

Chávez, Daniel. *Nicaragua and the Politics of Utopia. Development and Culture in the Modern State*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2015. Print. 363 pp.

JOSÉ MARÍA MANTERO
XAVIER UNIVERSITY

The recent work *Nicaragua and the Politics of Utopia. Development and Culture in the Modern State* by Daniel Chávez offers a timely study of recent Nicaraguan history and the distinct cultural and political manifestations of national utopian projects. As ambitious, grounded, and well-documented as the study is, the work would have benefited from a more Central and Latin American contextualization of utopia, the central theme and theory of the analysis. Essays and poems by Simón Bolívar, José Martí, Pedro Henríquez Ureña, Enrique Rodó, José Carlos Mariátegui, and works such as *La raza cósmica* (1925) by José Vasconcelos and the poem “Salutación del optimista” from *Cantos de vida y esperanza* (1905) by Rubén Darío, for example, call for a defense of Latin American identity and for the construction of an America where no one nation was subjugated by another and the influence of the United States in national and international affairs was offset by the strength of a continental consciousness. In all, *Nicaragua and the Politics of Utopia. Development and Culture in the Modern State* is a valuable contribution to the field of Nicaraguan and Latin American studies that combines the study of lesser-known documents (the inauguration speeches of the Anastasio Somoza García and Violeta Chamorro, for example) with an analysis of the work of cultural and literary icons such as Gioconda Belli and Ernesto Cardenal.

Published works focusing on Nicaraguan history, politics, and literature/culture have fallen a bit off of the academic radar since the re-election (and subsequent re—re—election) of Daniel Ortega as president in 2016 and his cozying up to neoliberal economic interests represented by overseas companies vying for the construction of the Nicaraguan interoceanic canal and far from the grand social and economic programs proposed by administrations of the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) during the 1980’s. Upon the victory of the Sandinista revolution in 1979, a number of important works were published that centered on *la nueva Nicaragua* and the viability of new social, political and economic programs. In the 1980’s, for example, works such as *Sandino’s Daughters* (1981) and *Christians in the Nicaraguan Revolution* (1983) by Margaret Randall, *The Ideology of the Sandinistas in the Nicaraguan Revolution* (1985), *Sandinismo, marxismo, cristianismo en la nueva Nicaragua* (1986) by Giulio Girardi, *Intellectual Foundations of the Nicaraguan Revolution* (1986) by Donald Hodges and *The New Concept*

of *Art and Popular Culture Since the Revolution in 1979* (1989) by Wes Craven, for example, delved into the sea change undergone across the nation during that decade. With the electoral defeat of the FSLN in 1990 at the hands of Violeta Chamorro and the Unión Nacional Opositora (UNO), studies such as *Entre la poesía y la pared* (1994) by Klaas Wellinga, *Nicaragua en busca de su identidad* (1995) edited by Frances Kinloch Tijerino, *Rascally Signs in Sacred Places* (1995) by David Whisnant, and *The Grimace of Macho Ratón* (1999) by Les W. Field evaluated the transformation of cultural policies and politics across Nicaragua and the continued existence of a revolutionary ideology in the face of what was in 1990 a stunning electoral loss. Since 2000, monographs on Nicaraguan culture and identity have waned due, in part, to the perception that the country is gradually finding a certain stability and that revolutionary ideals have been co-opted by the corruption, back-room deals, and administrations of Arnoldo Alemán (1996-2002), Enrique Bolaños (2002-2007), and Daniel Ortega (2007-currently). To this end, works such as *Women and Guerrilla Movements* (2002) by Karen Kampwirth, *Cinema and the Sandinistas* (2005) by Jonathan Buchsbaum, and *Memorias y escritura de Nicaragua* (2010) by Gema Palazón Sáez have centered on studying discrete elements of contemporary Nicaraguan culture that transcend mere political or literary analysis.

There has also been a renewed interest in first-person narratives, as literary figures such as Sergio Ramírez, Gioconda Belli and Ernesto Cardenal, for example, have penned their memoirs and autobiographies, and individuals such as Mónica Baltodano have begun compiling and publishing interviews and conversations. The four-volume collection published by Baltodano, for example, *Memorias de la lucha sandinista* (2010-2013), effectively documents the birth and subsequent transformation of the FSLN and the Sandinista uprising of 1977.

