Pluralism and Vanguardism in the Nicaraguan Revolution

by
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One of the major principles of the Nicaraguan constitution is that "The state guarantees the existence of political pluralism" (Article 5). One clear aspect of such pluralism is the maintenance of a multiparty system. Indeed discussion with representatives of the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (Sandinista National Liberation Front, or FSLN) as well as active scholars within Nicaragua reveals that political pluralism is often simply identified with a multiparty system. Yet it is clear that the FSLN as the "vanguard party" sees its function as guiding the revolution. Traditionally the concept of a vanguard party has been connected with the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat and a monopoly of state power by a single party; in a word, it has been associated with Stalinist strategy for maintaining political control through the Communist Party. How, then, can these two concepts work together? Here I will not speculate on the view that these concepts are combined only as a sort of cynical manipulation on the part of the FSLN. Only the future can show whether this is in fact the case. Here my concern is to show that the concepts of pluralism and of the vanguard have been synthesized in Nicaraguan theory and practice in a manner that does violence to neither of them. Further, I hope to show that such a synthesis can yield valuable theoretical insights which can go beyond the particular context of contemporary Nicaragua; the dynamism of contemporary Nicaraguan life is partially derivative of the combination in practice of two apparently contradictory notions. This example demonstrates that a creative approach to the combination of old political ideas can yield practical realities that go beyond old expectations.

The notion of "hegemony" constitutes a key linkage between the concepts in question here. Hegemony, often associated with the thought of Gramsci, but commonly used in the Nicaraguan context without clear relation to his works, suggests that particular social orders function within the context of

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domination by particular classes or social groups (Vargas Lozano, 1988: 30-33; Salazar, 1988: 34-40). Such hegemony is not simply a matter of the imposition of state power. Rather, the concept suggests that a context of broad social, ideological, and political relations provides the basis for possible action. As originally developed by Gramsci the point of the concept is to emphasize that a dominant class maintains its dominance through numerous sophisticated elements of social and cultural control as well as through the direct use of state power. “Direct rule” constitutes one of the “floors of the superstructure” through which dominant relations of production are maintained; “civil society” is the other “floor.” Within civil society “hegemony” is a function “which the ruling class exercises over the whole of society” (Gramsci, 1957: 124).

Traditional theories of political pluralism as an explanation of political reality within developed political systems, most notably that of the United States, have been frequently criticized for failing to take into account the fact that these systems function in the context of hegemony in civil society which serves the interests of dominant economic groups. Control of civil society provides for the possible parameters of social and political action. Within the United States, for example, this has meant that socialism is not a viable option for a “civil” means of participating in political practice. This is not only because socialist groups are repressed by open state power (although this has occurred on numerous occasions as well) but rather because the serious advocacy of basic change away from capitalist relations is not consistent with the rules of the game within the civil society of the United States. Most Marxist theorists would suggest that hegemony is exercised by a particular class; in capitalist systems this is the bourgeois class. Thus hegemony in a socialist system is presumably exercised by the working class, or the proletariat.

The FSLN as a vanguard party does not suggest that it is simply the agent of a particular class. Rather it sees itself as a force based on the “logic of the majority” or as the vanguard of “the people.” It may at first appear that this is only a hidden reference to the replacement of bourgeois hegemony by the hegemony of another class, simply called “the people” in order to avoid Marxist-Leninist terminology while maintaining it in practice. However, closer examination shows that the FSLN’s view is a good deal more sophisticated and complex than this. They allege that there never was bourgeois hegemony as such in Nicaragua. On the contrary, hegemony was exercised by a foreign power, the United States. Only in the latter years of the struggle against Somoza did the national bourgeoisie even attempt to exercise hegemony (see Jaime Wheelock’s analysis in Invernizzi et al., 1986: 191-192). Thus the FSLN was not the vanguard of a single class, but of the “broad
popular majority." The point is not, as some left opposition parties in Nicaragua would have it, to create the dictatorship of the proletariat. Rather it is to create a set of rules of the game which will allow all sectors of the society, including the bourgeoisie, to function but not to allow the creation of bourgeois hegemony. It is in this context that the concept of a "mixed economy" is combined with that of political pluralism and of a vanguard party representing "the broad masses of the Nicaraguan people."

