Book Review

La Botz, Dan, 2016

What Went Wrong? The Nicaraguan Revolution, A Marxist Analysis. Leiden & Boston: Brill, xxii + 407 pp., ISBN 978-9004291300, €155.00/\$185.00 (hb)

What destroys a revolution *after* its auspicious and justifiable beginnings? What factors undermine its potential? The answers to these questions, Dan La Botz argues, can be found in the ideological predispositions of its revolutionaries. In the case of Nicaragua, the Sandinista revolution failed to live up to its promise because, despite the lip service paid to democratic ideals, the Sandinista leadership was fundamentally incapable of establishing democracy. The Sandinistas ‘had no conception of the relationship between representative democracy and participatory democracy, no conception of the role of independent labour unions, no commitment to worker’s control’ (p. 361). What accounts for this undemocratic orientation? Their ideology. The Sandinista leadership was defined by Marxist-Leninism and Marxist-Leninism explains both the lack of democracy within their ranks and present day caudillismo in Nicaragua.

In *What Went Wrong?* La Botz traces the undemocratic practices of the Sandinistas. They came to power in the context of a political crisis and a socio-political vacuum: a weak economic and political elite failed to confront the Somoza dictatorship head on. The early leaders, including Carlos Fonseca Amador, had Stalinist origins: they were educated and trained in the PSN, a Stalinist oriented party. They subscribed to foquismo. When they were in power, they ‘adhered to Stalinist views of “democratic centralism” ... a Communist Party dictatorship ... the complete state control of the economy’ and society (p. 169). Their authoritarian tendencies, moreover, are especially evident in “The 72-Hour Document,” the monopoly of political power in the State Council, state control of mass organisations and farms, inadequate land distribution, military conscription, and their labour practices. The US embargo and sponsored counter-revolution, as external forces, did undermine their attempts at transitioning into a social-democratic society, but they failed in the

end because of internal factors, because their policies undermined popular democracy. They did not establish a totalitarian system – ‘they never created an actual dictatorship’ – but they did fail to live up to the expectations of social democracy (p. 256). This failure to create a more democratic infrastructure made it possible for the old oligarchy to reinstate itself as a new ruling class operating in a neo-liberal post-revolution context (1990–2007) and dystopian society (2007–present); when corruption and backroom deals became *de facto* currency, the betrayal of revolutionary ideals common practice, and revolutionaries became capitalists, if not protectors of neo-liberal practices.

Often accurate, La Botz’s version of events in the Nicaraguan revolution reads like a less vituperative version of Leon Trotsky’s *The Revolution Betrayed*. His exposition however, would have been enriched by a closer reading of Nicaragua’s history. The insistence that Sandinismo is exclusively Marxist-Leninist flies in the face of both empirical and theoretical facts. Its founders did at one point belong to a Stalinist party, but they also left it and broke rank with it. The very fact that the figure of Sandino is incorporated in their revolution narrative is testament in and of itself of this parting. Many Sandinista leaders have themselves repudiated the Stalinist indictment, and when circumstances called for it, as La Botz reveals, attempted to reinvent the party. They have also acknowledged repeatedly the influence of José Carlos Mariátegui and Antonio Gramsci, less virulent Marxists, in their development as revolutionaries. The Sandinistas also adapted to the failure of foquismo after their near obliteration in the Pancasan campaign (1967). Such misreading of history, of course, does not undermine the fact that La Botz’s portrayal of corruption and abuse, especially in the post-revolution period, is correct. The FSLN has taken many a wrong turn under the “leadership” of Daniel Ortega. Many of its leaders, as La Botz and others have argued, imposed their authoritarian discipline – developed in the struggle to topple the Somoza dictatorship – on society before and after the revolution period. Yet, Sandinismo is much more than a party and state practices. It is a material force that fuelled a revolution, defended a nation against imperialism, attempted to rectify its political misdirection when verticalismo threatened to undermine its ideals, and resisted and continues to resist neo-liberal globalisation.

What Went Wrong? would also have benefitted from a more theoretically grounded approach. Democratic Centralism is a concept not only “developed” by Stalin. Other Marxists have developed it in more democratic rather than centralist ways. La Botz has nothing to say about this. Stalinism is not the only Marxism to have inspired revolutionaries either. The use of Robert Michels’ concept of the “iron law of oligarchy” would have also illuminated the failure of the FSLN as a party. The same may be said of recent theoretical work on

caudillismo. Yet, La Botz's book is timely and important because it reveals the complex reality of revolution (in Nicaraguan society) at a time when Nicaragua has fallen off the news radar in the US. Any Nicaraguan and revolution scholar should read it, if only for this reason.

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