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The Nicaraguan Revolution and the Central American Revolutionary Process

The triumph of the Nicaraguan Revolution in 1979 represents to a certain extent the result, and at the same time the beginning, of a new stage in the cycle of social struggles that was opened up in Latin America by the Cuban Revolution. The long interval between the two revolutions can be explained by the counteroffensive launched by the United States following the Cuban Revolution and after a radical revision of U.S. foreign policy, which came to be dictated by the doctrine of counterinsurgency. Basing itself in the native ruling classes, and utilizing the Armed Forces as the main instrument for the implementation of that doctrine, the U.S. confronted the wave of insurrectional movements of that time in Latin America and other parts of the world with a stance that was highly military. The objective was, as is the norm in any war, not only to defeat but above all to annihilate the enemy.

In 1959, from the point of view of its imperialist interests, the U.S. not only was able but also was forced to proceed in that manner. The world capitalist economy was in its full expansive stage and in that context the U.S. economy, as well as U.S. ideological and political influence, had no rival. No one except the anti-imperialist, popular movements was challenging U.S. hegemony at that time, which was why those movements were perceived as the enemy to destroy. At the same time, the senseless hostility of the U.S. toward the Soviet Union made it difficult for the U.S. government to focus its attention on those movements, and thus it was forced to seek a certain level of agreement with the socialist bloc. In other words, the policy of counterinsurgency rested upon the policy of detente, so both had to function hand in hand during the decade that followed. The fact that detente would open up possibilities for the Soviet Union and other socialist countries to exert influence in the areas where insurrectional movements were unfolding did not enter into U.S. calculations. For this error they paid a price later on.

By 1979, the situation had changed radically.

The capitalist world went from prosperity to a phase marked by serious upsets, of which the crisis in the international monetary system was only one indication. It was also marked by sharp recessions, particularly those of 1974-1975 and including the current one. U.S. supremacy was being challenged in many ways by the European capitalist powers, particularly Germany, and by Japan. In the peripheral capitalist countries, after a brief setback, the insurrectionist movements gained new strength and achieved resounding victories in Asia and Africa, that favored the Soviet Union in the worldwide balance of forces. The conditions which 20 years before favored the U.S. offensive—crystallized in counterinsurgency—have changed considerably and thus demand new responses. Although coming from different perspectives, both Carter and Reagan are bent on finding those new responses.

It is not our intention, however, to focus our attention on the implications for U.S. policy of this new stage in the revolutionary process, which was opened up in Latin America by the Nicaraguan Revolution. Rather, we are interested in analyzing why the methods of counterinsurgency will not suffice to stop the revolutionary process, or, more simply, the rise of mass movements in Latin America, taking into account the internal causes which motivate them. We then would like to point out some of the implications of this for Latin America and the United States.

The Nature of the Process

In analyzing what is happening today in Central America and in Latin America as a whole, we see first that the social movements taking place there are not the result of backwardness but rather the result of progress. More precisely, they are the result of the type of economic progress experienced by that region. The penetration of foreign capital, which was the counterpart

of counterinsurgency, and intense economic development beginning in the 60's have had a very strong impact on the class structure of Latin America. These factors have also caused shifts in the alliances and agreements on which the state is based.

Parallel to the rise and consolidation of an agrarian, industrial and financial bourgeoisie, closely linked to foreign capital by way of direct investments or loans, we have also seen the living conditions of the urban and rural working masses grow worse and their composition change. Thus, the peasantry has not only had to suffer growing exploitation, but has also undergone brutal transformations in its way of life, particularly because of the rapid process of proletarianization, which has created a new agricultural proletariat and augmented the urban proletariat. At the same time, the urban proletariat has changed in character as a result of the industrialization of the 60's, due to pressure on its artisan sectors and the formation of a modern industrial working class which is more concentrated and in better objective conditions to organize itself. Meanwhile, the petty bourgeoisie also suffered a process of liquidation, giving way to new middle classes of an increasingly salaried character and based primarily on the growth of the service sector.

