strident in his reverence for the revolution and his critique of "neoliberalism."

¹⁶ The Plaza of Faith was constructed by the Alemán regime for Pope John Paul's second visit to Nicaragua in 1996. In previous years, the July 19th celebrations were held in the nearby Plaza of the Revolution, the location of the original 1979 victory celebration. However, in 1999, Alemán built a large "singing" fountain in the center of the Plaza (implicitly prohibiting a large public gathering) and the festivities were moved the Plaza of Faith. He also renamed the Plaza of the Revolution the Plaza of the Republic, its name under the Somoza regime. In 2007, the new Ortega administration tore up the fountain and reclaimed the Plaza.

Viewed on television, the tens of thousands of people in the Plaza of Faith suggested a resounding endorsement of Ortega and the FSLN. Far from the stage, at the other end of the Plaza, however, a different kind of *party* was taking place. Vendors hawked cheap rum and beer to a raucous and intoxicated crowd. Revelers stumbled and laughed as they covered their ears from nearby celebratory mortar blasts. Ortega's speech was barely audible amidst the festivities. While Ortega lectured from the podium about the democratization of power, it was the farcical Ortega depicted in "The Reggaetón" who seemed to embody the feeling of the rally:

Put your hands in air, all you faggots! Put your hands in air,
thieves! Make some noise! Rock it, D.J.!...In this *malecón* [the site of
the plaza], we're celebrating 10 years of a program of
deception¹⁷...What we want here is to shit ourselves
laughing...Long live the thieves, long live the *coyotes*,¹⁸ long live the
whores. Thieves, coyotes, drunks. Long live the whores!

Like the sanitized television version of the rally, Ortega's victory in the 2006 national elections gives the impression that the public love affair with Ortega and his party has not ended. However, popular sentiment, as well as the 2006 vote count, suggest otherwise. Electoral results indicate that Ortega's comeback actually had more to do with the splintering of the right wing than with Ortega's popularity.¹⁹ Ortega actually received more of the vote in 2001 when he *lost* to Liberal party rival Enrique Bolaños: In 2001, Ortega received 42.3 per cent of the vote, compared with 38 per cent

¹⁷ This refers to the television program, Programa Matizón, but also seems to refer to the "program" of Nicaragua's political leaders.

¹⁸ *Coyote* in Nicaraguan parlance can mean a person who helps traffic individuals illegally across the border to the United States, but the more general meaning (as used here) is someone who takes things they don't pay for or is an opportunist.

¹⁹ Since Bolaños's win in 2002, the Liberal party has undergone its own series of crises centered around the corruption of Alemán, culminating in a divided ticket and electorate. (Post-pact electoral law requires candidates to have only 35% percentage of the vote to win. Without the pact's modifications, Ortega would have faced a run-off with second-place finisher, Liberal Eduardo Montealegre [ALN-PC], who won 28% of the vote.)

in 2006. In 2001, Bolaños garnered 56.3 per cent for the Liberal party (PLC), however in 2006, the Liberal vote was apparently split between the PLC and the newly formed rival liberal party, the Alianza Liberal Nicaragüense (ALN), who received 27.1 per cent and 28.3 per cent, respectively (Dye, David, with Shelley McConnell 2002; European Union 2006). According to a 2008 Gallup poll, Ortega's approval ratings dropped that winter significantly below the 38 percent of the vote he received in November 2006. In February 2008, the percentage of the population that believed Ortega was doing a "good job" was 21 percent, down from 61 percent in a poll by the same company in February 2007 (shortly after Ortega reassumed the presidency) (International Herald Tribune 2008).

Ortega's makeover and rhetoric, I suggest, is not enough to maintain significant public support, not because it is false, but because it is not true in the right ways. This lack of "purity" is evident – as I discuss in Chapters 5 and 6 – in the disjunctures between Ortega's rhetoric about the "democratization of power" and the largely authoritarian politics he has enacted in the name of such democratization. The most significant such disjuncture for many former Ortega supporters started in the late 1990s when Ortega and then president Alemán began negotiating a series of secret amendments to the Nicaraguan Constitution. Those amendments, which came to be known as "*el Pacto*" [the Pact], were voted into law in 2000 (Hoyt 2004).²⁰ The Pact effectively concentrated power in the hands of Alemán and Ortega through the

²⁰ FSLN militant, Ortega advisor, and recent mayor of Managua, Dionisio Marengo, describes the pact-making process as highly secretive: "I recall the first negotiations we had with Alemán, during which a relationship was worked out between General Humberto Ortega [Daniel Ortega's brother] and Jaime Morales Carazo, Alemán's godfather and most important adviser, establishing points of agreement. Later they brought me into that negotiation, together with Alemán's private secretary, Alfredo Fernández. We worked for about three months and when a series of discussion points had been formulated, President Alemán and former President Ortega were incorporated into that small committee. Humberto stepped out, leaving just Daniel Ortega and me for the FSLN, together with Alemán, Morales and Fernández. It was a secret commission. Everything discussed was private; no one knew anything about it and that's still true right up to today. Nothing was ever leaked from the thirty-some meetings" (Marengo 2008).

privileging of the two-party system. Under the Pact, it became more difficult for small parties to receive public funding. Candidates were required to run on a party ticket and establish a percentage threshold for seats in the legislature, a move that was a staggering reversal of electoral laws passed by the FSLN when the party was in power. (In the 1980s, the FSLN had made specific provisions in the name of democracy to allow parties with a limited number of votes to win seats in the National Assembly [Nicaragua Network 1999]). In addition to consolidating two-party rule, the Pact also guaranteed Ortega and Alemán (and any future out-going Presidents) life-long positions in the National Assembly and originally provided immunity from any charges against them, such as the charges against Ortega for the alleged abuse of his step-daughter, Zoilamérica Nárvaez (described in the last section of this chapter), and the corruption charges against Alemán.²¹

Ortega presented the Pact to his supporters as a negotiation that would bolster the FSLN and help it defeat Alemán's "neoliberal...neo-Somocista project" (Ortega 1999) by giving the party the strength to win the national elections. He also argued that the Pact would prevent the Right from "stealing" future elections, as many Sandinistas contended that they had done when Alemán was elected in 1996. The idea of the Pact as a negotiation appealed to some. As one man assured me in 2001, "Pacts are a necessary part of democracy. Daniel has to negotiate." However, many Sandinistas were not convinced. As another commented, "the people of the base are split [about the

²¹ Alemán's impunity was overridden by subsequent political negotiations (Associated Press 2002; Gonzalez 2002; Latin American Post 2002; Close 2004), resulting in a 20-year sentence. However, Alemán was allowed to serve his sentence on his private hacienda, purportedly because of his poor health. This privilege is widely believed to have been made possible by negotiations between Ortega and Alemán (Latin American Post 2002). Alemán's sentence was later commuted to "country arrest," (Nitlapán-Envío 2007b) which gave him freedom to go anywhere within Nicaragua. In 2009, he was exonerated from any charges of wrongdoing (Nitlapán-Envío 2009; Ibarra 2009; Cruz 2009).

Pact]...there's a lack of confidence with the government...people are comparing this to a pact with Somoza."

References to Somoza emerged repeatedly throughout discussions of the Pact. While Ortega argued that the Pact would forestall the return of Somoza-style politics, for many the Pact was disturbing precisely because it was reminiscent of the concentration of power in the hands of an exclusive political class that characterized pre-revolutionary Nicaragua. Political analysts from the newsmagazine *Envío* pronounced that the Pact was: "...little more than political abuse of the Nicaraguan population by two *caudillos*...insensitive to the poverty paralyzing...[Nicaragua]...but all too aware of the scant democratic culture that history has bequeathed the country" (Envío 2000) In an unmistakable reference to Ortega's alleged sexual abuse of his stepdaughter, they argued that the Pact had "all the characteristics of abuse within the home, where the immaturity and dependence of the abused child are exploited by a disrespectful and irresponsible abuser," and contended that, "[b]oth forms of abuse are premeditated and are *based on unequal power, trickery, humiliation masquerading as protection...*" (Envío 2000, my emphasis).

In the lyrics of the *Políticos de Cavanga*, the character of Ortega tells the character of Alemán "We'll talk about our Pact...Inside of me there is no hatred or resentment. We are birds of a feather..." Alemán's sarcastic reply is, "Ha, ha, ha, Daniel. You made me cry." In this exchange, as in the above *Envío* article and in popular discourse, everyone knows that the Pact is an *engaño*. The problem with the Pact, what makes it "corruption" in the eyes of so many, is not the fact of negotiation with one's supposed enemies (indeed, as the man I quoted above pointed out, such a move could be a step away from the friend/enemy dichotomy and towards a more democratic, i.e., agonistic rather than antagonistic, politics) or the fact of deception, which could be about using the power of *engaño* to work against "power." Rather, the pact is corruption because it

uses the language of negotiation, reconciliation, and brotherhood to mask personal gain at public expense (i.e., impunity, permanent political office, etc.). The politics of the Pact mean collusion with enemies to the exclusion of former friends – less powerful political actors – including many, like the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS), who rightfully argue that they also have a significant claim to the revolutionary struggle.

3.4 Means and Ends

In 1998, Ortega's stepdaughter, Zoilamérica, publicly accused him of abusing her for almost 20 years. Ortega and Murillo denied Narváez's allegations and Ortega's supporters contended that the accusations were part of a plot to defame Ortega. Narváez, however, claimed that while Ortega presented himself to the world as an icon of revolutionary ethics, he privately violated her from the time she was 11 years old (Narváez 1998). In her testimonial, which was widely distributed and discussed in Nicaragua and abroad, Narváez describes Ortega's abuse as a violation of her right to exist as a full human being (2), explicitly juxtaposing this behavior with his proclaimed dedication to a revolutionary struggle for human dignity.

When Narváez made her accusations public in 1998, women's rights advocates rallied around her, demanding that Ortega face criminal charges. However, the charges were dismissed in 2001 because, according to the courts, the statute of limitations had been exceeded. In 2003, the Nicaraguan Supreme Court rejected an appeal from Narváez, supporting the lower courts' rulings. Advocates of Narváez contend that the rulings were flawed and partisan (at least some of the judges in question are known Sandinista party members). Having exhausted her legal options in Nicaragua, Narváez

pursued her case internationally at the Interamerican Human Rights Commission until 2008, at which time she withdrew her lawsuit (Envío team 2008c).²²

Party insiders loyal to Ortega say they know for certain that he is innocent. Writing in *Envío*, Vilma Núñez de Escorcía, an FSLN militant turned dissident and President of the Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights (CENIDH), however, contends that this is itself an engaño – that members of the party were ordered not to talk about the case and to describe it as a “political conspiracy” (Núñez de Escorcía 2000). What is perhaps most interesting about the accusations for thinking about such “corruption” through the lens of the discourse of engaño, is that at least some individuals, such as feminist writer Margaret Randall (author of *Sandino’s Daughters*) apparently knew about Ortega’s abuse of Narváez during the revolutionary era but did not reveal it for fear of reprisals against the revolution (Randall 1998). In other words, individuals – including feminist thinkers – apparently decided that in the context of the revolution’s struggle for legitimacy and self-determination against U.S. aggression and internal polarization, such an engaño, which according to Narváez’s testimony did irreparable harm, was a means that justified an end. That engaño – which was undoubtedly a painful one – weighed the price of such deceit against a perceived greater social good. It is that kind of calculation, one that the discourse of engaño suggests cannot be made in the abstract that is now weighing against Ortega.

It is in this context that Ortega is accused by many – especially feminists – of abusing his authority, accusations which have resulted in considerable cynicism, disgust and anger about his leadership. The new Ortega, as the Reggaetón contends, is, according to many, a cavanga. As Father Ernesto Cardenal, former Minister of Culture, poet, liberation theologian and FSLN dissident, puts it: “The Ortega-Murillo program is

²² The Interamerican Human Rights Commission is a part of the Organization of American States.

full of words of love, reconciliation, togetherness, religious piety. But at the bottom, it's really about bitterness, revenge, domination, and intolerance. Underneath it all is a false morality, hypocrisy, and hot-pink insanity" (Cardenal 2006).

While Ortega's makeover has alienated his former allies, it has apparently been successful with many of his former enemies: the hierarchy of the Catholic Church (especially Cardinal Obando y Bravo), multilateral lenders like the World Bank, and even US government officials (Smith 2006; Blumenthal 2007). Whether these groups and institutions took Ortega's transformation as "sincere" or whether they simply saw him as willing "to play the game," the Ortega administration seemed, at least momentarily, to be on friendly terms with many of its historical enemies. For instance, to the outrage of women's rights groups and human rights organizations in Nicaragua and around the globe, Ortega and the FSLN supported religious leaders' call for the criminalization of therapeutic abortion in Nicaragua, making Nicaragua one of the few countries in the world with a complete ban on abortion, even when the life of the mother is at stake (Center for Reproductive Rights 2008; Human Rights Watch 2007; López Vigil 2007). (I discuss this again briefly in Chapter 6.) (Ortega's relations with some of his former enemies, however, became shaky again after the 2008 municipal elections in which there were serious allegations of fraud on the part of the FSLN [La Prensa 2008a; Monterrey 2008; Nitlápán-Envío team 2008c; Nitlápán-Envío team 2008d].)

In post-revolutionary Nicaragua, the cavanga of Ortega and other political leaders has left many to grapple with a sense of betrayal and nostalgia for ideals of solidarity they once collectively embodied. At the same time, the discourse of engaño, such as that articulated by the archetype of the güegüense, is a discourse of "corruption" that, at times, unsettles the very notion of corruption by using corruption against itself. Engaño is capable of dividing people, but at the same time it is capable of creating profound feelings of unity through subversion. As the Reggaetón suggests, despite the

cavanga of the políticos, engaño retains a transformative power, one that may or may not be capable, in Mouffe's terms (2005), of transforming individuals into a collective "we" (18-19).

4. Corruption

4.1 Introduction: Resurrecting Mística

Since the mid-1990s, transnational actors such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, United Nations, Organization of American States, European Union, and others, have targeted corruption, typically defined as the misuse of public or entrusted power for private gain, as a major impediment to democracy and development in Nicaragua and elsewhere in the Third World (Eigen 2002). Data from Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI) indicate that Nicaraguans agree that corruption is a serious concern: Of the 32 countries in the Western Hemisphere included in the CPI in 2008, Nicaragua ranked near the bottom in terms of public perceptions of "political corruption" (Transparency International 2008). Transnational anti-corruption efforts thus coincide with attention to "corruption" by local actors in Nicaragua, most visibly among segments of the Left and Right that have broken with the dominant Sandinista and Liberal parties.

For instance, in 2005, in anticipation of the 2006 national elections, a faction of the Sandinista party known as the "Democratic Left" (*Izquierda Democrática*) joined forces with well-known party dissidents to form the Movement for the Rescue of Sandinismo or MPRS (*Movimiento por el Rescate del Sandinismo*). The founding of the MPRS was only the most recent effort of prominent Sandinista leaders to attempt to restore the moral and political integrity of Sandinismo in the face of the alleged corruption of Ortega and his allies within the FSLN. According to congresswoman and former FSLN Commander Mónica Baltodano, the founding of the MPRS was the outcome of a long history of fractures within the party over the politics and ethics of the

FSLN going back to the early 1990s (Baltodano 2006a; Baltodano 2006b). While Baltodano and others struggled to change the party from within despite their increasing marginalization by the party's top brass, other Sandinista leaders launched a more visible public challenge to the perceived corruption of the party from without: In 1995, former FSLN vice-president Sergio Ramírez and other militants founded the Sandinista Renovation Movement or MRS (*Movimiento Renovador Sandinista*), a dissident Sandinista party aimed at recuperating the "authentic values of Sandinismo" (MRS website).¹

Harkening back to the Sandinista ideology of *mística*, these movements interpret Nicaragua's socioeconomic problems as the consequences of a national moral crisis:

Nicaragua is experiencing a profound political, economic, and social crisis, but above all else, a moral crisis. The country seems to have lost its hope and its vision of the future and, at the same time, the old forms of domination and oppression have returned, egoism prospers, there is insensitivity in the face of suffering, an absence of social solidarity, the desire for easy money, double morality, corruption, illicit dealings, the cult of consumerism, and the destruction of natural resources (MRS "*Principios*").

This moral crisis is perceived to be rooted in the corruption of Sandinista leaders, but also in post-revolutionary, neoliberal politics: "We have witnessed ourselves stuck between the broken model of the total state and the broken model of savage capitalism, while we seem to be moving backwards, towards marginalization and poverty, inequalities of class and gender, external dependency and the destruction of nature" (MRS "*Principios*").

To move forward, the MPRS and the MRS argue, requires a resurrection of *mística*:

It is necessary to align ourselves with the Sandinismo that has not renounced the dream of a world of solidarity, a Sandinismo loyal to the values...of our heroes and martyrs, a Sandinismo faithful to the common good, a Sandinismo that doesn't look for the perks of

¹ The MRS, while critical of the FSLN, did run on a joint ticket with the FSLN in the 2001 (national) and 2004 (municipal) elections. Baltodano is now a part of the MRS.

leadership but whose function is to genuinely value the interests of the excluded. This is an undertaking that requires *mística*, self-abnegation and daily work with the people, not with the desire to be powerful, but with the goal of developing the only subject capable of the greatest tasks: the people in charge of their own destiny, conscious of the causes of their precarious situation, and endowed with the tools for their own emancipation” (Baltodano 2006).

Despite divisions between FSLN party dissidents and current party members – particularly over Ortega – Sandinistas generally tend to express a profound sense of loss and nostalgia for the *mística* that characterized the “golden” time of the revolution and echo this call for its resurrection. For example, as FSLN militant and Congresswoman Gladys Báez put it: “...[N]ow we have a struggle between morality and immorality because a climate of individualism pervades our society....the truth is that if we want to build a just society, a society with [human] rights, we have to rescue those values [mística].”

The need to rescue *mística* is not, however, a new sentiment unique to the post-revolutionary era. *Mística* has, in fact, been in need of resurrection almost since its inception. The back cover of the 1982 FSLN pamphlet “What is a Sandinista?” (Fonseca, et al 1982) for instance, proclaims:

It is necessary to rescue the *mística* of the FSLN; that everyday attitude of permanent sacrifice for our people; of respect towards our leaders and *compañeros*, of fraternity, humility, simplicity, of constant spirit of improvement. To rescue and reproduce [mística] to be better in our everyday work; to be and forge Men of the Vanguard.

Mística, it seems, is by definition elusive and in need of constant remaking. The Sandinista who embodies *mística* is “the most complete expression of the purity of man” (Fonseca, et al 1982), yet such embodiment is unattainable in any permanent way except by those who no longer inhabit the physical plain: the revolution’s heroes and martyrs. (The only pure revolutionaries, as many say, are dead.) *Mística* – the “natural”

meaning of humanity and manhood – must be constantly cultivated and renewed through practice and discipline.

What is new in the post-revolutionary era, however, is the sense that *mística* is no longer a collective goal and that the institutions – the party, the state, the revolution's leaders, and even the community itself – that once promised allegiance to that goal can no longer be trusted. Despite the efforts of groups like the Movement for the Rescue of Sandinismo and the Sandinista Renovation Movement, most Nicaraguans I encountered seemed to believe there is no longer purity in politics. Politics itself has come to be seen as a romantic deception: heartbreaking and built on lies. Like betrayed lovers, many Nicaraguans are cynical and nostalgic for the way things used to be.

In this chapter, I examine this sentiment of *cavanga* vis-à-vis dominant transnational and popular discourses of corruption. As I have described in Chapter 3, in the post-revolutionary context, public concern with corruption in Nicaragua has coalesced around politics, resulting in the equation of politics with corruption. I suggest here that concern with “corruption” in Nicaragua is unequivocal, however, its meaning and significance is not. While some struggle to resurrect *mística* within and outside the FSLN – which is sometimes but not always couched in explicitly “political” terms – a more popular response that I observed in my fieldwork was a widespread call for a pacification of the antagonistic dimension of the political through the removal of “politics” (i.e., “corruption”) from political processes. This call is at times more along the lines of a liberal call for an apolitical politics (one rooted in rationality in which conflict can be resolved through dialogue or the rule of law), but it is also, at times, a call informed by feelings of *cavanga* in the lives of those who understood the common good as an embodiment of revolutionary *mística*. The common call against “corruption” thus subsumes at times radically divergent understandings of what an elimination of

“corruption” might offer, particularly in terms of the imagined relationships between the people and the state.

4.2 Depoliticizing *La Política*?

The abuse of power by political leaders has left Nicaraguans deeply cynical about politics. Politicians today are “*corruptos*,” “*caudillos*,” and “*sinverguenzas*” [shameless scoundrels]. Despite their often dedicated participation in struggles for change in their communities, the local activists, city employees and even elected officials I encountered in my fieldwork often tried to distance themselves – at least publicly – from explicitly “political” behavior. As my friend Héctor told me, “...*nadie quiere identificarse como político, inclusive los mismos políticos...*” [No one wants to identify themselves as a politico, including the politicians.] His observation was evinced in a city council meeting I attended in which one counselor proclaimed to his fellow municipal officials that the council should not be involved in politics.

What does it mean to say that people – including activists and government officials – should not be involved in politics? Mouffe has defined politics as the “set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political” (2005, 9). The discourse of removing “politics” from the realm of politics that I observed in León and elsewhere in Nicaragua, however, is one that understands “la política” not as a way of managing the inherent tensions of the political, but as a fomentation and embodiment of those tensions, which, in the context of Nicaragua’s incredibly polarized history and the force of party politics, is understood by diverse actors as highly undesirable. “La política,” in this understanding, is synonymous with self-interest and animosity. It is tightly linked to party politics, whose interests are understood as those of specific individuals and groups and not of the “common good.” (It is not “politics” in the liberal

sense of rational, orderly debate between equals, or “politics” as “policy,” in the sense used by some transnational organizations and civil society groups [described in Chapter 5].) Such a discourse understands that “la política” has failed to do what they believe politics should do: allow people to collectively define the terms by which they will live despite what may be irreconcilable desires and values.

In the specific instance I described above, I think the city counselor’s call for eliminating politics from the discussions of the city council was a call against towing a party line in political decision-making. He was urging his predominantly Sandinista colleagues to reach consensus on an issue by setting aside party allegiances. Mouffe suggests that such behavior is characteristic of “deliberative” liberalism, which argues that, “it is possible to create in the realm of politics a rational moral consensus by means of free discussion” (OTP 13). Mouffe is correct that such “depoliticization,” while seeming to create more space for real debate by freeing individuals from the boundaries of party affiliation, is also a kind of pacification – a concealing or a silencing of real tensions and power struggles: After such a comment, any discord or disagreement – however necessary or fundamental – can be dismissed by being coded as “politicking.” At the same time, it is not a total repudiation of politics. It may be a repudiation of party politics, of the politics of *amigüismo* or the politics of animosity, but it is not a disavowal of conflict; it is a way of managing conflict, conflict that “la política” has provoked.

