

*Nicaragua, story of a forgotten country*

***Once upon a time the revolution***

*Twenty years ago, the Sandinistas overthrew the dictator Somoza. It seemed the beginning of a new era, but it was only the last roar of the 1968 generation. Today, a nation of children (more than half population is underage) has with no prospects for the future. Also because the past is just hypocrisy*

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Acahualinca has always been the worst area of Managua. The name of indigenous origin, seems to indicate an eruption of lava, the presence of a volcano. But if one day there was lava, today there are mud and excrement. "*No botar la basura*" (do not throw garbage) is written on the wall: an ironic invitation for those who live there.

The garbage trucks work together with "basureros" garbage-men, sad artists of separate collection of rubbish.

Naked children splash in puddles, waiting to follow, like a little festive parade, another load of waste: something will be, and another day will be past.

Not far away, there is the barrio "Vida Nueva", the district was rebuilt after the hurricane "Mitch". The houses are all the same: small, grey, they look still under construction.

On the other hand there is a nice basketball court, paved rectangle in the middle of a large green ground. "*Obras, no palabras*" the poster says, signed by Arnaldo Aleman, liberal president elected in 1996.

"Works, not words." A slogan in reverse: many, too many words spent about this nation, while the reality was (and is) always elsewhere, always distant, ineffable, incomprehensible.

Nicaragua was blown up for eleven years with ideological rhetoric, because it represented, for better or for worse, the last refuge of the revolutionary utopia before the Big Chill. The Nineties. The end of ideology. For somebody, even the end of history (and this nonsense, signed Francis Fukuyama, spread all over the world).

In Nicaragua, history seems to end, or start (depending on your point of view), in 1990, with the resounding electoral defeat of the Sandinistas, for eleven years in power, and the affirmation of Violeta Chamorro, leader of an unlikely coalition of 14 parties, named "UNO" (Unión Nacional Opositora).

Since that time, Nicaragua has got out of the spotlight of world public opinion to become an insignificant country, newsworthy only for natural disasters (a constant, here). In fact, the first impression is that of a poor, melancholic country that you might confuse with many others.

A couple of "guerrilla" monuments are not sufficient to characterize a city, Managua, neither old nor new, neither bad nor good. Poverty can be seen, of course, but it tends to thin out on huge spaces: there are few people, in both urban and rural areas, and so little movement, little life.

It is as if Nicaragua hids. A feeling that is becoming increasingly a certainty for the journalist who stubbornly tries to get an idea, to come to some conclusion. Presence and absence, truth and fiction, you hear everything and its opposite. The republic of ambiguity.

A student who works at the university library in Managua tries to explain this double reality with the "gueguense" tradition, namely plays of natives, who, presenting themselves in a grotesque fashion, actually mocked the conquistadors, the masters, who laughing at the actors, laughed at themselves.

But beyond the literature, the answers come from history, that does not begin with Violeta, or with the Sandinistas, or with Somoza, the great dictator.

Nicaragua is an always incredibly conflicting country, able to fight about everything, and whose ruling classes was always willing to resort to any means to ensure success.

Independence, in 1821, immediately sees the division between republicans and monarchists. One part wants to join Mexico, another Guatemala. In 1823 there is the first coup, and soon after, the

first civil war. Since that moment, a crazy unspeakable story starts: Nicaragua has at times simultaneously also two governments and four constitutions. Governments dissolve the assemblies, assemblies dismiss governments. The constitutions are changed as if they were waste-paper. Every political issue ends in gunfire. You sign an agreement and soon after begin to shoot. All nationalists, however, *todos caballeros*.

Every leader fills his mouth with national pride. Almost a fad, that of the Fatherland, also sung by the great Nicaraguan poet Ruben Darò, one of the greatest Latin American authors: "If small is one's country, great ones dream it/ My illusion and my desires, and my hopes / tell me there is not little country ..."

Yet, in 1855, an American adventurer, William Walker, was elected president: with a few hundred men he had managed to "win" one of the many internal wars. And in 1912, President Diaz did not hesitate to call to his aid the marines, who remained in the country until 1925.

