Nicaraguan Narratives of Development, Nationhood, and the Body

In July 1993, at a meeting held in Managua for women workers in cooperatives, those in attendance listened patiently as one man after another addressed them about the need to develop political consciousness during a period when the country was experiencing the harsh effects of capitalism and globalization. Finally, a woman stood up and confidently exhorted the assembled group to organize against such oppressive forces as neoliberalism and postmodernism. I never learned what led her to include the latter along with the former as capitalist threats, though she clearly linked them as emblematic of the late 20th century. Her words served as a challenge as I consider what postmodern approaches to the cultural politics of late capitalism have to offer to our understanding of the everyday misery and long-term prospects.

Abstract
Anthropological studies of development in Latin America generally have taken political economic approaches, though a few have raised important cultural questions as well. This work contributes to the latter project by approaching two subjects rarely discussed together: discourses of development and body politics. In Nicaragua during the last decade, contentious political economic differences have often played out in discursive practices, as the nation makes a transition from the revolutionary Sandinista period to the neoliberal era. Here I examine discussions of microenterprises and the informal sector as development issues in the remaking of the nation. Then I present the more personal, visceral narratives of working class and poor urban residents. These nondominant discourses that invoke gender and the body as sites on which current conditions are inscribed may point the way toward alternative approaches and critiques.
of so many in Nicaragua and elsewhere in studies of Latin America. Studies of development and nation-building in Latin America generally have used a political economic model, though a few have departed from that approach to raise important cultural questions concerning the ways in which discourses of development and the nation influence practices and outcomes differently across societies. This work contributes to the latter project by approaching two subjects rarely discussed together: discourses of development and body politics. Nicaragua during the last decade illustrates the way contentious political economic ap-

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Resumen
Los estudios antropológicos sobre el desarrollo en América Latina generalmente han usado una aproximación político-económico, aunque unas pocas han provocado cuestiones culturales importantes. Este trabajo quiere contribuir a éste último proyecto tratándose de dos temas que raramente se discuten juntos: los discursos del desarrollo y los políticos corporales. Durante la última década en Nicaragua, las diferencias económico-políticas controversiales han entrado en las prácticas discursivas a la vez que la nación realiza su transición del periodo revolucionario sandinista a la era neoliberal. Aquí analizo discusiones sobre microempresas y el sector informal como elementos de desarrollo en el reconstruir de la nación. Luego presento narrativas más viscerales y personales de la clase obrera y los residentes urbanas pobres. Estos discursos no hegemónicos que involucran cuestiones de género y el cuerpo como sitio donde se inscribe las condiciones actuales, pueden apuntar aproximaciones y críticas alternativos.
Fig. 1. Nicaraguan women cooperativists participate at a gathering in Managua in 1993.

Approaches may play out in cultural practices and discourses in a nation in transition from the revolutionary Sandinista past to the neoliberal present. While the neoliberal model of market-driven development is now dominant, the Sandinistas’ discourse continues to question the political underpinnings of that model. Drawing on my research among women and men working in small industries and commerce, and the scholars and policy-makers who have attended to them in Managua during the past decade, I consider the national-level debate on “microenterprises” and the “informal sector”—terms that are ideologically charged in the Nicaraguan setting. Then, I suggest that working class and poor urban residents offer more personal, visceral discourses based on local-level experiences of the body and personhood, often inflected by gender, to account for the difficulties they are facing. A case will be made for attention to nondominant discourses that invoke gender and the body as sites on which current conditions are inscribed and that may point the way toward alternative approaches and critiques. At stake is the way Nicaraguans (and others) apprehend and struggle over “development” and “nationhood.”

Doubting Development

Going beyond criticism of Western models, I am interested in how the views of scholars, policy makers, and ordinary citizens regarding “develop-
ment” and a “national project” work in the context of Nicaragua and elsewhere. To that end, I examine the dominant models and discourses of economic development in Nicaragua to see what these models do, even when they fail in their stated objectives. Then, I turn to the narratives of women and men in a working class barrio and in urban cooperatives in Managua, whose words and lives embody an alternative discourse, and suggest that a great deal may be riding on the contest over the terms of this debate.

My rethinking of development derives from several directions. The writings of Marx, Foucault, and feminist theorists have influenced the work of a number of anthropologists and others reexamining development. Escobar’s (1992, 1995) theorization of social movements and what he terms “the development encounter” is joined by the work of other scholars concerned with the post-Second World War construction of development and its consequences for the “third world” (e.g., Ferguson 1990; DuBois 1999; Pigg 1992; Moore and Schmitz 1995). Several feminist writers have entered the fray, including Westwood and Radcliffe (1993) and Marchand and Parparr (1995), whose work also challenges the modernist assumptions behind most development (as well as gender and development) thinking.

Following Foucault, Escobar (1984–85, 1995) and DuBois (1991) consider the dynamics of discourse, power, and knowledge, particularly as they have been constructed in the “first world” and imposed in the “third world.” They show how discourses of development have worked to consolidate the power of first world countries as they constructed the notion of “underdevelopment” and then set forth to build an apparatus to deal with it. At the same time, other discursive practices based on the local knowledge of third world peoples have contributed to social movements that challenge the dominance of singular accounts of development and underdevelopment. An understanding of power as diffuse, exercised from the bottom up as much as the top down (by state apparatuses) enables us to see how local-level initiatives may unsettle what appear to be fixed social structures.

