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Solentiname's Utopian Legacies and the Contemporary *Comunidades Eclesiales del Base* (CEBs)

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In this article, Lara Gunderson and I will converse textually about the relationship between the historically utopian character of Nicaragua's Solentiname commune and the contemporary *Comunidades Eclesiales del Base* (Ecclesiastical Base Communities; CEBs is the Spanish acronym) that she studies and worked with for her dissertation (Gunderson 2018). The article is part of a book that is currently under construction which explores the manifestations of utopia, dystopia, anti-utopia, and other types of futurism which I and several of my current and former students have encountered in our ethnographic research in Nicaragua, Colombia, Palestine, Native North America, and Greenland. The book does *not* follow a case-study strategy, in which these examples form part of an overall inductive *or* deductive argument about utopia, dystopia, anti-utopia and other futurisms. While the ethnographic portraits are not random—they follow the genuine interests I, and my students in dialogue with me, have developed—neither are they curated or crafted toward making a particular set of

arguments. Yet, I hope that in the end certain conclusions may be drawn—that remains to be seen.

We acknowledge that there was and still is clearly a very strong utopian socialist character to both Solentiname and the CEBs as Engels configured that notion, i.e., both Solentiname and the CEBs have been intended by its founders and participants to manifest embryonic forms of a new, egalitarian, and contradiction-free society to serve as a model for what Nicaragua could be in the future. The character of that utopia and its socialism was profoundly imbued not only by ideas and aspirations that come out of historical Marxism developed by Marx himself, in collaboration with Engels, and as interpreted specifically by Lenin. Certainly, the classic works of Marx, Engels and Lenin provided inspirations for socialist ideas for the leadership of the Nicaraguan revolutionary movement, the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (the FSLN) (see Hodges 1986; Beverley and Zimmerman 1990), while the ideas and analyses developed by Antonio Gramsci were perhaps more of an inspiration for the intellectuals within the revolutionary Ministry of Culture and other parts of the Sandinista cultural bureaucracy, as I encountered directly during my fieldwork (Field 1999). However, utopian ideas in Nicaragua and the FSLN, as we will explore, are just as much if not more provoked by ideas and aspirations that reflect a particular Christian orientation and faith.[1]

Marx had included Christian socialism in his critical dissection of utopian socialism in *The Communist Manifesto* (2000), characterizing it as a reactionary form. In *The Peasant War in Germany* (2000, 3rd edition), as discussed in the last chapter, Engels elaborated his analysis of Müntzer's Christianity as the vehicle expressing his radical

[1] As Beverley and Zimmerman (1990), and Hodges (1986) have both precisely described, there were multiple and complexly eclectic ideological roots of Sandino's nationalist movement. Beverley and Zimmerman list: "freemasonry, theosophy, Jacobin liberalism and the agrarian radicalism of the Mexican Revolution, Joaquín Trocado's 'magnetic spiritualism,' ideas of a 'indohispanic' racial destiny articulated by ideologues of the Mexican Revolution…both Christian and indigenous millenarian myths involved in earlier Central American uprisings, socialist and anarchist ideas derived in part from the influence of the IWW and the Flores Magón brothers in Mexico, and the southwestern part of the United States. (13). FSLN founders Carlos Fonseca and Tomas Borge revised and reinterpreted Sandino's legacy, strongly imbued by their participation in the very small Nicaragua Communist Party (*Partido Socialista Nicargüense*) but concluded that with its tiny industrial manufacturing sector and attendant proletariat, conditions in Nicaragua did not support the revolution that Marx had envisaged in the Manifesto. They developed a movement of armed national liberation that certainly was inspired by the Cuban Revolution, and additional validation of Sandino as a specifically Nicaraguan revolutionary symbol, particularly through the prism of Nicaraguan literature and poetry. Along these lines this article elaborates the differentiation between revolutionary Christian and revolutionary Marxist ideas in the lives of Ernesto Cardenal and the priests of the CEB.

vision of an egalitarian, classless world in which both the state and property had been abolished. The complex intersection between revolutionary socialism and radical Christianity in the life and work of Ernesto Cardenal, the revolutionary priest who founded the Solentiname commune and in the CEBs inherits a lengthier historical relationship between those two as well as being a relationship that has since Engels surfaced within the Marxist optic.[2]

Additionally, from the point of view of many powerful figures in the FSLN, Solentiname was a place where creative techniques were developed that facilitated the process of individuals coming to understand (*concientización*) the political, social and economic contradictions which created the violently oppressive lives the vast majority of Nicaraguan led, and in that way learning how to be revolutionaries.

The two profiles are quite distinct: a model of the future, a "foreshadowing of revolutionary transformation," as Dawes put it (1993: 183), on the one hand, and locus of a process for achieving class consciousness, on the other. During the period 1979-1990, one slogan heard frequently in Nicaragua was "*la revolución es una escuela*," which was a reference to the manner in which the Nicaraguan people were learning how transform their society through the very process of the transformation itself. Before the revolution triumphed, Solentiname had been considered such a school. In this study, Gunderson and I will engage in a textual dialogue about both kinds of utopian thought and action—utopia as model, and utopia as scenario for *concientización*—in the context of Nicaragua's political landscape since the mid-20th century. First, I will contribute some reflections about the Solentiname experience, through which I will ask Gunderson to respond to questions about the CEBs. Her responses follow. Additional exchanges between us complete the chapter. Our discursive method aims to contribute to both a consideration of utopian thinking in Nicaragua specifically and to the overall discussion of Marxism and utopia in this book.

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[2] In Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre's *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity* (2002) they argue that Marx and Engels' critique of capitalism and conception of socialism were in complex ways influenced by 19th century Romanticism. They specifically trace a connection between Engels' analysis in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (2010) to Romantic notions about pre-capitalist societies. From my perspective, it would be inaccurate to deny that Romantic ideas about the individual and society were pervasive in the time in which Marx and Engels lived, and would have had a mediated effect upon the ways they used certain words and images to express their ideas. In the case of *The Origin of the Family*, the overt and dominant influence was 19th century anthropology, itself a tense negotiation between Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment philosophies and views of humanity and diversity, and specifically the work of Lewis Henry Morgan—and this is certainly not the same thing as asserting the influence of Romanticism. In general, I disagree with Löwy and Sayre, and would not characterize Marx and Engels as influenced by Romanticism.

Field:

The historical, political and philosophical foundation of Solentiname were extremely complex, and embodied in the unique and remarkable life of its founder Ernesto Cardenal. The numerous elements that comprised the context for this community might easily be seen as contradictory and impossible to combine. In *The Grimace of Macho Raton* (1999), those contradictions were explored and I found their combination in the program to "decentralize and democratize cultural production" (from Beverly and Zimmerman 1990) in Nicaragua to have had less than positive outcomes for ceramics-producing artisan communities in San Juan de Oriente, Matagalpa and Jinotega where I conducted my fieldwork.