The people of Nicaragua as a whole are poor. Even among the remaining bourgeoisie the symbol of affluence is a functioning Toyota, not a new Mercedes Benz. Clearly, the FSLN is attempting to produce a system of hegemony which will fundamentally benefit the poor. Whether the poor constitute a class in the traditional sense is the subject of some dispute, but the prevailing view seems to be that "the poor" is certainly not the same thing as "the proletariat," which is conceived of as an urban industrial class (Núñez Soto, 1987; Vilas, 1984; Wright, 1988).

Within the Nicaraguan political system the state, as projected in the Constitution of 1987, guarantees a multiparty system with freedom of expression and a mixed economy. Yet the fundamental point in creating or maintaining hegemony is not simply holding state power. The maintenance of hegemony and the holding of state power serve to support a set of productive relations. Clearly, the FSLN sees itself as the overwhelming political force within the state and believes that it will continue to receive broad mass support. Nevertheless, the FSLN is not a mass political party, nor is there evidence that it ever intends to become one. It is not merely one party among many competing for electoral support. The FSLN is attempting to create and maintain hegemony within the Nicaraguan nation which will function in the interest of the broad majority of the Nicaraguan people.

In terms of its own structure and functioning, the FSLN is a vanguard party. Its history as the directing force of the revolutionary movement which overthrew the Somoza regime shows that it was always a small clandestine party. Bayardo Arce claims that after the triumph, when the question of a party arose, there was a notion that the party should be opened to all, while maintaining an internal structure of cadres. This idea, however, was determined to be "something too original to be managed" (Invernizzi et al., 1986: 74). By taking in several thousand people who had shown their commitment to the Sandinista Revolution through substantial work in the popular cause, the FSLN did significantly expand its membership shortly after the triumph, yet it remains relatively small; its "militantes" number about twelve thousand (Invernizzi et al., 1986: 63).³

The structure of the FSLN is typical of a vanguard party. It is headed by a directorate of nine FSLN "commandantes" who exercise direction over an
assembly of representatives, chosen, in practice, by the directorate. Militant status is awarded by the FSLN only to those who have evidenced their commitment to the revolution through substantial work. There are clearly many "aspirantes" who are not "militantes," though they seek to become so; to be a militant requires one to demonstrate vanguard qualities. It is clear that admittance to the ranks of the militants requires approval from those who hold party positions and that those who seek such status are subject to substantial supervision from those party members who are "responsible" for them.

The fact that the FSLN is a genuinely vanguard party should not, however, lead to the conclusion that it is therefore easily understood by imposing the model of other vanguard parties, especially that of the Soviet Union, as a way to make sense of it. Roberto Díaz Castillo suggests that implicit in the simultaneous adoption of the notion of the vanguard party and of pluralism was the rejection of some of the ideas of revolutions of the past. According to Díaz Castillo (1985), among these ideas was the notion of dictatorship and of direction of the party by a single individual as well as of a single party and monopoly of power. It is clear from the selection of the directorate which united the three tendencies of the FSLN that it would not adopt the model of single person leadership.

There was a certain pluralism involved in the formation of the FSLN in the struggle against the dictatorship. It is important to remember that the FSLN is not the creation of orthodox Marxist parties (pro-Soviet or Trotskyist) in the Nicaraguan context. As Núñez and Burbach point out, the original militants of the FSLN were drawn from diverse sources including not only those from the pro-Soviet Partido Socialista Nicaragüense (Nicaraguan Socialist Party, or PSN—the Partido Comunista de Nicaragua, or PCN, is a later split from the PSN) but also from those previously associated with Maoist, Trotskyist, and other types of Marxist organizations (Núñez and Burbach, 1987: 56). Jaime Wheelock remembers that beginning in 1974 the FSLN began to recruit cadres from within the Partido Conservador Demócrata (Democratic Conservative Party, or PCD), the Partido Liberal Independiente (Liberal Independent Party, or PLI), Alfonso Robelo’s Movimiento Democrático Nicaragüense (Nicaraguan Democratic Movement, or MDN), the Chamber of Commerce, the Instituto de Desarrollo Nicaragüense (Nicaraguan Institute of Development, or INDE), and from among university professors (1986: 73). Thus without denying that the FSLN has a strong Marxist and Marxist-Leninist component, it is important to remember that its cadres were in fact drawn from a very wide group of individuals, many of whom were familiar with and clearly rejected the traditional line of Latin American Communist parties in general and of the Nicaraguan Socialist
Party in particular. Marvin Ortega points out that one of the major differences between the FSLN and other left parties prior to the triumph of 1979 was that only the FSLN never called for the “dictatorship of the proletariat” and that no left party other than the FSLN defended the notion that there should be a multiparty system (1986: 17).