These writers recognize that such problems as underdevelopment have a concrete historical formation, but contend that “without examining development as discourse we cannot understand the systematic ways in which the Western developed countries have been able to manage and control and, in many ways, even create the Third World politically, economically, sociologically and culturally” (Escobar 1984–85:384). Indeed, development as discourse is also “a very real historical formation” even when it is built around fictitious constructs (1984–85:389). As such, the development paradigm needs to be reexamined and for that to occur, development must be challenged as a natural category. Ferguson (1990:xxv) shows how development in southern
Africa has failed in its stated goal of modernizing economic and social life, "all the while performing, almost unnoticed, its own pre-eminently political operation of expanding bureaucratic state power." He traces the social effects of ideas of development, arguing that a conceptual apparatus can bring about significant structural change. "The challenge," he writes, "is to treat these systems of thought and discourse like any other kind of structured social practice" (1990:77).

Several authors (Parpart 1993; Westwood and Radcliffe 1993; Marchand and Parpart 1995) have drawn together feminist and postmodern critiques in order to examine gender, development, and social movements waged over the right to national inclusion and full citizenship; in their view, these critiques' allied focus on difference disrupts universalist thinking about women that has represented them singularly as a gender without recognizing the specificity of their race, class, and national origin. As Parpart (1993:439) points out, some scholars of third world development have rejected these critiques as first world preoccupations. Yet she and others argue that both feminism and postmodernism have wide resonance and can move us beyond the "metanarratives of both Enlightenment and Marxist thought," based as these are on universalist assumptions about history and society. Indeed, these privileged and monolithic discourses are most likely to be shaken in those places where there is attention to power and difference, often in the third world. Feminist and other writers who examine discourse as social practice are nonetheless keenly aware of the difficulty of offering accounts that "deconstruct Eurocentric views" while they are tied, "by convention, to many of the terms that promote this unitary vision" (Westwood and Radcliffe 1993:2).

To this postmodern feminist critique of development, I want to bring further attention to the body in the construction of the nation. Nations sometimes stand in for ideas and meanings in the global imagination, e.g. India for postcolonial nostalgia (Appadurai 1996) and Brazil for Third World poverty and modernity (Scheper-Hughes 1992). In a similar way, the human body may stand in for the health or sensibility of a people or a nation, for instance, Puerto Ricans may suffer the illness of colonialism and seek the cure of nationalism (Negrón-Muntaner and Grosfoguel 1997), and Guatemalans emerging from a devastating period of civil war speak of their nation as a wounded body (Nelson 1999). As Lock and Scheper-Hughes argue, in a critical-interpretive approach there may be three "bodies": the individual, physical body, the social or symbolic body, and the body politic. While the materiality of the body is central to any analysis of the human consequences of neoliberalism, it is also important to understand "talk about
the body" to be "talk about the nature of society" (Lock and Schepers-Hughes
1990:61).

I will suggest that while the dominant discourses of development in
Nicaragua invoke the health of the body politic in the abstract, nondominant
discourses reveal that non-elite Nicaraguans are thinking politics through their
own bodies in a much more immediate way. Drawing inspiration from
literary and historical studies, I would agree with Masiello (1997:231), who
writes:

(NEO)liberal rule was never a disembodied process. . . . [I]t is not surprising in
this respect that a large number of Latin American social movements insist
on the body as a point of departure to defend human rights and economic
advancement; that powerful activists congregate today around issues of sexual
choice; that informal sectors reveal a high female component, with housewives
unions in barrios placing successful claims on democratic rule through
negotiation with the market.

As she urges, we will need to bring the gendered body as an “originating
point of discourse, community, and action” to our discussions of neoliberal
development and nation-building.5

**From Revolution to Neoliberalism**

In my research over the last decade, I have followed the rough transition
from the revolutionary government of Daniel Ortega and the Sandinista
National Liberation Front (FSLN) to the U.S.-supported governments of
Violeta Chamorro’s National Opposition Union (UNO) and Arnoldo
Alemán’s Liberal Alliance. My main concern has been to trace the effects of
this transition in the lives and work of low-income women in small industries
and commerce in Managua, and the women’s responses to increasingly harsh
living conditions. This period saw the introduction of a series of measures
designed to stabilize the economy through structural adjustment—policies set
in place elsewhere in Latin America during the 1980s. As we have seen, such
measures were implemented in Nicaragua in the latter half of that decade,
but most rapidly and crushingly over the last several years, as mandated by the
International Monetary Fund (IMF) and set in place by the Agency for Inter-
national Development (AID). The measures have included sharp cuts in state
sector employment and social services, privatization of industries, health care
and education, devaluation of the currency, and market liberalization.

Although 1990 signaled a significant reversal of policy orientation and a
neoliberal turn in the country, I have argued elsewhere that the political transition
should not be viewed as unilaterally “undoing” the changes brought

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about by the Nicaraguan revolution (Babb forthcoming). To be sure, the FSLN government was less orthodox than many socialist-oriented governments and developed a mixed economy based on land reform and an expanded state sector along with continued private enterprise. But its broad program of social transformation and the revolution's challenge to U.S. political interests was sufficient to prompt the Reagan administration to support the Contra war and impose an economic blockade. By the time of the 1990 election, Nicaraguans were frustrated by worsening economic conditions and longing for peace, and Chamorro's presidency promised to compromise with diverse political interests, particularly the still-strong FSLN. While her government represented a turn from state intervention in the market to a free market economy, the process was negotiated and the transition was complex (Spalding 1994). The 1996 election of Arnoldo Alemán marked a further turn to the right and harsher neoliberal measures, but even then the legacy of the revolution provided protection against extreme reversals of policy (Walker 1997).