I was concerned to figure out how, Ernesto Cardenal worked to reconcile his training in contemplative Mertonian Christianity in Solentiname, which shaped his desire to re-create the egalitarian Christian community that had existed early on in the history of that religion, with the revolutionary socialism under construction in Cuba that he had witnessed during a visit he made in 1970. Cardenal fused Mertonian Christianity to the emergent socialism in Cuba in the context of his romanticized and historically inaccurate *indigenista* notions of peaceful, harmonious pre-Columbian Mayan societies, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, his decision after the Somocista Guardia Nacional destroyed the commune in 1977, to throw his full support to the armed insurrection being waged by the FSLN. Specifically, I wanted to understand how the Solentiname experience, and that rich brew of Christianity, socialism and *indigenismo* then came to shape the policies of the Ministerio de Cultura (Ministry of Culture) insofar as these were affecting the artisan communities in San Juan de Oriente and in the northern highlands.

My analysis was slanted in an Engelsian direction, without clearly stating that this was the case. In other words, based upon my ethnographic work, I suspected that the legacy of the utopian socialist characteristic of Solentiname was in the 1980s clashing strongly with the class consciousness of the artisans with whom I worked, whose political profile, I argued, closely followed a Marxist understanding of class especially from the Gramscian perspective.

I found that in planning and implementing policies having to do with the promotion of creative arts and artisanal production, as part of "decentralizing and democratizing cultural production," the Ministry of Culture favored utopian approaches like what had taken place in Solentiname, in projects where the Ministry could initiate and maintain total control over the participants. Such projects, as in

Solentiname, featured a program of introducing and promoting creative artistic production (poetry, painting, and ceramics) to individuals and communities which had had their creative facilities abrogated under *Somocismo*. This type of project was favored, while projects based upon supporting the self-directed development of existing artisan communities, where people saw themselves as a revolutionary class that had helped to overthrow *Somocismo*, presented many challenges for the Ministry. Those challenges resulted in a bitter rejection of the Ministry of Culture by many artisan communities, including those where I worked, which instead opted to organize themselves as a union of small-scale industrial producers, under the Ministerio de Industria (the Ministry of Industry). The Ministry of Culture's workers came from Managua's urban petty bourgeoisie, and as Engels would have predicted, they favored the utopian approach. The artisan communities were fully aware of the class differences between themselves and the Ministry workers, and this realization only fueled their decision to self-represent their interests as a class to the FSLN through their own union. These tensions and (eventual) conflicts unfolded and were exacerbated in the mid and late 1980s by the role of the Asociación Sandinista de Trabajadores Culturales (the ASTC or Association of Sandinista Cultural Workers) led by Rosario Murillo, the wife of Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, which competed with and often thwarted the Ministry of Culture, in its relationships with artists, musicians and artisans like the ceramics-producing communities of San Juan de Oriente, Matagalpa and Jinotega, where I conducted collaborative fieldwork.

Let us focus for the moment on descriptions and analysis of the experience of Solentiname. In *The Grimace*, I wrote:

> In 1965, Cardenal bought the island of Mancarrón in the Solentiname Archipelago of Lake Nicaragua, where he constructed his own church, founded a commune and initiated a cultural experiment among the isolated and impoverished residents of the island. The experiment consisted of distributing paints, brushes, art books, clay, kickwheels, and looms to a large number of individuals on the island and encouraging them to paint, weave, and make ceramics. Some years later, Cardenal sponsored a series of poetry-writing workshops among the population of barely literate adults. He successfully gave the tools of creativity to the people of a community who had not believes in their own capacity to create anything in excess of their own means of subsistence. For the artisans of Masaya-Carazo, the price of Solentiname's success, I would say, was tallied in a pervasive paternalism among the employees of the Ministry of Culture, and their orientation toward developing their own plans for developing artisan-craft rather than a concern to consult with existing artisan communities. The Ministry seems to have found the already existing artisan communities more difficult to incorporate into the democratization of culture programs than the introduction of creative, artistic

> and artisanal programs into areas of Nicaragua (like Solentiname) where such phenomena had shriveled away under Somocismo. (91)

> Cardenal's visits to Cuba in 1970 and 1971 facilitated the fusion between his utopian experimentation with the use of culture and creativity in Solentiname with his indigenismo. He returned to Solentiname convinced that revolutionary socialism could be combined with egalitarian Christianity with a return to the social order of pre-Columbian civilizations. (92)

> Some have claimed that the Sandinistas interpreted the Solentiname commune as 'a living counterculture to the world of Somoza; an anticipation of what Nicaragua could be after Somoza' (Zwerling and Martin 1985: 45); by the same token, others recall that "the Sandinistas sometimes criticized it [Solentiname] as a dangerously illusory alternative to the brutal realities of power in Nicaragua" (Beverley and Zimmerman 1990: 68). In either case, by 1976 the Solentiname communards had abandoned nonviolence for guerrilla warfare, in alliance with the Frente Sandinista. (93)

In David Whisnant's review of the history of post-Conquest Nicaraguan culture and cultural policy, he wrote

> For Cardenal, Solentiname had indeed become a visionary model for the larger project of liberating and reconstructing the entire country. The painting and poetry experiments suggested powerfully, he argued, that there was great untapped intellectual and creative potential in Nicaragua's campesino population, that their daily lives were full of expressive possibilities to which they were at least latently sensitive, and that a collective process of concientización would liberate that potential and both link them to their accustomed environments and draw them into larger processes of political understanding and transformation. (Whisnant 1995: 188)

Dawes (1993) analyzed revolutionary Nicaraguan poets and poetry and traced Cardenal's efforts to reconcile the utopian socialism of the Solentiname commune with what he considered Cardenal's revolutionary socialism, following his visit to Cuba and after the Somocista Guardia Nacional [The Somozan National Guard] destroyed the Solentiname commune in 1977. Dawes argued that Cardenal's Christian utopianism, which was first developed during his studies with Thomas Merton at the Trappist monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky (1957-59), was considerably altered by subsequent years at a Benedictine monastery in Cuernavaca (1959-60) where he studied theology (Beverley and Zimmerman 1990: 66) and then his training at El Seminario Siervos del Espíritu Santo [The Seminary Servants of the Holy Ghost] in La Ceja, Colombia (1961-62). His ordination took place in Granada (Nicaragua) in 1965. Soon thereafter, Cardenal purchased the land on the island of Mancarrón where the Solentiname commune was established.

While studying at the seminary in Colombia, Cardenal encountered the dramatic influence of revolutionary priest Camilo Torres, an encounter which Dawes claimed "stripped his [Cardenal's] ideals of much of their idealism" (77).