The practical experience of the Nicaraguan Revolution shows that the concept of pluralism has deep roots within the FSLN and encompasses much more than a mere conception of a multiparty system. In the traditional theory of pluralism it is not only formal institutional guarantees, such as constitutional provisions and party structures, that count. In addition the theory emphasizes the representation of different interest groups through a complex structure of political inputs. In discussing the reality of democracy in the Nicaraguan Revolution, Coraggio and Irvin show awareness of this theoretical tradition when they state that “pluralism is not exclusively about political parties. The essence of pluralism is that it allows for a diversity of views that enriches political and social practice at all levels, not merely at the level of political parties” (Coraggio and Irvin, 1985: 33). The Nicaraguan experience demonstrates that this aspect of pluralism has deep roots in the experience of the FSLN both prior to the triumph and afterward.

Although the FSLN from its founding represented a vanguard of a few individuals organized in a relatively centralized manner, it never pretended to be the only relevant force struggling against the dictatorship. Indeed in many cases the FSLN found itself confronted even with armed uprisings, the most notable being that in Monimbó, which were not primarily a result of its own organizational work. Without going into a detailed account of the struggle against Somoza, we can note here that numerous forces, including organized Christian groups, student organizations, labor unions (often associated with other left parties), and national bourgeois groupings (notably those grouped around the leadership of La Prensa), were serious forces that engaged in antiregime activities. While the FSLN made serious efforts to organize within these groupings, they were not necessarily under its direct control. Thus a plurality of forces was a fundamental aspect of the uprising against Somoza. Ultimately, of course, the FSLN as an organized armed force was able to lead in the process of destroying the Somoza regime and organizing a new system.

It was the FSLN’s capacity to lead diverse forces that demonstrated its vanguard role in practice. But this was not a result of the fact that the FSLN somehow guided or controlled all other forces from the top, but rather that after many years of valiant struggle and the death of many of those who struggled, the FSLN captured the public imagination as the genuine repre-
sentative of the revolution. It was not that the FSLN commanded but that it led through its exemplary action. In this context it is interesting to note how the population in many cases depended upon the FSLN to provide arms and leadership once the insurrection was in full bloom. One participant in the insurrection in Monimbó said that after they had begun to fight with the Guard:

... we knew that the Sandinista Front would come, but there were those of us who imagined that they were going to come here in columns or something.

It wasn’t until later that we noticed that we were the Sandinista Front; that they came to orient, but that we were the ones, beside them, that had to fight. It was this day in which the red and black kerchiefs began to come out. For the first time everyone began to participate in the fight (María Chavarría, as quoted in Arias, 1981: 154).

As a result of this sort of phenomenon, many people came to think of themselves as “Sandinistas” in a sense other than formal membership in the FSLN. It remains the case that the statement “soy Sandinista” by no means necessarily implies party membership.

One way in which a group can gain hegemony within civil society is to develop broad popular identification with its symbols. The symbol of Sandino has deep popular roots within twentieth-century Nicaraguan experience. One of the main sources of hegemony is based on the FSLN’s identification of its struggle with that of Sandino’s army, those who alone were unwilling to trade their guns for “ten Yankee dollars” (see Palmer, 1988).

It is true that for its first few years the FSLN was a purely closed military vanguard but, according to Jaime Wheelock, new objective conditions in 1973-1974 made it possible to begin to work with other organizations (1986: 66-67). It was the willingness and capacity of the FSLN to direct developments so as to include people from all social groupings (other than the direct confidants of Somoza and the National Guard) that led to the development of pluralism in practice under the leadership of the vanguard party. The formation of three tendencies within the FSLN is often discussed in terms of the desire on the part of the Terceristas to engage in broad alliances in opposition to the other tendencies. Marvin Ortega says indeed that the first call for pluralism was “by the Terceristas with the call for a ‘common front of National Unity’ in 1977—not just of the left” (1986: 18). Yet none of the groupings had ever denied the viability of certain alliances and the necessity to work with numerous organized forces. It is essential to remember that the split was overcome by the formation of the directorate which contained three members from each of the tendencies, in itself a pluralist resolution of the
conflicts of the past. It is instructive that none of the groupings has called for a rejection of the sort of pluralism that the Terceristas initiated.

