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Review/Reseña

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Nicaragua's Imagined Futures

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Chávez's study of the utopian discourses embedded in the politics of the Somoza, Sandinista and neoliberal regimes proposes an insightful interpretation of the competing views that have produced or attempted to produce Nicaraguan culture(s) at different historical junctures. The chapters on Anastasio García Somoza's speeches and on his sons' taking and rewriting of their father's views of a Nicaraguan utopia are a particularly effective and interesting contribution to the field. Chávez's analysis of the Sandinistas' discourses is effective but less new simply because this period of Nicaraguan history and cultural production has been studied much more in depth by scholars in many different disciplines. Overall, though, Chávez's interdisciplinary book is an important contribution to Nicaraguan and Central American studies.

Chávez bases his reading of utopian discourses on three texts: Louis Marin's 1973 reading of Moore's *Utopia* in *Utopiques: jeux d'espace*, Bloch's *The Principle of Hope* (1954-1959) and Mannheim's 1936 *Ideology and Utopia*; and Krishan Kumar's critique of misreadings of utopia. Chávez reads these utopias together with Nicaraguan

representations of economic development and cultural production. Using Jameson's semiotic rectangle, Chávez visualizes how utopian discourses and theories of development in Nicaragua have been composed and put into practice by various regimes in order to project a vision of a prosperous future. Chavez's analysis also critiques regimes' pervasive attempts to fulfill ideas of development and progress that ultimately fail economies and people.

Chávez demonstrates that during Somoza García's regime three visions of utopia competed for dominance in the national imaginary. Somoza García embodied a powerful militaristic, authoritarian vision. This image was directly backed by Conservative and Liberal elites as well as by US political and military leaders. It asserted that through the Somoza García regime Nicaragua would rapidly achieve American-style modernization. A competing vision of Nicaragua's future saw Somoza's authoritarianism as necessary but opposed US economic and cultural hegemony. The *vanguardia*, young conservative intellectuals, produced the aesthetic representation of this utopia: Catholic, Hispanist, agrarian, etc. Augusto Sandino embodied the third utopian vision of this period. Unlike the conservative versions of utopia of this period, Sandino's writing imagined a pro-indigenous, pro-peasant, theosophic Nicaraguan nation. Despite their differences, some *vanguardistas* admired Sandino's and his followers' anti-imperialism. The Somoza National Guard's assassination of Sandino temporarily offset the influence of Sandino's discourse, but it did not succeed in completely erasing it as a potential utopia.

As Chávez argues, Somoza García, founder of the Somoza dynasty and its myths of progress and development, successfully constructed a utopian discourse to represent his regime's aspirations, achievements and interests. Through a perceptive analysis of Somoza García's 1941 State of the Nation Address, Chávez details the regime's mythologies, principles and a vision of a national future congruent with the dictator's worldview. More effectively than his sons, Somoza García communicated his assertion that his regime would effectively modernize, stabilize, and maintain order in Nicaragua. Through language, he posited that the future he delineated was dependent on his persona. As Chávez notes, in his speeches, Somoza García communicated his power by systematically speaking of the state as *yo*, rather than referring to the government as the subject of the actions described, thus presenting himself and his regime as guarantor of the future he envisioned and promised to the Nicaraguan people. The hegemony of Somoza's vision was countered by the conservative *vanguardia*'s alternative Nicaraguan history and culture. They shared some

characteristics with Somoza's discourse, including praise of authoritarianism—they flirted with fascism—social order and stability. Unlike Somoza, the avant-garde group imagined a Catholic Nicaragua, for instance. Notably they also imagined a renewal of Nicaraguan culture and replacement of the "old" *Modernismo* still being emulated by older literati; their 'war cry' being José Coronel Urtecho's "Oda a Rubén Darío." Chávez, thus, studies the *vanguardia*'s various manifestos, articles and poetry to show the construction of a conservative utopia that countered the Somocista vision. As he rightly shows, Pablo Antonio Cuadra's understudied *Poemas nicaragüenses* (1934, first edition) synthesizes the *vanguardia*'s primary ideological and aesthetic visions. Cuadra's collection celebrates Nicaragua: its geography, history and mythologies; and its religious, rural and popular traditions. Chávez provides the reader with Tables showing Cuadra's inclusion of Nicaraguan departments (provinces), references to specific places (e.g. lakes, rivers, etc.) in order to highlight Cuadra's construction of a particular Nicaraguan geography. For instance, he notes the absence of Managua and León, two cities that are his native Granada's competitors for power, intellectual dominance, etc. Cuadra's utopian space is markedly different from *Modernismo*'s cosmopolitanism and from the crisis-filled poetry of Huidobro. Ultimately, Somoza's utopian vision reformulated some of the *vanguardia*'s discourses, and thus, fulfilled some of these intellectuals' goals: strongman leadership, stability, modernization projects, territorial integration, and the realignment of liberal and conservative power relations.