Concerning the interesting and largely unexplored conjuncture between Camilo Torres and Ernesto Cardenal, Beverley and Zimmerman wrote:

> The period of Cardenal's stay in Colombia corresponded with the growing influence of Liberation Theology among younger priests in Latin America. Here he came into contact with Camilo Torres, one of the most influential figures in the new developments. Cardenal admired Torres' decision to give up his ministry and join the guerrilla movement, but rejected the choice of arms himself in accord with his adherence to Merton's principle of nonviolent resistance to evil. (1990: 67)

It is well known in Colombia that the priest Camilo Torres died in 1966 during his first combat fighting for and with the second largest guerrilla organization in Colombia, the ELN (Ejercito de Liberación Nacional [National Liberation Army]), and sometimes it is said he was a co-founder of that group. This was not the case; ELN was founded in 1964 by a group of Colombian rebels who had trained in Cuba and Torres joined the ELN by the end of 1965 at the earliest. It may have been in 1966 that he was integrated into the ELN, in which case he joined the same year that he was killed by Colombian troops. Torres was neither a commander, nor was he a mere foot soldier. Torres was a member of the ELN under the tutelage of the chief commander, Fabio Vásquez Castaño, who, with other leaders of the *grupo guerillero* [guerrilla group], was aware of the political leverage that Torres had as leader of the Colombian *Frente Unido* [United Front] and his role in unifying the Left. In fact, Torres went to his first combat because he requested this of Fabio. Torres was also not the only priest to integrate into the ELN. Not long after its inception, ELN's membership included a number of priests who were developing an analysis of poverty and inequality in Latin America that some years later was one of the foundations of the Liberation Theology movement. Part of Torres' own analysis of Colombian society derived from his distinguished academic profile: along with the renowned Orlando Fals Borda (Rappaport 2020), Torres created the first sociology department in Latin America at the Universidad Nacional in Bogotá; he was also an innovative scholar who helped to profoundly shape the development of social science in Colombia. (Gott 2008). As Torres himself stated, "as a revolutionary, as a Colombian, as a sociologist, as a Christian, as a priest" (Broderick 2015: 123), Torres suffused his Christian faith with the particular utopian eschatology embedded within Christianity, with a revolutionary struggle to establish socialism. He also worked

to reconcile Christian utopianism with Marxists and the Marxist struggle to establish communism—without, according to Cardenal, becoming a Marxist.

In Volume II of Cardenal's autobiography, entitled *Las ínsulas extrañas. Memorias II* (2003), Cardenal describes his training and life in the seminary at La Ceja. It turns out, as Cardenal confessed in this volume, that he never actually met Camilo Torres face to face. There was an opportunity, a rendezvous had been made by mutual friends, but Torres did not show up. Afterwards, Cardenal decided not to try again to meet Torres because he feared expulsion from the seminary, which would have meant that his ordination in Nicaragua would have been delayed if not entirely obstructed. The way that Cardenal did "come into contact" with Torres was through the outsized influence Torres projected in Colombia while Cardenal lived there.

Torres was a media personality—a mass media influencer one could say—before those terms had been coined. Whereas the Church hierarchy, inside the seminary and in the national media denounced Torres, abjured his ideas and considered them irreconcilable with Church doctrine, leading Torres to petition the church to diminish his priestly status, Cardenal was star struck:

> in cities, villages, factories, universities Camilo attracted more and more multitudes. The blessed old ladies were with him because he was a priest, and the communists because he was a revolutionary. All of Colombia was with him. Since the time of Bolivar we haven't seen anything similar. He travelled continuously all over the country. He filled the plazas where public demonstrations were being prohibited. All the opposition parties were with him, and all of the people discontented with the parties. The speeches he gave as a sociologist were very simple and understood by all of the people. This was an incredible mass movement led by a priest. (Cardenal 2003: 64, my translation)

Torres' fusion between Christianity and revolutionary practice provided a model for Cardenal that set the latter on a political path for the rest of his life. Cardenal wrote that for Torres:

> the revolutionary struggle was a Christian struggle and a priestly struggle. He saw in it [the struggle] the realization of the love for one's neighbor… He saw that he needed to be a revolutionary as much as a priest. And that the revolution was obligatory for all Christians, because it was the practice of love for everyone… One of Camilo's innovations was that he called for the union of Marxists and Christians in order to struggle for the revolution, He would not argue whether God existed or did not exist, when we know that misery exists. Nor would he argue about the mortality or immortality of the soul, when hunger is the cause of mortality. Philosophical problems would have to wait until later. (Ibid., 65, my translation)

Yet Cardenal denied that Torres had become a Marxist:

> He [Torres] did not arrive at the position that others arrived at later, the union between Christianity and Marxism. His position was the same as that of the Catholic communist José Bergamín, whom I heard say in Mexico: 'With the communists I will go to the death, but not one step further.' It wasn't possible to be Christian and communist, because they have different philosophies. But neither could one be anti-communist. Above all one needed to be against everything that divided the people. About Cuba and the Russians one simply says: 'The enemies of our enemies are our friends.' (Ibid)

Torres' revolutionary socialism was not in fact Marxist. It was not based upon an analysis of the capitalist economic system based upon the deconstruction of money, capital, wage labor and capital's systemic appropriation of the products of wage labor that generates the surplus value that is the genesis of capital's expansion, leading to a society divided between the disenfranchised working class who have nothing to sell but their labor, and the bourgeoise who own the means of production and purchase labor power. Torres' analysis was focused upon the hierarchically unequal society that the capitalist system produces, and the capitalist state which acts as the guardian of that system. He therefore did not recognize the central, indeed primary role of the working class in a revolutionary struggle, but saw the working class's participation as part of a larger social majority which he referred to as either "the poor" or "la clase popular" (literally, the popular class, but perhaps better translated as "the people"), whose opponents were not the bourgeoise per se, but rather the tiny group of land-owners, political elites, and wealthy power brokers whom Colombians (not just Torres) denominate "the oligarchy." What Torres did was to accommodate his revolutionary socialism and his radical Christian utopianism with Marxist participation in the struggle for a socialism that included both visions—he would not call himself a Communist (or a Marxist) but he wanted to struggle and fight, eventually as an armed revolutionary soldier, side by side, as allies, as comrades, with the Marxist guerrillas of the ELN.

Thus, Cardenal was indeed inspired by Torres as a revolutionary but not as a Marxist, and was also inspired by other revolutionary priests, including Father Gaspar García Laviana, a Spanish priest who took up arms with the FSLN, died before the triumph of July 19, 1979. Father Gaspar's radicalization, through his work with the impoverished Nicaraguan masses, perhaps more resembled the politics of Monseñor Oscar Romero, explored by Lara below. Lara will develop this thread further—the revolutionary tendency in the CEBs also seems more aligned to Monseñor Romero enunciated than to the revolutionary fusion Cardenal developed, which by the time of

the FSLN triumph in 1979, was clearly inspired by the example of Torres and other revolutionary priests.