According to Humberto Ortega the fundamental fact that led to the unity of the tendencies was that for each of them it became evident that they must unite forces "because no one could provoke the breaking (el crack) of the dictatorship by themselves" (Invernizzi et al., 1986: 53). Although Bayardo Arce argues that there is not "pluralism in the vanguard" in ideological terms (Invernizzi et al., 1986: 58), it is clear that the FSLN learned the necessity of uniting a plurality of forces in order to engage in successful political practice.

It was the long vanguard tradition of the FSLN combined with their common struggle with popular forces and even with representatives of the national bourgeoisie and its allies that gave it the controlling position in the final struggle against Somoza. It might thus appear that the only question, once Somoza lost power, was who would seize that power. A traditional understanding of a revolutionary vanguard might suggest that the vanguard should seize state power in order to transform civil society. In the context of a socialist vanguard, which the FSLN has never really denied that it represents, this would suggest that the state power which has maintained a bourgeois civil society should be seized by the vanguard and directed toward the construction of socialism.

However, as noted above, there really was no "bourgeois hegemony" in Somocista Nicaragua. Power within the state was far too personalized to be understood in this sense. Indeed one of the reasons that such a broad-based opposition coalition was possible was that many elements of the bourgeoisie were involved in the ousting of Somoza.

It is easy to move conceptually from the recognition that Somoza and the National Guard were involved in massive repression of the population as a whole to the view that a strong state existed which was headed by Somoza. More serious examination of the situation, however, makes clear that no strong or well-organized state as such existed, though it might make sense to speak of an authoritarian regime. In this sense there was also a political system through which formally organized political power was exercised. Within the political system there was a constitutional form which included a regular system of elections, a division of powers, the protection of constitutional rights, and so on. The political system, however, in the Sandinista view, lost all legitimacy with the electoral farce of 1967. From then on, in Wheelock's words, "it began to be seen clearly that there were two great camps in the country: that of the Somocista dictatorship and the bought-off coalitions of the right on one hand, and, on the other, that of the revolutionary left whose vanguard is the Sandinista Front" (1986: 61). Though not every one shared this view, it prevailed.
Those who hoped for a solution within the political system (seen as the formal rules of the governmental institutions) as well as those who hoped to see a solution at the level of the regime with “Somocismo without Somoza” were equally frustrated. The struggle was at the level of the state itself. Thus the task of the FSLN was not merely to organize a political system, to replace the political power held by the existing regime, but to create a fundamentally new state. This was not a new aspect of the FSLN’s view; they had always been involved in a revolutionary struggle to fundamentally alter social relations in Nicaragua, not merely to get rid of Somoza. José Luis Coraggio describes the situation clearly. He writes, under the heading “Hegemony as Political System,” that:

It is clear that certain capacities and styles for the construction of a new society were prefigured in the struggle for power. In its struggle against Somocismo the FSLN combined the armed struggle with counterhegemonic methods in order to actively accumulate forces and to strengthen its legitimacy and, in defeating the regime to defeat the bourgeoisie in its aspirations of gaining social hegemony “without Somoza” at the same time. After the triumph and as a result of this trajectory space remained open for all social sectors to actively participate in the new national project under the revolutionary hegemony (italics in original) (1985: 36-37).

Many people have wondered why the FSLN did not move immediately to elections after the triumph in 1979, given their clear popular support. In the present context it should be clear that in their view the point was not merely to move forward as the leading force within the existing structure of hegemony, within the state as it already existed, but to fundamentally transform that state. Humberto Ortega points out that this was actually discussed in conversations with U.S. congressional representatives (Invernizzi et al., 1986: 81-82).