Thus came the end of the old political structure in which a markedly rural oligarchy held the reins of state power. Now the state rests on a more complex class alliance composed of the remains of the old oligarchy and the new bourgeois fractions, which extends to the higher levels of the petty bourgeoisie. At the center of this new configuration of power are the Armed Forces, themselves undergoing an internal process of transformation. This process is serving to 1) make their anticommunist ideology more extreme, 2) provide them with new forms of organization and discipline, and 3) link them directly to property-owning groups by their occupying management positions in the business sector and their acquiring land and stocks, and by the personal relations being developed. Upon this base, then, is erected a highly exclusive system of domination which is organized around an authoritarian state, almost always of a dictatorial type, and which consecrates the primacy of the military institutions.

It is in this context that the political forces leading the revolutionary movements in Latin America today have come to exist. In many

cases they are new forces, constituted in the late 60's and early 70's. Others are forces which, having been practically destroyed by the counterinsurgent offensive, reorganized themselves within the framework of new conditions imposed by that offensive. The Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) is a combination of both. It encompasses the experience of past efforts which did not succeed, and it organized itself in its current form at the beginning of the last decade. In any case, these political organizations are not inexperienced in clandestine methods of work, nor are they characterized by open organic structures like those which had to face the counterinsurgency offensive and be destroyed by it. Today, *these organizations are born in the very heart of counterinsurgency itself; they have learned to organize and work under the strictest clandestine conditions, with cadres trained in the art of operating under the most brutal repression.*

This fact alone differentiates the conditions under which the present revolutionary struggle takes place. But it is not the only difference; the old vanguards of the masses were defeated not only because of their organic and operative conditions, but also *because of their ideology.* In effect, with the rise of the new bourgeois fractions which came into conflict with the old oligarchy in the 50's and 60's, the popular movements felt called upon to participate in that conflict. They have been strongly influenced by the methods of action defended by the rising bourgeoisie, particularly the electoral processes, broad mass mobilizations, etc. In that context, Guatemala is the model. But since the establishment of the counterinsurgency regimes, the popular movements have been excluded from the political arena. They have had to develop in the extralegal arena. Furthermore, they have had to function politically under conditions in which politics are defined by the bourgeoisie and imperialism as war, in essence leaving politics to the police and military apparatus.

The new vanguard organizations have had to understand this reality. But having done that, they are now functioning with complete awareness of it. That is why they have broken away from illusions of stable alliances with fractions of the bourgeoisie, alliances with the possibility of building new societies through the installation and development of bourgeois democratic regimes. The Chilean counterrevolution of 1973 has done nothing but confirm them in their decision to

make this break. That's also why the new vanguards have emphasized the military component which every political struggle contains. The existence of armed vanguards today derives both from the fact that they represent popular movements which are not subordinate to bourgeois leadership and from the fact that these movements must survive and triumph under conditions of counterinsurgency, the ultimate expression of which is the military character of the state.

Thus are derived the main characteristics of the Central American revolutionary movements of today. First, there is the internal distillation, in terms of the cadre, organizational forms and methods of action. Second, the striving to unite the popular movement as the central condition for developing a struggle independent of the bourgeoisie and the different bourgeois fractions. Third, a policy of class alliances which allows for agreements and compromises with sectors of the bourgeoisie but does not give any bourgeois fraction an integral part in the revolutionary social force—and this, by the way, influences the policies of alliances on the international level. Fourth, a political-military strategy based on the creation of revolutionary military power, not by means of divisions within a regime's armed forces, but rather by incorporating the masses of people into a people's army, led independently by the revolutionary organizations.

The success of that strategy in Nicaragua has sped its implementation in El Salvador and Guatemala as well, although the vanguard forces in these countries have in no way simply imitated the Nicaraguan process. The specific character of their struggle and organizational forms, of the process by which they implement their strategy of class alliances, of their strategic and tactical military plans, indicates that what the Salvadorean and Guatemalan forces have taken from Nicaragua is less a model than an inspiration to carry forward their own politics, founded on their particular national conditions.

Some Implications

The process currently taking place in Central America has many implications. Notable among these is the formation, for the first time on this continent, of a bloc of revolutionary states: Cuba, Nicaragua and most recently Grenada. At this stage it is still only a tendency toward a

movement, but it opens up great possibilities for the revolutionary movements of the area because of the political and material support they could receive from such a bloc, the significance of which is heightened by the fact that one of its members is located on the continent itself.