The same combinations of, and contradictions between Christianity, Marxism, the Cuban Revolution, creativity and scholarship, and both non-violent and violent struggle, resonated in the lives of Cardenal and Torres. For Cardenal, the utopian vision infused all of the tendencies he tried to reconcile in the Solentiname commune—he saw communism as equivalent to the Kingdom of God on earth, and the revolutionary institutions of Cuba as expressions of love, in a manner that is highly resonant of Torres. Cardenal the poet romanticized Torres, as he romanticized his highly inaccurate representations of pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. Cardenal's utopia—in both its Marxist and its Christian faces, its ideas about pre-Columbian societies, about Cuba, and about Camilo Torres—were all deeply romanticized, a characteristic of the operations of the Ministry of Culture under Cardenal of which the artisans I worked with also fully cognizant.

The importance of Cardenal's utopian experiment/experience in Solentiname certainly has had long-lasting effects upon the history of CEBs in Nicaragua. Williams explicitly (1989: 43) linked the histories of the CEBs and Solentiname in a manner which Lara Gunderson will develop in the next section:

> Paralleling the hierarchy's growing opposition to the Somoza regime was the development of a number of alternative pastoral strategies aimed at creating a grassroots Church in Nicaragua. Initial efforts were made between 1966 and 1968 by the Spanish priest José de la Jara and the Nicaraguan poet-priest Ernesto Cardenal. The former organized "Family of God" cursillos along the lines of the San Miguelito experiment in Panama, which served as the basis for the first comunidades eclesiales de base (CEBs) in Nicaragua. Cardenal founded a contemplative community "Nuestra Señora de Solentiname," on a small island in Lake Nicaragua, where local campesinos met to reflect on and discuss the Bible, thereby relating the gospel message to their lives.

Based upon her fieldwork with CEBs. Gunderson responds to questions that include: To what extent and in what ways is contemplative Christianity and the utopia of the early Christian communities' egalitarianism reconciled with a vision of a future socialist society? Are CEBs supposed to present as models or "foreshadowing" of a social transformation toward an egalitarian and/or socialist society? Or are they loci where *concientización* takes place, which is the necessary precondition for working towards such a transformation? Or is it both, as in the case of Solentiname? And if so are these two utopian projects always compatible?

Gunderson:

I think it's important to share a little bit how the CEBs tell their history. They actually give *charlas* [talks] on CEB identity and retell their existence from the first centuries after Jesus. I took a photograph in 2011 of the speaker's notes to capture this clear and practiced narrative that I think connects to our discussion of CEBs as a model for a future socialist society; the speaker of the *charla* divided church history into three models. The first era or model encompasses the first centuries of Christianity, becoming more centralized over the centuries, with Constantine and then with the development of a pope as having "absolute" power. The second era begins with the French Revolution, emergence of Protestantism, the Industrial Revolution and capitalism. The speaker defined capital and money as being false gods; yet the church situated itself within the capitalist system. The final model is the Church of the Poor. The idea of the Church of the Poor is that the members actively work to free or liberate themselves and others from the constraints of capitalism that impoverish them economically and spiritually (CNP 2008). They talk about working to bring about a Kingdom of God on Earth; they use some different words when talking about this transformative future including egalitarian society, liberation, and socialism, but the religious language is primary. They hold that this was Jesus' project and they as Christians must work for an egalitarian society too. They articulated their mission in this way:

> We, the CEBs in Managua, were born in 1966, following Jesus and inspired in the mystic of the First Communities and encouraged through the Testimony of the Martyrs, we are a Missionary Church, Prophetic, Evangelized and Evangelizing in the service of the People with a Fundamental Option for the Cause of the Poor and Excluded, we are networked and actively participate in liberatory processes for the construction of the Kingdom of God. (CNP 2008:18)[3]

I wrote previously (Gunderson, 2018) that Gutiérrez describes the story in the Gospels, when Jesus confronts the domination of the Jewish people by the Roman Empire and Herod's collaboration with the Romans, the publicans, the Sadducees' fidelity to law, and the Pharisees' hierarchical structure, and Jesus' call for a "new creation" that would end the domination of one group over another (Gutiérrez

[3] Cardenal's *Telescopio en la noche oscura* (1993) also references the mystic influence, illustrating, to me, the primarily religious foundation from which the CEBs work, to push back on the academic focus of their political involvement. Cardenal wrote this work after the electoral defeat of the Sandinista Party. He told Greg Dawes in 1999 (personal correspondence, 2021) that he designed *Telescopio* as a way to deepen his faith in trying times by returning to the mystic of Saint John of the Cross.

1988:130-135), reminiscent of Luke 20:25 "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which be Caesar's, and unto God the things which be God's" in which Jesus responded to critics attempting to trap him into framing his project as at odds with the Roman Empire. The CEBs in Nicaragua have maintained this objective as laid out by Gutiérrez. Gutiérrez lays out the different interpretations and ambiguity of the meaning of poverty in the Bible and suggests the idea that the poor are blessed is because the Kingdom of God has begun, in which the unjust structures that prevent people from becoming "fully human" (materially and spiritually) will end and result in a "world of fellowship" (Ibid., 162-173). I also noted that deciding not to wait until after death for the Kingdom of God is a reaction against the historic message the church hierarchy sent to the poor: to acquiesce to suffering in life so they will be first in Heaven.[4] This is the message that the Second Vatican Council attempted to rectify by asserting the "preferential option for the poor." In the same document that reasserted their mission, they list their most utilized words and phrases, including "Kingdom of God," for which they provide the following definition:

> It is a project of Father-Mother God in that we are invited to live as children of God; among one another as brothers and sisters and respectfully responsible of creation. A just, fraternal society in solidarity. The Kingdom has a transformative and operative sense like Jesus' passion for the radical transformation of our society following the goodwill of the father. It is a project of God that Jesus announces and that calls us to live in justice, love, and equality. (CNP 2008:36)

CEBs are by definition, small communities composed of people with shared life experiences. They emphasize the model of small community groups like those in the first centuries after Jesus. They cite Apostles 42 in the Bible that a church is simply an organization of a small fellowship of believers; wherever people meet to worship together. This fundamental definition of CEBs has been evoked to justify the divisions that arise; all CEBs are inherently sovereign. The CEB structure grew out of the Medellín Bishops Conference (1968) that was held to determine how to enact the Council of Vatican II (1962-65), the "preferential option for the poor" which constitutes a seminal reform of the Catholic Church in Latin America. The "preferential

[4] Gutiérrez discusses the ambiguities and contradictions between Matthew and Luke, material poverty, spiritual poverty, and then references Mark 1:15 "The time has come; the Kingdom of God is upon you" (Gutierrez 1988: 169-171). "Poor" is referring to both material impoverishment that prevents people from becoming their full selves and spiritual poverty in which people have to work to become in communion with their fellow humans. Gutiérrez repeatedly emphasizes the importance of fellowship and communion to Jesus' project and even quotes Camilo Torres on needing to fulfill the precept of "love of thy neighbor" (1988: 149).