Discussion of three fundamental phenomena can help make sense of the practical development of the newly synthesized concepts of pluralism and vanguardism. The first is the creation of practical pluralist structures of government in the form of the Governing Junta of National Reconstruction (with three FSLN and two non-FSLN members) and of the Council of State. These institutions operated from shortly after the triumph in 1979 (the Council of State was established in 1980) and continued to function until the elections of 1984 when they were replaced by an executive headed by an elected President and the new National Assembly respectively. The second is the development of “participatory democracy” especially through the creation of mass-based “popular organizations.” The third is the role of the army and the popular militia as elements that aid in the creation of a popular will and of popular hegemony.
It is important to see that one of the first steps taken by the FSLN was the creation of institutions which were clearly distinct from the FSLN as an entity. As the vanguard the FSLN felt that they were in charge of providing direction in a situation in which there were really few remaining institutions of any sort. When asked about the role of the National Directorate, Bayardo Arce commented:

In the beginning we were deeply involved in everything. Because of the lack of institutions, someone had to decide. The only visible authority, recognized by the revolutionary practice, was the National Directorate. But one of the first things that we did was to define a functional role. Thus a government, a military structure, and a security organization was created. The National Directorate reserved for itself the definition of the general lines for the political economy, military doctrine, agrarian reform and external action (Invernizzi et al., 1986: 42).

It is notable here that the directorate (a party institution) created a government; it did not choose to become the government although it clearly felt sufficiently strong to do so if it wanted to. It is also notable that it did not either dissolve itself or create the FSLN as a party in the first few months.

The first major step taken in creating the government was to form a “Governing Junta of National Reconstruction” in exile in early 1979. Its function was to serve as the new executive organ, a function that it formally exercised following Somoza’s flight from the country. Although its members were effectively chosen by the FSLN directorate, the first junta included two prominent figures from the non-FSLN revolutionary leadership as well as three FSLN representatives. Violeta Barrios de Chamorro (widow of the assassinated editor of La Prensa) and Alfonso Robelo Callejas from the Movimiento Democrático Nicaragüense were the original non-FSLN members. That this was not merely a formal cover for FSLN domination is indicated by the fact that the governing junta operated from its inception on the basis of consensus (apparently meaning unanimity in practice) although only three votes were required to pass a measure in the body. The last non-FSLN representative on leaving the junta commented that it always operated “with mutual respect” (Rafael Córdoba Rivas as quoted in Díaz Castello, 1985: 12). Though its membership rapidly changed with the resignations of Violeta Chamorro and Alfonso Robelo in 1980, it is instructive that they were not simply replaced by FSLN representatives. On the contrary, the positions were occupied by Rafael Córdoba Rivas of the Partido Conservador Demócrata and Arturo Cruz Porras, an international banker and representative of the bourgeois opposition to Somoza.7

From the point of view of making sense of pluralism in connection with the role of the vanguard, what is important about the composition of the junta is that it shows that the FSLN did not merely choose to impose its unilateral
conceptions upon other elements of the revolutionary movement. Even though all of the members of the junta recognized the real control of the FSLN directorate as the “vanguard” (Booth, 1985a: 187), the FSLN clearly used the junta as a way not only of bringing other forces along but also of determining the situation with respect to the views and demands of those outside the FSLN.

The view of the FSLN as a vanguard suggests that it will favor some interests over others. This is explicitly understood to mean that other parties are necessary to represent the less favored interests so that political decision making can function in a manner which takes into account the full range of social interests while continuing to “privilege” some sectors. Bayardo Arce says:

The Sandinista Front knows that it can not represent all sectors of the country equally because we prefer (privilegimos) the worker, laborer, campesino sector. In a society such as ours that is based on political pluralism and the mixed economy, we know that there have to be other interests that need their own political expression (Invernizzi et al., 1986: 90).

Thus the FSLN seems clearly to recognize that pluralism requires the representation of a diversity of interests through autonomous organizations.

The organization of the Council of State which shared legislative authority with the junta from May of 1980 until after the 1984 elections further indicates that the FSLN clearly understands pluralism to require representation of various interests in a number of ways. Pluralist theory requires that organizations exist that can “articulate and aggregate interests” within the political system. The Council of State represented not only political parties and movements (eight in number in 1982-1983) but also “popular organizations,” labor organizations, guilds and social organizations, and private-sector business organizations. Thus a plurality of groups had formal representation, including many that functioned as vocal opponents of the FSLN position within the formal political structure. Pluralism thus had a clear role in the actual development of the political system itself.