**Dominant Discourses of Development**

When I began extended research in Nicaragua in 1991, I had an affiliation with the Central American University (UCA) in Managua, where some of the most important work on the economy was being carried out. Like most intellectuals in Nicaragua, the academics at the UCA were largely identified with Sandinista politics. The Fulbright program, which sponsored my work that year, urged me to have a second affiliation with the Central American Institute of Business Administration (INCAE), which modeled itself on and had ties with Harvard Business School in the U.S. In contrast to the UCA, the INCAE had faculty and trained business students who were by and large sympathetic with the government's neoliberal turn. My double affiliation offered an excellent vantage point from which to observe the production of two quite different discourses to account for and remedy the problems facing the country. Indeed, my interest in discourses of development had its origins in the discussions I heard and participated in at the UCA and the INCAE—especially those related to my research in small industries and the "informal sector" of unregulated economic activities. From the humid offices of a national university in the city's center to the unnecessarily air-conditioned offices of the small but lofty campus of the business school, built at an elevation high enough to escape the urban discomforts, the intellectual as well as physical distance was substantial.

To discuss these two dominant discourses of development in Nicaragua I will relate what each has offered in conversation and in print regarding the situation of small industries and commerce, which constitute the bulk of
economic activity in the urban area. The INCAE came to serve as a think tank for the UNO government, with its highly-educated economists and other social scientists offering analyses of the current situation and training elites to take on positions of economic and political leadership. The school's director at that time was a Colombian economist well-known for his studies of small and medium-sized industries. The author of an analysis of the small business sector in Central America, Francisco Leguizamon (1990) has written that, through 1990, there was little attention to the small and medium-sized business sector in the region. This neglect was in spite of the fact that more than 90 percent of businesses in Central America could be classified in this category (up to 50 employees, managed by no more than three persons). He claims that current interest in the sector is a response to the worst depression since the 1930s and a recognition that this sector is key for Central American economies. Leguizamon considers national strategies and barriers to development in the region and proposes what he calls a “radical change,” a reference to a firmer commitment to the free market and capitalism as a force for economic development and “democratization.” He judges that small and medium-size businesses have the potential to play a greater role in the national economy, and adds that as they do, women will be among those who have more opportunities to enter the formal economy.

Leguizamon argues that in the Central American region, Sandinista Nicaragua suffered the most precarious conditions for development in the 1980s and now is most in need of change. He is critical of the way that private investment was limited, cooperatives established, and businesses decentralized. Blaming these factors for the drastic drop in national production, he maintains that Sandinista policy did more to restrict than encourage small and medium-sized businesses—though he acknowledges that 40 percent of the budget went to defense against the Contras by mid-decade and this produced a severe economic depression. Writing his analysis just after the elections, he concluded that the prospects for democracy and economic development in Nicaragua were improved under the UNO government.

Nevertheless, when I interviewed Leguizamon at the INCAE in 1991, he was less optimistic. He stated that he had so far seen little change in the economic situation and little improvement for small industry. Though the Ministry of Economy had created a new office of microenterprises and small industry, the office had scant power to introduce change, and Leguizamon saw instead the continued growth of informal activity, along with economic uncertainty and crime in the country. Even so, he appeared hopeful that the banks and government agencies would soon be able to
offer more support to small industries. In the end, he placed the main responsibility for continued poverty on Nicaraguan workers themselves, saying that what was lacking was an intense commitment to work, seeking opportunities, and taking risks. His characterization of Nicaraguans as insufficiently motivated was striking so soon after many of them had risked everything to defend their revolution. But the invocation in anti-Sandinista discourse of such views is often backed by charges that the state had been overly protective of workers and failed to develop competitive industries. When neoliberalism did not bring about any rapid improvement in the ability of small industries and commerce to compete successfully, the same analysts often fell back on the notion of a lingering legacy of dependency under the revolutionary government.

While this economist's view was widely shared at the INCAE and by other UNO supporters, a very different view was advanced by the social scientists at the UCA and in the majority of research institutes and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) I visited. The latter were generally sympathetic to the goals of the Nicaraguan revolution, in which many had participated, though they offered their assessments of mistakes of the FSLN as well as critiques of UNO policy and its consequences. Amalia Chamorro and other scholars in the School of Sociology at the UCA produced the most significant studies of small industries and commerce in the informal sector in Nicaragua (Chamorro et al. 1989, 1991). They used as their baseline the pioneering study of Managua's informal sector written as a doctoral dissertation (De Franco 1979) completed just before the FSLN victory. The author of this landmark work, Silvio De Franco, offered a structural analysis of the expansion of the informal sector under conditions of underdevelopment, emphasizing external constraints on growth and identifying the particular difficulties experienced by the majority of women in the sector. De Franco later became Minister of the Economy and Development and then president of the Central Bank under the UNO government, by which time his orientation had shifted significantly to the right (De Franco and Velázquez 1997).

In the neo-Marxist analysis of Chamorro and her colleagues, related to me in a number of conversations, the early years of the Sandinista government were represented as bringing support for the urban popular sectors and for small producers who were organized into state-regulated cooperatives. As a result, they argued, the growth of such areas as textiles, leather, handicrafts, food, and wood industries was promoted. However, a new pricing structure during that time resulted in lower earnings in the cooperatives and had the unintended consequence of encouraging informal (non-state regulated) activity. In some cases, these analysts echoed the view of those less
sympathetic with the revolutionary government, that state intervention in cooperatives had not benefited small industry in the long term.