option for the poor" is a joltingly different move for the Church to make as a consequence of these Vatican reforms. I wrote in my dissertation that,

> *whereas Vatican II leaders made generalized observations about underdevelopment and the needs of the poor, Medellín attendees worked to name the origins of poverty and outline specific guidelines for restructuring the church with a "preferential option for the poor." That phrase signified that the poor are not simply objects in need of compassion, but agents of their own history and liberation (Gunderson 2018; Gutiérrez 1988).*

The Medellín participants drew from processes already happening in Latin America, including the "Families of God" referenced by Williams (1989). The founding CEB in Managua began with two couples from San Pablo Apóstol who attended trainings with the Families of God in Panama; other CEBs formed after the fall of the dictator Somoza and were not established in parishes, but forced to function outside of them. The communities in the north of Nicaragua originated with Delegates of the Word from Honduras (Historia Nicaragua CEB 2009). There were also Capuchin-guided CEBs on the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua. So, in addition to Solentiname and Families of God, there were even more streams of CEBs emerging and coalescing.

Father Arnaldo Zenteno, a Jesuit priest, arrived from Mexico to Nicaragua in 1982 and continues to accompany them to this day. I and others familiar with the Nicaragua CEBs consider him a primary shaper of the Nicaragua CEBs. The CEBs refer to him as a guide, advisor, and faithful friend. He is also likely their best historian, documenting their process. It was clear to me during my fieldwork how much he loves them and how much he values their model of Catholic practice. I perceive him to have truly dedicated his life to the poor (embodying Vatican II and Medellín principles) and CEB members are full of stories they witnessed exemplifying this value in him too, including taking off his own shoes at a stoplight and placing them on the feet of a man outside without any shoes. Clearly, Father Arnaldo knows how to deploy the most provocative Christian imagery.

The CEB effort to articulate nationally began in 1983 out of necessity. The year 1983 marked the start of the Contra War, and very soon the Catholic hierarchy began working intensively to delegitimize CEBs, upon seeing their power threatened. Arnaldo was also instrumental in helping the disparate CEBs connect with one another, as well as the liberation theology powerhouse Dom Pedro Casaldaliga, and the rector of the UCA in Managua, Cesar Jerez. Arnaldo wrote:

> In 1983 a network was formed they called Equipo Promotor (Development Team). Within the team Communities participated, along with el Instituto Histórico Centroamericano (IHCA), Centro Antonio Valdivieso (CAV), Universidad Centroamericana (UCA), Centro de Educación y Promoción Agraria (Cepa), Conferencia de los Religiosos de Nicaragua (Confer), and others. But from their meetings, in 1985, and encouraged by the Bishop of Félix do Araguaia/Brasil, Don Pedro Casaldáliga and Jesuit priest and rector of the UCA César Jeréz, rector de la UCA, they formed an even bigger network: the CNP, at first the National Provisional Commission (Comisión Nacional Provisional); later, National Permanent Commission (Comisión Nacional Permanente) y currently the Christian Nicaraguans for the Poor. (Historia Nicaragua CEB 2009)

They have been inserting themselves in civil society from the beginning, participating in shaping it to be directed in favor of the poor. The Nicaraguan CEBs founded several "projects" as part of their prophetic work to respond to the neoliberal economic restructuring in 1990s Nicaragua. Father Arnaldo wrote that, after ten years of empire-imposed war that left 70,000 dead and thousands more disabled, peace did not arrive:

> But quickly we discovered that another war had begun, distinct but truly a war. There was a new government, badly named "Liberal"—that did not liberate us, but further oppressed us. Quickly we discovered a waterfall of evils in which there was more hunger than in the wartime, that unemployment was rising, that hospitals were scarce for the poor and that they had to pay nearly everything. And we saw how the wave of brutal contrast rose between the poor—extreme poverty and wasteful spending and the immeasurably rich. (Zenteno 2010)[5]

I wrote in my dissertation:

> In the face of this growing impoverishment and desperation, as the CEBs tell it, they reflected on their commitment as Christians and initiated projects that include serving the growing number of women in prostitution (Proyecto Samaritanas); creating a home for girls that houses and provides nationally-accredited education to children from throughout Nicaragua who have been removed from their homes because of abuse and neglect (Casa Hogar); supporting services for child streetworkers (NATRAS, or Niños-as/ Adolescentes Trabajadores); morning cafeterias for undernourished children and expectant mothers (Ollas de Soya); organizing a skills-based school for individuals served by other projects to learn technical trades such as cosmetology, computing, baking, and sewing (Escuela Tecnica); and developing a natural alternative medicine clinic in Managua. Rural CEBs have created heirloom-seed-sharing projects as well as community banks; some regions outside of Managua also have Ollas de Soya. (Gunderson, 2018)

[5] Zenteno gave me this document in a Word format, but I also found it published: http://www.redescristianas.net/una-buena-noticia-de-jesus-para-los-pobres-losproyectos-sociales-ceb-por-la-vida-arnaldo-zenteno-sj/

These Projects are highly organized actions taken in the face of capitalism and distinguish them from capitalism. Arnaldo gave me a document titled "CEB History" (2009) written at the end of the presidency of Bolaños (2007) that I assume he wrote: many of the documents he gave me often derive from what CEB members share at meetings and what they want to see written. After such meetings Father Arnaldo will write up what transpired, sometimes with help from others I think; but many documents do not have clear authorship. This document includes the CEB involvement in social justice activities:

> …A fundamental CEB task has been to maintain the Social Projects as signals of hope, to drive and participate in the Nicaraguan Social Movement Another World is Possible- and within this Movement to participate in the condemnation of the Iraq War, and the imposition of the TLC-CAFTA. The priorities that we've had in the last three years at the national level are: Strengthen the Youth Pastoral, Strengthen our participation in Civic Society, and the Growth of our CEBs in number and quality. (CEB Historia Nicaragua 2008)

Illustrating the different needs of rural and urban CEBs I mentioned earlier, some of the projects did not resonate with all members, just Managua. Conflict arose while I was there over what to call the projects. At one meeting, they agreed on "Social Experiences and Concrete Actions for Life" (Experiences Sociales y Acciones Concretas Por la Vida). This name would better include initiatives like reforestation in the rural northern regions, they reasoned. I would often hear statements such as, "well they have a different reality than us," when some groups were able to do something the others did not, like raise money.

Additionally, I think talking about utopias requires us to consider the CEBs tenet of *profetismo* and its connection to the Judeo-Christian prophets who denounced corruption and announced the coming of God. I am going to pull from my dissertation here again. Where the Roman Catholic hierarchy limits current prophets to Pope and clergy, liberation theology considers prophets as possibly anyone.