It is important to point out that opposition activity was not only a way for the FSLN to come to understand and adapt itself to the views of organized groups within the political system but also that these groups have had clear influence on the actual course of policy. Most notable in this respect is the large role played by the opposition in developing within the Council of State the most fundamental legal structures through which political competition is to be expressed. Both the Law of Political Parties and the Electoral Law were the subject of substantial give and take which resulted in the opposition influencing the final result in a serious manner.
The same has been true of developments since the 1984 elections, even though, or perhaps as a result of which, functional representation no longer exists. In the formation of the Constitution of 1987, numerous hearings were held throughout the country which led to substantial changes in the final document.

The national women’s movement played a substantial role in debates around the constitution and, although they were not successful in obtaining either constitutional provisions or legislation to meet such demands as the legalization of abortion, they certainly played a large role in the development of the policy. Similarly, it is clear that the Unión Nacional de Agricultores y Ganaderos de Nicaragua (National Farmers and Cattlemen’s Union, or UNAG) has had a substantial role in the development of agrarian reform policies with a fundamentally new direction.

In the previous paragraph I have made several references to “mass organizations” that are closely related to the FSLN. At first this might seem to question the genuine pluralist character of these developments. Yet I think serious reflection will show that the promotion of mass organizations by the FSLN is not only consistent with pluralism, but is in some ways its most clear expression. This is especially true in cases where the pro-FSLN mass organizations succeed in making major changes in FSLN policies or proposals. The national women’s movement, Asociación de Mujeres Nicaragüenses “Luisa Amanda Espinosa” (AMNLAE), succeeded in 1983 in obtaining female participation in the Patriotic Military Service in opposition to the proposals of the FSLN in the Council of State. The farmworker’s union, Asociación de Trabajadores del Campo (ATC), was instrumental in obtaining approval for the recognition of land seizures that the FSLN had originally opposed (Mondragón and Decker Molina, 1986: 12).

Two of the fundamental elements of pluralist theory are that no one wins all of the time and that those who are best organized, whose interests are “aggregated and articulated,” have the best chance of obtaining favorable results. Yet if there is any sense in which revolution and pluralism are to be compatible, the fact that interests are not automatically organized must be taken into account. This is especially true for those interests which have been least represented in the previous regime. If a new system of hegemony is to develop which can assure that the least privileged sectors of the old system are to become full participants in the new society, those sectors must be organized. This will not be in the obvious interests of those who benefited from old structures; this can be clearly seen in the fact that when the FSLN expanded the Council of State to represent those previously unrepresented, Alfonso Robelo resigned from the junta. It is in the development of mass
organizations and their function in revolutionary Nicaragua that the synthesis of pluralism and vanguardism is most clear. Here, in the interests of brevity, I will discuss only one example of how this functions, the development of the Comités de Defensa Sandinista (Sandinista Defense Committees, CDS).

The CDS have often been seen by critics of the Nicaraguan revolution as one of the clearest pieces of evidence that the FSLN is creating a totalitarian system in which pluralism has no reality. Yet a careful assessment of the experience of the CDS actually demonstrates the reverse. Perhaps the most significant fact is that by 1988 the CDS are viewed by the FSLN as in need of substantial change, so much so that Omar Cabezas has been assigned to fundamentally reorganize the institution. Critics of the Sandinista Revolution have argued that the CDS are simply a device, organized from the top down, to impose unpopular FSLN policies on the population as a whole. Cabezas holds that the most serious problems of the CDS in practice have been that they are (1) marked by a vertical processing style in which orders are seen as “going down” from the top; (2) too closely identified as an FSLN support group and thus too “sectarian”; and (3) overly bureaucratic in methods and style (oral presentation to LASA Summer Seminar, June 23, 1988).

What critics of Sandinista “pluralism” identify as the features that make CDS instruments of totalitarian control are precisely those that Cabezas seeks to alter by “democratizing” the organization. This is because in fact the role the CDS can properly serve for the FSLN and the Nicaraguan government is to provide input in the form of articulated demands on the government. The FSLN prefers an organization of community participation to an instrument of its own policies. It is not unreasonable to conclude that what they seek to do is to give real life to “mass” organizations so that they can genuinely play the sort of stabilizing role that organized groups normally play in a pluralist system. This requires a substantial degree of autonomy for such organizations, aided by organizing resources from the vanguard, not a tight system of centralized control. This is how a living pluralism must work.