Furthermore, these leftist academics contended, the Contra war and the U.S. economic blockade caused a series of social and economic dislocations in the country: scarcity of goods, restriction of imported items, high levels of inflation, and mass migration from the war zones to the cities. The Sandinista government turned its attention to the rural sector and agrarian reform to consolidate its base in the war zone, and began cutting back on programs that had benefited popular sectors in the cities. The informal sector grew to the extent that a free market coexisted with the official market and that the war contributed to rural-urban migration. In Managua’s sprawling Eastern Market, for example, the number of sellers was estimated at upwards of 10,000, mostly poor women, and rising in the early 1980s. A few grew rich, but the majority barely subsisted. In an effort to control inflation, the government held down wages, but this had the effect of encouraging formal sector workers to turn to the informal sector. The informal sector became the center of controversy in Nicaragua, and the government introduced policies restricting informal production and commerce that were clearly hostile to its workers—by then viewed as parasites and speculators—and that served as fodder for critics of state-led development. Some, like the UCA researchers, countered that in the context of war and economic hardship, informal workers were actually productive contributors to the economy (Chamorro et al. 1989). Not surprisingly, in contrast to the analyses offered at the INCAE, those at the UCA more frequently invoked the external constraints on development experienced during the Sandinista decade.

Two views of the post-electoral project of nation-building follow from these two different readings (exemplified by the INCAE and UCA analyses) of the past decade of revolutionary government. The first corresponds to the dominant discourse of the Chamorro and Alemán governments, based on a neoliberal model of free market development, while the second is a discourse espoused by Sandinistas and other critics of government policies who appeal for a more gradual introduction of structural adjustment measures. Both were formulated during a transitional time when substantial change was being negotiated in the country and claim to have a primary commitment to a democratic process.

A major policy change brought about in March 1991 included a maxi-devaluation that was intended to stabilize the currency, but which entailed a severe loss of real wages and buying power for most Nicaraguans. This was part of the IMF formula adopted by the government economic team that included massive privatization and cuts in state employment and social ser-

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vices—in other words, the traditional “shock” program of economic adjustment imposed in many parts of Latin America. Later the same month, the Ministry of Finance announced the Occupational Conversion Plan which, with AID funding, offered state sector employees severance pay if they agreed to leave their jobs “voluntarily.” The former workers were encouraged to establish small businesses and a good many purchased freezers to begin selling ice and ice cream from their homes—a dubious prospect as informal activities saturated the market.  

The Ministry’s Director of Budget Planning and the author of the Plan, Fatima Reyes, described the Plan in an interview as an integral part of the government’s structural adjustment program. The stated objective, she said, was to “stimulate economic reactivation, motivating the voluntary transfer of employees from the public to the private sector, to set up small businesses or to work in private enterprises.” An unstated objective appeared to be the removal of Sandinistas from the public sector and, in the process, a disproportionate number of women also left government jobs. Interestingly, the Plan emphasized moving people into commerce and the service sector rather than into production. When I asked if she thought that the entry of more people into small enterprises would further saturate that sector, Reyes minimized the importance of that concern by claiming that many who were adopting the Plan were already involved in family businesses and this Plan would simply assist them. Moreover, she described those adopting the Plan as mainly “housewives,” evidently referring to female state employees. When asked what impact the Plan would have on Nicaraguan families, she answered very positively that it would offer an opportunity for women to return home to their families. In so stating the objectives of the Plan, she adopted the language of the UNO government’s traditional family ideology (Fatima Reyes, interview, July 18, 1991).

When I spoke with Amalia Chamorro of the UCA about the Plan, she expressed the view that while the Sandinista government had attempted to formalize the informal economy by organizing urban cooperatives and, later, introducing sanctions against informal activity, the UNO government appeared to be doing just the opposite. By removing support for cooperatives, then cutting back the number of formal sector employees and encouraging them to work on their own account or in small businesses, the state was contributing to the saturation of the informal sector. Moreover, she noted, it should have been obvious to the Plan’s creators that most of the new commercial enterprises would be doomed to failure. Her critical perspective suggested a more cynical reading of the UNO’s “support” of small businesses, which might have served to mask its draconian cuts in the public
sector and the implications of these cuts for employment and the distribution of social services.

During the past decade, I have interviewed a number of individuals working in the Ministry of the Economy. María Hurtado de Vigil, director of the Office of Small Industries (up to 30 employees) and Microenterprises (up to five employees), has been a key player in government assistance to small business. On our first meeting, I inquired about the new emphasis on microenterprises at a time when the informal sector was still rapidly expanding. She responded that after the Sandinista government’s early support for small industries and cooperatives, its economic adjustment of the late 1980s resulted in a high failure rate among these enterprises as well as a growing number of workers in the informal sector. As for the UNO government’s free market policy of favoring the entry of imported goods and increasing competition, she described this not in terms of the cost to Nicaraguan producers but in terms of consumers’ right to better products. She told me that her office would support those small enterprises deemed “most likely to succeed,” and acknowledged that those “most likely to fail” might include more businesses operated by women (María Hurtado de Vigil, interview, May 8, 1991).