> Gustavo Gutiérrez interprets the work of the prophets as eschatological, denoting a break with the past and a new way forward (1988: 93-95). He explores language roots and historical interpretations to show that eschatology is not simply about the end time; it acknowledges the historical present and looks toward a new future, thereby perhaps setting the foundation for the "new humanity" or "Kingdom of God" that the CEBs foresee. (Gunderson 2018)

"The commitment to the creation of a just society and, ultimately, to a new humanity, presupposes confidence in the future" (Gutierrez 1988:121) is the sentence that begins his chapter on Eschatology and Politics and is one that describes the CEBs I observed. The way I saw it, the CEBs enact profetismo, or social justice activism and

consciousness-raising, to bring about the Kingdom of God, or the future socialist society.

Les, when you first wrote to me about collaborating on this article, "The real problem for Engels was that the utopian socialists did not derive their ideas from an analysis of existing society, as had Marx." It appeared to me during my fieldwork that the CEBs very much base their ideas and their futurist efforts on their continuous analysis of the material conditions in which they live, but I observed their insistence on a conflation between rural campesinos and urban workers as part of a single oppressed, popular majority in an unequal society, and de-emphasized the class difference between the two: sometimes they had to remind one another and work at this alignment.

Yet, I think some of them have advanced awareness of the contradictions beyond class consciousness, as you said, "between forces and relations of production and on the one hand, and of development of post-scarcity technologies, on the other." During my fieldwork I observed some CEB members acting on the basis of what I perceived to be an advanced awareness, albeit maybe without the language. One sister of the Guadalupe Order repeatedly attempted to get listeners to understand the connection between the makings of their cell phones and the arms industry that made its components. There is talk of capitalism, consumerism, globalization by mostly CEB leaders, but few delve in depth into analyzing the mechanics of those processes insofar as asserting they impoverish people. Gutiérrez and the documents Arnaldo shared with me make clear that liberation theology holds that capitalism is a structural sin, meaning that it is responsible for producing oppressed suffering people. Practitioners then must denounce that sin. This characteristic about them, organizing around their own values and so many organic intellectuals, makes me think more of Gramsci. Hodges (1986) referenced Gramsci too on the importance of "culture" for mobilizing a revolution.

But acting upon a preferential option for the poor in fact does not require an in-depth understanding by poor people of why they are poor. I observed that the urban "worker" CEBs in Managua who hosted the CNP meetings made an effort to listen to their rural *campesino* CEB counterparts and acknowledge their different experiences, yet they all identified as an impoverished majority. If they were following Marx, I would assume they would have observed a greater distinction between the *obrero* and *campesino*. They knew they had different realities and said so, and definitely issues surfaced because of it that they worked to reconcile, but there was no assertion of class separation that I observed. I did see and photograph an amazing *Cristo Campesino* mural in one of the rural CEB's meeting space and of course, Managua has the famous statue of *Soldado*

Desconocido with the words, *"Sólo los obreros y campesinos irán hasta el fin."* I'm inclined to believe these murals and statues are more part of their political history, which of course intertwines.

Field:

During your fieldwork, did you encounter CEB discussion and remembrance of Solentiname or of Ernesto Cardenal, and their historical connections to CEBs? And along those lines- - did CEB people discuss Marxism? Did they ever consider that there is a need to reconcile the concept of socialism in Marxist thought with Christianity, as Cardenal had labored to do, or did they think there was an obvious or harmonious connection between the two?

Gunderson:

Arnaldo endearingly called Ernesto Cardenal, Erni, and I met Fernando Cardenal once at the Jesuit house, Villa Carmen at the UCA, where Fernando lived and Arnaldo still lives. Arnaldo sometimes quoted Ernesto at events and meetings. I wrote in my fieldnotes that Arnaldo quoted Ernesto on Oct 20 when they do an annual mass at the URSS barrio to celebrate el Señor del la Divina Misericordia. The quote was about compassion (*misericordia*) and the church and how the two need one another. A visiting Spanish priest, who visits every year and sends resources to the CEBs, spoke of how distinct each CEB is and about the influence of Ernesto. He noted, however, that the influence of Arnaldo provides the strongest guiding force. Otherwise, my perception is that CEB people all know the story and consider Solentiname a historically important place, but that it is not a regular topic. They are so ensconced in their unique histories down to the barrio, that they do not identify as much with places farther away. I perceive them to all be supporters or allies of one another. Arnaldo perhaps felt more connected because of his friendship with the Cardenal brothers and his focus being a bit broader.

To answer the question of whether they discussed Marxism, during my first preliminary fieldwork visit to the CEBs, I spent the morning with Luciano, one of the founders who was trained in San Miguelito with Families of God and brought what he learned back to Managua and Father de la Jara. He walked me to visit an elderly woman who I think was a founder like him. They chuckled together when recalling to me that they were derogatorily called communists long before the Revolution. She said that during a bible group meeting someone had dropped a book by Marx in her lap. She

went through it later and said it sounded a lot like their practice of Christianity and didn't understand the big deal. This was one of the few instances they mentioned Marx specifically. However, they often used the slogan, "Between Christianity and Communism there is no contradiction." My perception was CEB participants consider the two quite harmonious, or better said, when you and I talked, they find a like-mindedness. Yet, does asserting that slogan imply some sort of awareness that not everyone sees that harmony?

Thinking back to this moment, between Luciano and the other senior woman, it seems to me an example of the distinctly Catholic perception that God/ the Holy Spirit is everywhere, embodied in people and things, that Andrew Greely (2000) and Robert Orsi (2016) talk about, that I write about in my dissertation. It speaks to their Catholic identity that even if Nicaragua's Marxist leaders did not identify themselves as Catholic, the progressive Catholics identified them as such because they all agreed on the "preferential option for the poor," or were acting on it anyway. In this line of reasoning, the CEBs are definitely not Marxist in their utopian efforts and vision, but fall more within the history of socialist Christianity.

One CEB facilitator in Carazo attended the Department of Ecumenical Research (DEI, *Departamento Ecuménico de Investigaciones,)* in Costa Rica, where Franz Hinkelammert is, and was very conversant in Marxian literature and thinkers. I did not experience most CEB members speaking about Marx; their discourses were really focused upon the Bible and their interpretations. Yet, they did talk about FSLN founder Carlos Fonseca and the eminent Sandinista *comandante* Tomás Borge- old and young- mostly as part of Sandinista history, with which they deeply identify.

Instead of talking about Ernesto Cardenal, CEBs referred endlessly to Óscar Romero. They quote him and the most frequent was "to be a committed Christian is to be a good citizen." His quotes are painted on their walls, his photo is on their altars, t-shirts, they enshrine his face and words everywhere. They called him a saint before he officially was one. I wrote in my fieldnotes from 2/9/15 that when long-time CEB champion and coordinator Sr. Margarita announced to everyone's joy that Romero was declared a martyr by Pope Francis, she expressed hope that Pope Francis would come to El Salvador. Some people said they already knew he was a saint, asserting their distinction and greater progressivism from Rome.