But the importance of the Nicaraguan process is not limited to this development. Its impact is felt very directly, especially in the Central American region. For one thing, as we have previously pointed out, the Nicaraguan Revolution has become a source of hope and inspiration for the Guatemalan and Salvadorean movements, regardless of the fact that these movements maintain their particular characteristics. The unity achieved by the Salvadorean movement and the current process of unification underway among the Guatemalan revolutionary forces have been considerably influenced and accelerated by the experience of the FSLN. Moreover, the effects of the Sandinista Revolution in Central America go beyond the revolutionary movement and affect the balance of forces in the whole area, causing abrupt shifts in Costa Rica and Honduras and serving to strengthen Panamanian nationalism. Pressure from the U.S. on those countries serves only to further polarize the political forces and radicalize the situation. All this has made Central America a *critical area*, a weak link in the imperialist chain which threatens to become even more important in that sense than Southeast Asia in the past decade or the Middle East today.

This is true also because the Sandinista Revolution transcends Central America and radiates towards the rest of the region, particularly Mexico and the nearest of the Andean Pact nations. The progressive shift to the right in Venezuela, Colombia and Ecuador radicalizes the situation, as does the rightward trend in Costa Rica and the conversion of Honduras into the bastion of U.S. imperialism. This is all the more true because the rightward shift runs counter to the trend that sparks the popular movement—a movement which, as indicated previously, is stronger now than before the intensification of the counterinsurgency campaign and also has had a positive influence on the development of the left in those countries.

Nicaragua and Central America's revolutionary process in general also intervene indirectly in the power play between the stronger nations of the area and the U.S., a play which revolves around

the renegotiation of the status and new interests of those nations. This is especially clear with respect to Mexico, whose Central American policy is guided by criteria very different from and, in fact, in open contradiction to those of the U.S. But the same phenomenon can also be seen with respect to Brazil, and in a different sense with Venezuela, Argentina and even Chile.

Brazil has achieved a remarkable economic development since the end of World War II. This development, especially since the mid-60's, has been characterized by relations established with Western Europe and Japan which have served to reduce the economic pressure of the U.S. and, consequently, its political importance in Brazil. The fact remains, nevertheless, that the U.S. continues to be the superpower of the capitalist world, the sphere in which the Brazilian military government consciously inserts itself and attempts to assert its subimperialist schemes. Consequently, there must be a revision of the existing relations between the two countries that includes a whole gamut of still unresolved issues. Central America *per se* is not among those issues for Brazil, which has always regarded that region as being under the direct influence of the U.S. and outside of what it considers its own sphere of influence (South America and southern Africa in particular). Nevertheless, in the eyes of Brazilian subimperialism, Central America is an important chip with which to negotiate. This is why Brazil includes its eventual support for U.S. policy in Central America in the general package of pending issues to be negotiated with the U.S. The magnitude of that package makes the process of negotiation very difficult and actually makes Brazil very reluctant to fall into line with the policies that the U.S. wants to impose in the capitalist camp with respect to Central America.

With regard to Venezuela, following the difficulties it had with the United States because of its support for the Nicaraguan Revolution (which was encouraged by the Social Democrats at that time), it has now been brought back into line. Steps in the same direction have already been taken in the case of Argentina, by tightening relations with that regime following the replacement of Videla with Viola. [General Roberto Viola, ex-Commander in Chief of the Army, replaced General Jorge Rafael Videla as President of Argentina on April 4, 1981.—*Ed.*] The current process of rapprochement with the Chilean

military government, and that country's rabid anticommunism, will most likely produce similar results.

Nonetheless, in every one of these cases, the U.S. government is nowadays forced into a position of more formal "politicking," in the sense that it has to discuss and negotiate its positions. The days are long gone when it could impose its will without appealing to the Latin American bourgeoisies. The OAS itself, formerly the forum which blessed undisputed U.S. hegemony over the continent, has now become an organization difficult to control and likely to produce important defeats for U.S. policy, such as its open opposition to Somoza and any intervention in Somoza's favor on the eve of the Sandinista victory. For this we can thank Mexico, with its clearly apparent position, and Brazil with a less visible one.