The direct military intervention of the United States, to support one or the other faction (the clash was between conservatives and liberals) was the cause of the guerrillas led by General Augusto Cesar Sandino.

As honest as the day long, Sandino. Limited culture, not a statesman, not an ideologue, perhaps even not a great strategist. But he was consistent, honest, clear as crystal. "I do not sell myself and I do not give up: they must win me", he said. And also: "There are men who believe, because they live well, that is crazy to sacrifice for the collective good".

Sandino believed in it, even if his main (not to say the only) goal was to redeem Nicaragua from servility to the United States. He naively fell into a trap set by his great rival, Anastasio Somoza, commander of the National Guard invented by Americans, after reaching an agreement. There is an amazing picture that shows them embracing: Somoza, the murderer, tall and fat, in a uniform that looks like a policeman; Sandino, the victim, small and thin, with his broad-brimmed hat, the boots and cartridge belt. It is perhaps the most emblematic image of this country, even if it dates back to 1934. Sandinistas and Somozistas bound in a deadly embrace, the one of violence, authentic material constitution of Nicaragua.

For forty years, Somoza family ruled the nation, to be considered personal property in Nicaragua. The power passes from Anastasio to his son Luis, and from this to his brother, another Anastasio. But the insurgency is getting stronger and more widespread. A larger sectors of society join Sandinista guerrillas, started in 1962. The repression becomes brutal and indiscriminate. U.S. President Jimmy Carter accept no more to cover Nicaraguan dictator, who digs his own grave with a double murder, that of Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, editor of "Prensa", in 1978, and that of Bill Stewart, an American journalist, in 1979.

Pedro Joaquin Chamorro, Violeta's husband, is the bourgeois opposition to Somoza. He had a huge reputation (of which his wife will benefit), his newspaper openly defied the dictator. His funeral will be the most watched in the history of Nicaragua.

The vast majority of people side with the Sandinistas, and on July 17, 1979, when Somoza, now isolated and abandoned by Washington, goes into exile, Managua explodes into a memorable celebration. The miracle happened: the revolutionary guerrilla, one of the least strong and organized in Central America, won.

Nicaragua, for once, seems united by the fall of the tyrant, the common enemy.

But since that moment, everything starts to be double. There are a double interpretation of the Sandinista period, a double assessment of that experience, an ambiguous legacy of the revolution. For the left, a generous and even naive attempt to build a democracy based on social justice was choked by a dirty war of aggression perpetrated by the United States, namely, by President Reagan, a champion of ultra-conservative right.

For the right, the hegemony attempt of the Sandinistas was to build a Cuban-style regime: Sandinistas have stifled promised freedom and ruined the economy, they contributed to the division of the country and they felt more or less like all the communist regimes in Europe. This is what is repeated at all levels, from the intellectual to the *campesino*, from politician to the beggar. Opposing opinions, schizophrenic versions, regardless of cultural and social level.

However, a great incentive to go beyond the clichés.

The first concerns the war. People like Ken Loach (director of "Carla's Song") has no doubts: on the one hand poor and noble people, with the Sandinistas; on the other, an army of supporters of Somoza, funded by the CIA. But then you can meet a number of poor peasants who tell you that many of them, in the eighties, were with the notorious "Contras" (short for *Contrarevolución*). When testimonies multiply, doubts increase. How is it possible? After the agrarian reform, the crusade for literacy, free education and health service, how can we explain such a phenomenon? For the "orthodox" Sandinistas (see the interview with Bayardo Arce) is not explained.

For the critical Sandinistas (considered "traitors"), like Sergio Ramirez, author of "*Adiós muchachos*", which is the literary case of the year in Nicaragua, there is some possible explanation. The issue of land, for example. For the Sandinistas, the land was to be state property, used by cooperatives ("*Unidades de Producción Agropecuaria*"), and not divided among the peasants, who did not have access to individual ownership. "It was a mistake that would cost blood - Sergio Ramirez writes - because the revolution, violating the most sacred promises, produced the first of its great disappointments."