For Chávez, Luis and Anastasio Somoza Debayle's regimes, following their father's assassination, represent the culmination of the Nicaraguan economy's integration into the world market and Cold War political dynamics. The author also notes that while both of the Somoza brothers regimes differed from Somoza Garcia's in some aspects, they continued projecting a conservative utopian vision. Unlike Cuadra's utopian space, Luis attempted to represent Nicaragua's relationship with the US as more institutional in character. His regime also wished to present itself as an equal, full partner of US in its Cold War fight in Latin America. As a more modern nation, Luis's Nicaragua allowed for the development of opposition parties and labor unions, for instance. But following dynastic tradition, the police and army forces repressed political activities once they became a nuisance to the regime. When the opposition attempted to overthrow him, Luis ably responded by presenting his regime as the guarantor of stability. Similarly, the regime's involvement in the creation of the Central American Common Market allowed it to view itself as an agent of

development and modernity. Here Chávez analyzes Luis' addresses and letters to the Nicaraguan people published and debated in major Nicaraguan newspapers. His analysis shows Luis' regime's construction as a rational, modern institution in an unstable world. But, in Chávez's reading, the regime's self-fashioning was negated by the explicit political critiques of emerging poets and writers, in particular by the alternative vision produced by the "Generation of 1940" who viewed political and artistic practice as a joint project. Chávez discussion in this part of the chapter focuses on *Trágame tierra* (1968) by Lisandro Chávez Alfaro and the "three Ernestos'" (Mejía Sanchez, Martínez Rivas and Cardenal) opening up of Nicaraguan poetry to divergent sources and prose (exteriorism), and recuperation and refashioning of the epigrammatic tradition and, thus, the revitalization of Nicaraguan poetry. Chávez effectively traces the ways in which this period's writers' alternative anti-Somoza vision formed the foundations of a revolutionary dissent that did not come to fruition until the 1960s and 1970s. The author bases his interpretation of the "three Ernestos'" epigrams on the 2010 classification proposed by *Epigram, Greece and Rome New Survey in the Classics*. Thus, he categorizes the epigrams according to their subjects, target, and particular use as public performance text. As with Cuadra's *Poemas nicaragüenses*, here Chávez provides the reader with tables specifying epigrams' classification in order to detail and show that these Nicaraguan epigrams functioned as they did for the Greeks and Romans, showing the Somoza dynasty was not invincible nor its power unquestionable. These analyses are an important contribution to the study of these three poets' literary evolution and significance in Latin American poetry. Similarly, Chávez argues that, as does Nicaraguan poetry of the time, *Trágame tierra* denounces the injustice and violence of the Somoza regime through a technically innovative novel that incorporates transnational literary trends into Nicaraguan literature.

In his discussion of the last Somoza's regime, Chávez focuses on the reiteration of Somocista mythologies of modernity and order and on the demythification implemented discursively in literature and by the political opposition. Using Sergio Ramírez's *De tropeles y tropelías*, Chávez argues that Ramírez helped to delegitimize the regime and its claims of modernity. Further, his study of Solentiname, the small religious and artisanal community Cardenal established, attempts to prove that the community's Christian, nationalist ethos slowly reached the population broadly and contributed to the creation of a Nicaraguan revolutionary utopian vision. In this chapter in particular, Chávez weaves together a variety of texts to show the

dialogue and conflict between differing visions of a future Nicaragua. Chávez analyzes Anastasio Somoza Debayle's 1966 electoral speeches' rhetorical strategies, the use of the majestic 'we' and his presentation of every potential project as one he would oversee personally, as well as his attempts to appropriate the opposition's use of "revolution," as a positive value. Chávez shows that Somoza Debayle would go on to exploit utopian myths about development and Cold War fears of communism to continue to arm the National Guard and repress the opposition. In this chapter, Ramírez serves as Chávez's example of opposition to Somocista political and economic ideals and of new literary trends in Nicaragua. In his fables, Ramírez uses the language and discourses of dictatorships to reveal the violent, unjust reality of societies living under authoritarianism. Again, Chávez classifies the fables' critiques of state institutions and Somocista myths (e.g. modernity, order). This table can help the reader visualize Ramírez systematic attack on Somoza's dystopian Nicaragua. The author then presents the community of Solentiname and the resulting *Gospel of Solentiname* as a preview of what a new revolutionary society could be. Chávez helpfully lays out differing views of the experience of Solentiname by academics, commentators and Cardenal's supporters and detractors. Through a careful review of available information on the evolution of the Solentiname project, Chávez shows that it played an important role in the development of a Sandinista aesthetic and of utopian possibilities for a revolutionary Nicaragua.