To that end, *Nicaragua and the Politics of Utopia* dovetails nicely with the body of work on Nicaraguan political and cultural history and offers a provocative application of utopian concepts to distinct national policies and cultural artifacts. Divided into seven chapters, an introduction and conclusion, the volume examines the legacies left by subsequent presidential administrations from Anastasio Somoza García (1937-1956) to the most recent reification of Daniel Ortega (2007) and relates these to the construction of a national utopia. The first chapter, “A Tale of Three Utopias and One Dictatorship,” approaches the construction of a national conservative utopia by Anastasio Somoza García and reviews cultural and counter-cultural reactions to this project as represented by the poetry of José Coronel Urtecho and Pablo Antonio Cuadra, for example. Chapter 2, “Market Dreams and the Transnationalization of Nicaraguan Politics and Literature,” analyzes political events in Nicaragua during the 1940’s, 50’s and 60’s—particularly the political transition of power in 1956

when Anastasio Somoza García was assassinated and his eldest son Luis became president—and the role of literature on the national scene. Chapter 3, “The Lion in Tropical Winter,” examines the birth of the FSLN and the emergence of a revolutionary consciousness and opposition to the Somoza dictatorship, particularly the role of culture and literature in the dissemination of an alternative (read “authentic”) national identity. Chapter 4, “Nature, Gender, and Development in Sandinista Nicaragua” traces the development of a revolutionary utopia after the victory of the Sandinista revolution in 1979 and uses the poetry of Gioconda Belli to exemplify the intended transformation of gender roles and relationships in post-revolutionary Nicaragua. The next two chapters, “Cultural Warfare I” and “Cultural Warfare II” describe the internal conflicts of the FSLN, particularly as they applied to revolutionary leadership, cultural policies, and the development of a Nicaraguan cinema beholden to—yet, paradoxically, also striving to be independent from—political programs and discourses. The final chapter, “Democracy without Dreams,” brings the analysis into the present and examines the application of neoliberal ideals by the post-1990 presidential administrations of Violeta Chamorro (1990-1997), Arnoldo Alemán (1997-2002), Enrique Bolaños (2002-2007), and Daniel Ortega (president since 2007), the respective contribution of each to the construction of a national utopia, and the reaction of Nicaraguan writers to these efforts and to the ever-changing tide of national reconstruction.

It is difficult to overlook the work that Chávez has invested in this project, collating and organizing materials that range from the political history of Nicaragua to the role of Nicaraguan contemporary literature in nation-building and an examination of Nicaraguan cinema, particularly during the Sandinista years (1979-1990). His insights into current events are complemented by his deft handling of the various types of search for a Nicaraguan identity and its requisite social, political, economic, and cultural manifestations. The explication of his theoretical base for the term “utopia” at the beginning of the work is especially useful in light of the multiple—and often contradictory—definitions offered by theorists throughout the years. His use of presidential campaign speeches and addresses to illustrate discrete moments in the expression of a national utopia are especially valuable, particularly as these texts are studied alongside numerous poems and novels. Chávez also offers effective summaries of principal national political and cultural movements, of the literacy campaign (undertaken by the Sandinista government in 1980), and abundant documentation regarding Nicaraguan films and the classification of poems by Pablo Antonio Cuadra and Ernesto Cardenal as these relate to the construction of a national *weltanschauung*. The conclusion is to be especially noted, as it presents a brief but efficient summary (seven pages) of the principal points of the monograph

and offers possible avenues of further exploration (the future role of Mexico and the United States, for example, in contributing to the stability of Central American nations).