Another form of “depoliticization” imagined to decorrupt politics is the recasting of problems that were (and are still by some) considered to be political problems as the responsibilities of “civil society,” the “private sector,” or individuals, rather than the state. Such recasting, viewed by many as characteristic of “neoliberalism,” has primarily taken place under Liberal party (PLC) rule in Nicaragua. From 1997-2006, under Alemán and later his successor Enrique Bolaños, the PLC drastically downsized the

Nicaraguan state, privatizing utilities and other formerly public entities at the behest of international lenders like IMF (Dye and Close 2004). During this time, the PLC was plagued by corruption scandals, which, as in the case of the FSLN, culminated in the formation of factions and the eventual splitting of the party (Close 2004; Nítlápan-Envío team 2008b).² (Such scandals, rather than discourage or reconfigure “the fight against corruption,” provide fuel for the anti-corruption fire, as well as fodder for *políticos*.)

Burchell (1996) argues that such reconfiguration of the relationships between people and the state is a defining feature of “neoliberalism,” which he describes as being a “generalization of an ‘enterprise form’ to all forms of conduct” (29). He cites Donzelot’s (1991) notion of such a form entailing an implicit “contractual implication,” one that is classically liberal to the extent that it depends on the autonomy of the individual and a notion of contract, but “neoliberal” in its use of what we might think of as “market thinking” to understand the relationship between individuals or groups and the state. Such a contract “offers”:

individuals and collectivities active involvement in action to resolve the kinds of issues hitherto held to be the responsibility of authorized governmental agencies...the price of this involvement is that they must assume active responsibility for these activities, both for carrying them out and, of course, for their outcomes, and in so doing they are required to conduct themselves in accordance with the appropriate (or approved) model of action. This [model of action] might be described as a new form of ‘responsibilization’ corresponding to the new forms in which the governed are encouraged, freely and rationally, to conduct themselves (29).

I observed this phenomenon on occasions in my fieldwork with city officials and community organizers in León, such as the time that these groups worked together to coordinate citizen brigades to clean up polluted sections of the city. I describe this in

² Bolaños was effectively kicked out of the PLC for his persecution of Alemán and subsequently formed another Liberal party, the APRE (Alianza por la República/ Alliance for the Republic).

greater depth in the following chapters, but for the moment want to note how these brigades effectively (though not efficiently) tried to transfer responsibility for public sanitation from the state to citizens in the name of “participation” and community empowerment, and, in the process, re-imagined the state as a “facilitator” rather than determiner of peoples’ lives. The citizens and government officials (both Sandinistas and Liberals) in León that I knew described their clean up efforts as people “taking responsibility for their own problems” and not waiting for the state to solve them.

Paley (2001) documents a similar pattern in neoliberal Chile, in which she contends that discourses of participation (and more broadly of “democracy”) subsidized neoliberal economic restructuring (143). However, Paley, like Donzolet and others critics of “neoliberalism” does not delve into how and why local actors found such discourses meaningful. In contrast, I interpret these understandings in the following two chapters as an internalization of neoliberal notions of individual responsibility, but also an extension of revolutionary feelings of collective responsibility and self-determination, and a critique of top-down state-society relations. I suggest that what seem to be key tropes of “neoliberalism” offer currents of thought that resonate with diverse groups who seek to decorrupt the “selfishness” of politics.

4.3 Corruption and the State

Despite their associations with “neoliberalism,” efforts to decorrupt official politics – which signify a fundamental reformulation of the state / society relationship – appeal to Nicaraguans across the political spectrum, including many on the Left of the Sandinista generation. In my fieldwork, I found that my friends’ attitudes about the state in the post-revolutionary era were profoundly ambiguous and complex: often simultaneously full of longing and anger, bitterness and hope. These mixed emotions – a legacy of Sandinismo and its breakdown – both challenge the minimalist state policies of

neoliberal reformers and provide an opening to them. The perceived need to decontaminate politics is, I suggest, what Dagnino has termed a “perverse confluence” (2003) of neoliberal ideology and revolutionary ideals of human solidarity and autonomy. It is a confluence that the new Ortega administration has been anxious to disrupt, evidenced by its hostility toward civil society groups. A recent FSLN publication, for example, depicted non-governmental organizations as Trojan horses and branded civil society critics of the administration as neoliberal sympathizers (Lacayo 2008). In the rhetoric of the administration, Nicaraguans are either for (and part of) the new Sandinista state or against (and not part of) it, a dichotomy that bears little resemblance to the actual attitudes and practices of most people.

To understand the complexity of Nicaraguan attitudes toward the state vis-à-vis the problems of “corruption” requires a brief reiteration of the characteristics of the Sandinista revolutionary state. Three fundamental interlocking features characterized the revolutionary state: It aimed to provide Nicaraguans with the basic necessities for life (food, health care, work, education, etc.); it imagined the meeting of such needs as motivated by and consequent of an ethical struggle for greater human dignity and solidarity (*mística*); and it strove to meet those material and spiritual needs through the active participation of citizens in their communities directed, or at least filtered, through the apparatuses of the state. In practice, despite the Contra War and the economic crisis that accompanied it, the revolutionary state greatly improved the standard of living of the poor majority through its social programs, particularly in the areas of health and education (Walker 1997). The participation of Nicaraguans in a wide range of social projects and programs saturated peoples’ lives with political significance and cultivated an ethic of *mística*, a tangible and immediate sense of being part of something greater than oneself.

This dedication to the greater good is captured in a letter that my friend Cristina's brother, Santos, wrote to her shortly before he was killed in the Contra War. In my effort to understand the ethos of *mística*, I have returned to this letter again and again, each time struck by a sense of anguish and awe as I read it. Santos was in his early twenties when he wrote it, a poor young man from a humble and uneducated rural family. He wrote:

I am following the trajectory of the revolution...I feel giant in the university of the people, that which is more than a universe. I study the language of the people's song: the love, the peace, the happiness in the smiles of the children...A star is shining brightly in the distance and I will tell you the bitter histories of my young country. How much I have loved it from the time I was a child. We will never forget those who came before us, those who made possible our childhood laughter, our goodness as men...For them there was only one hope: our youth, and only one sure thing: our victory. The great victory of everyone and forever. From me you won't hear any more – a feeling in my heart. I know that now only the wind goes with me and behind my footprints come others erasing me...And in spite of everything, I go on, foolish as I am, my rough and harsh road. My road that will soon end. But the heart of the people is immortal.

What I find remarkable about this letter is that Santos's patriotism and self-sacrifice is motivated not by an abstract ideal ("revolution," "country" or "the state") but by the love, happiness and "goodness" of real people. For Santos, "the people" is not an abstraction; they are not the Marxist-Leninist "masses," but material and knowable (though perhaps not actually known) human beings with desires, hurts and joys. This, it seems to me, is the underlying force that propelled the revolution's *mística* and that which haunts Nicaragua today in the aftermath of the crisis of Sandinismo.

Sandinistas and their supporters that I knew in my fieldwork expressed mixed emotions about the state because the Sandinista state both fomented the *mística* Santos describes and was fundamental to its demise. This tension was most acute in the relationship between personal and political life. During the revolution, politics and private life were often treated as if they were inseparable. In his letter, Santos's very

existence is part of a great revolutionary trajectory and even his childhood laughter is a product of a revolutionary ethos. This extension of politics into the personal, and vice versa, was tremendously potent. For example, for many women, such as Sandra from Chapter 2, the revolution was a catalyst for re-evaluating personal problems like poverty and domestic violence as political issues (see also Randall 1994). At the same time, however, the intertwining of politics and the personal vis-à-vis the state was often constraining and overbearing. The state, after all, demanded not simply allegiance, but at times a literal sacrifice of the self. Santos apparently embraced and embodied this calling, but for many – especially those less enamored of the Sandinista project – the force field of the state bordered on the dictatorial. Nicaraguans inside and outside the FSLN criticized the state for its attempts to determine the minutia of everyday life. Sandra, for instance, saw herself and her fellow FSLN officials as intruding too much into peoples' lives in their efforts to foment participation in community projects: "We tried to control people...we wanted everyone, *everyone*, to be there when we had meetings. Everyone *had* to participate. But maybe there were people who...didn't want to participate. We didn't allow for that." If the revolutionary state made possible a sense of people as political actors whose personal lives mattered, it also prescribed them to be particular kinds of actors with particular kinds of personal lives. For Sandra and others, this prescription was ultimately untenable.

During the Contra War, such state control of daily life was felt particularly acutely in two domains: the consumption and acquisition of consumer goods (including foodstuffs) and military conscription. Under the state's wartime rationing system, individuals were told which consumer goods they could obtain and how much they could have. Many resented the state-issued coupon books and having to form long queues to obtain everyday items for their families. Political elites purportedly had access to special stores for foreigners (*diplo tiendas*), which featured luxury and hard-to-find

items. Such stores remained inaccessible to “the masses” and their presence was particularly grating in the face of widespread shortages of basic necessities like cooking oil.

However, if rationing was an everyday headache, the military draft was a nightmare. As my friend José tells it, in the early days of the revolution, people believed that, “everything was going to be great, the color of roses, that the revolution was going to give them everything...But then they realized...that they had to...fight to sustain the revolution. Everyday there were more people dead...” The state, which promised abundance and new life in exchange for such sacrifice, was unable to uphold its end of the bargain. By the end of the 1990s, the juggernaut of the Contra War had left the revolutionary project in shambles and thirty thousand Nicaraguans dead (Close 1999).

Post-revolutionary Nicaraguan attitudes toward the state are ambiguous in large part because the Sandinista revolutionary state was itself contradictory: the state was given life by the *mística* of countless real men and women like Santos and it was an inextricable part of their daily lives – what they ate, where they worked or studied, the lens through which they told their history and the way they imagined their futures; yet, “the state” in peoples’ everyday discourses remained external – “a sphere above us,” the domain of often self-serving leaders, a mystical entity which could make life livable, or make it miserable, or take it away. By the late 1980s, the paradoxical intimacy and distance of the state, combined with the apparent hypocrisy of party leadership and the psychological and material toll of the Contra War, had fueled a popular sentiment of heartbreak. That heartbreak continued throughout the 1990s and into the Twenty-first Century for many who had dedicated their lives to the revolutionary project only to find themselves barely able to meet their basic needs in the post-revolutionary era.

4.4 The Corruption of Everyday Life

It is a commonplace in Nicaragua as well as in the United States and elsewhere to describe corruption as a “cultural” phenomenon (“*una cultura de corrupción*”), observing that corruption is simply “the way things are done.” In this assessment, corruption is an ingrained and largely ahistorical abuse of public power for private ends and an unchanging part of everyday life that is difficult, if not impossible, to extirpate. It is the rule, not the exception. Ortega and Alemán will steal from the public just as Somoza did before them, just as Pedrarias Dávila did in the Sixteenth Century (Vargas 2000). Such a perspective is bolstered in post-revolutionary Nicaragua by cynicism about the revolution and its leaders.

Nicaraguan poet Iván Uriarte describes what he sees as Nicaragua’s culture of corruption in his poem, “*La buena imagen*” [The Good Image]. The poem describes corruption as part of every aspect of society: politics, economics, morality, and everyday life. Corruption is part of “the system.” But, in contrast with more commonplace depictions of corruption as a perversion or a sickness, Uriarte’s corruption, which he refers to as “Madame Corruption,” has a “good image”:

Corruption has such a good image!
Always impeccably dressed in full suit
and unmistakable tie
Golden credit card
Well received and taken care of everywhere, respected
Always present in the most fashionable places...
(Uriarte 2001, 48, my translation)

Madame Corruption, for Uriarte, takes the form of a glittering society seductress, pillars of the state like police officers, firefighters, military leaders, and moral stewards of society, like Bishops. She is an “apocalyptic prostitute,” the “pet” of the World Bank and IMF, and the “right hand” of the Justice system. She surrounds around us in

everything we say and do. Corruption, for Uriarte, is undefeatable because even those of us who critique her are corruption's accomplices. She is inescapable.

Transparency International and others engaged in the transnational fight against "corruption" contest this seemingly fatalistic notion of corruption, pointing out that while it may be deep-rooted and widespread, corruption is a learned ethical behavior and therefore can be combated through greater societal awareness and institutional intolerance (n.d.). I have so far argued that it is necessary to historicize the problem of corruption and, in this regard, I concur with TI that corruption is not a static condition. However, I believe that TI's conception of corruption as fundamentally a problem of individual ethics – albeit one that can do tremendous harm to the political and economic realms – is too narrow and misguided. It is this conception – which imagines that it is possible to remove the social, and therefore tension, from decision-making and replace it with a flat, universal "ethics" – that makes it possible to think about governance in terms of "transparency." Uriarte's notion of corruption, in contrast, both points to how corruption can never be external to the social relations in which we are embedded and, at the same time, critiques corruption as a problem of individualistic (i.e., neoliberal) thinking and feeling (e.g., his references to corruption's "golden credit card" and bond with international financial institutions).

For many Sandinistas, the ethical was historically made inextricable from politics (and economics). That intertwining through the Sandinista struggle was a transformation of everyday notions of proper and improper behavior. It was literally an ethical revolution. Given this history, corruption in Nicaragua today is bigger than individual or even societal or institutional "choices" about proper ethical behavior. (Though this is not to say that such choices don't matter.) It is not simply a problem of ethics that impacts politics and the economy; rather, it is an ethical-political-economic-spiritual problem. In other words, there is something we could think of as a "culture of corruption" in

Nicaragua, but more in the sense that Uriarte describes it. That “culture” is neither so immutable as some believe nor as readily transformable as others would hope.

Consider, for example, the story told to me by my friend Héctor. An economist and Ministry employee, Héctor was coming home from the beach with his girlfriend on his day off. As he neared his home in the capital, he entered an intersection whose light had only seconds before turned yellow. An instant later, an officer in a patrol car pulled him over and accused him of running a red light. The policeman asked to see Héctor’s paperwork and, noting that Héctor had received his driver’s license in his hometown (a rural area many hours from the capital), informed him that in order to pay the fine, he would have to make an appearance at the city hall in his hometown. Not only would Héctor have to pay the fine, but he would also lose a day of work and have to pay for gas (which, at the time, was so expensive that Héctor often took a hot and dusty four-hour bus ride to visit his family instead of his own car).

Héctor got out of the car and lied to the officer. “Well, you see officer,” he said, gesturing at his flip-flops – which are typically only worn in public at the beach except by the most indigent – “I can’t afford to pay this fine.” Incredulous, the officer asked Héctor to explain how he could afford a car. Héctor told him the car belonged to his family and that he rarely drove it. He opened his wallet and flashed the remnants of cash left from his beach trip. “Look,” he said, “I only have 40 *córdobas* to my name” (about ten percent of the normal fine). The officer considered the story, and after what seemed an interminable pause, nodded in the direction of a local *fritanga* (street food stall) and said, “Well, go get me some *carne asada* [grilled beef].” Héctor hurried off on foot to buy the man some lunch.

I heard the story of the *carne asada* from my friend Héctor when I asked him to explain how it was possible to offer a bribe without explicitly engaging in corrupt behavior. For Héctor, as for many Nicaraguans, bribery is distasteful and potentially

dangerous and therefore cannot be openly discussed. To directly raise the idea of a bribe would be an insult to the moral integrity of the interlocutors and has the potential to result in more dire circumstances, such as an arrest. However, such “corruption” is also understood to be necessary and commonplace. Héctor recognized, indeed – like a true güegüense – took pride in, his active participation in this little piece of street theater. He successfully played by the “rules” of engaño and in the retelling of the story he laughed a great deal at both the chicanery of the officer and his own quick thinking. (He found it particularly amusing that the officer complained upon receiving his meal that Héctor had failed to bring him a soda.)

But, like popular interpretations of the cavanga described in Chapter 3, the playful repartee and humor Héctor narrated were undergirded by a sharp, if ironic, political analysis. “If you see it in a positive sense,” Héctor commented about his story, “the officer didn’t charge me the normal fine, and man, the poor guy, he was hungry. He *earned* his lunch.” As an economist and government employee, Héctor is well versed in the logic that bribery is a form of “corruption” and that corruption is unhealthy for society, but his encounter with the police officer could not be resolved by calculating an abstract ethical equation. For Héctor, the bribe in question offered an ethically-politically-economically satisfying solution to the tension between the state’s dysfunctional bureaucracy and the needs of the officer and himself. The bribe allowed “rightful” behavior to be negotiated. In this analysis, Héctor’s purchase of the carne was a reasonable solution to the problem that the police don’t earn a living wage and that government bureaucracy is labyrinthine. In the absence of a state that takes care of its workers and its citizens, “corruption” literally feeds – as well as feeds off of – the body politic. In this story, participation in “corruption” is not monstrous or glittering, but is necessary the survival of everyday people (including icons of the state like police and bureaucrats) in a dysfunctional system.

For some Nicaraguans like Héctor, “corruption” implies the breakdown of the revolutionary social contract that both protected and provided for the people and bound them in a shared struggle for greater humanity. This understanding of corruption contrasts markedly with the focus of transnational organizations on corruption as restricting the freedom of the market or harming liberal democracy. In fact, for some at least, the neoliberal paradigm that undergirds these presumptions may be precisely the problem. Market-oriented “democratization” and economic liberalization may be facilitating “corruption” at the same time as they claim to work against it (Manzetti and Blake 1996; Girling 1997; Deonandan 2006).

For instance, in the spring of 2002, local artists painted a mural in a public park behind León’s City Hall (see **Figure 1** on next page). Entitled “*El Gran Pedo*” [“The Great Fart”], the mural, which is accompanied by Uriarte’s poem, depicts corruption as a mutant-like beast whose central feature is a giant anus defecating violence, environmental destruction, poverty, sickness and hunger. Crushed under the monster’s claws and hooves are the Constitution and the scales of justice, while the legislative, fiscal, judicial and electoral powers of the state surreptitiously suck money from the creature’s numerous teats. Grotesque mouth-like spines with lolling tongues line the monster’s back, each representing a recently privatized public utility (water, electricity, etc.). The head of the beast, labeled “Neoliberal Savage Capitalism,” is poised to devour Nicaragua’s national flower and is topped with a three-pronged crown of spikes: the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and Inter-American Development Bank. On the right side of the mural is a statue of a giant fist making the *guatusa* gesture (discussed in the previous chapter). The bust is labeled, “bust in honor of the great national leader Arnaldo Alemán Lacayo.”

When Nicaraguans lament “corruption” and equate corruption with “politics,” some apparently share TI’s concerns, however, in the context of Nicaragua’s

revolutionary history, the predominant public understanding of corruption is rooted in people's lived experiences of hunger and illness, of bitterness, of alienation and broken dreams in the absence of a state that protects and provides for their everyday needs.



Figure 1 “El Gran Peto” [“The Great Fart”]
Mural painted in 2002 in downtown León by artist Daniel Pulido and assistants. Photo by G. Ramsey (2002), used by permission.

For some, at least, these experiences are understood as the direct result of neoliberal politics that privilege the market and the rights of individuals over the social. To understand this, requires looking more closely at the lives of Nicaraguans such as my friends José and Cristina (Santos' sister), who struggle to survive and live with dignity in the post-revolutionary era.

José and Cristina

Each year, there are a limited number of openings in Nicaragua's public universities for students to study particular careers. The year that the son of my long-time friends Cristina and José began college, he was unable to study the career of his choice at a public (i.e., free) university, despite excellent test scores and a solid high school transcript, because the openings had already been filled. He eventually resigned

himself to his second choice – a more pedestrian and less lucrative career at a private school. My husband and I agreed to help pay his tuition – a relatively small amount for us, but an impossibly expensive sum for his family. Cristina was grateful but embarrassed by our assistance and lamented that her son had been kept out of his chosen field because of what she called “amigüismo.” According to Cristina, the friends of those in power at the universities were the people whose children had access to the best opportunities. Her son had been excluded because he came from a poor background, one without the kinds of social connections in Nicaragua that could guarantee his success. As she put it, “*El que tiene los reales es el que vale*” [The one with the dough is the one that counts]. However, if Cristina’s family suffered from such practices, they also, at times, benefited from their own personal-political networks. Cristina’s differentiation between her own use of such networks and that of those she considered “corrupt” is one of the complexities of thinking about “corruption” that I will consider in this section.

When Ortega was re-elected president in 2006, Cristina was once again able to find work in the state agency where she had previously been employed in the 1980s. She attributed her job to her friends in the agency – the people that knew her during the revolution and valued her family’s long-standing Sandinista party affiliation. (Her husband, José, was a Sandinista soldier during the Contra War and continued to volunteer with the party on occasion.) Just as the Liberals had done before them, the Sandinistas – according to Cristina – had fired those who didn’t subscribe to their politics and had brought in their supporters to staff the office. Cristina was thrilled to be working again and badly needed the income. However, she was realistic. Her enthusiasm for her new job was tempered with a deep-seated anxiety that as soon as the government changed hands again – as it likely would given the dissatisfaction of much of the public with the new Ortega administration – her job would disappear.

Cristina and José are quick to criticize the “corruption” of bureaucrats and political leaders, but they do not consider their own obtaining of employment through their networks of political allegiances as a form of “corruption.” Yet Cristina’s anxiety about her job security suggested that Cristina saw something wrong with the way such things seemed to work. However, she was resigned to the fact that such networks are an anticipated part of everyday life. As I describe below, the benefits of such networks are something which people like Cristina and José feel is rightly theirs and it is the sense of being cheated out of such benefits that they understand as “corruption.” In contrast, anti-corruption projects like TI presume that people like Cristina and José need to become “aware” of the problem of “amigüismo” in order for corruption to diminish. However, looking more closely at the lives of people like Cristina and José might offer alternative ways of thinking about the meanings, causes and consequences of the behaviors that some label corruption. I tell Cristina and José’s stories here in some detail to convey how the meaning of “corruption,” for Cristina and José, coincides with the dominant notion of corruption as the “misuse of entrusted power for private gain,” but how the meaning and significance of that “misuse” is something quite distinct from the understanding of corruption articulated by neoliberal anti-corruption crusaders.

Cristina and José were born in a small, rural town to families who struggled to provide their children with the basic necessities of life. Cristina’s mother died in childbirth when Cristina was a young girl and Cristina worked from the time she was seven or eight years old, selling tortillas to help support the grandparents who raised her and her siblings. José’s father killed himself in a game of Russian roulette when José was a boy, leaving his mother to raise her four children alone.

When the revolution triumphed in 1979, José enlisted in the revolutionary army. He was 12 years old. In 1980, at age 13, José was sent to guard the Honduran frontier. From 1980 and 1982, he served in several local mobilizations. In 1983, he traveled to

Nicaragua's southern Atlantic region to defend against Contra forces operating out of Costa Rica and spent over a year in the montaña. He returned home in 1984 and was given a scholarship by the Cuban government to study teaching in Cuba.³ He stayed in Cuba for eight months, earning a teaching certificate in spite of the fact that he had only completed the sixth grade in Nicaragua. Back home and uninterested in teaching, José found work in a state-owned factory in the capital, Managua.