They also were aware that their Romero paraphernalia marked them as a certain kind of Christian, as social justice activists. On our trip to Rancho Grande near the Bosawas to protest the government-supported gold mining happening there, people

donned their most CEB-related t-shirts and hats, many people wearing Romero's face on their shirts and quotes from him- - a couple had shirts with Fr. Arnaldo too. When we were stopped by police- I'm not sure what kind—they all quickly zipped up their sweatshirts and otherwise covered up their Romero attire so the intention of our trip would not be discovered and we would be detained or turned back. They also hung yellow and white Vatican flags out the bus window in anticipation of being stopped and claimed to the police we were embarking on a parish church retreat.

I went back into my interview notes to answer your question about whether they spoke of Marx or Cardenal, and to see if I had anything more on Romero. I found more than I even anticipated. People spoke of Romero when describing their liberation theology practice to me throughout my interviews, and when I asked them about guides, because they seemed to reference certain individuals over others. They did not mention Cardenal. The following are some instances that I discovered in which people referenced Romero.

A CEB founder in Matagalpa told me it filled her heart to hear that the Pope named Romero a martyr and that she hoped Francis would open the doors for progress, noting the local churches were "enemies" of the CEBs who "did not recognize the reality of the pueblo." Another person referenced Romero when telling me that she could not separate her CEB membership from her involvement in social justice struggles. She said, "If something is happening you need to speak up, whether it is government or institution." Several people said Romero was a guide because of how he lived, how he "embodied" the Gospels. A young man mentioned Romero and Sandino together, describing their process of transformation. Another young man said Romero "lived his message." The director of one of the Projects in Managua said Romero was political as a Christian, but not partisan. I asked the Guadalupe nun about CEB guides and she said, "Well of course Oscar Romero is the model of a prophetic voice for the CEB. He gave his life for the most vulnerable people. He is like a patron for the CEBs. He motivates us. He told us that if he dies, he will be inside us. And now there are more people who have given their lives in the fight for the Communities and they are part of the CEBs too. He is a prophet."

A facilitator in Carazo said, referencing Romero, "The testimony of the martyrs and their causes nourishes us a lot… I am inspired by their dream, they help us move forward." Lastly, the Spanish organization that helps fund the Nicaraguan CEBs call themselves the Oscar Romero Committee. Romero was, it turned out, a significant presence in my fieldwork!

Romero was not a Marxist. As a priest, he served the upper class. It was not until he became archbishop that he really processed the abject violence committed against the impoverished majority in El Salvador. When his friend, Jesuit Rutilio Grande was murdered, Romero came to speak increasingly about the plight of the poor. He changed to really embrace a preferential option for the poor. And he was martyred for it. It seems from my interviews that transformation and martyrdom is a compelling story to CEBs. They talk of being transformed themselves as followers of liberation theology. Cardenal, in contrast, did not represent a dramatic transformation story, and was not killed for it, even though he easily could have been. Nicaraguan CEBs, especially in the León/Chinandega departments, have an affinity with El Salvador, both in terms of experiencing civil war and promoting liberation theology, and they meet and share with one another. I do remember listening to the older CEB members recall when Pope John Paul II shook his finger at Padre Ernesto and their faces were clearly pained. They are still quite hurt about being essentially condemned by the Church hierarchy; they do not want to be separate from the Church. The Guadalupe sister I mentioned above, whose work has been to organize new CEBs, has been pushing them to insist on continued membership of CEBs within their parishes; in Mexico where she is from and within the CEB she grew up in, they are not separate.

The CEBs I observed did not explore the origin of the poverty much beyond observing the relationship between poverty and capitalism. I think this idea ties back into Engels' critique that you began our correspondence with. Maybe this is where Romero's approach and Cardenal's differ, where Christians and Marxists find like-mindedness in their focus on the poor but come at it from different places. I wonder, too, if the *Tercerista* Sandinista approach that valued allying with anyone to further the revolutionary cause played any role in conflating the worker and the campesino.

In my dissertation, I wrote about the CEB methodology to becoming conscious in order to produce a vision of a future socialist society:

> An important feature that is found in both the revolution and liberation theology is use of the terms "new man" and "new woman." The terms are present in both biblical and revolutionary texts. The Nicaraguan revolution promoted the development of new men and new women as part of the transformation of society the revolution was trying to bring about (Montoya 2012). Gutiérrez's liberation theology text relies on biblical texts to discuss the "new humanity" that is the goal of the liberation process (Gutiérrez 1988:81). There was a confluence and overlap of values between revolutionaries and liberation theology practitioners in that both were concerned with liberating the poor from injustice. In this overlap, CEBs in the 1980s worked mainly

> through state-sanctioned arenas of the FSLN on a common nation-building project. The CEBs' current claim to be in a phase of renewal thus refers to an ongoing "Christian responsibility" to create a "new and more just world." (Mulligan 2010)

While the revolutionary process of the 1980s failed to actively cultivate new women, the CEBs continue to make this effort. That provides an important perspective in reflecting on what you wrote in the previous chapter concerning Fourier's efforts to relate the success or profundity of a revolution to the extent to which women are emancipated. Notwithstanding Engels' critique of Fourier's utopian socialism as insufficiently grounded in an analysis of existing society (Engels 1969), the CEBs' utopian project also marks the emancipation of women as central to the fate of revolutionary transformation.

I observed during my fieldwork that the CEBs often distinguished themselves from other Christians by their emphasis on the need for reflection upon their social, political, and economic contexts. "Orlando" shared a long story of how much harder it is for young people in the youth groups to take the time to reflect on their situation (a key ingredient to becoming *conscientizada*) because they have to work/hustle all the time. Orlando, who is about my age, having come up in the '90s, contrasted their reality with his own youth, during which he had no compact discs to sell, and had more free time as an impoverished youth in Managua, and his youth group spent long periods of time talking about the roots of their impoverishment. Because of contemporary young people's context of growing up in such a consumerist culture, it is harder to bring them to consciousness, according to Orlando. In this example, Orlando considers CEBs as sites where *concientizacion* takes place.

During CEB activities, I observed individuals working to practice egalitarianism. It often took the form of reminding themselves and one another of this unachieved ideal. They loved to point out how feminist their leadership was: they were mostly facilitated by women. Others performed a pained response even hearing the word "leader" because of how much that word implied inequality. At the same time, I think all had the desire to cultivate leadership qualities among the youth.

You asked: Are CEBs as a model for social transformation toward a socialist society, on the one hand, and as loci where *concientización* takes place, on the other always compatible? The CEBs as a whole clash over how they envision their trajectory and what actions or stands they should take to bring about a socialist society. People explained to me that they were like a big family with spats, but a family that stays

together and loves each other in the end. Their history is marked by certain CEBs and CEB regions separating themselves from the rest for periods of time.