Of course even the most naive and friendly observer of the Nicaraguan Revolution must recognize what its most outspoken critics emphasize most strongly about the reality of the FSLN vanguard, namely, that it has much of its base in the military. What distinguishes the FSLN from all other historical forces in Nicaraguan politics is the fact that it began as a small military vanguard. Hegemony in the struggle was obtained by this vanguard because, not in spite of, its military characteristics. The leaders of the FSLN are known as “commandantes”; the military, the militia, and the police forces are known as “Sandinista.” It is important to see that the merging of the concepts of vanguard and pluralism, through an understanding of the role of hegemony
in every social system, must account for the role of the military as a social and ideological vanguard as well as simply a means of national defense and social control.

It is tempting to suggest that the military aspects of the FSLN would have faded away if it were not for the contra war and direct military threats to the new revolutionary state. To think in this manner, however, as Peter Marchetti points out, is to simply fail to recognize the reality of war that has faced all systems in transition in this century. Revolutionary transformations, especially those involving national liberation, will be opposed by substantial forces which have benefited from the prior regime or which fear the example that the revolution suggests. If we are to make sense of situations such as that in Nicaragua, we must "take the fact of war seriously" (Marchetti, 1986: 305). It is not possible to abstract war or its concomitant military and security organization out of the process of developing and maintaining hegemony in contemporary revolutionary contexts. To do so is to ignore one of the essential features of the phenomenon under consideration.

The substantial military organization in Nicaragua is important not only because it is essential in order to maintain the very existence of the system in which hegemony is possible, but also because it promotes pluralism in its own way. It is important to remember that under Somoza the National Guard came to be seen as clearly separated from the people as a whole. It was not merely a tool of the dictatorship; it was its instantiation. The military struggle against the Somoza regime was a popular one, not merely a confrontation between the FSLN army and its military opponent. The development of armed struggle was not merely the growth of a Sandinista army to confront and replace the National Guard; it was the expression of popular will to create a sovereign Nicaraguan state. Jaime Wheelock points out that the FSLN was "conscious of the fact that it was important not to convert itself into an army but to be the head of an armed people" (1986: 115). With the success of the insurrection it was clear to the FSLN that it was essential to construct a popular army and a security apparatus. As Torres and Coraggio stated:

In the light of other failed revolutionary experiments it was considered that a popular and revolutionary army politically oriented towards the defense of the revolution was a necessary safeguard for the possibility of carrying out an effective democratization and social transformation in Nicaragua (1987: 33).

Thus the point was not simply to put the FSLN military force in charge. It was to create a popular military force. This force was to serve as an instrument of hegemony not only in the simple sense of defending the national sovereignty and militarily eliminating the remains of the old military force, but more importantly in the sense of integrating the people as a whole with a
military force that it could see as its own rather than as the instrument of an internal or external enemy. It is clear that this has been a success. Fear of the army or the police is virtually nonexistent in the population as a whole. The point of the fact that there is a Sandinista army and a Sandinista police is not that they serve as instruments of the FSLN but that they serve as intermediaries between Sandinismo meaning popular support for the general revolutionary practice and Sandinismo as represented by the FSLN as the vanguard.

The development of a popular Sandinista militia which has handed out up to half a million modern weapons to the population organized in local groupings is a similar measure. It not only provides for effective military action against a contra force that emphasizes civilian targets but it provides, as well, for a practical sense of people’s participation in the revolution. To be a member of a militia or the army does not mean that one is a part of the FSLN. Bayardo Arce claims that the most generous estimates would lead to the claim that 12 percent of the army are members of the FSLN. On the other side of the equation, he says that only 59 percent of the members of the FSLN are either reservists or members of the militia (Arce in Invernizzi et al., 1986: 84).

Thus it is flight of fancy or ideologically motivated nonsense to suggest, as do “high level Western diplomats” in “deep background briefings” (the rules of the interview from which these quotes are drawn do not permit further identification of their source), that the FSLN is the army or that the role of the Nicaraguan military is analogous to that of the Salvadoran, Guatemalan, or even Chilean militaries. On the contrary, the Nicaraguan military situation is one that guarantees broad-scale popular participation, even among those who would prefer to abstain. It thus maintains the hegemony of the existing state primarily through its capacity to prevent a fundamental change through military action. In this respect its role is little different from that of the military and the National Guard in a system such as that of the United States. The difference is in the interests that are protected and how the armed forces exercise their role in maintaining hegemony. As one Sandinista helicopter pilot told me, the Nicaraguan military is “proletarian” and therefore doesn’t provide the same level of benefits and respect for its officers as does the military in other countries. What he recognizes is that the structure of the military itself plays a role in the maintenance of hegemony through the creation of attitudes among the military themselves as well as by protecting state power.