In 1986, José was drafted back into military service. He spent two more years at war, this time fighting in the mountains of northern Nicaragua. José left the service in 1988. He was twenty-two years old and had been a soldier much of the last ten years. He returned to Managua and got a job at the same factory he had worked at before with the help of his uncle, who was active with the FSLN.

José's salary was about \$120 dollars a month, which was a good salary at that time, enough to support a family of four or five people. In addition to his paycheck, José and the other workers also received a basket of rice, beans, oil and sugar every month from the state. "There were many benefits for the workers," he remembers. And, "if you didn't like where you were working, you could find somewhere else. There were a lot of places to find work. The salaries were sometimes low, but everyone was busy [working]."

José joined the *Juventud Sandinista* (Sandinista youth organization) and helped to organize unions in and outside the factory to support the revolution. "We formed an economic brigade. They couldn't fire anyone because we were organized...If we wanted a favor of the factory, they would do it. We organized in the *barrios*, made *piñatas* for the kids. It was great. Everyone was working together."

³ Many young Sandinistas were given educational scholarships by the Cuban government (as well as the governments of the Soviet Union and some Soviet Bloc nations).

In 1990, José and Cristina, who had initially met and courted in their hometown, were living together in Managua. Their first son, Freddy, was born that year. In the 1980s, Cristina had finished high school and, through the help of a teacher, had completed a one-year secretarial training course. In 1985, after her grandparents had passed away, she began working as a secretary for a state agency in Managua. As a state business, the company distributed approximately twenty-five percent of its earnings back to the workers. Cristina's salary was thirty-to-forty-percent higher than José's.

When the Sandinistas lost the presidency in 1990, José remembers his friends and co-workers being both distraught and relieved. They were sad to see the revolutionary government lose power, but glad that the war was over. Many were worried about their jobs. Within a short time, the food-subsidy program for workers was eliminated and the factory began to lay off workers.

"To get ahead," they [the factory bosses] said, "we have to eliminate." We workers held strikes. We were unionized. We tried to find out why we were being laid off but they just eliminated us. They gave us a little money and we left. The baskets of food, the benefits for the workers, it was all eliminated. Now the company has been bought by foreign millionaires.⁴

The state's process of "*compactación*" ["compaction" or downsizing], which initiated in the economically-chaotic last years of the Sandinista period, went into full swing with the new Chamorro administration. Chamorro's "Occupational Conversion Program" – which provided workers with severance money funded by USAID – saw 28,000 state employees laid off by the early 1990s (Babb 1997). As Chavez Metoyer (2000) details, such downsizing was only one component of the administration's

⁴ The company was bought by an Italian multinational, Parmalat, which, in 2003, was rocked by one of the biggest corporate corruption scandals in history over the disappearance of 4 billion dollars from its books (Hooper 2008). But that is another story...

neoliberal restructuring of the state and economy mandated by multilateral lenders like the International Monetary Fund.

At Cristina's office, the layoffs happened in stages over several years:

With the first downsizing we went from being 700 employees to about 450. First they started by laying off 100 people, next they fired 150 more. As secretary to an important administrator, I made it passed the first round, the second, the third, the fourth, and finally lost my job in the fifth round. It was when the staff has been reduced to 250 people. The same week I was laid off, José lost his job at the factory. I got my notice on Monday and he brought home his letter on Friday.

It was 1995 and Cristina and José had just had their second son.

The loss of the material benefits of the revolution was emotionally as well as economically devastating. For Cristina and José, steady employment meant not only keeping their family nourished, but also maintaining the dignity and sense of personal worth the revolution had fomented. The family tried to survive by opening a small store in their house, but their business, like that of many other families, was able to make only a minimal profit. For Cristina, the loss of income felt like a judgment, an indictment of failure. The strain of unpaid bills became an almost unbearable weight. As she told me in 1999:

I've been a nervous wreck...because of the pressure of our financial situation...It makes you feel really depressed...if you have a little store, and it's ruined, people keep coming and asking you for things and you have to tell them that you don't have anything to sell them because you have no money. The distributors come by offering you things to sell, and you have to say to them, I don't have any money. I don't have *any*. I can't. And that makes you feel awful. They know you are in a bad state and they still ask you anyway. And that happens *every* day. *'What! Is your business falling apart? Are you going to abandon the store?'* And so on. Those comments keep bothering you. They keep bothering you. And each day you feel more demoralized. Each day you feel smaller. Like you are less and less. And you start to believe that's really all you're worth. Money stops coming in and it is demoralizing and it makes you psychologically ill.

Between utility bills, taxes and other expenses, Cristina and José, like many small business owners, found their store falling apart. They began to seek out microcredit loans from banks and other lenders. To cover their loan payments, they pawned some of their possessions. Despite these efforts, the shelves of the store became increasingly barren.

To keep the family afloat, Cristina started to make and sell fruit drinks. Each morning for the next several years she made large buckets of juice, a laborious effort beginning early in the morning with a bus ride to the market to buy fruit. Although initially lucrative, Cristina's profits dropped precipitously when others in the neighborhood began selling similar drinks.

Cristina and José tried other ways to make money. They set up a sort of primitive arcade in their storefront with old TV and Nintendo sets for the neighborhood kids. They sold homemade bags of ice, hotdogs, and dried beans. José took up sewing and made pants and uniforms for his neighbors. He traveled unsuccessfully to Costa Rica twice to find work in construction and came home penniless. He worked for a time in a *maquiladora* (free trade zone factory) and as a private security guard. Cristina occasionally found employment as a secretary, only to lose it again after a year or two. They both dreamed of going to the United States to work and send money back to their children.

In 2000, José found work in a sweatshop in Managua's free trade zone. He worked six days a week sewing blue jeans for export. He was paid by the piece and lamented the many plus-sized garments manufactured by the American-owned factory. ("I could fit both my legs into some of those pants!" he would exclaim with dismay and amusement. How, he wondered, could Americans be so fat?) The work was hot, hard and paid poorly. In addition to the day-to-day exhaustion of the work itself, José suffered extreme psychological fatigue from the constant anxiety that at any minute he

might lose his job. (Like most sweatshop employees, he had no job security and his employers hired and fired workers seemingly at random and quickly dismissed anyone who agitated for better working conditions.) He was also seriously demoralized by the fact that he was working in a *maquila* owned by gringos, something that in the days of the revolution he would never have imagined for himself or his country. Fortunately, at least, unlike some of his co-workers, he avoided any serious accidents on the job. However, the long-term consequences of José's sweatshop work were yet to be revealed.

On his days off, José began attending adult-education classes in anticipation of eventually losing his job at the maquila. Working and studying seven-days a week, he graduated a year later with a certificate in public accounting. Like so many times before, however, his hard work did not pay off. In 2001, the sweatshop fired José and scores of other workers, and, despite his daily efforts, he was unable to find another steady job as an accountant or in any other field for a couple of years.

In the meantime, Cristina finally found work again as a secretary through some of the people she had known at her former job. The work came with a steep-learning curve. In the years since she had last been employed, computers had become an essential part of the business environment. She quickly learned word processing and Excel, but because of her lack of experience, she was paid less than her coworkers and feared that if the company downsized she would be among the first to go. Sadly, she was correct. She held onto the job for two years, but as the economy worsened, the company laid off its least important personnel, including Cristina. Despite anxious searching, it would not be for three years – until the beginning of the new Ortega administration – that Cristina would again find a job.

When Cristina lost her job, José doubled his efforts to find something – anything – that would pay the bills. Eventually he found work driving a truck, picking up or delivering important papers and parcels for a bank, often at night or in the early-

morning hours. The work was dangerous. Simply driving in Nicaragua can be hazardous because of the poor condition of the roads, as well as illegal and/or intoxicated drivers, but driving a bank truck at night also put him at greater risk for robberies. The situation was worsened by the fact that his employer frequently sent him far into the countryside where the roads were often abysmal and the desolation made the journeys extremely risky. He would sometimes drive almost all the way across Nicaragua, an eight- or nine-hour trip, and then turn around and drive back without stopping because the bank would not pay for lodging and it was not safe to sleep in the truck. Cristina feared for his well being, but also for that of the family because with escalating violent crime in their neighborhood, it was dangerous to be home alone at night with the children.

José's work was exhausting, but neither José nor Cristina anticipated just how difficult the job would become. José's right knee had bothered him periodically for years due to a repetitive stress injury from his long days in the maquila sewing pants. By 2007, however, the injury had become debilitating. He could no longer drive without constant pain and sought medical assistance. Under the new Ortega administration begun in 2006, the basic medical services at the hospital were free, however José's problem required surgery and the surgery was not free. The cost was \$5,000 – far more than José and Cristina's yearly income – and an impossible amount for a family that constantly lived hand-to-mouth. José lost his job and the family was once more plunged into crisis.

It was in 2008, after several difficult months with no regular income, that Cristina managed to obtain her current job through her former colleagues. She was hired by the same insurance company that she had worked for in the 1980s, this time to process applications for life, health, and other types of insurance. However the company was now semi-privatized rather than state-controlled. (Like many former state entities, it had been made "autonomous" under neoliberal reforms in the 1990s.) Her wages are meager and her medical insurance will not cover José's surgery. She works

from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., five or six days a week depending on her bosses' demands, occasionally working later into the evening with no overtime pay. Taking two buses across the city each way to work means that she leaves home at 6 a.m. and returns at 8 p.m. each night. After work, there is the house to clean, food to prepare and helping the children with their homework. She is exhausted, but with little-to-no job security, she is grateful simply to have the job.

Since the loss of the revolution, Cristina and José, like many Nicaraguans, have struggled daily to provide basic food and clothing for their children, to keep their electricity turned on, to find steady employment. They have done so largely without any help from the state. During the Alemán administration in the late 1990s, Cristina lamented:

Politicians just think about themselves...They aren't looking out for the wellbeing of the people...Daniel is looking for his own self improvement. Arnaldo [Alemán] is looking how to make things better for himself. And the other parties are looking for their own betterment. And no one is worrying about the people...*The government doesn't have a conscience...* They're only interested in taking your money and they don't care how people survive. In this country life has no value. No value at all...The only people worth anything are those with lots of money...

The government, they believed, was "absent from the true realities of the country" and did not provide for the people in the way it should. "[The government doesn't] give you the opportunity to get ahead. They close the doors on you...The people on the bottom are dying of hunger. The people on the bottom don't have work, they don't have any benefits. Everyday it just gets worse..."

The emotional and physical toll of such struggles for Cristina and José has been almost unbearable. Both have battled depression on and off for almost two decades. When José was initially laid off from his state factory job, he began a two-year drinking binge to cope with his anger and frustration. Cristina's cholesterol skyrocketed, her digestive system revolted and she became so stressed that she could not eat. Between

her stomach troubles and saving what little food the family sometimes had for her kids, her plump frame became frightfully thin. For much of the last ten years she has suffered from stress-induced migraines. Cristina rarely discloses the extent of her ailments to José because she believes that he blames himself for the family's financial crises. They cannot afford to purchase both his and her prescription medications, so Cristina buys José's and avoids telling him about her problems, a situation which exacerbates her stress by further reducing her already limited emotional-support network. She frightens me by confiding that, "People kill themselves because they can't stand the pressure...That's what's happening with people here. The debts we have are *deudas fatales* [fatal debts]."

Cristina and José have little social support outside their immediate family. Because of their economic situation, they are rarely able to visit extended family members who live in their rural hometown, let alone depend on those individuals for assistance. Their relationships with their neighbors in the over 20 years that they have lived in their Managua neighborhood have mostly been cordial, but never intimate. Cristina's sense of shame prevents her from sharing her problems with other people, as if her family's difficulties are the consequences of personal failures. Some relationships with neighbors have been openly hostile. Since I have known Cristina and José, they have feuded repeatedly with neighbors whom Cristina believes are jealous of her family's apparent relative financial wellbeing. (Though it is only a simple cinderblock house with a zinc roof, Cristina and José have long lived in one of the more attractive homes on a street that includes many houses made partly of scrap wood or metal sheeting.) Cristina believes that most Nicaraguans today, like some of her neighbors, are spiteful and envious.

A lot of people [in our neighborhood] think we have money. They don't know the situation we're in. But I'm not going to walk around saying I have so many problems, that I have no money. Because that's what people really want to hear. They want to see you destroyed...People don't like you to get ahead. They like to see you in the same place you've always been and if they see that

you have even a little more than before, it hurts them to see what you've got...People don't like to see you succeed. They like to see you destroyed. All Nicaraguans are like that. Everyone wants to be better than everyone else.

Over the last decade, Cristina and José have had one significant long-term friendship with a couple in their neighborhood. The neighbors, Don Carlos and Doña Mindy, were Liberal party supporters and Cristina and José avoided discussing “politics” with them. They were wary of “politicizing” the friendship by bringing to light the tensions that they understood to be inherent in any discussion of “la política,” so they steered clear not only of partisan topics, but also of critical discussion of everyday life issues that had an explicit political dimension. For instance, Cristina told me that Mindy would complain to her about the state of the local hospitals, but Cristina would simply agree that they were abominable without pointing out that the problems with the health care system were, in fact, linked to neoliberal downsizing of the state. Thus their friendship with Carlos and Mindy was largely rooted in everyday small talk about the neighborhood or other local gossip, the long-standing friendships between their school-age children, and the occasional exchange of small favors. Although they did not discuss the extent of their financial crises with Carlos and Mindy, on occasion Carlos would lend them a small amount of cash for a possible business venture and this aspect of the friendship resulted in Cristina and José treating the couple with great deference, referring to them by the formal titles “Don” and “Doña.”

Cristina and José generally avoid making their political allegiances known amongst their neighbors. José, for instance, enjoys listening to Nicaraguan revolutionary folksongs, but he plays the cassettes quietly so that the neighbors won't hear. When I would accompany the family to the yearly celebrations in honor of the anniversary of the revolution, José and his sons would wait to don their celebratory red and black bandanas until after we had left the neighborhood.

The notion that “you can’t trust people” is widespread in Nicaragua today, but made painfully evident in Cristina and Jose’s lives by the crime that terrorizes their neighborhood (and more generally the capital city as a whole). Their street is the scene of frequent acts of petty crime (robberies, vandalism, etc.), but also occasionally of gang violence that culminates in serious injuries or even deaths. Tragically, their friend Don Carlos was the victim of such an act. Carlos worked as a currency exchanger at one of the city’s markets – a potentially lucrative but also dangerous occupation because it involves carrying relatively large quantities of cash. In 2007, Carlos was ambushed and murdered by a group of young men shortly after leaving home. The police caught only one of the perpetrators and because Doña Mindy feared retaliation for her role in his apprehension, she fled the country, seeking refuge with relatives in Miami. Carlos’s death left behind two young children. Cristina and José no longer have people they consider real friends in their neighborhood.

In the lives of Cristina and José, the loss of the presence of the state is more than just the loss of a welfare state. The revolutionary state offered people like Cristina and José ways of surmounting the challenges of daily life that extended far beyond mere financial assistance. The absence of the state that Cristina and José feel so acutely in their lives is the absence of a revolutionary social contract that protected and provided for them, but also bound them with others in a shared struggle for greater human dignity. The selfishness and lack of trust that they encounter in the workplace, in schools, in the streets, amongst their neighbors and amongst their political leaders is a corruption of a collective dream, one made real – if only momentarily – by their own sweat and blood and tears. It is a dream that they still cling to with bitterness and sadness and desperate hope.

Without the revolutionary state and its *mística*, Nicaraguans are faced with a paradox. They cannot meet their needs in a political environment in which the state is

absent from morality, but the state – like its politicians – had lost its claim to moral authority. Some FSLN supporters, like Cristina and José, are cautiously optimistic that President Ortega will effectively reunite politics with ethics to the benefit of the country's poor majority, however many see Ortega as simply another *corrupto* manipulating the state and the people to his personal benefit.

In this context, many have turned away from the state at the same time that they continue to make claims on it. They do not want to be involved in “politics,” they don't want the state to tell them how to live, and they may even shy away from connection with neighbors, yet they still feel that the state owes them something. One community leader in León explained to me that she would never work for the city government or a political party because “la política” is too corrupt, yet she argued that the municipality should compensate her for her work, which she described as doing what the state could no longer or would no longer do. She thus struggled to position herself both outside the state and inside it at the same time, something that enabled her to maintain her moral dignity but at a rather high cost to her economic survival.

The sacrifices that Cristina and José made for the revolution – particularly the loss of loved ones like Cristina's brother – are a constant reminder of this peculiar relationship with the state....The state, it seems, failed to live up to its end of the bargain. As Cristina once put it, “So many died and *for what?*”

4.5 Corruption

Corruption is a widespread concern, but what “corruption” means is far from transparent. What I have tried to show in this (and the previous) chapter is the complexity of thinking about corruption in post-revolutionary Nicaragua. For TI and other such critics of corruption, corruption is an inappropriate mixing of the personal and the public resulting in harm to democracy and the free market. For many

Nicaraguans – such as the mural artists depicting neoliberal capitalism as synonymous with corruption – however, corruption is the separation of politics (and economics) from the social. As Cristina put it in her discussion of “la política”: “In this country, life has no value.” That is, life – everyday existence, which is a constant struggle – has been separated by neoliberal capitalism from the purview of the state. Cristina’s comment reminds me of Don Augusto’s depiction (Chapter 1) of the “stealing” that he points out is sedimented practice in capitalist systems. Over the last two decades, Cristina and Jose have been imbricated in systems of exchange characterized by institutions that undervalue their labor and consistently fail to give enough back. They have been asked to give and give and pull themselves up in the process but have received almost nothing in return. For Cristina and José, that sedimentation, in the context of their experiences of the revolution, is still a point of contention (i.e., it has yet to become hegemonic and thus still exists as set of political feelings), but it is a process that is wearing them down and wearing them out.

These contrasting perspectives advance very distinct visions of the role of the state, as well as what constitutes proper political action and everyday ethical behavior. Transnational actors concerned with corruption, such as the World Bank, IMF and others, advocate the downsizing of the public sector in the interest of the freedom of the market and individuals, which they contend will bring greater social good. Yet it is apparent from the experiences of people in Nicaragua that downsizing the public sector will not, at least not in and of itself, eliminate “corruption” either in TI’s sense or in the sense described by the experiences of Cristina and José. As I suggest in this chapter, such downsizing may, in fact, further normalize corruption as Cristina and José understand it.

In **Table 1** (next page), I have briefly sketched the definitions, meanings, causes, and consequences of corruption, as well as possible “solutions” (explicated in the next

chapter), from the perspectives of some Nicaraguan and transnational actors. By necessity this chart is an oversimplification, but it may be helpful to trace the general parallels and divergences in the understandings of “corruption” I describe.

Table 1. "Corruption"

	Definition	Meanings	Causes	Consequences	Solutions*
Popular post-revolutionary society (including Sandinista dissidents)	Top-down, self-serving politics	Breakdown of revolutionary ethics / contract. Individualization or privatization of public resources and life.	Selfishness Unscrupulous leadership	Loss of societal wellbeing Loss of social trust Loss of <i>mística</i> Loss of individual freedom	Rule of law Strengthening civil society Citizen participation Everyday ethical practices like <i>¿Cuanto le debo?</i>
FSLN	Neoliberal politics	Predominance of market over state / social.	World capitalist system	Loss of societal wellbeing	Strengthening the state Citizen participation (within the state) Removing enemies from politics
Liberal party	Socialist politics	Predominance of state and / or social over the market and individual freedom	Self-serving leadership	Loss of individual freedom Harm to free market	Downsizing the state Rule of law Strengthening civil society Citizen participation
Transnational Actors (Transparency International, World Bank, IMF, etc.)	"Misuse of entrusted power for private gain" (TI n.d.)	Inappropriate mixing of private and public (in both the "public" and "private" spheres)	Ingrained social and institutional norms	Harm to free market Breakdown of "democratic" process	Downsizing the state Rule of law Strengthening civil society Citizen participation

* Discussed in Chapter 5 and 6

5. Purification

Nicaragua is dealing with total corruption and it needs a total purification. Everything is contaminated. [We need] a new mentality – a new moral and civic respect and common sense. Anonymous public comment on the website of the newspaper El Nuevo Diario in response to the dropping of Arnoldo Alemán's "jail" sentence. Jan. 17, 2009.

5.1 Introduction: Purifying the People through the State

In June and again in July of 2008, tens of thousands of Nicaraguans marched through the streets of the capital against the “dictatorship” of the new Ortega administration.¹ The protests, organized by civil society groups, brought together an unprecedented mix of organizations and individuals from across the political spectrum, including supporters of the Sandinista Renovation Movement and anti-Alemán Liberal factions (Coordinadora Civil 2008a & 2008b; El Nuevo Diario 2008b; Envío team 2008b; La Prensa 2008b). The Civil Coordinator, a national consortium of over 300 organizations formed in response to the crisis surrounding Hurricane Mitch in 1998, urged Nicaraguans to participate “For the right to life, to food, to work, and to citizen participation” (Coordinadora Civil 2008a). “We Nicaraguans,” they declared,

...are marching...to insist that our demands are incorporated into national plans, respecting the [rights of] social organizations. It's not possible to remain indifferent to the demands of the citizens, that we continue suffering the [government's] political persecution that has begun against groups and persons. We cannot allow the closing of spaces of participation (Coordinadora Civil 2008c).

¹ Some put the number at ten thousand, others contend the marches have included up to fifty-to-sixty thousand people (El Nuevo Diario 2008b; Envío team 2008b; La Prensa 2008b; Coordinadora Civil 2008d). Similar marches have subsequently been held in Managua and elsewhere in the country (see website of the Coordinadora Civil: <http://www.ccer.org.ni/>).

Ortega dismissed their demands and accusations as a conspiracy against the revolutionary state. Since taking office, Ortega has persecuted civil society leaders and activists and repeatedly referred to such individuals and groups as “sellouts,” “traitors,” and “cowards” (Envío team 2008b). Feminist activists, such as Sandra from Chapter 3, have been particularly targeted for their support of abortion rights.

In September of 2008, the weekly FSLN party magazine, *El 19* – named in reference to the Sandinista overthrow of Somoza on July 19, 1979 – featured a cover story describing non-governmental organizations as “modern Trojan horses,” the “product of neoliberalism,” whose principle function is to serve as “cushions” against structural adjustment policies (Lacayo 2008). According to various FSLN officials cited in the issue, NGOs are a neoliberal conspiracy, initiated in the 1990s as part of a strategy of “global domination” by imperial powers like the United States. In the same issue, in an article by Rosario Murillo – one incongruously illustrated with still images from the horror film *The Shining* – Murillo links Nicaragua’s “fake” civil society movement to the CIA (Murillo 2008).²

In November 2007, Ortega and Murillo officially implemented a new governmental structure intended to replace the existing civil society structures they contend are so threatening. Their “Councils of Citizens’ Power” (CPCs), according to Ortega and Murillo, are grassroots venues for “direct democracy” and, as part of the state, are intended to govern along with the legislative and judicial branches of the government (Cuadra and Ruíz 2008; Nítlápan-Envío team 2007a). Critics and analysts contend that the CPCs go against the Constitution by supplanting existing mechanisms for participation defined in Nicaragua’s Law of Citizen Participation (Ley de Participación Ciudadana 2003) (discussed below) (Loáisiga Mayorga 2007; Cuadra and

² An article in the same issue describes the work of an anthropologist funded by the government whose “macro theory” proves that Nicaragua is, in fact, the “cradle of civilization,” that is, the “Original Mother” of all other people in the world (Zambrana Sept 2008).