Because it has been forced to deal politically with Latin America, the United States under Carter favored the democratic institutionalization of the military regimes there. Although such processes do not lead to full democratization, they do open possibilities for participation by the bourgeois opposition, and to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the country, for participation by certain sectors of the popular mass movements. This indicates a relative flexibility on the part of these regimes. If this were to take place without compromising bourgeois and imperialist domination, which is the reason for seeking to build the armed forces as the fourth power in the state, then the United States would not have to deal with monolithic, powerful and arrogant military governments and would have enough maneuvering space to carry out its objectives.

Conclusions

The revolutionary Central American movement has turned that area, which was formerly an unshakable cornerstone of U.S. imperialist domination, into a critical zone. The movement has been helped by the relative weakening of U.S. economic power in the context of the current world crisis, and by the contradictions that have arisen between the United States and the rest of the imperialist powers of Europe and Japan. Another factor is Latin America's economic and political diversification, which has given rise to

more powerful states with interests of their own that are not antagonistic to those of the U.S., but still conflictive. These factors have aided the development of the insurgent forces in Central America. But the determinant factor has been their reorganization, following the application of counterinsurgency policies, and their ability to operate in the midst of counterinsurgency. In fact, they have turned the exploitative and repressive nature of the regimes into a legitimation of their struggle, in the eyes of their people and the world.

The Central American revolutionary movement has thus opened up new perspectives for popular and progressive forces throughout the continent. Under Carter, the United States' perception of this situation led it to attempt a reaccommodation of its dominance by pushing for the institutionalization of the dictatorial regimes and for a new image. This process has been complicated by the sharpness of the class contradictions in Latin America, and their international effects. Under Reagan, the North American response has been to fortify counterinsurgency activities in Latin America, without abandoning the line of favoring institutionalization, as is demonstrated by continued U.S. support for the civilian-military regime of El Salvador. But if each of these lines of action (institutionalization and counterinsurgency) separately appears inadequate to the task of containing the rise of social struggles in Latin America today, then their combination, far from strengthening the imperialist strategy, creates contradictions that do not promise much success.

At this crossroads, the United States will have to use all its imagination to find responses that can deal with what Latin America is undergoing today. So long as it insists on looking for answers whose purpose is to reverse the present situation and relive the past, that is, so long as the U.S. attempts to reestablish its domination over the region as it was in the past, then the responses it gives are unlikely to prove successful. The United States will have to take to heart the idea that *the power and autonomy of the Latin American people's movement, especially of its working class, and the political capability of the*

new vanguards that have arisen in the past decade, will force a radical redefinition in U.S. relations with the region and, in contrast to what has been the rule through the last century, the quest for a relationship not based on subordination and exploitation.

The U.S. ruling class and its state, as it is structured today, are obviously not capable of moving towards such a radical change. This is a task that falls to the popular movement of that country, and constitutes one of its greatest responsibilities in the transformation of U.S. policy which the Latin American revolution is demanding. The popular forces of the United States are prepared for this, through such memorable struggles and victories as those which were at the root of changes in U.S. policy toward Vietnam. Today this line of action is again needed, with even greater emphasis and greater possibilities of victory—particularly if one recalls that Latin America is not a foreign reality to the United States but part of its own internal composition, by virtue of those millions of immigrant workers who are directly exploited by U.S. capital, not to mention the Puerto Rican people. It is with those groups, and in alliance with other abused minorities, that the U.S. working class, progressive forces and the country's leftist organizations will have to focus their actions in order to guarantee a future that is different from the one promised by a Carter or a Reagan. As in the case of Vietnam, their formulas mean not only the diverting of resources and the sacrifice of youth in a foreign war to preserve the U.S. ruling class, but also *an internal conflict, the tearing apart of the United States itself*. The state of the U.S. ruling class will take advantage of this conflict to repress the people of that country, subject them to a political oppression unprecedented in U.S. history, and chain them to an exploitation made worse by the cost of maintaining such oppressive policies.

It is for this reason that, along with the liberating forces on the move in Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala, and arising along the length and breadth of Latin America, it is up to the North American people—*la palabra la tiene el pueblo norteamericano*—and the forces that can best express their historical interests.