Chávez devotes three chapters to the utopian discourses of Sandinismo. He begins with the concepts and myths that guided the Sandinista government's transformations and errors. The first of these in the relation between society and nature as embodied by the guerrilla combatant transformed into the New Man. Chávez focuses on the writings of Carlos Fonseca and Omar Cabeza's *testimonio*, *Fire from the Mountain* (1985). To analyze this utopian discourse's vision of women's relationship with nature, Chávez also considers Gioconda Belli's poetry. As in previous chapters, Chávez uses a semiotic rectangle to plot the discursive components of Sandinismo and the Latin American New Man. Chávez asserts that while discursive components (the people, modernity, technology, modernity, nature) remain tense, the goal was always a new society, a New Man. Most interesting in this chapter, and in contrast to Ileana Rodríguez's and other critics' interpretations, Chávez posits that the Sandinista women's reaction to "machista" male *testimonio* may not have been a feeling of exclusion but rather a sense of potential transformation for both men and women in a Sandinista utopia. Instead of seeing phallocentrism in Belli's imagery as some

critics have, Chávez asserts that Belli gives women their version of the "naturalization" of the guerrilla combatant's body, as seen in Cabezas for instance. In his view, Belli's strong female subjectivity represents women's capacity to participate in the revolution, sacrifice, etc. as her male counterparts do. This alternative interpretation of the New Man explains, for Chávez, Sandinismo's popularity among women and other sectors.

He discusses Sandinista cultural production as "a war of cultures" (Gramsci) divided into two chapters, "Cultural Warfare I and II". The first of this pair traces the process of building a readership for Sandinista discourses: the formation of revolutionary cadres knowledgeable of revolutionary ideology; the broadening of the movement to include progressive sectors of Nicaraguan society, such as Christians; and, after the revolutionary triumph, the implementation of Sandinista cultural policy and the literacy campaign. Of particular interest is Chávez's discussion of the conflicts between diverse units involved in Sandinista cultural policy, including those among promoters of poetry (e.g. ASTC and the popular poetry workshops); and his analysis of "On Production and Productivity," a speech delivered to a national assembly of labor unions by FSLN Commander Víctor Tirado López. His analysis of Tirado's speech focuses on his use of personal pronouns to contrast Sandinista discourse's desire to acknowledge the masses' volition and the need for the people's cooperation to counter Somocista discourse. Chávez presents the literacy campaign as another strategy in which Sandinistas tried to connect directly with the masses and incorporate them into their vision of development and modernity.

As Chávez notes, Nicaraguan film, another element of the Sandinista cultural policy project, has received scant attention. To correct the dearth of analysis of INCINE's [Nicaraguan Institute of Cinematography] goal to transform Nicaraguan's viewing habits and challenge Hollywood's dominance, Chávez offers the reader information about INCINE and uses theater programming for two different weeks published in *Barricada* and *La Prensa* as sources to understand the Sandinistas' strategy to transform spectatorship. With tables listing theaters, film titles, directors, origins, years, and genre, Chávez discusses representative films from three categories (Third Cinema and art films; cinema of tradition; cinema of superspectacle). He also considers how the films analyzed could contribute to the transformation of spectatorship habits and analyzes *Alsino y el condor* (1982)—Nicaragua's first full-length feature film—and its critical reception. Chávez finds that although INCINE's success was limited, the films that were produced communicated to the Nicaraguan spectator

that they and their country were worthy of film. As Chávez notes, there is still much to be researched about INCINE's and its role in Sandinista cultural policy.

The last body chapter of Chávez study focuses on the aftermath of the Sandinista regime and the transformations wrought by neoliberalism. Sandinista utopian discourse was replaced by neoliberal myths (progress, development). The myths he observes in the Chamorro (1990-1997) and Alemán (1997-2002) governments rely on democracy and order in the former, and efficiency and order in the second. As Chávez does in earlier chapters, here he deftly analyzes the two administrations' discourses and mythologies of democracy and neoliberal economic change. The Sandinistas' cultural policies were discontinued and divested immediately. Chávez posits that the literature that emerged in these years did so in spite of the state's austerity policies. As has been noted by other critics, the literature of this era critiqued society using humor, irony, parody, but without a clear utopian or social project to bolster its claims. Here Chávez provides the reader with close readings of poetic texts by Belli, Anastasio Lovo and Juan Sobalvarro of the so-called "1980" and "1990 generations." Finally, he also analyzes Erick Aguirre's novel *Un sol sobre Managua* (1998) as an example of texts that deal with the loss of potential utopia represented in Sandinista discourse. The literary analyses, particularly of poetry, are sound but limited, perhaps due to lack of access to poetry collections. It is notable, for instance, that Chávez does not consider the wider scope of Sobalvarro's poetic work or of *400 Elefantes*.

Overall, *Nicaragua and the Politics of Utopia: Development and Culture in the Modern State* is an important contribution to studies of Central American literature, culture and politics. Chávez persuasively argues for the continued relevance of utopia and utopian projects in the imagining and implementation of a more just, sustainable future.