Ruíz 2008). They effectively – and apparently illegally – supersede institutional structures such as the Municipal Development Committees described in this chapter.

Councils (e.g., the Supreme Electoral Council) are a component of the state invested by the Nicaraguan Constitution with authority to bring together individuals representing different sectors of society in collaboration and consultation. As I will discuss below, there already exist under Nicaraguan law at least five types of councils institutionalizing civic participation in the state. Critics of the CPCs, such as members of the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS), however, argue that the Councils of Citizens' Power, as established by Ortega-Murillo, are a violation of the section of the Constitution that governs the organization, duties and procedures of the Executive branch. Law 290 (Article 11) sets out the rules for Councils, stipulating that none of the functions or authority of other branches of the state, including the Executive, can be transferred to such Councils (Loáisiga Mayorga 2007).

Most problematic, however, to critics and some analysts of the CPCs is their apparent inseparability from the party and their direct control by Murillo who is the top party official overseeing the new branch of government (Loáisiga Mayorga 2007; Nítlápan-Envío team 2007a; Cuadra and Ruíz 2008). Some Nicaraguans worry that the CPCs will serve as mechanisms for control and manipulation of the population at the hands of party leaders (Cuadra and Ruíz 2008). Sandinista militant-turned-dissident and feminist activist, Sofía Montenegro – a frequent target of Ortega – for instance, is quoted by the Nicaraguan newspaper *La Prensa* as warning Nicaraguans that they must avoid being “manipulated by false promises [of the CPCs] that will divide us and drive us towards a catastrophic future – with violations of our human rights...and a return of the dictatorships of the past” (Loáisiga Mayorga 2007). Or as my friend Angel – a former Sandinista supporter – described to me by email in 2008,

We citizens are really worried that what is happening is the installation of a new type of dictatorship, one without precedent,

in our country. What most worries us is the formation of groups [i.e., the CPCs] that, disguised as citizen participation, are actually a threat to the freedom of expression and even of thought itself.

In this analysis, the CPCs both harken back to the state control of the past (to the Somoza regime, but also specifically to the revolution's Sandinista Defense Committees, which I describe at the end of this chapter) and portend an even more ominous future.

Ortega and Murillo, however, contend that the CPCs are the location of "real" citizen participation and they make no bones about the inseparability of the CPCs (and by extension, the state) from the party and from themselves personally as the head of the FSLN. For instance, in 2008 Ortega told supporters gathered for anniversary celebrations of the revolution, "The only civil society is the CPCs, the only civil society is the Sandinistas..." (Envío team 2008b). Murillo similarly proclaimed, "We have to recognize that without the Sandinista Front there is no citizens' power" (Envío team 2008a). This conflation of the people with the party's leadership extends to the administration's depiction of Ortega and "the people" as synonymous, as exemplified in the term "the People-President" [*Pueblo Presidente*].

The "People-President" is used in government publications and websites to refer to the public as the leader of Nicaragua while also referring to Ortega (see, for example, the government website: <http://www.fise.gob.ni>). A cartoon from *El 19* depicts a laborer, labeled the "Pueblo Presidente," struggling under the weight of a cart full of capitalists. The Pueblo Presidente (in the form of the government logo "El Pueblo, Presidente!") is also a play on words of the familiar revolutionary roll call in which the name of a deceased hero is announced and the people respond with the word "Presente!" [Present!]. In this reversal of the traditional call-and-response, however, the people are the historic heroes and the president embodies them, making them present in

the here-and-now.

Ortega and Murillo's revamping of citizen participation is a radical departure from the predominantly non-partisan (yet not necessarily horizontal) politics of civil society organizing and citizen participation from the late 1980s through the late 2000s. In this chapter, I look at the politics of citizen participation in Nicaragua in the period after the consolidation of what some Nicaraguans call "neoliberalism"³ and prior to the re-election of Ortega (roughly 1999-2006). My focus is on how the rhetoric and practices of citizen participation in the post-revolutionary (but pre-Ortega administration) period imagined participation as a way of purifying the "corruption" of politics. I consider the paradoxes such purification presents for remaking the relationships between the people and the state in the wake of Nicaragua's perceived crisis of political authority. In doing so, I take seriously the basic contention of Ortega and Murillo's accusations about the confluence of the rise of civil society and what they call "neoliberalism" in Nicaragua, but I also lay the groundwork for a discussion in Chapter 6 of the possibilities created by this rethinking of politics and the political relation for moving beyond the top-down politics of the Ortega model.

5.2 Purifying the State through the People

The Law of Citizen Participation

In 1999, at the end of a decade characterized by a nationwide but heterogeneous sense of political corruption and by a concurrent rise in non-partisan civil society organizations, a group of Nicaraguan non-governmental organizations and state entities

³ I refer to "neoliberalism" this way because not only is it unfixed in the ways I have previously described, but also because the notion of the existence of a politics that can properly be called "neoliberal" is itself a point of contention. That is, the term "neoliberal" is not simply a description, but also a critique and a reification. Those who are called "neoliberals" by their enemies or adversaries, as the case may be, do not identify as such.

began collaboration on a proposal for a national *Ley de Participación Ciudadana* [Law of Citizen Participation], referred to here as Law 475. Law 475, which was approved by the National Assembly during the Bolaños administration in 2003, formalized the processes through which Nicaraguans could and should (according to the Law) participate in local, regional and national governance. These processes included: citizen-originated legal initiatives, citizen consultation in policy and budget planning, the official integration of community and interest groups in local development planning, the right to petition and denounce public officials, and the protection of citizen participation as a human right. To put these processes into practice, the Law created four new types of Councils within the state – Municipal Development Councils, Departmental Development Councils, Regional Socioeconomic Planning Councils, and a National Council of Citizen Participation – each operating at different levels and each charged with specific tasks related to citizen participation. The Law also acknowledged the existence of Nicaragua’s extant institutional structures for citizen participation, such as neighborhood or rural development Committees at the local level and the National Social and Economic Planning Council at the national level.

Diverse individuals and groups from across Nicaragua (including many individuals within the FSLN at the municipal level in León) embraced the Law of Citizen Participation, describing it as a significant and necessary counterweight to a corrupt culture of politics that concentrated power in the hands of political elites. As I describe below, local municipal officials and community leaders in León took the law quite seriously, meeting over the course of many months to discuss its details and its implications for the city. The law was seen both as a mechanism for strengthening and deepening existing participatory practices and a formal declaration of the rights of citizens to participate in governance.

Law 475 aimed to transform the relationship between the state and its citizens (CDC 2001, 3). Designed by civil society and state actors,⁴ the Law set out to “...convert the citizenry from their condition and quality as objects of governance (*“los administrados”*) to protagonists of the transformation of Nicaraguan society...” (Law 475, paragraph V). The Law’s authors described this “new relationship” between citizens and the state as essential to the very functioning of Nicaraguan society.⁵ “Modern society,” they noted, “is only governable if citizens...participate in the design of public concerns” (CDC 2001, 5). Thus the Law of Citizen Participation, they contended, was fundamental to democracy and development (CDC 2001, 8-10).

Law 475’s imagined culture of democracy, peace and progress was juxtaposed in the Law against a politically polarized and, the Law implied, less-than-truly democratic past. The Law, however, did not explicitly reference the revolution (or the dictatorship that preceded it). The absence of the revolution from the wording of the Law was necessary for the Law’s idealization of consensus as a fundamental political objective. In place of Nicaragua’s past and ongoing polarization, the law calls for Community Associations that will promote a politics of peace and tolerance.

The Law’s authors did describe Nicaragua as having a “rich heritage of participation” and noted a precedent for citizen participation in the nation’s Constitution, but the specific genealogies of that heritage were omitted (CDC 6, 8-9).

⁴ These groups included the Center for Constitutional Rights, the Nicaraguan Association of Municipalities, We Make Democracy, the Commission for Peace and Human Rights, the National Integrity Committee, the Central American University, and the Attorney General for the Defense of Human Rights.

⁵ Similar calls for a restructuring of the relationship between citizens and the state through participation, as I discuss below, are part of a broader trend throughout Latin America and elsewhere in the “developing” world over the last two decades. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to provide a comprehensive overview or critique of this trend, a project that has already been undertaken by others (Adams 2003; Avritzer 2002). This project offers instead a micro-level examination of such discourses in the context of the specific history of Nicaraguan cultures of politics.

Nonetheless, the revolution was undoubtedly a catalyst of the Law. As I discussed in Chapter 2, the Sandinista revolution was made, in large part, through the participation of everyday people in both the overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship and the formation of the new Nicaraguan revolutionary state. That participation, however, was guided – and in many instances dictated or controlled – by the revolution’s “vanguard” and party leadership. In describing to me the importance of Law 475 in the context of this history, Henry, a Sandinista and a promoter of citizen participation with a public-private agency, quipped: “The revolution was a good school. We learned two things: centralized democracy and the power of the people.” Thus though the history of the revolution remained unnamed in the letter of the law, in the eyes of many Nicaraguans (including, presumably, many of its authors), the spirit of Law 475 was a response to this basic contradiction. Law 475 was imagined, at least by some, as a way of decentralizing and making good on the revolution’s promise of democracy.

The design and ratification of Law 475 was thus part of a deeply-rooted historical concern with purifying or de-corrupting Nicaraguan politics. Like *mística*, it aimed to transform people from their alienated states as objects of governance to protagonists in their own development. Unlike *mística*, however, the Law of Citizen Participation – like other related post-revolutionary struggles for political purification discussed below – was imagined to purify politics through an elimination or removal of the political relation from governance. As I describe below, this movement towards purification sought to diminish the contentious, unruly, deceptive, and opaque from questions of governance through the involvement of people and communities in the shaping of policy decisions. Through the discourse of participation, “politics” was imagined as split into the apolitical and therefore uncorrupted “policy” (interestingly, also “*política*” in Spanish) and its seeming opposite, the political, inherently “dirty,” and party-based, politicking. In other words, the post-revolutionary liberal state was

seen to be incapable of containing the seemingly inherent volatility and immorality of politics. In its place, diverse Nicaraguans and transnational institutions like lenders and development organizations imagined a post-socialist state in which governance increasingly took place outside what they imagined as “official” politics. This new relationship between people and the state was imagined possible through the citizen participation facilitated by Law 475 and related practices and policies of state decentralization.

Decentralization

In 1984, Nicaraguans celebrated what are widely regarded as their first “free and fair” elections with the selection of Daniel Ortega as the nation’s President (Booth 1985; Walker 1991). The first municipal elections in Nicaraguan history were later, in 1990 (Bravo 2001).⁶ These elections were significant given that the Nicaraguan state has historically been divided into two primary levels: the central or national state and the municipality.⁷ The municipality is defined in the Nicaraguan Constitution as the basic political unit of the state. The 1990 municipal elections were part of a gradual process of post-dictatorship state decentralization that began in the late 1980s at the end of the first Sandinista regime. According to municipal law expert Alejandro Bravo, the FSLN expressed willingness soon after the overthrow of Somoza to return autonomy to the

⁶ Under the electoral law established by the FSLN in 1989 and implemented for the first time in 1990, the people directly elected the city council and the council elected the mayor. As a result of constitutional reform under the Chamorro administration in 1995, the people directly elected the mayor as well as the council. However, it is worth noting that under Nicaraguan municipal law, the council (and not the mayor) is technically the “maximum authority” of municipal governance (Bravo 2001, 50).

⁷ The country is also divided into “departments” (roughly on par with the U.S. concept of “counties”), as well as regions, however there is comparatively little governance activity that occurs at the departmental or regional level (Cuadra and Ruíz 2008). In theory, decentralization could occur at all these levels. In practice, the primary locus of decentralization in Nicaragua is the municipality.

local level, however it was not until 1987 that the FSLN issued a new Constitution establishing municipal autonomy (Bravo 2001).⁸ In 1988, the new Municipal Law (Law 40), defining the role, rights and responsibilities of the municipality took effect. According to Bravo, the FSLN lagged in establishing municipal autonomy because, like the Somoza regime, it needed a strong central state to enact its politics (Bravo 161). For Bravo, the movement towards a decentralized model under the FSLN was a political decision intended to strengthen the party's bases of support "through the means of a participatory democracy tamed and controlled by the party apparatus" (Bravo 161). Nicaraguan political analyst Juan Luis Rocha offers a different reading, positing that greater municipal autonomy initiated under the FSLN was the result not of power brokering or deepening democracy, but of the country's financial crisis, which necessitated shifting responsibility for public services to the local level (Rocha 2002).

Decentralization slowly grew under the Chamorro administration. Under pressure from multilateral organizations including the International Development Bank, World Bank, and USAID, the Chamorro regime expressed serious commitment to decentralization only at the tail end of its tenure in 1995 in its "National Plan for Sustainable Development," forming a National Commission for Decentralization charged with devising a decentralization strategy (Ortega Hegg and Navas Morales 2000). In 1995, the Chamorro administration also reformed the Nicaraguan Constitution, effectively deepening the degree of autonomy afforded to the municipality (Bravo 2001). However, according to decentralization experts Manuel Ortega Hegg and Jorge Navas Morales (2000), the Chamorro administration's interest in decentralization was more about maintaining external (i.e., multilateral) support for the administration than about an internal desire for decentralization.

⁸ For a more complete history of the role of the municipality in Nicaraguan history, including the pre-Somoza structure of the state, see Chapter XV, "*Breve Historia del Municipio en Nicaragua*," in Bravo (2001) or Jorge Flavio Escorcía (1999).

Since the Chamorro administration's initial steps toward a more decentralized state, the national government has moved slowly, at times grudgingly, toward a more decentralized model (Grigsby 2003; Rocha 2002) under continued pressure from multilateral lenders, transnational development organizations (e.g., the United Nations Development Program) and foreign non-governmental organizations. Decentralization is defined by the Nicaraguan Commission for Decentralization as "the transfer of functions, resources and power, from a central [state] entity to an autonomous [state] entity, at the municipal or departmental level, or directly to civil society" (*Comisión de Descentralización* 1996, cited in Ortega Hegg and Navas Morales 24). In practice, decentralization in Nicaragua has more often been the transfer of functions – or *vainas* [problems], as many Nicaraguans I spoke with put it – but not *reales* [money or resources] from the central state to the local level. In 2001 and 2002, under the Alemán and Bolaños administrations, the transfer of money from the national level to municipal governments was only 1 per cent of the national budget, a percentage woefully inadequate to support local governance and infrastructure and remarkably scant compared to the transfers in other countries in the region and world (Grigsby 2003; Ortega Hegg and Navas Morales 2000). As Rocha (2002) notes, the transfers in 2001 were equivalent in approximately \$1.34 (U.S.) per person *per year*, "less than the cost of a gallon of diesel, a plate of food, a third of a ream of paper or the daily wage of the lowest paid agricultural worker." In 2001, during my research, over one-third of Nicaragua's mayors simply closed down their local governments for two months due to financial crisis (Grigsby 2003). In 2003, negotiations between the nation's mayors, legislators, and President Bolaños culminated in a Budgetary Transfers bill that would increase the percentage of state to local transfers to 4 per cent in 2004, increasing it gradually to ten percent by 2010, putting Nicaragua on par with the rest of Central America (Grigsby 2003), but far behind the regional average (22 per cent for Latin

America in 2004) and well below that of countries like Argentina, which transfer approximately 50 per cent of their national budgets to the local level (Institute for Fiscal Studies).

Decentralization has been widely touted by development organizations and multilateral lenders as a solution to the problems of inefficient and “corrupt” government (Montero and Samuels 2004; Oxhorn, Tulchin and Selee 2004). Along with citizen participation, decentralization is offered by such groups as “the magic formula to solve the problems of democracy” (Bravo 2001, 123). Many such groups, as well as nongovernmental organizations like sister cities, have made their continued support contingent on decentralization, which, along with citizen participation, they contend, is fundamental to fighting corruption and promoting democracy and development in Nicaragua and throughout the developing world (Fisman, Raymond and Roberta Gatti 2000; Huther, J. and A. Shah 1998).

However, it was not just transnational organizations that urged the Nicaraguan state to decentralize throughout the 1990s and the early years of the 2000s. Beginning in 1993, for instance, Nicaragua’s mayors (Sandinista and non-Sandinista) joined forces to form the Nicaraguan Association of Municipalities (AMUNIC), a network dedicated to promoting municipal autonomy and supporting the work of municipal leaders (Ortega Hegg and Navas Morales 2000). In 1997, AMUNIC succeeded in their negotiations with the central state to revise Nicaragua’s municipal law to allow for greater local autonomy (Ortega Hegg and Navas Morales 2000).⁹ In my conversations with Alejandro Bravo, AMUNIC’s legal counsel, for instance, Bravo told me that, “Decentralization is the legal apparatus through which citizen participation happens...Decentralization is

⁹ AMUNIC is one of many networks of municipal leaders throughout Nicaragua. Between 1988 and 1998, there existed at least 20 such groups (Ortega Hegg and Navas Morales 2000). AMUNIC is, however, the most important of these groups at a national level.

democratization.”¹⁰ For Bravo, the move towards greater local autonomy at the municipal level in governance practices is a continuation of a movement towards “greater democracy” that historically began with the formation of the modern liberal state (Bravo 2001).

In my field research with municipal leaders in León, I found that, like Bravo, local government officials and community leaders across the political spectrum applauded discourses of citizen participation and decentralization as frameworks for instituting greater “democracy” and fighting “corruption.”¹¹ Community leaders in León clearly understood that there was something quite material to be gained through their participation in local governance and their regular participation in what were often incredibly long and dull meetings was a testament to that conviction. Leaders knew that participation offered the possibility of putting a neighborhood’s infrastructure project on the municipal budget, as well as the possibility of funding such a project with help from foreign cooperantes [donors or volunteers]. It was not surprising, therefore, that a huge banner praising decentralization as key to development took center stage at a conference in León in 2002 between local officials and activists and representatives of León’s numerous (predominately European and North American) sister-cities. However, I believe that support for participation in local governance meant more to many leaders than simply a strategy for extracting much-needed funds. Decentralization, as I discuss in more detail later, is widely appealing because its critique of centralized power resonates across diverse political philosophies in the context of Nicaragua’s long history of struggles for self-determination (against U.S. imperialism, military dictatorship, top-

¹⁰ This conversation occurred in 2002, prior to the passage of Law 475 (which established a new “legal apparatus” for citizen participation).

¹¹ This finding is supported by the survey research conducted with municipal leaders at regional forums by Ortega Hegg and Navas Morales in the mid-to-late 1990s and discussed in their book *Descentralización y Asociacionismo Municipal* (2000).

down socialism, and, most recently, “political corruption”). The cry for local autonomy unites – at least superficially – “neoliberals” and socialists, World Bank economists and community activists, all of whom pinpoint the inefficient, controlling and corrupt state as a common adversary. Local autonomy, such individuals believe, will better serve the interests of citizens by involving them in decision-making processes, which will make governance more transparent, accountable, and efficient.

Yet decentralization can also be seen as a paradigm that constrains and limits greater “democracy” through a “neoliberal” revisioning of the state. For some critics, decentralization is indeed part of the trajectory of liberalism in the last thirty years, but a trajectory away from classical liberalism’s fundamental principle of equality and toward an atomized individualism that prizes autonomy above the collective wellbeing formerly provided – at least in theory – by the state. For instance, as Gabriel Pons Cortés writes in *Envió*,

Decentralization in Latin America has generally involved the state passing off the obligation to provide or participate in offering public services with no compensation mechanisms for poor municipalities that cannot collect taxes or lack properly trained personnel to offer such services. “Decentralization” has become an ideological fad in many countries, and the powerful institutions responsible for applying globalization have used it to score their own goals, taking advantage of the good press given to municipalism and decentralization to delegate to the municipal governments responsibilities that really belong to the state (Pons Cortés 2001).

In her ethnography of democracy in post-Pinochet Chile, Julia Paley similarly describes how discourses of citizen participation have effectively subsidized “neoliberal” economic restructuring by relieving the state of its responsibilities and passing them on to citizens in the name of participation and empowerment (Paley 2001). Sonia Alvarez (2008) likewise argues that the focus on civil society participation (what she calls the “civil society agenda”) has to some degree co-opted and circumscribed social movements, diverting our attention from the larger re-

conceptualization of the state-society relationship such participation implies and from other arenas and forms of social struggle, such as those less tightly linked to the state or those that employ less “civil” means of engagement. (I would add that the name “civil society” can also be read, as my research suggests, as implying that politics “inside” the state are uncivil, furthering the need for neoliberal purification.)

Such critiques, as I will discuss, were not unfamiliar to local leaders in Nicaragua and raise important questions about what “greater democracy” might actually mean and about the on-the-ground politics of ideals like participation. In what follows, I consider these questions by looking at practices of citizen participation and decentralization in municipal governance in Nicaragua’s second largest city, León. In this chapter, I focus on some of the paradoxes of this remaking of the relationship between people and the state. Then, in Chapter 6, I examine some of the possibilities created by this rethinking and its significance for our understandings of politics and democracy.

5.3 Paradoxes of Purification

Consensus and the Common Good

In compliance with the Law of Citizen Participation, the city government of León began to organize a Municipal Development Committee in May 2004.¹² As outlined in Law 475, the Municipal Development Committee was charged with assisting city authorities from the Alcaldia in development planning, policy implantation and evaluation, and reviewing the city budget (Law 475, Art. 52). To form the Committee, the mayor’s office invited local NGO, community, and political party leaders to a public meeting at City Hall. At the meeting, Committee members were elected by their

¹² Municipal Development Committees are briefly mentioned in the 1997 revision to Nicaragua’s Municipal Law (Law 40, Art. 28), however until the passage of Law 475, León’s city government employed a different institutional structure for development planning.

respective civil society and government sectors. Law 475 did not specify that committee members be selected by vote, only that the committee was “representative of the actors and forms of organization” in the municipality. The composition of the committee was, by law, the decision of the city council (Law 475, Art. 55). The specific composition of the León committee ultimately included the mayor and vice-mayor (both FSLN members) and representatives of the national government, the Sandinista, Liberal and *Camino Cristiano* [Christian Path] parties, the Chamber of Commerce, the Indigenous Community Association, the National University, the Communal Movement, the Coordinating Commission for Children and Adolescents (a public-private partnership), and AMNLAE (a national women’s organization affiliated with the Sandinista party).

In late June 2004, on a visit to city hall, I noticed a piece of paper taped to the wall in the office of the city counselors. It appeared to be a letter of complaint about the formation of the Municipal Development Committee. Curious, I asked the secretary, Margarita, if I could read it. She took it down and allowed me to make a photocopy at a nearby store. When I returned with the document, Margarita stapled it to the wall. There were, she explained no more tacks or tape. The city, like many city governments throughout Nicaragua, was in financial crisis and there was no money to buy even basic supplies.