My interview with a leading member of CONAPI, the National Association of Small and Medium Industries, offers a striking contrast (Fig. 2). Antonio Chávez was the head of the Managua region, and later became president of the national trade union organization, which was formed in 1983 by the Sandinistas and became more active later in the decade. The organization is still identified with the FSLN although the leadership takes pains to say that they have no “political color” and that the membership is politically diverse. Although CONAPI has recently had few resources and has offered only limited support to its membership, it remains the major organization representing the interests of workers in small industries. When I asked Chávez about recent government policies and their impact on women, he was quick to respond, telling me that women comprise 54 percent of their membership, mainly in the textile and food industries, which have been particularly vulnerable under the new policies. For example, he said, the lower tariffs on imported clothing as well as the recent entry of used clothes from the United States have severely undercut garment production and sales by many Nicaraguan women. While he acknowledged that the decline in the sector began under the Sandinistas (prompted by the economic crisis that was in part due to U.S. intervention), he emphasized that the UNO’s shock treatment was far worse. Expressing concern for the harsh consequences for women, he noted that besides economic marginalization, women experience
a machista culture, health problems, and heavy family responsibilities (Antonio Chávez, interview, May 8, 1991).*

**Contestation and Convergence**

Clearly, the government on the one hand and CONAPI and workers in small industries and commerce on the other—like the INCAE and UCA scholars—had very different assessments of the post-1990 situation in Nicaragua, and especially of the economy. The language they used revealed some key differences, with the former advancing the position that microenterprises could thrive under the new liberal market conditions if workers were given the chance to become competitive, and the latter emphasizing the failure of small industries and informal sector workers to get by, let alone thrive, during a time of crisis, shock treatment, and the resulting unemployment. Although up to now I have emphasized the differences between the two dominant discourses, in this section I will draw attention to the similar logic underlying what appear on the surface to be distinct political-ideological positions.

While Sandinistas and others critical of the government’s economic policy could be said to be producing an alternative to the government’s dominant discourse or master narrative of development, they have not produced entirely distinct discourses. In fact, they share the underlying assumptions that a measure of adjustment is necessary and that workers themselves embody the potential of the nation to forge ahead and “develop.” Despite the opposition to neoliberalismo, or the neoliberal model imposed by the government in
response to IMF and AID pressures, an alternative model has not been offered. Instead, critics have pointed to the shortcomings and high social costs of the neoliberal plan, but have only proposed a more gradual introduction of measures to stabilize and adjust the economy, along with programs to support small industries to become more competitive. At the turn of the century, a viable alternative appears even less likely, though I will suggest later that more hopeful prospects are embodied in the social movements emerging in civil society over the last decade.9

As the UNO government's promises to reactivate the economy grew more desperate in the face of worsening unemployment and deepening poverty, officials often invoked the errors of the Sandinistas and inadequacies of Nicaraguan workers themselves to account for ongoing problems. That was the case during several meetings I had with Stefan Platseau, the Dutch head of the National Program to Support Microenterprise (PAMIC), created by the Ministry of the Economy in 1991 (Fig. 3). In his first year on the job, Platseau was optimistic that with credit and training offered to qualified microentrepreneurs, the problems of the past could be overcome. He shared the opinion held by many others that the revolutionary government had ruined workers by lending them excessive support but without the training they so badly needed. He was intent on training highly motivated individuals to work in microenterprises, thereby demonstrating their viability and making

Fig. 3. Government offices of PAMIC, supporting microenterprise development.

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his program a success (Stefan Platteau, interview, February 24, 1992). Yet, a year later, Platteau revealed the tougher attitude and more cynical outlook that was apparent among government officials. Pointing to a problematic “work culture” in Nicaragua which he traced to the last decade, he said that in his position he countered a “culture of distrust” with a “culture of management.” To that end, he told people that if they wanted to succeed there would be “blood, sweat, and tears.” The condescending language he used was resonant of the “culture of poverty” (or, in Nicaragua, sometimes termed “culture of subsidy”) thinking of those in the development field who locate the obstacles to modernization in the people themselves or in their state-directed economies rather than in problems stemming from globalization or the development process itself.10 The reality is, of course, more complex but the ideological effect of holding workers themselves responsible is to invite polemics and preclude the possibility of learning from the past. Although Platteau did not view PAMIC or the growth of microenterprises as likely to rescue the economy or to transform the society, he seemed to regard the solution to the most immediate economic problems as riding on the success of his program (Stefan Platteau, interview, July 23, 1993).

Some members of the government expressed an even deeper cynicism about the likelihood of economic recovery. As unemployment and underemployment rose in recent years, the growth of the informal sector continued unabated. A large number of people were selling items ranging from food and drink to TV antennas and exercise suits, as well as washing car windows at intersections in the city (Fig. 4). In an acknowledgment of the severity of the problem, a joke was circulating: How can 30,000 new jobs be created? The answer: install 1,000 new traffic lights at urban intersections. Ironically, after the 1996 election of Arnoldo Aleman, huge traffic circles replaced lights at major intersections in the city, and some Nicaraguans quipped that the new president had gone that far to eliminate informal vendors from the streets.

During interviews over the last few years, Luis Carvajal, director of Entrepreneurial Development in the government office of PAMIC, called attention to the assistance offered to promising microenterprises to enable them to develop and market better products. PAMIC has in its purview the same range of industries as CONAPI, including clothing and shoes, furniture, food, and metal work. The official presence of PAMIC in Managua as well as in national campaigns and fairs to promote products gives visibility to the government’s apparent concern for small industry. Carvajal, like Platteau before him, believes that the Sandinista government was overly protective of workers in guaranteeing them a market, and that the quality of production
suffered. With the neoliberalism of the 1990s, some workers still expect the state to provide a safety net, but they are learning that they must “be competitive or die.” This change is good, he said, and builds the self-esteem of those who manage to succeed (Luis Carjaval, interview, July 3, 1996).

