Flawed strategies planted seeds of Sandinista defeat

The Sandinistas' strategy of reaching upward, outward and to the right eroded their class and popular support inside Nicaragua. Since Sandinista policies pandered to the elites as the "new realism," there was little to hold the less-committed Sandinista supporters: they could not be expected to follow the labyrinth and the 180-degree policy shifts — in the hope that they would find the golden chance in an uncertain future—particularly since the Sandinista byways were leading toward orthodox market-oriented austerity programs.

Falling between two chairs: Retaining elements of private-property ownership is sensible, particularly in underdeveloped societies with a substantial petty commodity class, but neither worked: the elites absorbed subsidies, exported hard-currency earnings, fired workers, and cut wages. The Sandinistas' strategy of reaching upward, outward and to the right eroded their class and popular support inside Nicaragua. Since Sandinista policies pandered to the elites as the "new realism," there was little to hold the less-committed Sandinista supporters: they could not be expected to follow the labyrinth and the 180-degree policy shifts — in the hope that they would find the golden chance in an uncertain future—particularly since the Sandinista byways were leading toward orthodox market-oriented austerity programs.

The last and somewhat bizarre effort of the Sandinistas to follow in the footsteps of their Western adversaries was the election of 1988. The Sandinistas' strategy of reaching downward, inward and to the left failed to gain U.S. support while strengthening the opposition and weakened the Sandinista national constituency. President Daniel Ortega's freeing of Somocista and contra terrorists created popular disaffection. Apart from the injustice felt by the victims, it must have demoralized Sandinista supporters who had been fighting the war to encounter their assassins on the streets and killing out leaflets in the electoral campaign.

The pattern of opposing and then conceding opposition positions was repeated throughout the period leading up to the elections: the extensively documented U.S. financing of military and financial intervention in Nicaraguan politics was first denounced and then accepted. No other regime—West, East, North or South—has allowed media and political groups supporting external armed intervention to receive funds and to function publicly. The decision to allow the U.S. to bankroll UNO's political campaign was merely the culmination of this policy.

These unilateral internal concessions were matched by a similar external process. In the so-called peace process, Nicaragua accepted minute scrutiny of its electoral process, while Guatemala and El Salvador's bloodletting was passed over and the contras were not demobilized. Once again, the populace was marginalized as concessions to overseas elites took primacy. After years of urging the Nicaraguan people to support the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FNLN) in El Salvador, Ortega signed a statement describing the Cristiani regime as "the true front of the National Liberation Movement." The Sandinista policy was geared to ending the U.S. blockade, its policy fell between two chairs: it failed to gain U.S. support while strengthening its internal adversaries. While the FSLN won victories (in small scale) over the contras (by 1989, the contras were being paid off with U.S. aid), it did little to strengthen its own popular base.

The making of the revolution: The Nicaraguan revolution took place in a poor country and sustained a decade-long destructive war with an intransigent imperialist power. The pressures of war and economic necessity forced difficult choices on the revolutionary leadership. Strategies designed to consolidate that revolution helped undermine it. The results were tragic not only for Nicaragua and Central America but for progressive forces everywhere.

Yet the struggle for state power in Nicaragua continued. The old ruling class has regained a portion of power, namely control over the political regime, but urban and rural working people are still the dominant force in civil society, as well as in the popular army, the judiciary and the police. Given Ortega's embrace of electoral politics and free-market economics, it should not be difficult to negotiate and perhaps reach some formula for power-sharing.

In the Third World, U.S. interventions have produced only detours to popular revolutions. But delayed transformations in which nationalist, democratic and social demands converge become more radical. U.S.-installed electoral regimes have been unable to resolve fundamental contradictions, whether it is Jose Napoleon Duarte in El Salvador or Corazon Aquino in the Philippines. On the contrary, such interventions have accelerated deep-seated economic problems. Brent, with almost one-third of the labor force now unemployed, is paradigmatic of the outcome of U.S. intervention. Nicaragua's electoral outcome is a setback in the larger historical process, but it is temporary and partial. 

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The Pogo fallacy: Blaming the genes and not the system

Suddenly it becomes a lot clearer, doesn’t it, that the Enemy isn’t Us? Not unless we’re to blame for trying to survive in the World As It Is. The Enemy is The Bank, isn’t it, the system. Corporate imperialism is a blight uncontrolled will to profit will be served even if it means the death of the planet? And its apologists. Like Pogo. The media whores for those who see themselves as having marched away to the gas ovens that WERE the Enemy. Our hearts are the problem, in short that ITS ALL OUR FAULT.

Is there no let in the victims of the Barou’s war on the Earth? Not to emulaw us even to name the Enemy? Can’t do that, can we? Safer to blame ourselves.