The letter stapled to the wall was a declaration from a local NGO called the Democratic Forum decrying the manner in which the city had formed its Municipal Development Committee. The Forum accused the local government of conducting the meeting in an “improvised” and exclusionary manner and failing to clearly explain the laws and procedures surrounding the committee’s formation. Referring to a specific section of Law 475, they contended that the local government had misinterpreted the Law: According to the Law, the committee must include a representative of an indigenous community organization, but, at his discretion, the mayor can select more

than one such representative to participate. In their statement, the Forum pointed out that the mayor had not taken advantage of this power to select more than one such representative and urged the mayor to include individuals from diverse factions of the local indigenous community on the committee.¹³ The statement concluded by declaring the Municipal Development Committee to be “provisional” while “steps are taken towards consensus and participation.”

I asked my friend Lucía who was present at the meeting to select the Committee what she thought about the accusations. Lucía was an active and hardworking young community leader of one of the poorest neighborhoods of the city. At the meeting, Lucía had been elected to serve on the Municipal Development Committee. She was also a member of the Democratic Forum. She said that in her opinion, the claims were not substantive. Rather, she confided, “The head of the Forum was upset because they didn’t chose her [to serve on the committee].” She added that the Democratic Forum was a new NGO and that the NGO representatives selected for the committee were people with long histories of local participation.

What I found provocative about this story was how a process that set out to depoliticize governance was, from the beginning, fraught with politics rooted in existing power relations (between NGOs as well as between NGOs and the municipal government). The Democratic Forum, like the authors of the Law of Citizen Participation, anticipated a future of greater consensus, but the formation of the Municipal Development Committee challenged the very possibility of consensus (as imagined in the Law) in which broad sectors of civil society (e.g., NGOs or ethnic groups) have common interests that can be collectively represented without conflict.

¹³ The dominant indigenous community organization in León is only one of at least four such organizations in the municipality divided by competing claims of authority and authenticity, as well as political party allegiances.

This story highlights the fact that non-governmental organizations are not simply an apolitical sector of society. Rather, they are, as a planner within the León Alcaldia put it, “sectarian.” This same planner, who was assisting in the coordination of the Development Committee, described bringing together groups with diverse political orientations and agendas as the biggest challenge to the local planning process. Yet she imagined that it was possible for such groups to put aside politics in favor of a shared notion of the common good. She described her goal as: “...that people can sit together at a table that have different political ideologies but at that table it is irrelevant because they don’t talk about that. Rather they are there to discuss what is...best...for the development of the municipality.” Her comments echoed those of the central state agency charged with municipal development, the Nicaraguan Institute for Municipal Development (INIFOM), in support of Law 475, “Governability is strengthened to the degree that there exists the willingness to put political and personal interests after the interests of the nation and its citizens” (INIFOM 2004, 8).

Setting aside “politics” to collectively develop policy presumes a concept of politics as something that can be compartmentalized; something that is only a *facet* of oneself or a superficial (“ideological”) barrier between the self and others and not central to one’s identity or everyday life. As I have already indicated, I think this concept of politics is inaccurate and I will say more about this later. For the moment, I want to contrast this notion with a statement from my friend Ernesto, the Director of the city government’s Office of Community Relations, in response to my question whether political parties still mattered in Nicaragua given the widespread disdain for politics. He said, “I would be lying to tell you that political parties no longer matter. Nicaraguans will tell you this, but they are lying.” When I pressed him to explain, he said,

There are people that still have dreams of the war. When I see Alberto [another city hall official], I can say hello to him like a friend, but I still see him in the [enemy] trenches. I haven’t been able to get over it. I lost a brother in the war. When we’re in the

City Hall, I'm thinking about my brother and we're still fighting,
but this time with ideas, with words.

I found Ernesto's comments eye-opening. Despite the camaraderie, teamwork, and friendly joking around that often went on inside the halls of the Alcaldia between men like Ernesto and Alberto, there was nonetheless underneath real and painful tension rooted in history that could not – at least not so easily – be absolved. Liberal notions of consensus in such an instance would be like the smooth surface of a sea that churns below with decades of personal / political antagonisms. What happens to such conflict – that which “we don't talk about” and yet still embody – in the institutionalization of a “harmonious” society? At the level of the individual psyche, the experiences of people like Ernesto – who gave his youth to the revolutionary struggle only to see it disintegrate before his eyes and is depressed and frustrated – suggest that there is something significant that is compromised by such “consensus.” Such denial is in some ways parallel to the revolutionary call to purification that also demanded a setting aside of the self for the common good – a denial that was tremendously powerful, but also ultimately untenable and had substantial unintended negative consequences at the societal level. Beyond the individual, the attempted separation of politics from the personal (or the collective) brings the risk of the exclusion (obscured but still palpable) of certain groups from official political processes. For Mouffe, a political dimension that values consensus above all else is exclusionary because politics is fundamentally about struggles between competing notions of the common good (Mouffe 1993). Following this insight, it seems that the discourse of consensus in Law 475 excludes that against which “civilized” political discussion is constituted: Nicaragua's own history of revolution, civil war and ongoing conflicts. This silencing, as I will later draw out in my discussion of Nicaragua's Communal Movement, can be both politically useful and problematic, but it is, nonetheless, political.

A similar case at the national level can be seen with the recent clashes between the FSLN and the Civil Coordinator, the non-profit consortium of over 300 civil society groups that has come under fire from the new Ortega administration (described on page 1 of this chapter). The Civil Coordinator, whose motto is, “Building Citizenship to Impact Public Policy,” has issued numerous declarations condemning the practice of “politics” in Nicaragua (see <http://www.ccer.org.ni/>). In their declaration “Social Organizations and Political Parties” (Quintana Flores 2008) for instance, they are explicitly critical of what they describe as the “direct participation” and “complacency” of political parties in the dismantling of the Nicaraguan state (e.g., the privatization of utilities and the downsizing of the state sector). They lament that “the market was presented as a panacea and substitute for the functions that were abandoned by the state” and that “within this framework the same groups continued enriching themselves and some new rich have emerged...but the majority continue impoverished across the nation.” They decry the general inability of the political system and parties to govern effectively and meet the needs of the population and strongly condemn what they see as the sublimation of the citizenry to the machinations, “verticalism,” and “deceit” of political parties and their leaders. The CCC insists that political leaders must “fight corruption at its foundation” and no longer “sell illusions, [and] deceive the population with unfulfilled promises.” What is evident in both this language and the response to it by Ortega, is that the CCC is criticizing not only politics in general, but specifically what they see as the politics of “neoliberalism” *and* the politics of the FSLN. Yet like the lawmakers who drafted the Law of Citizen Participation, the politics of the CCC are couched in apolitical terms that emphasize not politics but consensus. The nation’s problems, they contend, are questions of the “defense of human rights,” and “oblige us to dialogue, to seek consensus and coordination. We are not talking about political pacts

in benefit of persons and/or groups...but national accords, national consensus, to the benefit of everyone, to the benefit of Nicaragua" (Quintana Flores 2008).

The separation of "political" and "personal" interests from policy for the common good is appealing – and powerful – in the context of Nicaragua's political history because it seems to offer not exclusion but the possibility of inclusion, of a heterogeneous but unified municipality and/or nation moving forward, together, toward greater development and democracy. Such purification is also problematic because it tends to obscure – not eliminate or make transparent – power relations, which grow ever more complex as citizens are officially and yet not officially made part of processes of governance. Those power relations inevitably re-surface, in the form of accusations of corruption (as in the case of the Democratic Forum) or accusations of deception (e.g., the CCC's "Trojan horses"), situations that necessitate even further purification. In their ethnography of corruption in India, Visvanathan and Sethi describe a similar phenomenon when they say that, "reform is the compost of corruption" (1999, 4). The harder one works to purify politics, it seems, the more one obscures power, making purification a Sisyphus-like endeavor, ever more necessary and out of reach.

Dilemmas of Decentralization

León's Municipal Development Committee was inclusive of some of the most prominent leaders in the local area but, as the above story makes plain, it was by no means representative of the many diverse organizations – governmental and nongovernmental, secular and religious – throughout the municipality. Just how representative the group was remained uncertain because, at the time of my research, no one in the Alcaldia or in the local NGO community had a comprehensive list of the many organizations operating in León. The size of the city, the lack of municipal resources,

and the proliferation and concentration of nongovernmental organizations in the area had made it practically impossible for anyone to create a definitive list.

This lack of information meant that it was difficult for the city government and others to keep track of who was doing what and when. Some sister cities made a concerted effort to coordinate with the Alcaldia's Office of External Cooperation – planning projects in conjunction with the city government, consulting with their experts on development projects, etc. – but others only engaged with the local government when absolutely necessary. (Interestingly, some sister-city activists described this distance from the city government as “keeping out of politics,” while others saw it as a way to remain political and not be restricted by affiliation with the state.) Despite the best efforts and intentions of many individuals, there was overlap, misinformation, miscommunication, lack of coordination, and often ambiguity about who was in charge of particular tasks or projects. León, in some ways it seemed, was too decentralized. One of the hopes of local leaders was that Law 475's Municipal Development Committee would help to create greater coordination between the different parties involved in development in León.

The problems with such a haphazard smorgasbord of projects and programs may not be readily apparent for those of us who, despite the dominance of the so-called Washington Consensus, still live in a state system that offers a modicum of a safety net and provides for basic infrastructure like roads and schools. As the following story describes, for citizens in León – as for many throughout post-revolutionary Nicaragua – access to such resources in the post-revolutionary period, while critical to basic survival, was by no means guaranteed.

In the mid-1990s, Britain's National Lottery, a private corporation mandated by the state to donate a percentage of its profits to charity, allocated \$120,000 to a community center in León. When the money ran out, the British sister-city organization

that had requested the funds decided to ask for more. In 2000, they made a second and more ambitious bid to finance two micro-credit programs and pave the road to *Nuevo Amanecer*, a neighborhood of León planned and financed by another sister city in coordination with León's municipal government. This time, however, the British Lottery turned them down. Thomas, the English sister-city activist who made the bid, explained to me in an email that,

They said they preferred to fund 'people' based rather than capital or infrastructure projects. I took that to mean that they didn't like the road...if I had removed the road from the application I might have had more chance of success because it would then have been largely a social programme...but I convinced myself to go ahead on the basis that an integrated project would be of more benefit to the community – a view that was borne out in our meeting with the community the other day.

The inseparability of infrastructure from "social" programs was indeed evident during our visit to Nuevo Amanecer in February of 2002. Thomas and I were visiting the flat, grid-like and colorless development on the outskirts of the city as participants in the conference on sister-cities and "decentralized sustainable development." The encounter was awkward: in the dirt patio of a model concrete-block home, 25 foreign activists were seated with a few Nicaraguans in a semi-circle of white plastic chairs. A group of about two-dozen residents stood on our periphery. Planners from the mayor's office urged us to discuss the community's problems. There was silence. Curious as to the remote location of the development from the city center, I commented that I was surprised how far we were from downtown. This observation sparked an exchange in which several residents linked their economic difficulties to the unpaved road to the distant urban core. Buses, they complained, did not enter their community, making the buying and selling of goods a daily challenge.

The problem of roads like the one to Nuevo Amanecer emerged repeatedly in my discussions with residents in León's working-class and poor neighborhoods. In the daily

lives of community leaders and local government officials, things like potholes, drainage ditches, and pavement were sources of struggle and exasperation. Many individuals knew that Nicaraguan Municipal Law specifies that municipalities are, in fact, responsible for taking care of road-related infrastructure (Ley de Participación Ciudadana), however in the context of the city's financial crisis and the proliferation of non-governmental organizations, which entity – if any – would take responsibility for dealing with the road to Nuevo Amanecer was uncertain. The situation was further muddled by the fact that during the first Sandinista administration, local-level infrastructure problems like neighborhood roads were determined, at least initially, to be a collective responsibility of residents (see discussion of the history of the Communal Movement in Chapter 6) (Envío team 1989).

Residents of Nuevo Amanecer were unable to find a satisfactory answer to their transportation problems when they asked the conference participants visiting their neighborhood to help them pave their road. One foreign activist deflected the request, emphasizing that her small organization received many such solicitations. Another replied that local leaders must submit a formal request through the mayor's office that might then be transmitted to her organization. A third, Thomas, told the story of his problems with the British Lottery, but reiterated the words of a colleague earlier in the day at the conference: "we remain optimistic that the National Lottery in Britain could again be a source of further funding in the future."

Like the residents of Nuevo Amanecer, the residents of another of León's low-income neighborhoods, *Via Democracia*, were also banking on such optimism. The road to Via Democracia begins just one block north of the city's central thoroughfare but feels like a rural back road. Houses are pieced together from bits of scrap metal, old boards, concrete blocks, and black plastic. A stream of milky, foul-smelling water threads its way along the rutted dirt road – the sewage system for the neighborhood's wastewater.

As you near the entrance to the neighborhood several blocks off the main street, the road inclines and narrows, crossing the line between *una calle* [street] and *una trocha*: a rough path accessible only to pedestrians, bicycles, and motorcycles.

In March of 2002, residents of Via Democracia gathered for a public meeting organized by city hall to promote citizen participation. A crowd of about 50 listened to the mayor describe the financial crisis of the municipality. The local government's lack of funds had made necessary an "austerity plan": city hall would have to cut back on expenses while at the same time augmenting its tax revenues. Decentralization, the mayor lamented, had so far meant a redistribution of "responsibility not money": the municipality had more to do and less with which to do it.

In 2001, five percent of the city's budget came from the central state – an amount the mayor described during his visit to Via Democracia as sufficient to pave seven miles of road in León (the nation's second largest city). In the same year, over twenty percent of the budget came from "foreign cooperation" – donations from sister cities, governments, and non-governmental organizations. As one of León's senators commented at the 2002 Sister Cities Conference, "Decentralized external cooperation has been the principal source of investment in our municipality." Although technically more money came from local tax revenue (see below), during my fieldwork it was often pointed out by city and community leaders that "León is maintained by non-governmental organizations," foremost amongst those its 17 sister cities.

One solution to the city's financial woes proposed by the mayor's office as well as the Institute for Municipal Development (INIFOM) was for citizens to pay more taxes. In 2001, over thirty-five percent of the city's budget came from local tax revenue. Still, the vice-mayor admonished citizens at one public forum that if they learned to be

“good tax payers,” there would be paved streets, parks and sewage systems.¹⁴ Wealthy countries, he explained, were powerful and well off because people in those countries paid their taxes. Both the vice-mayor and a local INIFOM officer (at different public forums) linked what they saw as a lack of tax paying to a public perception that the government should take care of local problems. As the INIFOM officer described it to a group of community leaders,

There is an enormous potential in each municipality to make money [from taxes]. A lot of people are just waiting for the state to give them, give them, give them.” The vice-mayor urged citizens to pay taxes so that foreign donors would be satisfied that “we [are working to] develop ourselves.

The call for citizens to take greater responsibility for societal problems is frequently tagged as a central trope of neoliberal governmentality (Burchell 1996; Donzolet 1991). Paley (2001) has described how neoliberal discourses of citizen “co-responsibility” with the state in Chile have re-framed political issues as “community” problems. In León, calls for citizen responsibility came not simply from Liberals or those who might be labeled “neoliberals,” but also from many who considered themselves critics of “neoliberalism,” such as León’s vice-mayor (a member of the FSLN) as well as many community leaders within the Communal Movement. People active in local politics in León almost universally proclaimed the need for citizens “to contribute,” “to give and not just receive,” “to take care of their responsibilities,” and to “not simply wait for handouts.” (There was far less agreement, however, about what such responsibility entailed.) Understanding why this discourse was so resounding and the ambiguities – and politics – that lay beneath this seeming consensus means considering the history of citizen participation and the state in Nicaragua, something I will discuss in the last chapter of this dissertation when I look at León’s Communal Movement. For the

¹⁴ Nationwide, between 1995-1998, taxes constituted 49-52 percent of municipal income (Ortega Hegg and Navas Morales 2000).

moment, I simply want to pose some of the paradoxes of such discourses in the post-revolutionary context.

In Nicaragua's Law of Citizen Participation, individuals' "rights" to participate in governance are described as inseparable from their "*deberes*" [duties or obligations] for societal problems (CDC 5). For example, the authors of the Law posited that citizen participation was key to reducing poverty and bolstering economic development. In this instance, participation was not simply taking part in public forums or lending a hand in a community organizing effort, but stimulating the economy in the fight against poverty. According to the law, "...there is consensus that poverty cannot be confronted only with [state] subsidies or policies of assistance" and thus "the role of...the unemployed to generate jobs is fundamental" to economic growth (CDC 7-8). The unemployed can do this, they optimistically noted, by starting businesses or by "formalizing" their productive activities as itinerant salespersons or makers of homemade goods (CDC 12). The feasibility of such pronouncements is put in doubt by the experiences of families like that of Cristina and José (described in Chapter 4), who have tried desperately to create work opportunities for themselves over the past two decades in the absence of any substantive assistance from the state.

Yet it is a call that resonated for Cristina as well as for many of the community leaders I knew in León, who contended that people like themselves should "take responsibility" for "their" problems. For instance, reflecting on the pollution in her neighborhood in the nation's capital, Cristina told me:

You have to give or you're not going to receive...Here [in Nicaragua] we see a badly made society. We have to be more civilized...This trash that you see in the street. There's the bin, but they [neighbors] throw it on the ground....They blame the mayor's office, the government, but they are the ones to blame. The blame belongs to the people.

Cristina blamed her neighbors for the garbage problem, but her analysis points to her internalization of this notion of personal responsibility. Her family's story is poignant and heartbreaking, in part, because she has so earnestly tried to supersede the challenges posed by the lack of basic state services and a social safety net, often interpreting her lack of success as a personal failure despite her awareness of systemic injustices. (If only, she has told me on many occasions, she had tried harder, were younger, were better looking, had more skills.) Leaders I knew in León also emphasized the need for personal responsibility, but their discourses of such responsibility were more explicitly cognizant of its political implications. For instance, during my fieldwork, leaders from the Communal Movement in León took part in a trash clean up campaign in one of the city's poorest neighborhoods. When I asked the leaders why they would do this (instead of, say, organize a campaign to bring city garbage service to the neighborhood), they told me that they were participating in the campaign because the city government was financially strapped – something they linked to the maladministration of the Alemán regime – but also because they wanted “to give the idea to people that the leaders are also working.”

The multiple meanings of “responsibility” in the context of decentralization implied above were made more evident to me in an encounter with a clean up campaign worker at a celebration for Mother's Day at the Alcaldia in 2002.

*May 29, 2002
City Hall, León*

...[A] newcomer arrives [for the celebration] and sits near me. She is middle-aged with short hair, wearing jeans and a “*Limpieza es Salud*” [Cleanliness is Health] t-shirt. She sits down next to me and asks me if I work with an organization [NGO]. I tell her no, but she is insistent... “¿Usted no trabaja con ningún organismo?” (You don't work with any organization?) She is clearly disappointed by my response.

I ask her what she does and she tells me she is on a short-term contract with the Alcaldia's clean-up campaign, hence the t-shirt. She tells me, “We [Nicaraguans] are ill-bred (*maleducado*), we don't think about the environment. We throw garbage anywhere.” I say, “Some people say the garbage pick up doesn't come to their neighborhoods.” She agrees this is a problem, but says that Nicaraguans need to learn not to litter.

"Foreigners come here and what do they see? All this garbage." I notice that on the back of her shirt is a cartoon showing a blonde woman bending down by some garbage on the street. I ask why the woman is blonde and she says the woman is a foreigner encountering garbage.

I ask her how long she's been working with the Alcaldia and she says 15 days. A temporary position. I ask how she got the job. She tells me: "through the party [FSLN]." She explains that although she has long been involved with the Frente, she had never asked the party for anything, but because of her economic situation she really needed the work and so she went to the Alcaldia and asked them to give her something, which they did.

She tells me that she is going to college and is in her last year of a career in international relations with a specialty in "foreign cooperation." As part of her degree she is developing a library project in a rural community near León. I ask how the idea for the project emerged. She says it was her idea, but she presented it to the community and they were enthusiastic about it. It turns out that the library would be part of a public school financed through Japanese donors. She is seeking the funds for the books. I ask her where she has been looking for the funding. She tells me she went to the Hamburg [Germany] sister city, but they told her their funding cycle was closed and that they only fund projects within the city. Then she went to Minnesota [another sister city] and they told her they were not accepting projects at this time either...I ask her if she has considered asking the municipal or central government for support. She says no. I ask, what do the people in the community think about asking the government for the money for the library? She says, "The say that the government doesn't do anything. They don't give us anything."

What I find remarkable about this and the previously described exchanges about garbage is how "personal responsibility" – like the garbage itself – is understood symbolically as a marker of moral worth, one, which is often directly tied to resource allocation. Garbage is a real problem (it contaminates the water supply, spreads disease, etc.), but it is also a problem, as the t-shirt suggests, in what it "says" about Nicaragua and Nicaraguans. The blonde woman on the t-shirt isn't just grossed out by litter; like Cristina, she is witnessing a "poorly made society," one that cannot do for itself and is therefore unworthy of solidarity. "Responsibility" can thus be simultaneously read as a discourse about self-determination and autonomy *and* a discourse of dependency. The tight linkage between these seemingly disparate discourses is highlighted by an exchange I heard during a meeting about municipal planning and citizen participation between INIFOM officials and community leaders. One leader asked the group, "But what about us country folk? *No one is talking about how we are*

going to feed ourselves" [my italics]. Another leader responded by telling him about the foreign funding her community had received from Spain. "What you have to do," she told him, "is look for a *cooperante*" [donor]. Right after this, another leader turned to me and asked, "Do you belong to an NGO?" This was a question I was asked again and again during my fieldwork.

NGO organizers I knew in León were not unaware of the paradoxes of their politics. Some described themselves as "playing the role of the state" out of necessity or as a "temporary" measure. Almost all voiced frustration with León's lack of resources from the central government. Many described themselves as critical of neoliberal socioeconomic policies such as privatization and still imagined the state as the rightful provider of social services. As Becky, the American sister-city coordinator described in Chapter 1, put it, "Nicaragua can't always be dependent on NGOs. The government's got to provide social services, in the future when Nicaragua no longer needs NGOs." When I asked her if NGOs might in some ways facilitate the withdrawal of the state from peoples' lives, she replied, "I worry about it, but it's hard to just leave."

My friend Sandra, the Sandinista militant-turned-dissident described in Chapter 2, struggled with these dilemmas in her work with NGOs. In a conversation with me about her involvement in the post-revolutionary period with a sister-city organization and a women's rights organization, she described the tensions she felt between wanting to meet peoples' often-desperate needs in the context of an absent state and wanting people to be empowered through real, not "mediated" participation – the kind that was unleashed during the revolution but, in her experience, fell victim to the verticalism of the party.