In 1998, Carjaval stressed that the Aleman government had made a high priority of microenterprise development by putting more resources into that vulnerable sector. He emphasized the importance of marketing techniques, finding niches, and having “vision.” Pushing the point further, he referred to an inevitable process of “natural selection” in this period of globalization, whereby a “new type of entrepreneur who manages the tools of the market will survive.” Given that an estimated 60 percent of the economically active population works in small enterprises, this sector is bound to contract, he said, but there will be a positive outcome in terms of specialization and competition. Revealing the contradictions of the neoliberal era, he claimed that women are given special consideration as microentrepreneurs, even as he described the certain failure of many of their small industries (Luis Carjaval, interview, June 9, 1998).

Meanwhile, in recent years CONAPI has signaled its nonpolitical orientation and its concern to work effectively with—albeit sometimes in opposition to—the government. In 1996, when the trade union organization was

Fig. 4. Street vendors in Managua seek city intersections in which to sell items.
working to challenge a proposed new law that would adversely affect cooperatives by eliminating their favored tax status, Antonio Chávez reported that CONAPI had helped to stem the decline of small industries. He pointed to some recovering enterprises and implied that CONAPI had played a role (while also acknowledging that a good coffee harvest that year had benefited the whole economy) (Antonio Chávez, interview, July 4, 1996). However, the CONAPI membership often complained that their organization’s leaders served little purpose beyond maintaining their own positions and that small industries continued to suffer losses. Indeed, in a period of high unemployment and state sector layoffs, administrators in private and public offices like CONAPI and PAMIC had a lot at stake in demonstrating their own worthiness and service to their constituencies in order to protect their positions. By 1998, CONAPI’s image was tarnished as the former leadership was charged with corruption and a number of cooperatives elected to drop their membership in the organization. If an unstated objective of development programs is to support the apparatus established to promote development goals, this example from Nicaragua suggests that the apparatus of CONAPI may be in danger of foundering as that of PAMIC (now renamed INPYME) gains ascendancy in the neoliberal era.

Working Class Narratives: A Departure from Dominant Discourses

Until now, I have discussed two discursive practices in Nicaragua, the first produced by neoliberals in government and the academy and the second produced by Sandinista critics in trade union organizations like CONAPI as well as the academy. Most of my research did not consist of interviews in offices, however, but rather spending time talking with members of urban cooperatives and small industries around Managua, and with residents of a popular barrio where many worked in the informal economy. When I compared the dominant development discourses against what working class Nicaraguans had to say, I expected that they would align themselves with one or the other discourse based on their life experience and political orientation. However, I discovered that the two dominant discourses were problematic and overlapping in themselves, and that the discursive practices in urban cooperatives and barrios at various times were similar to and other times departed from dominant discourses. Here, I offer a sampling of the rich and diverse views of these working women and men, highlighting what they expressed about the current situation in their country. Later, I argue that their persistent appeals to the body and personhood in relation to development
offer, if not a well-formed political stance, a nascent alternative stemming from a consciousness that remains resistant and potentially revolutionary.

Some of the people I interviewed appeared to have adopted the neoliberal view that conditions were getting better, as evidenced by the increasing modernity of Managua and the introduction of new imported items on the market which they hoped one day to be able to obtain. One example was a woman I spoke to in the barrio who was employed in a small but modern new supermarket, La Corona. Unlike the majority of those working as sales help who were from better off areas of Managua, the woman I met mopping the floor was from the barrio. She was no doubt satisfied to have a secure job, working 48 hours per week and earning about U.S.$100 per month. When I asked how she viewed the current situation, she glanced around at the fully stocked shelves of products, many of them luxury items like liquor, canned fruits, pastries, and other imported foods. She observed that things are better now, and that before (under the Sandinistas) they were in decline. Before, they had to stand in line for goods, but now products are in ample supply. The policies are good, she said, expressing confidence that life would improve and that all would benefit from the greater availability of items on the market.

Others in the barrio shared the opinion that times had been particularly difficult under the Sandinistas. Although the barrio had lent strong support during the insurrection that ended the Somoza dictatorship, a majority had voted for the UNO government in 1990. A widowed owner of a car parts workshop voiced her dissatisfaction with the current situation, saying that her business was down and she had to pay high taxes to the mayor's office. Like the majority of those I interviewed, she complained that “there are things to buy, but no money to buy them.” However, she went so far as to reminisce about the pre-revolutionary period of the Somoza dictatorship, remembering it as a “royal time that we'll never return to,” when you could buy cars and many desired products. She recalled the Sandinista period as “the dark part of Nicaragua's history, in every sense.” In the end, she expressed the hope that the situation would improve in the future.

Another woman I spoke to had opened the front room of her house on the barrio's main square as a small shop where she offered soft drinks and occasional simple meals. She explained that the bottled drinks actually belong to a male acquaintance of hers who left his job under the Occupational Conversion Plan and began selling on his own, then asked her to sell for him. When asked what she thought of the present situation, she described herself as on neither side politically (Sandinista or UNO), and as an active member of the evangelical church that owned the house she lived in. She stated that
"it's the same poverty," referring to conditions under the FSLN and UNO governments. Having lived in the barrio for 25 years and having observed the growing number of informal businesses, she complained that there are more sellers than buyers now and too many small shops and restaurants, so that all are suffering.

Despite their initial support for the UNO government, most of the people I talked to in the barrio were completely disillusioned a year or two after the elections. Without the expected level of U.S. support or the promised economic recovery, peace and the end of the economic blockade were insufficient to satisfy them. Most spoke up immediately about the failings of the government and its policies. While those in more privileged and powerful places debated about what measures would "start up" the economy, workers in the marginalized informal sector and the beleaguered cooperatives were quick to point to immediate problems such as unemployment, lack of credit, low wages, rising prices, and poor health. Whereas the former utilized the ideological maneuver of talking in abstract terms, the latter spoke directly to the effects on body and soul.