This article cannot address all relevant aspects of pluralism or vanguardism in the Nicaraguan Revolution. It has been an attempt to examine a few elements of each as they relate to each other in a dialectical manner which provides much of the vibrancy and dynamic of Nicaraguan political life.
Examination of the Nicaraguan experience shows that the hegemony of a popular revolution in the modern era not only requires a vanguard which consciously constructs a series of policies but also that popular hegemony can be promoted by the operation of pluralism within the political and social order to provide that vanguard with guidance about possible directions for action. Whether there is a conscious group (the vanguard as the “power elite”) which maintains hegemony and directs political developments in the advanced industrialized countries that constitute the original model for pluralism is a question far beyond the scope of this analysis, but it is clear that this is conceptually possible. What is occurring in Nicaragua, and probably in other revolutionary movements including the Salvadoran one, is a merging of the concepts of pluralism and vanguardism in the practice of developing a consciously structured system of “popular” hegemony which works in a pluralist manner.

NOTES

1. Such a position was expressed to me in interviews with Milu Vargas, legal counsel for the National Assembly; Omar Cabezas, guerrilla commander and coordinator of the Comités de Defensa Sandinista (Sandinista Defense Committees, or CDS); and Marvin Ortega of Itziani, a major research institution.

2. For example of such an analysis see Nolan (1984). Nolan was a foreign service officer in the U.S. Embassy until being declared persona non grata along with the U.S. Ambassador and a number of his colleagues in 1988.

3. Milu Vargas, Director of Legal Affairs for the National Assembly, estimates about 11,000 (oral presentation to LASA Taskforce on Nicaragua and Central America Summer Seminar, June 20, 1988, Managua). It is interesting that the U.S. Embassy estimates the number to be substantially higher. It seems safe to accept the lower estimates as more accurate. It is difficult to obtain estimates for the number of “aspirantes” who have not obtained “militante” status but it is safe to assume that they are not sufficiently numerous to make the FSLN a mass organization in any sense.

4. The concept of vanguard is widely used in Nicaragua to refer to those who are “advanced” workers, those who, for example, demonstrate high levels of productivity. Prizes are given for the “vanguard” units in productive enterprises. In at least one case “vanguard workers” in a state farm were those chosen to receive newly built housing units. Thus not all those labeled as “vanguard” are militantes but it is clear that militantes must be in the vanguard.

5. There is some dispute as to whether the fact that there was no single leader appointed as general secretary was a conscious choice to avoid unipersonal leadership. Díaz Castillo (1985) suggests that Carlos Fonseca and Sandino were named the chief leaders because they had already died. Humberto Ortega seems to share the view that this was a conscious choice but Jaime Wheelock seems to argue that this was a historical result which would not have been produced if Fonseca had lived and that the nine-person directorate was a peculiar result of the reuniting of the three tendencies into which the FSLN had been split (Invernizzi et al., 1986: 36-40). The
directorrate, formed in March of 1979, still has the same members. They are Daniel Ortega, Humberto Ortega, and Víctor Tirado López (all three from the Terceristas), Tomás Borge, Henry Ruiz and Bayardo Arce (Guerra Popular Prolongada, or Prolonged Popular War Tendency), and Jaime Wheelock, Luis Carrón, and Carlos Núñez (Tendencia Proletaria, or Proletarian Tendency).

6. For the “political system-regime-state” system of categories used here, see Torres-Rivas (1985). While the present project does not allow for an extensive elaboration of these concepts, I believe that they are extremely useful in making sense of actual political developments within the context of political change.

7. A good brief history of the formal governmental developments from 1979 through 1984 is provided in John Booth (1985b: 29-44).

8. This should not be taken to imply that the Guard was only recruited from existing elites. On the contrary, many of its recruits came from the most humble campesino backgrounds. Somoza himself was not of sufficiently high social status to be admitted to the exclusive La Terraza club. However, once recruited, members of the Guard were intentionally isolated from their fellow citizens economically and socially.

9. It is interesting to note that the FSLN originally saw its opponent simply as Somoza but later came to think of the opponent as U.S. imperialism itself.

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