We [sister cities] are...trying...to resolve many problems of basic necessities that shouldn't be the responsibility of the sister cities, but of the government. But the government doesn't know or doesn't involve itself where the real problems exist. The government – and also many NGOs – insert themselves where they are visible, where they can market themselves...in my work I

try to go to the places that aren't so easily seen. For example, I was working in the mountains installing aqueducts and it was incredible how much benefit that kind of project was bringing to the population and how the people got involved in the development of the project...I really like that kind of work and I like feeling part of the work, of working in that way with the people. [Sandra noted that she favors sister cities because they have historically been "more integrated" in the communities in which they work than some NGOs.]¹⁵

After the loss of the [national] elections [in 1990], I felt that there was a lot of substitution of NGOs for the state...there were many [NGOs] doing projects...in infrastructure that should have been the responsibility of the state...and I felt that the NGOs were neutralizing...the participation of the citizens in the sense that they put band-aids [*parches*] on the problems... [W]e go on resolving small problems, but this means that really we are functioning as a cushion for the government. And the people lose their effervescence, [they lose] all their rage...because these organizations are giving them partial solutions, and, at the same time, limit their participation, what they can actually demand. And now you see that there is no longer the same attitude on the part of the [popular] organizations to demand what they need. Everything is mediated and at times I feel the NGOs contribute to that mediation, to that neutralization of the feelings of the people.

This is a conversation that we [civil society activists] had during Hurricane Mitch – that the government is not resolving our problems. The people resolving them were the NGOs. But the NGOs did not have the capacity to resolve all the problems, they were just putting band-aids on them. Our [women's rights] group ended up giving out food, looking for building materials to give to the people because we were there...and this is the situation of the NGOs.

Interestingly, Sandra uses the same term here, "cushions," [*colchones*] used by the new Ortega administration to describe the work of NGOs. However, Sandra describes NGOs as cushions for the government, whereas Ortega describes them as cushions for

¹⁵ The distinction between an NGO and a sister city is somewhat vague here and elsewhere. Sister cities are often technically considered NGOs, although some are, in fact, part of or closely linked to the local governments in their home countries. Additionally, the term NGO is loosely used in Nicaragua (as it is in the U.S.) to refer to any non-state-based organization, but often specifically refers to large (typically foreign) donor organizations as opposed smaller "civic" or activist groups. In this excerpt, Sandra seems to waffle between categorizing her sister city and her women's rights group as NGOs and situating them outside the NGO category. This ambiguity speaks to the dilemmas of governance encountered by such groups that Sandra describes.

“neoliberalism.” Both Sandra and Ortega express serious concern with the absence of a state that protects and provides for the peoples’ welfare, but for Sandra that concern is directed against an unresponsive government, whereas for Ortega it is directed against his proclaimed enemies, those he sees as facilitators of “neoliberalism” – such as NGOs.

As mentioned above, the notion that the state should be responsible for the general welfare was actually one to which many NGO leaders I met subscribed.¹⁶ Some saw themselves as strengthening local self-determination by supporting municipal decentralization. For instance, the coordinator of the European sister city that helped León to plan and develop the Nuevo Amanecer neighborhood explained to me that her organization wanted to see Nicaragua become more decentralized so that “the municipality...has the capacity to take on its responsibilities.” Like many Nicaraguans I met, she continued to believe – despite the anarchistic configuration of post-revolutionary governance – that the state should ultimately be responsible for meeting peoples’ needs. (Her sister city, not, I think, coincidentally, was one of those funded by and officially linked to her city government in her home country.) At public forums demanded by such development organizations, donors, and lenders, citizens typically participated by presenting local officials with a litany of complaints and requests that, in their views, the municipal government should alleviate: the lack of pavement, the absence of sewage lines, the puddles which served as breeding grounds for dengue- and malaria-transmitting mosquitoes. Citizens often lamented that the local government had not made good on its obligations. For instance, in Via Democracia, one resident berated the mayor: “I am filled with sadness...with indignation...Your name is going to be tarnished! You should do the things you promise!”

¹⁶ This coincides with the argument of former FSLN Commander and Minister of Agriculture Jaime Wheelock Román that NGOs and other civil society groups have, contra Ortega, actually been key players in the struggle against neoliberal reforms in Nicaragua (Nítlápan-Envío team 2007c). (Wheelock contends that it is actually Ortega and the FSLN who have been responsible in recent decades for the spread of “neoliberalism.”)

Decentralization in León fed the expectation that it was indeed the state and the citizens that were responsible for resolving the problems of the people, but at the same time reinforced the fact that actually getting things done meant seeking out transnational actors like sister cities and foreign lenders. In this model of governance, local officials found themselves with more to do, not enough to do it with, and mandates by the central state, transnational development and financial organizations, and civil society groups to integrate citizens into local governance. Municipal government officials I knew expressed exasperation at this situation and their inabilities to meet peoples' needs. As my friend Ernesto observed after one such public forum:

This just isn't right. It's not right to keep giving people expectations... Imagine, each year we come to these neighborhoods and we say tell us what you need and they tell us: we need to pave the streets, we need garbage service. And then we go away and come back the next year and it's the same story. With our budget we can't do these things, but we still come and listen and the mayor makes his promises. It's like with a woman. If I'm trying to get with a woman, I have to lie. I have to say, what beautiful eyes you have, even if her eyes aren't beautiful. You have to lie...

In this context, the mayor and his staff made many promises most everyone knew they couldn't or wouldn't keep, acts of engaño that resulted in accusations of "corruption." Citizens showed up at public forums with their requests and complaints as they were urged to do and generally left unsatisfied that they had truly been heard. And, the city – and the municipal government itself – survived through León's numerous development organizations.

The lack of coordination between those involved in local governance meant that the cumulative effect, as the mayor noted at one public forum, was that everyone was "pushing the cart from different directions," something he warned would lead the municipality into a state of "chaos." "What we hope," he added wistfully, "is that there will be a convergence between the institutions of the state, civil society, city hall, and all of you as part of the development of this municipality. So that we make one single plan

and everyone pushes from the same side.” Such a convergence, it seemed, would require at least some substantial agreement about the common good – what it is and how to achieve it. However, the only thing so many diverse actors could seem to agree on was a need to purify politics by moving governance – at least temporarily – outside the confines of the state. In the process, they had, ironically, weakened their ability to transform the state in the ways many of them hoped for.

Governance by citizens can only be imagined as an inherently purifying force if political power continues to be conceptualized within a conventional framework that identifies politics with the “official” (e.g., the state or the party). The stories told above, however, suggest that the imagined “depoliticization” made possible by citizen participation and state decentralization is actually, borrowing from Latour (1993), also a translation of the social into the field of politics. What I find hopeful – not despite but because of the cacophony of voices and tensions in the life of the municipality – is, as I describe in the next chapter, this translation.

6. Remaking Politics

6.1 Radical Democratic... *Neoliberalism*?

There is a widely proclaimed need in Nicaragua for “greater democracy.” Everyone from Daniel Ortega to his fiercest critics seems to agree that more democracy would be better and that less would be worse. What is it, however, that makes for a more “democratic” society? Supporters of the Sandinista revolution often told me during my fieldwork that Nicaragua was a “so-called democracy” – a “neoliberal” democracy of electoral politics and token participation but not of everyday life. Critics of the revolution, such as the United Nations representative cited later in this chapter, often told me that, “democracy began when the revolution ended.” Others, more recently, have described Nicaragua under the new Ortega regime as a “dictatorship,” the antithesis of democracy. These narratives are – on the surface at least – at odds, and it is important not to lose sight of the competing claims they make about what a more democratic society might look like. As is the case with “corruption,” there is no consensus in Nicaragua today about how “democracy” should be defined. But the discord between them can also obscure their points of intersection. As I suggest in this chapter, there are strands of thought that they share about the “autonomy” of individuals and communities and the relationships between people and the state. In this chapter, I try to show how these at times overlapping notions were being reworked by community leaders in León to create something that they believed was more profoundly democratic – despite its many paradoxes – than either “revolutionary” or “neoliberal” democracy. In the previous chapter, I considered some of the problems local leaders in León faced as they attempted to create “greater democracy” through citizen

participation and other practices imagined as purifying politics. In this last chapter, I describe some possibilities for more radical democracy that may be emerging out of the conjunctures of post-socialist and “neoliberal” politics in the struggles of these leaders to improve the lives of their communities.

Laclau and Mouffe use the concept of “Radical Democracy” to describe a retrieval of the most democratic aspects of the socialist and liberal traditions for use in present-day democracy making (Smith 1998, 10-11). This radical democratic imaginary includes equal rights and access to the material resources necessary for self-development; meaningful participation in social, cultural, political and economic decision-making; the redistribution of power and dismantling of institutionalized inequality; plurality, diversity and autonomy without dominance; and, the continuous negotiation of identity and politics through networks of solidarity. I suggest here that the concept of Radical Democracy speaks to the political visions and practices I heard and saw articulated by community activists and local government leaders in León in what I, like many others, had presupposed when beginning my fieldwork was a “neoliberal” era. My point is not that “neoliberalism” is radically democratic – or that neoliberal politics do not exist – but that leaders in León have culled from neoliberal ideology radical democratic possibilities. Those possibilities are hybrid politics that “corrupt” the imagined purity of neoliberal ideology by articulating it through local histories and present-day discourses of socialist politics.

In the rhetoric of Ortega and many others who are critical of what they call “neoliberalism,” there is the presumption of a political culture (some even imply a conspiracy) that uses the language of “democracy” to manipulate people to conform, to their detriment, to the logic of the market. Dagnino (2003), Alvarez (2008) and Paley (2001) have pointed out how certain tropes of “neoliberal” governmentality, such as the decentralization of political decision-making, exist in a kind of “perverse confluence”

(Dagnino 2003) with the practices and aims of social movements in Latin America. I find this observation useful in that it points to the power dynamics at play in the intersections of such discourses – something I have tried to draw out in the previous chapter in the examples of the implementation of participatory governance practices in León. However, at the same time, I find this notion limited in that it employs the same discourse of purity that I have tried to demonstrate is so problematic in the actual practices of politics: “perversion,” like “corruption,” implies the former existence of something pure that has been tainted or contaminated. As I’ve described, the ideal of total purity (such as that utilized in the discourse of *mística*) has tremendous political power, but as an actual political practice it is ultimately untenable. In Nicaragua, those most attached to this notion of purity seem to be transnational lenders and development agencies (e.g., those fighting for “transparency” as discussed in Chapter 4) *and* those on the “Left” who are their biggest critics.

For example, in contrast to the politics of “neoliberal” purification described in the previous section, the politics of the new Ortega administration – particularly Ortega’s contentions that the political interests of the FSLN are the interests of the nation, and that the peoples’ interests and the president’s interests are synonymous – challenge the possibility of a real division between politics and the personal (both practically and theoretically). However, the discourse of “apolitical” participation and consensus is still rooted in the existence of difference (that is, the need for participation and consensus presupposes that the socio-political world is constituted by diverse subject positions and experiences), whereas the politics of Ortega, a politics that seems to embrace the tension and discord of the political relation, actually necessitate a narrowing or restriction of heterogeneity into “pure” categories (that is, the dichotomous and ultimately unsustainable partitioning of people into “friends” and “enemies”). Ortega’s model aims to be a democracy in the Schmittian sense (a democracy built on

the collective unity and homogeneity of the people), however by dictating rather than pushing for hegemony, Ortega cannot build such unity.

The seemingly depoliticizing effects of the participation/consensus model (e.g., the turn away from party politics) allow Ortega to depict himself as engaged – unlike the civil society “cushions” – in “real” politics; politics that matter to the most serious questions, matters of life and death. This argument has been reiterated by some solidarity activists, such as the U.S.-based Nicaragua Network, which issued a public letter explaining why it was standing by the new Ortega administration despite complaints from its supporters about the administration’s violations of human rights and crackdowns on civil society groups. In the letter, the Network’s Co-Coordinator, Chuck Kaufman, juxtaposed what he saw as the real accomplishments of recent FSLN initiatives with such complaints:

The Zero Hunger program has provided 32,709 poor families with animals, seeds, fertilizer, etc., so they could become food self-sufficient and sell their surplus. Zero Usury has provided low interest loans to small farmers and merchants so they can earn a livelihood and feed their families. Houses for the People is putting roofs over the heads of families that previously lived in shacks built of anything they could find. Project Love is working to eliminate the tragedy of child labor. The subsidized food distribution centers are all that stand between some families and malnutrition. The Sandinista government is taking steps to feed, clothe and house its people despite skyrocketing food costs and the greatest crisis in capitalism in 80 years. I think these programs mean something; and what they mean for the lives of real people is more important than the howls and outrage among the political class in Nicaragua and abroad (Nicaragua Network 2008).

In this letter, as in the new administration’s discourse, the politics of the FSLN are depicted as meaningful and genuine (i.e., “pure”) while criticisms of the administration are characterized as phony, self-serving and elitist (i.e., “false”). The FSLN magazine *El 19*, for instance, featured an article titled “Protesting from Below?” debunking the supposed purity of Ortega’s critics:

Speaking of marches and protests, what happened to the group of intellectuals that recently came out of their houses to protest what they call the dictatorship of the pact? I don't want to say their names, but...[t]hey [are the same ones who] rode the wave of the revolution to benefit from fame outside Nicaragua... We already know who they are. They are the same [i.e., opportunists and hypocrites] (Editorial El 19 2008).

The administration is, in effect, claiming its own purification of politics, one that situates Ortega and the FSLN as honest and dedicated to the common good and its opponents as false and self-serving. (Like Trojan horses, they are something other than they seem to be and, in fact, something quite nefarious.)

Ortega's rhetoric has been effective with some Nicaraguans, such as my friends Cristina and José, who despite their cynicism about politics and political leaders, still cling to the hope that Ortega's return to the presidency will fulfill his campaign promise of a "preferential option for the poor." Their support of the FSLN, however, is rooted less in any real change in their daily lives since the inauguration of Ortega in 2007 and more in a sense of self and identity shaped through the losses and gains of the revolution: Cristina is, as she says below, "proud to be a poor person with dignity." That identity, emerging out of a class struggle popularly configured as a battle between the revolution's New Men and the "enemies of humanity" is one that ultimately depends on dichotomous notions of "friends" and "enemies," "good" and "evil." As Cristina put it in an email when I questioned Ortega's leadership after widespread allegations of fraud on the part of the FSLN in the country's municipal elections in 2008:

There is something that I want to tell you, which is that I am proud to be a poor person with dignity, I am proud to be a Sandinista...I am proud to keep defending the rights [of others] for which my brother died. And I am never, never, going to be on the side of those that killed the young people who would otherwise be here today...

Cristina did not – could not – accept the notion of electoral fraud. The reelection of Ortega and the FSLN's apparent victory in the municipal elections meant a vindication and a reaffirmation of her identity as a Sandinista – something I hope this

dissertation has conveyed goes far beyond simply membership in a political party. Ortega's division of Nicaraguans into friends and enemies of the people spoke to her deep-seated sense of pride in Sandinista struggle, her contempt for those she saw as responsible for the death of young people like her brother Santos, and a still flickering hope for a more just future for Nicaragua's poor majority.

Paradoxically, Ortega's rhetoric of purity is also effective for Cristina and José (and others, I think) because of his reputation for double-dealing and shrewd self-interest – traits (as I have described in Chapter 3) described by many Nicaraguans as markers of genuine Nicaraguan-ness. The ambiguity of *engaño* (described in Chapter 3) means that this “güegüenseness” is interpreted by Ortega's critics as “corruption” and by his supporters as cleverness and patriotism. Like Alemán, Ortega is understood by some to affect populism not only in his rhetoric, but also in his politics. Cristina, for instance, speaks in positive terms of Ortega as a *callejero*, someone of the streets, a concept that implies both dirtiness and familiarity with the everyday life of the poor. (It is notable that Nicaraguans generally refer to both Ortega and Alemán by their first names – implying familiarity – whereas the more formal “Doña Violeta” is reserved for Chamorro. Most formal of all is Enrique Bolaños, known almost exclusively by his last name.)

This identification with the poor is one of the reasons why the current FSLN administration's battle with its Sandinista dissident critics continues – despite Ortega's own elitism and wealth – to be fought rhetorically as a class struggle. As I mentioned in Chapter 4, the dissidents who comprise the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS) also employ the language of purity (e.g., the need to resurrect *mística*), but despite widespread disapproval of the politics of Ortega and the apparent social capital of MRS leaders like poet and priest Ernesto Cardenal, novelist and former Vice-President Sergio Ramírez, and revolutionary hero Dora María Tellez, the MRS continues to have

little support at the polls. Ironically, it may be because the members of the MRS are so earnest in their convictions that they are perceived as suspiciously self-righteous and are thus labeled elitists or hypocrites. (They are – or were – still within the party system, which, for some, marks them as *corruptos*, making their use of the language of purity almost inevitably hypocritical.) Ironically, and despite its best intentions, the MRS has fallen into the trap of being situated by its opponents outside “real” Nicaraguan-ness. No surprise then that the Ortega administration has so effectively identified them as “traitors” in cahoots with other “outsiders” like foreign development organizations.

The friend/enemy dynamic is one possibility for politics and one that has historically been a particularly powerful motivator (e.g., in the case of the Sandinista revolution), but it is not the only kind of political structure that can exist between peoples (Mouffe 2005). It is not, therefore, inherently more “real,” or more “political,” although in a particular instance it might be more politically productive for achieving certain ends (e.g., the overthrow of a dictatorship). Mouffe, following Schmitt, argues that the political relation is always conflictive because there can never be a universal notion of the common good. For Mouffe, the challenge of democracy is the question of how to structure the relations between ourselves and our opponents democratically, that is, in a way that recognizes and respects the inevitable pluralism (and thus conflict) of human existence.

The new Ortega administration depends on and advances an antagonistic model of politics that, while resonant for some people like Cristina and José, is, for many Nicaraguans (as opinion polls about his popularity suggest) out of touch with the complexity of politics and political identities in the post-revolutionary era. The claim of a neat distinction between friends and enemies is particularly weakened by Ortega’s own manipulation of shifting networks of alliances throughout his political career, including, most notoriously, his pact-making with “enemies” like Arnaldo Alemán. The

biggest problem for his antagonistic model, however, is that it has alienated, sometimes quite aggressively, too many of the people who, at one time (however briefly), considered themselves part of a collective Sandinista project. Many such individuals – like Sandra, for instance – still identify as Sandinistas, but cannot reconcile their own profound convictions in human solidarity, rooted in the ethics that guided their participation in the revolution, with the hierarchical structure and “corruption” of the party under the leadership of Ortega.

In contrast, what has been called “neoliberalism” in Nicaragua contests the grip of existing party politics on the state and allows significant space for a plurality of shifting and interconnected identities – even as its “depoliticizes” them, challenging the possibility of collective identification and action. In this democratic imaginary (though, as I have described, not often enough in practice), power to determine the common good is distributed more equally throughout the social – that is, the social is more, not less, politicized – opening spaces for a plurality of self-governing social identities and movements (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Discourses of participation are undoubtedly forms of governmentality and discipline people in particular ways (e.g., as “citizens” with responsibilities or as masses or leaders with “*compromisos sociales*”), but what I want to suggest in this chapter is that the meaning of participation is neither fixed nor empty; that is, it is neither already filled by or simply waiting to be filled by neoliberal (or revolutionary socialist) discourses. Like Freedom or Equality, Participation has a genealogy in Nicaragua (and elsewhere) whose complexity allows it to be more like floating signifier than a normative concept. The meaning of “participation,” I am arguing, is a site of political fermentation in which current discourses including ideals we might identify as “neoliberal” and existing political subjectivities (such as those that make up Sandinismo) are articulated (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Smith 1998, 78) in novel and, at times, hopeful ways.

As I have described, the decentralization of the Nicaraguan state and the growing emphasis on participation between 1990 and 2006 occurred at the behest of international financial institutions and development organizations, but also with the enthusiastic support – and at times active political intervention – of Nicaraguans of diverse political orientations struggling for a more horizontal political structure. Local municipal officials and community activists in Nicaragua who embrace the processes of participation mandated by agencies like the IMF and World Bank are not dupes nor are they simply making the best of a bad situation. Not only did local actors respond enthusiastically to public participation in budget planning, they also resoundingly criticized the mandated participation for not going far enough. Officials from both major political parties, local government technicians and community leaders from the Communal Movement complained that the process was more a “consultation” than “real” participation, implying the need for greater participation in the future. One local government official lamented “the people participate...they say what they want, but, in the end, they don’t decide. There isn’t real equality.” A city council member complained that the local government’s strategy for inviting citizens to participate – primarily through the Communal Movement – was too partisan because of the historical linkages between the Movement and the Sandinista party. He was emphatic that citizens should be invited to join in the forums by megaphone announcements throughout the city. Here, I suggest, we see that the meaning of participation is not simply mandated by institutions such as the IMF, but negotiated within a culture of politics that is constituted by practices of neoliberal and (post)socialist politics and the subjectivities formed through and in resistance to them.

Moving our political engagement beyond “Left” and “Right” divisions is uncomfortable, difficult, and fraught with risks. For at least some individuals, as has been the case for some political dissidents in Nicaragua, it is potentially dangerous. But,

it is, I believe, necessary to sustained and meaningful political change. It is not simply an academic exercise, but something that is already happening on the ground in the tensions and collaborations between local community and government leaders in places like León, where people are actively struggling to make demands on the state and other governing entities that are not already formulated by transnational or state (or other) experts and bureaucrats. In the following sections of this chapter, I consider the case of León's Communal Movement and the "nonpolitical" politics they articulate at the interstices of these discourses and categories as they attempt to negotiate the paradoxes described in the previous chapter.

6.2 León's Communal Movement

In 2002, the Inter-American Development Bank made a loan of 22.5 million dollars to the Nicaraguan Institute of Urban and Rural Housing (INVUR) to subsidize residential construction for 17,500 low-income households. (A second phase of the project scheduled to begin in 2006 would bring another 25 million from the Bank and subsidize another 17,500 households.) The subsidy program was also funded by the Nicaraguan state, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the government of Austria, and others. As part of the on-going decentralization of the state, the program was to be executed at the municipal level by local "auxiliary entities": banks, housing cooperatives, lending and micro-credit organizations, city governments, and "other public and private social institutions" (*La Gaceta* 2002).

In August of 2002, representatives from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and Institute of Urban and Rural Housing (INVUR) held a meeting about the program at León's city hall. Present at the meeting were several representatives of the local Communal Movement, municipal government technicians, city council members, and myself. In what follows, I briefly trace the discourses of

politics, development, participation and democracy that circulated through the meeting. I then situate those discourses within the context and history of the Communal Movement in order to show how they resonated for local community leaders.