A dramatic separation most recently over the 2018 civil unrest sparked first by the government's inadequate response to the wildfires in the Indio Maíz reserve, which is located on the southeastern corner of Nicaragua bordering the San Juan River and Costa Rica[6], and then when the Ortega administration cut retirement benefits and raised payroll taxes. The founding CEB at San Pablo Apostol separated from the other Managua CEBs because the founding CEB chose to remain supportive of the current Ortega administration, and thus of the Sandinista Party. This breakage was reported in the newspapers, and the different reports made it hard to know exactly what had occurred without having been there.

I began fieldwork shortly after the CEBs throughout Nicaragua had begun a new effort to come together on a national scale, to revitalize the Christian Nicaraguans for the Poor (CNP), the name they give to their national articulation. The whole of El Bloque, i.e. all of the numerous CEBs throughout Leon and Chinandega, had organized together with the CEBs in El Salvador, but not as much with Managua until then. Similarly, the Estelí and northern CEBs were organized and met with one another, but not with all of the Managua-Masaya-Granada CEBs. At least one rural community in Estelí had had a conflict with the main Estelí CEB and affiliated with Managua instead, at least until the revitalization efforts began. Tola in Rivas no longer networked with Managua or other CEBs either; one person explained it was for economic reasons because they could not afford to travel to meet. Even the CEBs within Managua would separate and reconnect, like the eastern barrio URSS, whose natural medicine clinic provider had had a personality conflict with one of the main Managua regional facilitators. Another dispute between Managua barrio CEBs occurred when some people supported a relationship with the charismatic Catholics, and others strongly disagreed. Some of these conflicts were created by the financial difficulties of remaining in touch, but in most instances, conflicts were political and fueled by personality disagreements over strategy and trajectory. The main issue was how to build a future socialist society through the model of the CEBs.

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[6] The Indio Maíz Biological Reserve is a large (over 1200 square miles) protected area, the second largest protected humid tropical rainforest in Nicaragua, that features an extraordinary biodiversity of plant and animal species. It is also located entirely within the autonomous territory of the indigenous Rama and Afro-Nicaraguan Kriol peoples. When extensive wildfires broke out in 2018, this became one more highly politicized focus of often violent disputes between supporters of the Ortega government and its critics.

Schisms erupted while I was conducting my fieldwork over the CEBs current support—or lack thereof—of the Ortega administration. I heard many adults caution the youth to "be careful," when young people suggested a protest on the Managua rotundas with t-shirts that manipulated the ubiquitous Ortega slogan: "Let's go with Ortega! I build the nation!" The youth suggested adding in the same pastel greens and pinks, "I build the nation by saying no to mining!" and to wear their shirts while carrying signs in one of the rotundas at the capitol, denouncing the administration's support of foreign mining corporations. Father Arnaldo, in response, stated that following through on their ideas could get them in trouble with the government. This is another example of the diminishing space and freedom for criticism in the current Ortega administration, and that the CEBs are not unified in how to respond to these rising limitations on free expression. This situation also illustrates how the youth are aware of the conflicting goals among the CEBs, emphasizing critical reflection and the question of what position to take towards the Ortega administration. This similarly related to the Managua CEBs' reluctance to denounce government attempts since 2012 to build an inter-oceanic canal across the southern part of the country and across Lake Nicaragua.

Disagreement around the creation of new CEBs during the overall national effort to revitalize, and the ensuing misunderstandings and conflicts. Political differences and partisanship with respect to the ruling Sandinista Party and government caused continuous frustration on the part of the established CEBs, but not one that led to any actual breaks.

Having worked to create an egalitarian society during the revolutionary era, their experience as CEB participants leads them to hope that their project is indeed possible.

Field:

Gunderson's response speaks cogently to the utopian socialist strivings of the CEB movement and their historical efforts to navigate their organization as a locus for both modeling the equality that is envisioned as the hallmark of future socialist society and a center for raising consciousness in order to spark and motivate a socialist politics based upon Christian morality and sensibilities.

Where is our dialogue going? Let us ask ourselves two things:

1) Given our understanding of Nicaraguan history does the utopian impulse in that country necessarily derive from both a Christian understanding of the world as well as a Marxist analysis?

2) Given the many ways utopian projects have failed in the last century or more, is the utopian impulse, as expressed in Solentiname historically and in the CEBs both historically and in the current time, a necessary (but not to say sufficient) feature of imagining a future for Nicaragua that redresses the characteristic inequalities of Nicaraguan society and the characteristically authoritarian nature of Nicaraguan politics? Is a/the utopian project in Nicaragua exhausted and no longer relevant?

Gunderson:

I think through this discussion, we can safely say the CEBs do not as a whole approach their utopian impulse through a Marxist analysis, but a Christian one that aligns with Monseñor Romero. They call themselves socialists and revolutionaries, but not Marxists. They denounce the inequality that capitalism creates, but do not distinguish *obrero* from *campesino*. Some people perceived that the liberation theology project appears to have failed after the FLSN electoral loss in 1990, but I believe my fieldwork proved that not to be true. Do any utopian projects by definition fully succeed or fully fail? What is the timeline we give such a project to succeed or fail and how do we measure that? I want to say utopian projects are ongoing. While the Nicaraguan CEBs continue to exist, the project has to be ongoing because they insist on it, yet there certainly is not support for them within government structures and a diminishing one from NGOs.

Field:

I entirely agree with Lara: we have each of us realized more fully than either of us had previously understood the differences between being a revolutionary and being a Marxist in the context of Nicaraguan Christianity's intersect ion with the Sandinista Revolution and its complex aftermath. Moreover, it seems additionally clear to me that since the "preferential option for the poor" comes from the power of Biblical allegory as a prism with which to understand the social conflicts and inequalities of the present, as well as the dream of socialism in the future, that this approach to revolution could

easily—I think it is already—outlast the class-based analysis Marxists bring to their vision of revolution and socialism.

Yes: the utopian impulse in Nicaragua *does* necessarily derive from both a Christian understanding of the world as well as a Marxist analysis, and probably a great deal more from the former than the latter. Therefore, in that light, the utopian impulse as expressed in Solentiname historically and in the CEBs both historically and in the current time, is very much a necessary—and perhaps sufficient—feature of imagining a future for Nicaragua that redresses the characteristic inequalities of Nicaraguan society and the characteristically authoritarian nature of Nicaraguan politics.

Because this is the case, we would argue that the utopian project in Nicaragua is not exhausted and remains relevant, but—we conclude—this is much more because of the Christian vision of and struggle for socialism, as embodied by the Theology of Liberation, and much less because of the Marxist analysis of capitalism and its own utopian desires and revolutionary imperatives. This is a rather sobering realization for any Marxist, but what it means about Marxism's and Marxists' struggle for socialism requires further consideration, elaboration, and complication in the chapters that follow.

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