Ramirez, which is one of the historical leaders of the Sandinistas, admits that the revolutionary elite, for its socio-cultural origin, could not fully recognize the needs of a deep rural society tied to tradition. The most emblematic case was that of Mizkito Natives, a small Anglophone ethnic group of the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua, who fought against Sandinistas to defend their autonomy. "A war can not be imposed only from outside, even from the United States - says a member of the Catholic Church - it is demonstrated by the example of Vietnam".

As seen in the context of the Cold War, the conflict of the eighties is yet another civil war in Nicaragua, even if old school Sandinistas will never admit it. As they will never admit that, while the war bled the country, preventing it from reaching at least the major social results obtained from the Castroism in Cuba, it tremendously strengthened the power of the party leaders and of the party on society, but alienating the consent of most people.

At the time of the 1990 electoral defeat, the Sandinistas controlled virtually everything: army, police, trade unions, media. The transition was slow and difficult, and it is not over yet. It is at this stage that the most blatant betrayal of the revolution ideals occurs: with the approval of special laws 85, 86 and 88, gone down in history as the laws of the *pinata*. With these laws, the Sandinistas officially protected property confiscated and redistributed during the revolution. More concretely safeguarded their personal wealth.

The guerrillas grown up in Marxist - Leninist philosophy, disgraced themselves just on private property. The senior management of the SNLF (Sandinista National Liberation Front) joined the Nicaraguan wealthy families (the Chamorros, the Lacayos, etc.). Only the undisputed leader of the party and the revolution, Daniel Ortega seems to have kept out of the "feast", but in return his brother Humberto, the head of the army until 1995, now a successful entrepreneur in Costa Rica, made a lot of money.

About property (land, buildings, businesses) an endless litigation was opened, going on for ten years. In the total uncertainty of the law (which is prevalent at all levels), the strongest prevails, of course (there are former owners who sought and obtained U.S. citizenship in order to "defend" better themselves).

The countryside, which has enormous potential for a population of only five million inhabitants, is in an incredible state of disrepair. Arnaldo Aleman is an unrepresentable president: as mayor of Managua first and head of state then, he has increased his personal wealth of 900 percent, according to a survey of "Controlor".

But Daniel Ortega does not press him about the judicial and moral issue, because he used immunity to avoid the trial brought by his partner's daughter, Zoilamerica Narvaez Murillo, who accuses him of having raped her when she was a girl. Although he has not changed one iota the tones of revolutionary leader, and attitudes (FSLN looks like a police station, closed to all visitors and guarded by soldiers armed with machine guns) Ortega adopts a policy based on pacts with the government contemptuously defined "Somozista".

Considering the moral neglect and the ambiguity of the Sandinista leaders (the others, the Liberals are not even to be taken into account), it is no surprise that Nicaragua is backward-looking, without ideas and without any particular models for future.

It is a huge gap, which is particularly pronounced in the foundations of society: family, school and church.

Nicaraguan Catholic Church is represented perfectly, at a top level, by Cardinal Obando y Bravo, the mediator of the mediators, unable to go beyond an endemic (pro-government) moderation. At a basic level, if there was ever the generous impulse of the Theology of Liberation, one wonders where it went. Priests are very few, people religiosity is one of the dullest of Latin American. Nicaragua is truly a land of mission.

Education is the problem number one: if Sandinistas incredibly blown up the results of the "literacy crusade" and the school for everybody, the neoliberal policies of the last decade have ditched what remains the first and most important factor in development of a nation.

But the deep discomfort of Nicaragua is expressed within the family.

"It is the absence of a father figure that have a decisive influence more than any other", said UNICEF's Norwegian representative for Nicaragua Bernt Aasen. The family is often made up of a young mother, children and occasional companions. De facto unions are a traditional constant, as it is traditional maintaining relationships with several women, even an official one, and other "unofficial", with legitimate and natural children.

The legacy of the history concerns the latest generation of teenagers who fought and had political and social responsibilities in the eighties (Sandinistas lowered the legal age to 16 years). A burned generation. Grown up earlier, indoctrinated by the revolutionary epic, thirties generation today is unable to handle normally. Their problems are exacerbated by an unemployment rate that reaches peaks of seventy percent. They are fathers unable to be a model. The betrayal of the revolutionary spirit is also the betrayal of a generation, that of the fifties, the heroes of the guerrilla struggle. A similar process occurred in Europe with the activists in the 1968 protest movement, who integrated seamlessly into the dominant model, yet afford to give life lessons reminding "those formidable years".