Responsibility for development must shift from the state to citizens

The Inter-American Development Bank, in a press release, described the subsidy program as helping to “transform the government’s role from a producer of housing to a facilitator of [the] private sector” and strengthening “the capacity of...nongovernment [sic] organizations and municipalities” (BID website). The goal of shifting responsibility from the state to citizens was articulated throughout the meeting in the frequent assertions of the UNDP representatives that development, such as that promised through the INVUR subsidy program, could not take place without the active participation of citizens. Recipients of the subsidy, they emphasized, would be required to contribute either a percentage of the total cost of construction or contribute physical labor or materials. As the UNDP representative leading the meeting remarked, “...there is no development without personal effort...There is no gift [giving]...Sustainable human development is development we’ve made for ourselves.”

Democracy began when the revolution ended

A little further along in the conversation, the Communal Movement’s coordinator for the city, Ricardo, asked about the roles of the “auxiliary entities” (referred to in the meeting at “facilitators”). Could a *community* be a facilitator? Who would make the ultimate decisions about the process and the distribution of funds? The UNDP representatives responded that there were various criteria for eligibility, but ultimately it was INVUR (a state entity) that would decide whom to subsidize based on data they received from the local government. Then, emphasizing that the selection process would

be based on hard facts and not the politics of “amiguismo,” one of them added, “Remember, in the 1990s [i.e., when the FSLN lost control of the government] we began to make the first steps to development. To democracy.”

The same UNDP representative later linked participation and development in an implicit critique of the Sandinista revolutionary state: “We don’t make our decisions vertically...One of the most important things to us at the UNDP and in this government is citizen participation...Every citizen has the right to participate...This is the most important thing for the development of our families and our communities. Not from top to bottom but from bottom to top...”

This process is not about politics

No one at the meeting contested the claim that Nicaraguan democracy began in the 1990s or questioned what such democracy actually meant. Instead, Ricardo politely asked for clarification about the process to select and train the facilitators. I was fascinated when the man from the UNDP responded to his questions using a pejorative to refer to the Sandinista party while proclaiming that there were no “politics” involved. He said, referring to the colors of the Sandinista party and ruling Liberal party, “This [program] is for everyone to have opportunity...red *with a stain* [i.e., the Sandinistas, whose colors are red and black] or red without a stain [the Liberals].¹ Nothing about politics. It doesn’t matter what colors they are...This is not about party politics, but about the politics of that which must be done for social wellbeing. We don’t get involved in partisan issues.”

¹ In Spanish, “*rojo con mancha y rojo sin mancha*.” The word *mancha* in this expression comes across more strongly than the literal translation, “stain.” Mancha here implies something that is dirty or tainted.

As I sat in this meeting, I was struck by how the politics of the INVUR program articulated by the UNDP official were at once a denial of politics and incredibly politicized. I was astounded, moreover, by the way that the leaders from the Communal Movement remained poker-faced despite the repeated negative comments about the Sandinista party and revolution. Were they simply strategically conforming to the rules of “participation” in exchange for much-needed resources? I felt torn between wanting the leaders from the Communal Movement to defend the revolution and challenge the apparent hegemony of such discourse and a sense of admiration at their seeming political savvy and ability to remain cool in the face of such barbed language.

What I did not consider in the moment, but which complicates my initial reading of this situation, is how the discourses of participation, democracy and politics in the meeting also, at some level, ring true for many – though certainly not all – members of the Communal Movement based on their own experiences of the revolutionary and post-revolutionary eras. In other words, while not overlooking the deployment of deception as a strategy for negotiating within dominant discourses of democracy and development, I think it is necessary to consider how the Communal Movement’s denial of “politics” and embrace of “participation” is also generated by internal critiques of revolutionary democracy and their visions of more horizontal power structures. To consider this, I first offer a brief history of the Communal Movement in Nicaragua,² followed by a description of the challenges faced by local leaders in the Movement in León. I then describe a meeting of the Movement’s leaders in which some of the same discourses of participation and politics circulated.

² This history is drawn, in large part, from a history of the Movement’s published in *Envío* in 1989. I am also drawing from my conversations and interviews with members of the Communal Movement in León and the work of Katherine Hoyt in her book *The Many Faces of Sandinista Democracy* (1997).

The history of the Nicaraguan Communal Movement begins with clandestine struggle. The Movement initiated in the late 1970s, prior to the overthrow of Somoza, as Civil Defense Committees – neighborhood-level revolutionary cells (some linked to or evolving from Christian Base Communities) that provided safe houses and support for the revolution's guerrillas (Envío 1989). After the triumph of the revolution, the Civil Defense Committees emerged from secrecy as Sandinista Defense Committees (CDS), a neighborhood-based movement tightly linked to the party and "charged with organizing the entire population to carry out basic social functions, raise political consciousness, offer a channel for popular participation in decision-making and mobilize people to defend the revolutionary process" (Envío 1989). The CDS claimed a vast grassroots membership (approximately 500,000 people in 1980) and were essentially a para-state organization with responsibility for tasks the new Sandinista state was unable to manage alone, including health and education campaigns, land and house distribution, the domestic installation of water and electricity, the building of schools and parks, garbage cleanup, and monitoring prices and consumer goods through the ration card system (Envío 1989, 5).

The CDS embodied the revolution's mix of popular participation and top-down governance. They were "democratic" to the extent that committees were run on a day-to-day basis by local residents and held elections to select leadership. They also had representation in national level decision-making through their leaders. At the same time, the CDS were hierarchical and lacked autonomy from the state and party. As the national head of the Communal Movement, Enrique Picado, told researcher Katherine Hoyt about the CDS in the early-to-mid 1980s: "It was a totalitarian mentality and style, totalitarian!" Although the Movement was structured around popular participation, "the notion that anyone should come up with an original idea was frowned upon" (Picado, quoted in Hoyt 1997, 57).

The CDS played a major role in the merging of personal and political life in the revolutionary era. Their governance of the population extended into what had previously been considered the private sphere, for instance into the resolution of domestic disputes. Popular perspectives on this varied. Some supporters considered it an accomplishment of the revolution: the breaking down of individual alienation in the formation of a new society. As one CDS member quoted in *Envío* commented in 1989, “Before the triumph, everyone lived isolated from one another, in their own world. The CDS changed all that. Now we feel like family” (7). Others were far less enthusiastic and saw the CDS as an intrusion and even a violation of their privacy. As Sandra put it to me in an interview in 2002,

They [the CDS] inserted themselves in even the most minimal aspects [of peoples’ lives]...the distribution of resources...or if someone wasn’t going to the coffee or cotton harvest, then they were looked upon badly by the Communal Movement [the CDS] and then they had problems...Logically, in society not everyone sees things the same way, but the romanticism of some and the fanaticism of others...they would intervene.

By the mid-1980s, popular support for the CDS had dramatically declined, in part because of its role as the “eyes and ears of the revolution” during an era of military conscription (Envío 1989). Increasing political polarization, complaints about self-serving and hypocritical leadership, and citizen burnout diminished participation. According to Omar Cabezas, the movement was no longer a mass movement but a movement of activists (Cabezas cited in Envío 1989, 7). Under the leadership of Cabezas, the Movement split from “Papa State” in 1988 with the idea that it would be “the community which solves problems with the help of the government, and not the government with the help of the community” (Cabezas 1988, quoted in Hoyt 1997). Cabezas saw the need to transform the CDS from a para-state organization to a “vast community movement where people organize to resolve their problems” (Envío 1989,

11), where "...the community is no longer the instrument of the state; the state is the instrument of the community..." (Envío 1989, 17).

The renamed and reconstituted Communal Movement broke its formal ties with the FSLN and proclaimed itself a non-partisan popular movement dedicated to two agendas: 1) dealing with the immediate and concrete problems citizens faced in their neighborhoods and communities (e.g., garbage, streets, etc.), and 2) fomenting popular participation in the country's development (Envío 1989). Today, the Communal Movement is a national non-profit civil society organization with local chapters throughout Nicaragua. The group works primarily at the municipal and departmental level to improve "material and human conditions...through the organization and participation of community members" (Movimiento Comunal Nicaragüense 2003). The Movement aims to be an inclusive, participatory, "bottom-up" organization. It has three symbols: the worker ant, representing the Movement's orientation as a collective of everyday people working together for the greater good; the rainbow, signifying diversity; and the *Flor de Sacuanjoche*, Nicaragua's national flower, symbolizing national unity. During my fieldwork, the León branch of the Communal Movement defined the Movement in a handwritten statement posted in its office as follows:

The Nicaraguan Communal Movement is a not-for-profit, non-partisan, non-governmental, self-determining and self-sustaining civil organization. We seek the improvement of the lives of the people of our communities nationwide through the our organization and the participation of the people without discrimination as to sex, race, ethnicity, age, religion, economic condition, political affiliation or ideology. Our orientation [*naturaleza*]: is of struggle and seeking alternatives to the unjust, elitist, and dominant neoliberal model. Our vision: The empowerment of people [*personas*], family, and community expressed in their participation in the making of decisions...

In the city of León, the Movement facilitated the election of committees of neighborhood leaders charged with organizing their communities to improve their collective quality of life. In practice, leaders I knew scrambled to solicit resources for

their neighborhoods from the state and NGOs, describing themselves more as frustrated go-betweens than as representatives of popular collective struggle. Such leaders frequently complained that their neighbors expected the leaders to do everything and rarely participated in efforts to improve the life of the community. Although the Movement's coordinator for the city, Ricardo, organized regular meetings during which the leaders learned about programs and projects in the city, met with representatives of the state or NGOs, discussed problems they were facing in their neighborhoods and networked with one another, many leaders criticized the Movement itself for failing to provide them with the necessary resources (such as training and petty cash) to negotiate the decentralized bureaucratic maze they routinely encountered in León. The leaders I knew were mostly hardworking and dedicated to resolving problems in their neighborhoods, but they were also exhausted and exasperated by the everyday challenges they faced in their neighborhoods and in city hall.

One such leader was my friend Javier. In the mid-1990s, Javier and his wife took possession of a small piece of land on the outskirts of the city. They built a home for themselves and their young children out of plastic sheeting and scrap metal and boards, but there was no running water and no street access to their house. Javier and some of his neighbors, who struggled with similar living conditions, joined together and succeeded in improving the basic infrastructure of their neighborhood through the help of the city government and non-governmental funding. Shortly after this, a representative of the Communal Movement approached the community and urged them to hold elections to select leaders to continue working on solving the neighborhood's problems. Javier was elected to serve as a community leader and had continued in that role for six years at the time that I knew him.

Javier frequently lamented the fact that few of his neighbors or even his fellow elected leaders took initiative to deal with the neighborhood's problems. He disliked the

fact that he had been elected so many times, but took the job because no one else would do it. He attributed this lack of community participation to the loss of *mística revolucionaria* and the lack of resources available to community organizers. As he told me in an interview:

From the mid-1980s to about 1990, the people solved their own problems and the municipal government didn't have to come and solve them for them. People would just say, "give us the materials and we will do it ourselves with a little bit of guidance from you" and they would do it. But with the beginning of the "democratic" government, it was no longer possible. The resources were no longer there and the people didn't want to get involved... My father was the coordinator for his neighborhood [in the 1980s] and then the people worked [participated], *but with their hearts*. If someone died, people collected a fund [to help the family]...they didn't think to go try to find an institution... [NGO, state agency, etc.] Now, if the people need a *piñata* for the children, they go to ask the institutions, but it wasn't like that then. Back then we would make our own tickets and show a film and everyone would come and we'd sell food and from that we would raise money for a piñata for the kids and buy presents for them too. Today, no, the people don't want to collaborate. A lot of people say, "I barely have a job, I buy [stuff] for my kids." But what about others?... People have distanced themselves from...others and they've become more individualistic... There's no support and the people say, 'No, I'm not going to go, because no one is helping me to pay for the cost of getting to city hall [bus fare]...it's all coming out of my pocket and I don't have enough for myself and my family...' ...And [then there is] the bureaucracy. "Bring me a document, make five photocopies..."... The people say, "No one helps me and I am paying out of my own pocket..." Because of this, they've lost their enthusiasm.

Javier worked long hours at his job in a nearby factory while his wife sold *chicha* (a popular corn beverage) from a stall at one of the local markets. Between the two of them, they managed to feed and clothe their children and pay for an occasional luxury like a book or an ice cream. By 2004, their once plastic house had concrete walls and a zinc roof, but the floors were still tamped earth. Most of Javier's time outside of work was spent trying to navigate the complex requirements and protocols of funding agencies and the city government in order to improve the living situation of his family and his neighbors. Along with other leaders, he was frustrated by what he described as the false

promises made by political leaders and hoped to change the dynamic by organizing his fellow leaders to make more demands on the city's elected officials. Javier described this situation in a conversation with another leader from a nearby neighborhood and our mutual friend Faustino, a social promoter from the Office of Community Relations in the Alcaldia:

[W]e need to talk about the problems faced by the community, where we are, where we are going, to let people know that the more they participate [*va asistiendo*], the more will come our way, or we're just going to stay the way we are. When another opportunity comes our way, what we need to do is remember the self-determination [*autoridad*] that we once had, when we saw something that we wanted and no matter what, we did it. [Because now]...it's like we drowned ourselves, we became quiet, and time passed us by and here we are. *If that's not true, you all contradict me!* [Other leader injects: "No, it's just as you are saying."] And then along comes some *scoundrel* promising something during the elections and then he disappears and doesn't do it. And that's been the dynamic. So, what we need to do over the next six months, what's been my goal, is to put together a description of the problems we are dealing with in our communities and, if possible, formalize it as a "project profile" to submit to the municipal government as a petition, as a demand, as a complaint. Like, [here is] what we want, here is our community. These are the needs of our communities. Here is the basic information you need to do the projects, to invest in. We'll be waiting for you and we'll wait for you next year too, because we know you are going to hold a public forum, you're going to call us, you're going to call me...and say you want me there. *Well, here we are with this!* Maybe not so that there is a specific answer to a particular neighborhood, but so that they understand the general demands of this community.

Javier described what the leaders would need to do to make his vision a reality:

We need to talk with those who would benefit from the projects, to ask them about the problems they are dealing with...we need to take account of things. We need sewer systems, but how many streets [need them]? How many meters [of pipes]?...Do we really want sewers? If we do, it's not the responsibility of the city, but of the water utility. [Other leader interjects: "That's the problem that exists today," i.e., the ambiguity over who is responsible for what.] But the Alcaldia can manage the project, or the community can manage it with the backup of the institution [Alcaldia], but we can't do the project ourselves. So what do we do? And [for example], we have the problem of trash in some neighborhoods where there is no garbage service. And the spread of disease as a

consequence... So there we are. *We need to come up with alternative solutions as a community.*

I was privy to this conversation because, knowing of my interest in the involvement of leaders like Javier in local politics, Faustino had recruited me to help him put Javier's plan into action by putting together a database diagnosing the needs of each neighborhood in the section of the city where Javier and his family lived. I was struck at the time not only by the enormity of the task, but also by the irony of leaders like Javier making the city government accountable by taking account themselves of the problems in their communities. Javier and others saw this as a necessary act of self-determination, but I couldn't help but think that it was simply one more service the state was failing to provide. Shortly after we began creating our database, the city government did begin their own (much more extensive) accounting in a process of participatory budget planning, their Multi-annual Investment Plan (PIM) for 2002-2004, mandated by foreign donors, lenders and the Nicaraguan state, and Javier, Faustino and I gave up on our project. Javier continued his struggle to find resources for his neighborhood, in part by participating in the PIM process.

The PIM process, originally formulated by methodology from the World Bank, included 13 forums in the city limits and 11 forums in the surrounding countryside with leaders from the Communal Movement (as well as other citizens), facilitated by social organizers like Faustino and planners from the Alcaldia. The process, which I observed on various occasions, sought the input of community leaders like Javier in formulating the city's budget priorities, but was criticized by many inside and outside the Alcaldia for not being "real" participation. Faustino, for instance, lamented to me that what was being called participation was really more just like a "consultation." Many leaders like Javier participated enthusiastically – it seemed the local government was finally listening! – but he and others also complained that they were not the ones making the

final decisions about what should or should not be funded. Others contested who was being consulted. During a city council meeting, for instance, one of the Liberal party counselors angrily challenged the notion that the PIM process included “real” participation because the leaders invited to the forums were members of the Communal Movement and therefore “partisan.” (Other citizens were, in fact, welcome to attend, but formal invitations from the Alcaldia were indeed issued directly to the Communal Movement.) Another counselor, Vicente, a Sandinista who normally spent a morning a week at the Communal Movement office meeting with leaders, replied with almost equal outrage, “They are not ordered around by anyone. They are elected! When we speak about leaders, we’re talking about the community!” The Liberal party counselor snapped back that Vicente was mixing “politics” where it didn’t belong. Listening to this exchange were several representatives of León’s sister cities who had been invited to participate in the discussion of the planning process. A representative of a sister-city organization – a Nicaraguan friend – leaned over and whispered to me that everyone in the audience must be bored of the politicking of the city counsel. One thing that was “real” about the PIM process of participation was the tensions surrounding it, but those tensions were also so hackneyed and familiar to some that the debate and the people – like many of the leaders themselves – were simply tired.

One person who was still fired up about the paradoxes of participation was the Coordinator of the Communal Movement for the Department of León, Alonso. Alonso’s work took him into rural and urban communities throughout the department and he was less directly involved in the activities of the Movement in the city. For this reason, I had few direct interactions with him. A sociologist and social worker by training, Alonso has been part of the Communal Movement since the late 1980s. In an interview with me in 2002, Alonso spoke angrily of how he saw dominant discourses of participation mediating the activism of the leaders whom he helped to organize. He felt that the

leaders and other citizens were being deceived and even coerced by the state and foreign donors into shouldering what should have been the responsibilities of the state. He described this dynamic as a kind of bait-and-switch:

What happens? In the last meeting of leaders here [at the Communal Movement office] the National Police came, the Ministry of Health came, the city government came...and in my opinion it was a meeting fabulously devoid of real community content [i.e., genuine participation]. The Ministry of Health explained to the people that we are plagued by epidemics, but they said, 'We, the Ministry of Health don't have medicines, we don't have pills to prevent malaria, we don't have diesel to fumigate...So, you leaders should organize the people, ask them for money to buy the diesel, to buy the insecticides, look for where to buy a pump to fumigate.' We are dealing with irresponsible institutions! Very irresponsible! The Ministry of Health, they have a budget, the Constitution says that they are ones responsible...We communities are not going to assume institutional responsibilities...We don't need four idiots from the Ministry of Health to tell us that they don't have anything. They are using our time and our resources. What we should be talking about instead is how to denounce them as irresponsible...The police come and they tell us about the crime that is growing in our communities and how they can't stop it because they don't have the resources...and they say to the leaders, 'You are the ones who are responsible [to prevent the delinquency]'...They use the people, so that each day the people are more dependent...and they pacify the people so that they don't protest, so that they don't denounce what they don't approve of."

For Alonso, this practice was the antithesis of the autonomy that he envisioned for the Communal Movement:

We have to be constantly working for our independence, our self-determination, the autonomy of the MC. That is to say, we have to work every day to avoid turning ourselves, or our leaders, or our communities, into persons who are dependent on an institution, dependent on an Alcaldia, dependent on a program or project – whether it be North American or European. We have to struggle for...our own things, to find our own progress and productivity. It's not easy, but we have to start to proclaim it because if we don't what we are building is a pitiful people, a begging people that is going to go asking the Alcaldia, that is going to asking the government, that is going to go asking everyone, that if they see a white person [*chele*] they'll say "Don't you have something for me, help me with these projects..." This is an inhumane situation...but the problem is that...the majority of the people who work in such institutions don't even think about this.

Actually, they promote it, they love it when the people depend on them...”

He concluded this comment by observing that institutions create dependency in order to manipulate people to encourage their “citizen participation” at election time; that is, such participation is really about a partisan, “neoliberal” agenda.

Alonso’s vision of the relationship between communities and the state mirrors that idealized by Communal Movement founder Omar Cabezas: “...the community is no longer the instrument of the state; the state is the instrument of the community...” (Envío 1989, 17). It also has parallels with the critique of the relationship between government officials and community leaders articulated by Javier and Faustino in their efforts to present the city government of León with community leaders’ demands. Yet Alonso’s critique, like Javier’s plan, is also reminiscent of “neoliberal” discourses of independence and self-sufficiency and raises questions about the practical and theoretical implications of such autonomy. This confluence of post-socialist and neoliberal thinking about the relationship between people and the state hinges on an apparent mutual agreement amongst a wide variety of actors in the notion of “autonomy.” However, in Alonso’s reading, neoliberal practices of autonomy – in the name of “democracy” and participation – unfairly burden local communities with state tasks, necessitating a dependency on actors outside the Nicaraguan state to the detriment of local people. Listening to Alonso’s analysis, it is hard not to be convinced that he is correct. There does, in fact, seem to be something profoundly “undemocratic” in this dynamic.

However, at a practical level, where is the line between autonomy in which the state is the instrument of the people (the Movement’s vision of “autonomy”) and autonomy in which the people are the instrument of the state (the “neoliberal” vision)? Javier’s proposed database of demands suggests that in the day-to-day struggles of leaders like himself, such a line is difficult to draw. Was Javier being “used” by the state

(or other governing bodies)? Was his participation “mediated”? In terms of the tasks he set for himself and his fellow leaders (the creation of “project profiles” for the city), it seems that the answer is yes, and yet there is something powerful that cannot be ignored in the passion with which Javier imagines that he will turn those profiles into collective demands:

Like, [here is] what we want, here is our community. These are the needs of our communities. Here is the basic information you need to do the projects, to invest in. We’ll be waiting for you and we’ll wait for you next year too, because we know you are going to hold a public forum, you’re going to call us, you’re going to call me...and say you want me there. *Well, here we are with this!*

Alonso’s vision of community autonomy depends on interdependence – on the reinvigoration of an ethic of non-individualism (at the local level but also at the level of the central state), something also articulated by Javier. Such an ethic requires more than simply a state that readily dispenses resources like bus fares or even fair wages. Such an ethic necessitates a state with a differently configured politics of leadership, one that remakes the historically constructed relationship between people and their leaders. In the perspectives of many community leaders and municipal government officials that I knew, many leaders (including, some said, Alonso) paradoxically remained within a paradigm of leadership rooted in the revolution’s vanguardist philosophy – a paradigm that neoliberal notions of participation and decentralization suggested was sorely outdated.

As Javier put it:

...[T]he government changes every four years, but the structure of the community organization [Communal Movement] at the local level hasn’t changed... When they are elected they are elected making the same promises and after they’re elected, nothing. There were times I remember when the...Communal Movement was involved in some good projects and facilitated the training of a lot of leaders and they really excelled, but that was like the foam, like the effervescence, like an Alka-Seltzer when you drop it in the water, it starts to rise and then it’s extinguished, it dies, and everything goes quiet. I’m not trying to talk badly about the

organization, rather about the ways its treated the leaders...Now there are new currents of thought in the movement that are trying to make changes, but these changes are going to be difficult because there is resistance in the structures of the organization that have been in place for years...[but] times have changed, conditions have changed...the situation is different and now they are the ones dragging behind...