As exhaustive as the study is, however, a number of the supporting themes hint at a few indispensable elements of “the politics of utopia” in Nicaragua and deserve a more precise contextualization, particularly those sections that establish the theoretical center of the monograph and enter into dialogue with national cultural policies, production, and artifacts. There is copious analysis of the Literacy Campaign inaugurated by the FSLN in 1980, for example, but there is no mention of the Literacy Campaigns begun in 2007 and 2012 by the current Sandinista administrations (ideological successors, some would argue, to the same literacy campaign begun three decades earlier). There is also a passing reference to the three Sandinista factions that fought the revolution—the *Guerra Popular Prolongada* (GPP), the FSLN *Proletario* and the FSLN *Insurreccional* or *Tercerista*—, yet the volume would have benefited from a more prolonged comparative examination of these groups, especially as each articulated its own particular “utopia” for a post-Somoza Nicaragua.

There are also a number of voids left by the insufficient description of relevant terms and by the absence of seminal works by Nicaraguan authors and their role in the (re)construction of a national utopia. Chávez references “the strength of Sandinista poetry as a complement to the ideological effort to reclaim the nation as nature” (191), yet the principal characteristics of said “Sandinista poetry” are not offered. Given the striking differences in cultural policy between the Ministerio de Cultura led by Ernesto Cardenal (1979-1987) and the Asociación Sandinista de Trabajadores de Cultura (ASTC), a detailed description of “Sandinista poetry” would have been helpful. Similarly, Chávez states that “The poetry and the novel of the post-Sandinista era became not only disenchanted with immediate history and pessimistic in its general outlook, but a sense of loss and a recurrence of dystopian discourse became a primary trait of these works” (269). Later in the work he notes “the growth of poetry in an unexpected direction” in 2000 (294) and the “apathy and confusion” (298) found in the poems of writers belonging to the Generation of 1990. These general descriptions deserve a more nuanced approach to the characteristics of post-Sandinista poetry that would connect it with previous generations and project it into more contemporary times. As one of the “Cinco Grandes” mentioned by Chávez, for example, the writer Michelle Najlis is in a privileged position to serve as bridge between the first generation of Sandinista writers and the subsequent groups of poets exploring the “apathy and confusion” of current generations. Her first collection of poems, *La revolución armada* (1969), offers verses that rile against the Somoza régime and, at the same time, offer the essential building blocks for a national utopia.

Regarding prose, an analysis of the novel *La niña blanca y los pájaros sin pies* (1992) by Rosario Aguilar and the memoirs of ex-president Violeta Chamorro, *Dreams of the Heart* (1996), would have contributed significantly to the sections in Chávez's work on the renewed popularity of the Nicaraguan historical novel and the enunciation and ensuing reconstruction within the context of a national utopia. As one of the preeminent novelists of her time, Aguilar has published works that criticize authoritarianism and sexism and, in the process, offer implicitly dystopian/utopian representations of the nation. *Dreams of the Heart* by Chamorro also provides a window into the guiding principles of what became efforts at balancing a peaceful political transition after the defeat of the FSLN in the 1990 national elections with the measured ideological dismemberment of the Sandinista legacy by the Unión Nacional Opositora. In this respect, it would be interesting to read how her memoirs dovetail—or not—with the Inaugural Address on April 25, 1990 that Chávez analyzes (275-285). Considering the thematic focus of *Nicaragua and the Politics of Utopia*, the author would have done well to include these and other works relevant to recent conversations on the subject.

Nicaragua and the Politics of Utopia. Development and Culture in the Modern State is beyond question a necessary and ambitious contribution to the study of cultural policies and production in Nicaragua from Anastasio Somoza García to Enrique Bolaños. While the vast spectrum of the study and the broad thematic approach have left more than a few significant spaces in the narrative, we should note that this same approach has made for an important, encompassing work that looks to understand the past, present, and future of Nicaraguan nation-building through an examination of poems, novels, films, presidential speeches, and other varied and vital documents. Throughout the work, Chávez skillfully handles the vast bibliographies on the subject and manages to ably contextualize his commentary within the ample body of previous works. In addition, the photographs and charts published throughout the volume effectively complement the material included in the monograph. Although there are sections when Chávez's observations gloss over the analytical possibilities and overlook seminal texts, the connections between politics and culture in Nicaragua and their corresponding utopian projects are solidly established. In sum, Chávez is to be applauded for the indispensable insights he provides and the meticulous care with which he has prepared this monograph.