—Tom Revelli, Is Pogo Public Enemy #1?

The trouble with Pogo-ism (“We have met the enemy and he is Us”) is it allot the blame without any sense of proportion. Environmentalists are particularly guilty of Pogo-ism. Look in any major magazine. The story of the judicious killing of the Peace Pigeon peacefully was asked: where do we go from here?

Bill (Death of Nature) McKibben answered that we need a little more humility and a lot less self-sure and humbler attitude toward the rest of creation. And we must do it quickly.” Thanks, Bill. Petra Kelly, from the West German Green movement, suggested that “the problem is not the atom bomb, but the hearts of people.” Kirkpatrick Sale took the view that “the task for the late 1980s ... is nothing less than to begin the long process of changing our culture;” and James Howard Kunstler called “the Earth is not being destroyed by the industrialists alone; it is being destroyed by every consumer: we must renew our families and our communities. We must remake the local economies of household and community.”

Usually, when people go on in this sort of style, the next thing you hear is the word Empowerment. Now once upon a time there was a perfectly good word, Power. They had it, and we wanted it. In moments of revolutionary upsurge we seized it, or tried to. Victor Serge once wrote a novel called The Birth of Our Power.

Then, one sad day, we didn’t want power anymore. We wanted empowerment. The Birth of Our Empowerment. It doesn’t sound very good, does it? What does it mean? Still don’t know. So far as I can see, the notion of empowerment is an offshoot of the self-realization movement and probably, if you go back far enough, primal-scream therapy. Every time you see the word empowerment substitute power and see how it holds up.

Ralph Nader, whom I greatly admire, is partly to blame. He uses the phrase citizen empowerment a lot. But at least Ralph means something serious. He’s talking about power, and he knows who the enemy is. Not us but them, the corporations.

The trouble with Pogo-ism and with the idea of empowerment is that they imply we’re playing on a level field. We are all equally The Enemy and if we all equally empower ourselves, then suddenly the enemy will no longer be Us. In fact, there’ll be no Enemy and Us will hold power.

This is all folly, of course. As Tom Revelli points out, most of us are only less than Us. The damage is being inflicted by capitalists and their elected functionaries at the federal, state and local level who are not just empowered—they hold power. Capitalists and their political representatives love to spread the blame. In the mid-’80s Daniel Patrick Moynihan, now the senior U.S. senator from New York, declared himself so wonderfully to the powerful (notice the difference between the empowered and the truly powerful) by saying that black people hadn’t somehow brought it all on themselves.

Blacks weren’t, Moynihan suggested, poorer, more unemployed, less healthy, worse educated, more ill-housed, less long-lived than white folk because they were the victims of a racist and exploitative class system. No. The lay flat in something called The Crisis of the Black Family. It was all their fault.

Powerful people loved to hear Moynihan say this. They called him brave and unafraid to challenge conventional wisdom. In other words, he was telling them exactly what they wanted to hear and he was empowering them to leave their own misery to.

In the olden times, powerful people used to explain away viable injustice by saying that if the world were fairer God wanted things to be. At my school we used to sing a hymn called “All Things Bright and Beautiful.” One of the verses went like this: The rich man in his castle, The poor man at his gate, God made them high and lowly. He ordered their estate.

In other words, when God was handing out empowerment cheats, most people drew short straws.

The modern version of God’s disposing hand is genetic destiny: the fault, dear Caesar, lies not in our stars but in our genes. Some blacks and 50 percent for whites. Do you say that’s because of genetic susceptibility or because of limited access to health care for blacks? Blacks get the dirtiest and most dangerous jobs in industry, working, for example, on the top side of coke ovens, living in close proximity to mills, with maximum exposure to point-source discharge of atmospheric effluents, so they have high cancer rates.

Now, as regards these TB infections, at an early stage cells called macrophages, mop up invading bacteria, prior to the first immune response. And at that point there may be differences between macrophage response between blacks and whites. But in the end the macrophages do not reflect a wide range of prior considerations—including stress, poverty, nutrition—which is simplistic in the extreme, and to say there’s genetically determined is nonsensical.”

So, Epstein said, it was all very well for those four doctors to match their black and white populations at the time of the study, but there was in the study no consideration of a wide range of those prior variables: where had the black people in the nursing home grown up at? What had they worked? What had their income levels been compared to similar indices for the white patients?

When you think about all this for a minute, you see that the custom of “empowerment” is an offshoot of the self-realization movement; it was a study that assumed that black people growing up in Arkansas in the ’20s and ’30s were, by the time they entered an old persons’ nursing home, on average par in terms of physical resilience to elderly white persons from the same state. Phoey to Pogo-ism. Power had already taken its toll.

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