Community leaders described good leadership as horizontal, as working collaboratively and thinking collectively – ideals that seem far from the class divides of the neoliberal economic policies but which, paradoxically, seemed closer to the practices of governance advocated by neoliberal reforms. Neoliberal calls for consensus, for instance, spoke to some leaders not only because they seemed to pacify the polarizing animosity of politics, but also, as Graeber (2004) points out of anarchist consensus practices, signified a rejection of Marxist vanguardist *and* liberal politics. Graeber notes that consensus as a practice can take many forms (e.g., liberal instead of anarchist), however, his description of the underlying values of anti-vanguardist consensus practices are similar to the values I heard articulated by leaders within the Communal Movement who found the notion of consensus appealing (if at times problematic). Such groups, Graeber says,

operate on the assumption that no one could, or probably should, ever convert another person completely to one's own point of view, that decision-making structures are ways of managing diversity, and therefore, that one should concentrate instead on maintaining egalitarian processes and considering immediate questions of action in the present (2004).

This politics does not seek to “eliminate” the political antagonism, rather it takes it as a given. It is unavoidable. It is in this sense profoundly challenging to liberal politics. However, the antagonism begins at the level of the individual. This is not a dismissal of the existence or necessity of collective antagonisms, but a recognition that in order to live and work collectively without practicing extreme antagonism (e.g., through violence) we must also always begin with how we act individually and interpersonally

amongst our “friends” as well as our adversaries. (It is in this sense a critique of socialist practices not unrelated to existing notions of revolutionary “autocrítica.”) For Graeber the politics of anarchism that he describes therefore contends that “ones means must be consonant with ones ends; one cannot create freedom through authoritarian means; that as much as possible, one must embody the society one wishes to create” (2004). Such notions are particularly interesting in the context of Nicaraguan discourses of engaño and give new light to the notion of such practices as “anarchistic” (see Chapter 3).

Notions of leadership along these lines were present in the workshop I attended in the afternoon on the day Silvio (Chapter 1) offered me the Alcaldia truck. It was a workshop for community leaders in a small rural village outside the city, one funded by a foreign NGO and led by Alicia, a former coordinator from the Communal Movement. Alicia had worked in “participation” for over 20 years, in the Communal Movement during and after the revolution, in the Alcaldia’s Office of Community Relations (as an organizer like Faustino) and with non-governmental organizations. The workshop was part of a series of training sessions for community leaders coordinated and paid for by the NGO but initially proposed by the Communal Movement. The participants in the workshop were a dozen men and women, some old enough to have been part of the revolutionary struggle, some of them teenagers. All of them identified themselves as community leaders, some within the structure of the Communal Movement, others as part of other community-based civic organizations.

Alicia began the workshop by asking the participants to collectively discuss the meaning of leadership. From this discussion, the leaders generated a list describing good leadership, which included the following (in this order): good people skills, strategic thinking, engaged with others, problem-solver, values others’ opinions, good listener, participates, honest, coherent, humanitarian, analytical, disciplined, productive, humble. Alicia and the leaders reviewed the list together and Alicia commented on each

descriptor. "Yes," she told them, for instance, "A leader should be engaged with others, not totalitarian... He should take into account the opinions of the people. He should know how to share..." "What," she asked the group, "is totalitarianism?" Several of the leaders offered answers. One said, "When a leader does everything himself..." Another responded, "A leader who doesn't share with the people." Others replied, "Being autocratic." and "Caudillismo." Alicia told them they were correct and added, "A leader who says, 'I know everything and you all don't know anything'...A leader who is against change...A leader who has been in power for 20 or 30 years and refuses to let a young person take his place..." She then rhetorically asked, "What does democratic mean?" A leader who is democratic, she said, answering her own question, is "he that takes into account the opinion of everyone...He that accepts the participation of others."

A few minutes later, Alicia was describing different types of leaders (secular, religious, community, state, etc.) and asked the leaders to tell her the name of a "political" leader in Nicaragua. Someone responded, tongue-in-cheek, "There are no political leaders in this country." Alicia chuckled along with the group, but then pointed out, "Alemán is a political leader." Someone muttered: "Alemán is one of *their* leaders." Undeterred, Alicia said, "Daniel is a political leader...Fidel in Cuba is a political leader. Hitler was a political leader. Ronald Reagan was a political leader..." Another leader in the group commented, "They're all the same. They might not think the same...but they are all the same." Alicia followed the direction of the group while returning the conversation to the earlier trope that a good leader knows how to share power. "There needs," she concurred, "to be an internal renovation of the party [FSLN]..."

The notions that change is necessary to healthy democracy and that it must come from the people and that good leadership means facilitation, not telling people what to do, are extensions *and critiques* of the top-down democracy of the revolutionary era. As long-time Communal Movement organizer Don Julio put it, employing the same language

used by international finance and development organizations to contrast the past and present, “By the same paternalism of our revolution, which gave us everything, which suckled us, the state was ours. Now we are facilitators, ‘orientaters.’ The solution [to peoples’ problems] doesn’t depend on us.”

I want to conclude this section with a description of another meeting, the gathering of Communal Movement leaders with various state and NGO interlocutors that Alonso described above as “fabulously devoid of real community content.” In my reading, the meeting was not devoid of community content. It was, I think, rich with a complicated mix of converging discourses of “responsibility” and “autonomy” that spoke to the problematic of leadership at the juncture of post-socialism and neoliberal politics. Alonso rightly points out that in the meeting agents of the state (the Health Ministry and the police) are asking the leaders to take responsibility for problems that could be considered the duty of the state. He is also correct that the leaders are largely non-confrontational, though they do complain frankly about the corruption of the police and the lack of police responsiveness to their needs. What I think Alonso overlooks (or perhaps simply reads differently than I do) is how “neoliberal” notions about the source of change and the meaning of leadership were used by diverse state and NGO actors and the leaders themselves to negotiate tensions in the conversation and advance a common sense of purpose and group identity. This negotiation was not, I think, simply a pacification of politics; it was also an affirmation of collective struggle, albeit one configured differently than past struggles.

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Offices of the Communal Movement, León

8:45 a.m. Revolutionary folk music is blasting throughout the building as the leaders assemble. Don Luis gives out copies of a flyer to the leaders to give out in their neighborhoods about how to prevent malaria and other diseases. The flyer links mosquito-borne diseases to poor sanitation. Tania [a leader] looks at it and comments that the city’s garbage service doesn’t come into her neighborhood, the site of the clean up campaign and one of the poorest in the city.

At 9:10, Ricardo, the coordinator of the Communal Movement for the municipality, begins the meeting. There are about 30 leaders present. Ricardo reviews the agenda for the meeting, which includes a plan for fighting malaria, dengue, and other diseases, a project for urban reforestation, a discussion of public security, and a discussion of the mission of the Communal Movement. There is also time at the end of the meeting for any additional topics.

The first point of discussion is the plan for fighting mosquito-borne diseases in León. (By this time, there are 45-50 leaders at the meeting.) Ricardo tells the leaders that the Nicaraguan Ministry of Health (MINSA) will conduct a health brigade throughout the city to fight mosquito growth. The previous year, there were 155 known cases of malaria in León. A representative from the Ministry talks for about a half hour about how to avoid mosquito growth, urging the leaders to support the effort by talking with their neighbors about cleaning up garbage and draining standing water. Ricardo tells the leaders, "Neither the Alcaldia, the Health Ministry, nor the population can solve this problem alone. We all have to work together." No one says anything about the infrastructure problems (e.g., the lack of garbage service), which contribute to the mosquito problem.

At 9:40 Doña Flor, the NGO Director (described in Chapter 1), arrives to talk about her program's urban reforestation project. I am somewhat surprised to see her at the meeting because she is known around town as a Liberal and I know from my conversations with her that she has many negative feelings about the Sandinista party. This is the first time I have seen her at the offices of the Movement. The project she describes will offer communities free donated seedlings. The leaders, she says, will be responsible for finding people in their neighborhoods to plant the trees. She warns the leaders that if their communities are going to take the seedlings, they have to commit to the project:

Two or three years ago someone donated some little trees and we gave them to some different neighborhoods. The first neighborhood told us that they were going to plant them at 6 a.m. the next morning...we came back a couple of days later and they were still there in their sacks, dried out and dead. But we also went to another neighborhood and they planted them and today they are giving shade... But another time we went out to the countryside to meet with the *gente* and nobody showed up.

Her tone strikes me as patronizing, but the leaders chuckle and nod their heads as if in agreement as they listen to this story. Doña Flor continues, "International Agencies are getting tired of helping us since we don't do our part...I hope that you will plant these seedlings. We have to plant the seedlings of God, of democracy. The most important thing is that we actually do it!" The leaders seem to take her words to heart. A leader from the community that failed to plant the donated seedlings explains to Doña Flor and the other leaders, "What happened in our neighborhood was that there was no coordination. We need to become more organized. Our neighborhoods are becoming like deserts [for lack of trees]. Doña Flor is an altruistic person." Several other leaders join the conversation, commenting on the goodness of Doña Flor for offering the project and the need for reforestation and coordination amongst the leaders and their communities.

At 10:10 there is a presentation of an accord between the Communal Movement and the city police to ensure greater security for the city's citizens. The police chief presents the accord and tells the group,

These problems – domestic violence, assaults – they aren't problems that the police can resolve alone. Everyone has to work to resolve them. That means all of society. We all need to take

actions of precaution and prevention...We need a city that is morally clean, not only free of garbage.

Ricardo reads the accord, which links poverty and "corruption" to delinquency and violence. He reiterates that the police cannot solve such problems alone. Ricardo signs the document on the behalf of the Communal Movement and hands it to the police chief. The leaders applaud. This is followed by a discussion between the chief and the leaders about which problems are most significant in their communities and the need to work together to prevent them. Several leaders talk at considerable length about the crimes they see in their neighborhoods: illegal food vendors and billiard halls, the sale and use of recreational drugs, robberies, public intoxication, the dumping of garbage. One leader says, "Leaders shouldn't be afraid to denounce the young people who are selling drugs because the young people are victims too... We have to give an example of ourselves as leaders..." Another leader comments that the Communal Movement needs to maintain high anticorruption standards and suggests that the police look at the records of all the leaders in the organization. Others complain about the lack of response from the police and the Alcaldia despite their prior complaints. Two complain about "corruption" within the police force. Doña Marina describes an illegal pool hall operating in her neighborhood because of police corruption, "The owner *says* that he is a Sandinista and that he has an agreement with the police and because of that he can do whatever he wants." The discussion wraps up with the police chief introducing the officers responsible for different sectors of the city to the leaders.

11:40 a.m. The leaders are growing restless and some are beginning to leave. Before they can go, Ricardo intervenes and says that he wants to introduce a new Communal Movement document that is, "like our Bible." The document is a new set of guidelines for the Communal Movement produced by leaders at the national level of the organization but up for review and revision by the local branches of the Movement. Ricardo gives an overview of the document. It seeks to reconfigure the Communal Movement to make it more inclusive, to generate greater participation and decision making on the part of the communities. The new guidelines encourage community forums so that, "the communities make the decisions. That the process comes from below to above."

The leaders express general approval for the document. What is on paper sounds good. However, conversation then turns to divisions within the León Communal Movement over the allegedly corrupt behavior of some leaders. Some want Ricardo to intervene in the conflicts. Ricardo tries to ease the tensions by reminding the group that, "It's important that each community resolve their own problems." Doña Tania agrees, telling the others, "Ricardo can't come to solve our problems for us." Ricardo reminds the group, "Here none of us are pure white doves, but we are all *compañeros*. We shouldn't attack each other. Tomorrow it might be any one of you directing the organization." Another leader interjects, "We *all* have stains on our wings." Her comment is followed up by another leader who says, "Each neighborhood is its own neighborhood.... Other leaders shouldn't intervene. Each leader is respected by their community." There is brief applause, followed by similar comments about leadership ethics and the self-determination of the leaders and their communities. One leader sums up the conversation with the comment, "We are free and autonomous and sovereign communities. We are not doing this for our own profit, but for the good of our communities."

6.3 Politics without Purity

*Here none of us are pure white doves, but we are all compañeros.
– Ricardo, Communal Movement Coordinator*

The revolutionary heritage of the Communal Movement is readily evident to those who step inside the Movement's León office. The revolutionary folk songs, the pictures and slogans of Che Guevara and other revolutionary heroes, and the use of terms like "compañero," are all recognizable and meaningful markers of the group's history. However, despite the Movement's history – and its on-going ties with Sandinista government officials in León – the Movement officially maintains that the organization has no political party or state affiliation and that it does not make distinctions in its work on the basis of political position or ideology. According to the Movement's Departmental Coordinator, Alonso, the group is totally non-partisan:

There are many leaders that belong to the Frente Sandinista, but there are also leaders that do not ...and there are leaders who are not involved with any political party. And that's what's great about the Communal Movement...For us...it doesn't matter if the Alcaldia is Sandinista or if it's Liberal...Our "political party" is community work, our political party is the necessities of the people in our communities, that is, our political party should be about denouncing arbitrariness and violations against human rights, that's our political party...

During my fieldwork, the veracity of this claim was repeatedly challenged by people inside and outside the Movement in conversations, rumors, and, at times, arguments. Commenting on this phenomenon, Don Julio explained, "Our goal is to not politicize things. Our organization is not political. [But] many people say that it is Sandinista." Faustino, the social promoter from the Alcaldia who worked with leaders from the Communal Movement, described the relationship as follows, lamenting that the Movement did not openly state its apparently Sandinista orientation:

What the Alcaldía and the Communal Movement share is that both institutions have the same political position and ideologically

they have the same political current, because even though the Communal Movement says that it's not political, it's not true. We have to be honest. It represents a political line of thought and ideology because its leaders represent a particular political current and ideology...it's not a formal relation...it's a convergence, nothing more, nothing organized. I wish it were. I think it would make things better.

Others, however, were less sanguine about the alleged linkages between the party and the Movement. Some were leaders within the Movement who complained that the organization "manipulates the people [for political purposes]..." Other complaints came from outside the organization. Friends and acquaintances that did not associate with the Communal Movement typically justified their behavior by saying that the Movement was "only for Sandinistas." Some Sandinista dissidents, such as my friend Sandra, expressed distaste for the Movement and dismissed the notion of the organization's separation from the party, describing the Movement as a "political arm of the Frente."

One day during my fieldwork, an activist from another community organization arrived at the Communal Movement office and accused the staff of reconfiguring the Movement to the benefit of the Sandinista party. Don Julio and one of his colleagues argued that this was not true, that the Movement was for everyone. When the man left, Don Julio was embarrassed and seemed somewhat shaken. He told me that he had been afraid that the man might turn violent. Shrugging it off, he said, "It happens all the time." Then Don Julio leaned closer to me and conspired, "It's important for the Communal Movement to organize now in the neighborhoods for the upcoming [municipal] elections. So that our candidate – the Sandinista party candidate – wins the mayoral race...They [the Movement's leaders] try to disguise what they're up to, but that is the objective." (On another occasion Don Julio told me that the organization remained "non-political" because if they were too involved in "politics," their legal status would be taken away.)

In their 1989 history and assessment of the Communal Movement, the writers from *Envío* noted that at the time of the Movement's official separation from the party and the state, the work of the Movement was "still to some degree understood [as being about] winning support for the party" (Envío 1989 14). As described above, this understanding was also evident during my fieldwork and resulted in tensions inside and outside the Movement. Over the past twenty years, the Communal Movement has officially distanced itself from the "corruption" of official politics, but that distancing has been read by many as a kind of deception, that is, a claiming of a purity that does not actually exist. However, I want to suggest here that what is remarkable – and hopeful – about the Movement is just how it has positioned itself inside and outside the party and the state at the same time. This perversion of conventional political binaries has brought problems, as described above and in the previous sections of this chapter, but it has also provided a protected space for a reworking of the ideals of Sandinismo vis-à-vis the lessons of the revolution – its accomplishments and its shortcomings – and the paradoxes and possibilities of neoliberal politics. Specifically, the Movement's "autonomy" – an autonomy that like any other can never be total or absolute – has created a space for challenging historically embedded notions of leadership and the meaning of solidarity that, at least at the time of my research, were protected because of its ambiguity.

The ambiguous political affiliation of the Movement leaves it open to accusations of duplicity and power plays, of impurity. How do its leaders reconcile this with their frequently stated desires for the Movement to be "apolitical," more "autonomous" and free of "corruption"? I think Ricardo's observation, that "none of us are pure white doves," speaks to this problem. His answer is not a resolution – it is, I think, an unresolvable tension – but rather a reminder of the positive productive nature of that tension. For Ricardo, like the others leaders I knew, post-revolutionary politics require a

recognition of the impossibility of absolute purity without letting go of an ideal of a world that is less “corrupt.” “Deceit” is as inescapable as politics. Taking deceit out of politics would be taking life out of politics. This insight is what transnational anticorruption forces and some transnational development organizations have failed to grasp in their quest for political purification even as they have succeeded, in some ways, in translating politics into everyday life through their practices of participation. Here, for instance, is how Alonso described the Communal Movement when I asked about the “apolitical” nature of the organization:

The Nicaraguan Communal Movement *is* a political organization. Everything we do has a political significance: planning for dignified housing for our communities is a political action, defending the rights of our rural producers to financing is a political action, participating in the network for the defense of children and looking for how to resolve the problems faced by those children and their families is a political action. Politics is something that is part of our everyday work.

The politics of the Communal Movement, like the lives in which they are rooted, are not “pure” or abstract. Rather, they are an intimate dance, sometimes of solidarity, sometimes of protest or defiance, in which articulating a shared notion of the common good is an everyday and never ending struggle.

6.4 Conclusions

“Corruption” is a widespread concern in Nicaragua and elsewhere. However, as I have argued in this chapter and throughout this dissertation, what “corruption” means depends a great deal on our politics and on our understandings of the political relationship. Diverse political actors in Nicaragua describe “corruption” as a detriment to “democracy” because it privileges the interests of the few over the common good, yet

the basic political question of defining the common good – and by extension that which is a corruption of the good – defies easy consensus.

In the dominant liberal conceptions of politics historically emerging out of Europe and the United States, “politics” have been understood as ways of containing the conflict that seems to be inherent in human society by managing and negotiating peoples’ competing needs and desires. In Nicaragua, the Sandinista struggle challenged this notion by waging revolutionary war against the “corruption” of the official state politics of the Somoza dictatorship and U.S. imperialism. At the same time, Nicaragua’s revolutionaries re-imagined politics as a spiritual practice of human solidarity inseparable from everyday life. However, in the wake of the loss of the revolution, the crisis of Sandinismo, and the transition to what some call “savage neoliberal capitalism,” politics in Nicaragua has been widely reconceived as synonymous with “corruption.”

When I began studying Nicaraguan politics I was struck by Nicaraguans’ profound cynicism and disgust with politics, but also by their concomitant passion for talking about all things political. Politics in Nicaragua was not a discrete topic that only merited discussion after listening to the evening news. Rather, politics seemed to imbue most conversations – in the market, in taxis, in peoples’ homes, on the street. Everywhere I went, people initiated discussions with me about the latest political drama, be it a national scandal involving the ruling party or a matter before the local city council. Nicaraguans would tell me they wanted nothing to do with “politics” and yet they seemed to care more deeply about them than any people I had ever met.

To a large degree, this dissertation has been an attempt to examine the social and political underpinnings of this initial observation and to ask what happens to the relationship between people and politics in such circumstances. Many of the Nicaraguans I knew during my research, I have suggested, had come to believe that “la

política” was so corrupted that it could no longer be purified. They had lost faith not only in the redemptive power of politics unleashed by the revolution, but also – at a more basic level – in the ability of official political practices and leaders to determine the social good.

What I found fascinating and perplexing was that this sentiment coincided in Nicaragua with the emergence of a neoliberal paradigm that also imagined politics as too antagonistic, too irrational – indeed too “corrupt” – to effectively meet the needs of a pluralistic society. Politics, in the language of neoliberal reforms, needs to be civilized and purified into “policy” through consensus, through the decentralization of the state, and through the active participation of individuals and communities in their own governance. Such language, I have argued, resonates for many Nicaraguans, including many I knew who were otherwise highly critical of what they understood to be “neoliberal” politics.

This does not mean, however, that there is widespread support for the above described neoliberal model. Rather, I suggest, that the local community and political leaders in Nicaragua that I knew were actively reworking key tropes of neoliberal politics through their personal and collective histories of socialist struggle. That reworking was, at times, seemingly paradoxical: it aimed for rationality, consensus, and transparency while explicitly recognizing the impossibility of “pure” politics; it embraced neoliberal rhetoric of autonomy, responsibility, and pluralism, but interpreted them through socialist notions of collectivity and solidarity. It is this reworking that is at play in Duo Guardabarranco’s invocation in their new album, *Transparente Nicaragua* (described in the Preface to this dissertation), that history will not be changed by those who “betray themselves for ambition,” but rather by each of us in our own lives.

When I returned to the office of the Communal Movement in León in 2004 to visit my friend Don Julio, I noticed a graffito on the outside wall of the building that read:

“Only the people can save the people!” In the main hallway, a poster from a foreign development program reminded visitors, “With the Law of Citizen Participation, You have a Voice!” On the wall of the office, there was a postcard of Rigoberta Menchú, a picture of George Bush in the guise of Hitler, and a bumper sticker that read, “I am Nicaraguan. No to Corruption! Nicaraguan Communal Movement.” Nearby, someone had posted a handwritten sign that said: “The good leader is he whom the people respect. The bad leader is he whom the people hate. But the great leader is he of whom the people say ‘we did it ourselves.’”

These phrases, which encapsulate the reworking I have described, are powerful, assertive, and provocative, yet they are too incipient, I think, to be labeled as a particular kind of political “ism.” They might, I suggest, also resist such labeling precisely because of the “anti-political” nature of the critiques from which they emerge – as well as the particular power of ambiguity and engaño at this historical juncture. I hope this dissertation has conveyed that I think these discourses are tremendously important, not only for Nicaragua, but also, at a theoretical level, for moving beyond conventional frameworks for thinking about politics. The reworking that I have described pushes us to consider politics outside the binaries of pacification/conflict and to see – and to make visible – politics at a more intimate and fundamental level, politics as both translation and purification: the active rethinking and remaking of notions of the social good in peoples’ everyday conversations, feelings, and practices.

Nicaragua today faces many challenges, not least of which is the poverty that makes the struggle to survive a daily reality for the majority of the population. The tragedy of Nicaragua is manifold and its complexity defies the reductionist politics of Daniel Ortega – and those of transnational groups seeking to eliminate “corruption.” It is important, for these reasons, not to romanticize the struggles of the leaders of the Communal Movement or other Nicaraguans fighting for what seem to be more

profoundly democratic notions of social change. We all, as the leaders in León so eloquently put it, have stains on our wings. The problem of “corruption” cannot be solved by ideals of purity, not even by the sacrifices of the “saints” whose loss makes us tremble with nostalgia and heartbreak. Corruption – in its many incarnations – matters because it shows us the porous boundaries between “politics” and “mere living.” The more radically democratic challenge may be not to shore up those boundaries, but to practice politics without losing sight of the inseparability of the common good from the everyday ethics and practices deployed in the struggle to define it.

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