A number of women related their strategies for coping with the present economic situation. A seamstress from a small garment factory in the barrio that, like many small businesses, had fallen on hard times was the sole income earner for a household that included her two daughters and three grandchildren. When asked if her wages met their needs, she said that she had to "stretch, stretch, stretch" her earnings. They have modified their eating habits like many families and, instead of having three good size meals as in the past, they eat much less. Whereas before they would have rice, beans, bread and milk for breakfast, now they have coffee and bread. And rather than washing clothes every day, they do it just twice a week to save on water and soap. She does her ironing, considered essential by working class Nicaraguans, just once a week. All this she refers to as "the struggle to survive." Difficult as this woman's life seemed when I spoke with her in 1992, it was far harder a year later when production at the factory came to a near standstill and her income was greatly reduced.

A woman who had worked for a decade in a garment cooperative returned home when the group lost the building they had used as a store due to their inability to keep up monthly payments. She continued sewing at home, but with sales of new clothing down she had turned to the sale of cheaper used clothing imported from the U.S. In addition, she had a freezer from which she sold a few soft drinks each day. She complained that unlike the Sandinista government, the UNO was not helping them, and she added that CONAPI was not assisting them much either. She was not hopeful about the
future and did not see how any government could improve things. For now, she said, her family makes sacrifices, doing without basic foods, access to transportation, and other needs.

A retired carpenter and self-styled historian of the barrio enjoyed talking, so I often sat with him to hear his recollections of the past and to listen to his strong views about the current situation. As a long-time Sandinista, he compared the present unfavourably with the past. He described the Chamorro and Aleman governments as unable to govern and incapable of developing plans to reactivate the economy. They have tried to stabilize the economy "on the backs of the people, making them suffer," and "the political cost is very high." He views the new orientation of the government as inevitable, but expects that just as socialism failed in the country so will capitalism and the neoliberal project. He pointed to a lack of national identity among Nicaraguan capitalists, who instead serve individual interests and international capital, making a successful national project unlikely.

One of this man’s neighbors, a retired man who used to work in a small enterprise making windows, talked to me about his family’s situation. The six adults and four children living in his house depend largely on his small pension and the salary of one daughter who works as a secretary. In the past, his wife took in washing for a neighbor, but now no one has money to pay for that service. They eat mainly beans and some cheese, but no meat. Telling me that his wife is a loyal Sandinista but that he is not, he sounded deeply resigned as he summed up the situation: “The working class is poor. The governments are alike. There is no work.” The despair evident in his words suggests he has given up, though it also reveals a frank insistence on naming the material problems that poor and working people confront.

Fig. 5. A retired man in the barrio frequently shared his opinions about the current situation in Nicaragua.
As should be clear, work and the lack thereof were at the center of most of my conversations in the barrio. Some people offered painful accounts of their experience with unemployment or inadequate earnings. A mother of two young children who worked as a schoolteacher described the difficulty her husband had during four years without a job. Telling me that he was sorely affected and had problems with his “nerves,” she said that he consulted a psychologist but there was no relief until he converted to an evangelical faith. She later joined too, and they have found a measure of peace, even as they continue to face economic hardship. Her invocation of faith as providing an alternative to medical healing and economic well-being, when those were unattainable, was striking.

An older woman who was long active in the barrio and with the Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs (a Sandinista organization), had much to say about the national situation during my visits with her. She acknowledged that there were problems in the economy during the time of the FSLN government, but she attributed them largely to the war and the blockade. People at least had food to eat, as the government distributed cards that allowed everyone to get basic foods at reduced prices. Since 1990, she told me, small industry is failing. There is no work and people have no money to spend. With strong competition, small businesses like her front room store fail while large businesses prosper. She also addressed the high toll the economic situation has taken on people's personal lives, telling me that people are not eating well and they are dispirited, causing their physical and psychological health to suffer. With eight people in her house dependent on her retired husband's pension and her small store income, she spoke passionately about the burden of neoliberal policies.

Clearly, economic policies have taken a heavy toll on both women and men. Taking a broader, historical view, we may observe that Nicaraguan experiences of revolution and counter-revolution as well as neoliberalism have been distinctly gendered. Masculine as well as feminine identities have been forged as men have suffered from their disproportionate involvement in war, casualties and death, and from rising unemployment causing them to return home with a loss of dignity. For their part, women too have participated in armed struggle in Nicaragua at levels before unheard of, they have experienced unemployment, and have also felt the impact of men’s misfortunes within families and households. When men are present at home in greater numbers they may pitch in to help women or introduce new levels of stress, and when they abandon their families they may leave them feeling distraught or relieved; there are many different stories in the barrio.
Although some women felt that the burden of shouldering the economic crisis was shared equally by women and men, many articulated the ways that women carry the heavier load. The situation is particularly acute for those in the high number of female-headed households but, even when men are present, women bear the main responsibility for feeding and clothing their children and performing housework. Circumstances are made more trying, some say, by the jealousy of husbands who do not want their wives to work even when their earnings are essential. Several women in urban cooperatives that I followed over the past decade left in part because of the opposition of men to women working. A group of housewives who trained for ten months as welders had worked together for only two years when they disbanded, explaining that difficulty launching their business along with family demands drew them back home. Women in an artisans cooperative who produced ornamental bark items also left their cooperative when their husbands persistently demanded that they tend to their children and their homes. The multiple demands placed on women as family members and as workers are rarely considered by government officials even as they express their commitment to making small enterprises succeed.