Twenty years old generation, in Nicaragua, contrary to what happens to us, continue to listen to them. At least guys like those of "Sandinista Youth" in Jinotepe. Prepared, excited, curious, "tough." Perhaps too little critical of their "fathers". Perhaps a little dazed by the myths of the past. Maybe they need to assist the third consecutive defeat of SNLF (elections of 2001) so they decide to fire those who continue to feel irreplaceable and they are not, those who continue to be revolutionary in words and more realistic in facts. In any case, you can trust this generation.

**Cesare Sangalli**

*Meeting with Bayardo Arce, Sandinista leader*

## **Ripped off by the "Viper"**

Disconcerting. This is the feeling of facing the person and what he says. Bayardo Arce, 50, has always been in the hall of the buttons of the revolution, namely, the Directorate-General of the party. He is one of the "Group of Nine", the nine leaders who led the guerrillas to victory against Somoza. But he does not communicate the soldier pride, and never gives in to the temptation to romanticize the past. Or maybe he does, but in the way you do not expect. He talks about the Sandinistas as a "tropical Marxism", presenting a moderate view of the revolution: they wanted "a pluralistic society", "mixed economy", "with the guarantees of individual rights" and "alliances with all countries". Reagan would have struggled against a nascent social democracy, precisely because he did not want that model, and not a new Cuba, placed in Central America. Idealistic revolutionary or penitent moderate? How to define who judges a "romantic" idea that poor

people should vote for the left? A former communist guerrilla whose children study in private and Catholic schools? Needless to seek answers. The commander Arce, like he is still called, is elusive, like all Sandinista leadership.

**We start from the unexpected defeat in the elections of 1990. How do you explain it, after some time?**

The key factor in the defeat is that the resilience of Nicaraguan people, after six years of U.S. aggression, had reached a limit. People were exhausted by war. President Bush made clear that if we had won the elections, there would be no peace. And still we were defeated by a slender margin, the country was essentially split in two.

**And the defeat in the elections of 1996? The war was now just a memory ...**

In 1996 there were blatant fraud. Of course, Aleman had a slice of the electorate on his side, but at least we had to go to the second ballot. Then there was the support of the Church, through Cardinal Obando y Bravo, who, while the election campaign was already closed, celebrated a Mass attended by Aleman, telling the now famous "parable of the viper" (an invented parable, in which a man who helped a wounded snake, is bitten, however, because the viper can not deny its nature - an allusion to the Sandinistas - author's note). The Mass was broadcast on television and the homily of Obando greatly influenced the people, given the low cultural level of most people ..

**But was it not normal to expect in a so poor country that after six years of liberal policies, people would have opted for a radical change?**

The idea that poor people should automatically vote for the left is a romantic idea ... Otherwise the left ruled around the world .. (The objection that poor people in Western countries are a minority is not worthwhile, author's note). And then there is a backward mentality that has not changed, because it takes a long time to change it ... Not all people's choices are understandable. Think there are people who die rather than to accept a blood transfusion ... (I guess he alludes to the Jehovah's Witnesses, author's note)

**Do you agree with those who say that if Daniel Ortega will run for a third time, the Sandinistas have no chance of winning the election?**

R - I do not know, it is premature to talk about the presidential candidacy. First, we have to deal with the municipal elections of 2000. The outcome of this election will certainly affect the debate on the presidential candidacy. The fact remains that today, Daniel Ortega is the most charismatic leader throughout Nicaragua, and not just of the SNLF.

**Do you believe that there are alternatives to the dominant cultural model, that of U.S. consumerism?**

R-During the revolution we faced the problem of how to escape to the North American cultural model. But we were already late, because history, with the spread of "mass media", went in the opposite direction. You could not prevent this process. We tried to live with. I have not even tried to indoctrinate my children. They are simply different from us, belong to another age. They are the Internet generation ...