In general, the language used by workers in small industries and commerce to describe the current situation was far more direct and personal than the technical language of government bureaucrats and policy makers or of academics. Their descriptions of the effects of the economic adjustments on their lives were visceral—suggesting, in effect, how economic hardship was inscribed on their bodies and minds. One woman told me that her garment cooperative was “drowning” as a result of policy that favored the entry of imported clothing and made materials more costly to purchase. A woman from another garment cooperative that was narrowly avoiding bankruptcy described the economic “blows” the co-op had experienced and the way that, since the elections, the free market policy was “killing” them. A man who had served as head of a bakers cooperative until the economic downturn drove the co-op to sell its property, told me that the government is “asphyxiating” small industries and only helping large ones. This, he said, occurs in spite of the potential of small industries which employ the majority of workers in the country. He concluded that between neoliberal politics and high unemployment, people are unable to get ahead and, more often, are failing.

In the last few years, people I have spoken with have used even stronger language to describe the effects of harsh economic conditions on body and soul. The owner of a small restaurant told me that the system is “killing them,
massacring them.” One baker I interviewed gestured graphically as she described how competition from large industry-produced bread is “hanging them.” A retired man, describing his family’s increasingly meager meals, said they can no longer “endure.” In keeping with the PAMIC official’s prognosis that the neoliberal economy would mean the “survival of the fittest,” people’s stories made reference to small businesses expiring and, in a few cases, individuals committing suicide in desperation.

When even the activists among those I interviewed describe the Community Movement and the Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs working at the level of the barrio as “paralyzed,” it is difficult to avoid representing these Nicaraguans as rather passive victims of circumstances beyond their control. However, while the people themselves often describe conditions as hopelessly bad, they nonetheless speak about and act on their commitment to “struggle,” and talk about the “hope” they hold onto as they “cope” with the economic situation. Some continue to participate in oppositional politics, whether at the barrio level or in the Sandinista party, and others claim a victory in simply meeting their families’ most basic daily needs.

Neoliberalism and Discourses of the Nation and the Body

For a brief time in the 1980s, Nicaragua stood as an international symbol of revolutionary hope or neocolonial anxiety, depending on one’s political outlook. Now, in neoliberal times, Nicaragua stands variously for hopes deferred or capitalism’s promise, again depending on one’s perspective. But whatever view is held, there is agreement that the country is facing grave economic problems and that the body politic is ailing. Neoliberal policy analysts debate whether “gradual or shock therapy” is required to stabilize the pathologically ill economy and leaders rationalize that “a gradual approach would mean the death of the ‘patient’” (De Franco and Velázquez 1997:104); ironically, by employing the metaphor of the economy or the body politic as a sick person, they rationalize harsher austerity measures and disregard the effects on physical bodies. Even Sandinistas and others critical of government policy, work within the neoliberal system and call out for needed medicine, but what they have in mind is a palliative for “shock therapy”: Antonio Chávez made such an appeal when he complained that the government was not so much as providing “aspirin” for small industry’s “migraine.” The barrio residents and other low-income people I spoke with were the most explicit in saying that social and economic ills in the country are creating bodily ills in real, live individuals—a key point that is overlooked in the dominant
discourses. In Nicaragua, as elsewhere, the political economic woes of a nation are often expressed and contested in terms of physical disorder and mental distress.

Certainly, body metaphors are employed across social classes to describe the nation's economy and its population. What appears notably different is the elite's notion of what harsh medicine needs to be administered to heal the nation, and working class and poor people's imagery of the bodily consequences of both the economic crisis and the medicine that is being administered to deal with it. As we have seen, the elite may blame workers for becoming "spoiled," "lazy," and "parasitical" under the Sandinistas and, now, for failing to take risks and become "competitive." They may emphasize the physical price of "blood, sweat, and tears" that workers must pay to "survive." Poor and working people, of course, view things rather differently, as they describe the outcome of recent policy measures as ill health, depression, and sometimes even suicide.

While academics and policy makers advance discourses based on social and economic assessments (and, doubtless, their own personal and political interests), the physical and psychological welfare of working class and poor people hang in the balance. Their bodies function as a battleground in discussions that center on how quickly adjustment measures may be introduced and how much the population can withstand before irreversible damage is done—or before political protest grows stronger. Low-income workers and barrio residents offer their own critical, oppositional accounts as they describe their personal and family circumstances and suffering. While these narratives are clearly marked by class, they are also deeply gendered as women's stories convey the extra burdens they carry in a society and economy that depends on them to perform increasing domestic responsibilities.

The brief personal narratives of hardship and struggle offered here may be unsurprising to those who have spent time in Latin America in periods of economic crisis and political transition. But we might benefit from increased attention to the site of the body, or what Price (1999) terms "the very local," as a location (like the local, national, and global) in which broad processes unfold. Indeed there is some evidence that neoliberalism can produce health crises, as in the rapid spread of cholera in unprepared Latin American nations a few years ago (Petras and Morley 1992:54). In Nicaragua, "natural" disasters such as Hurricane Mitch are made far worse because of the environmental devastation, poverty, and governmental disregard that also stem from a free market orientation (Envío 1999b). And increasing reports of domestic violence in the country may be attributed to continued patterns of
male dominance and to the growing support of the women's movement for women to report abuses, but there appears to be a correlation with worsening economic conditions as well (*Envío* 1999a). Studies that have examined the psychosocial disruptions of the Contra war and economic adjustment in Nicaragua have found that the consequences are particularly acute for women and children (Fernández Poncela 1996; Quesada 1998). My research endorses the need to consider not only the materiality of subaltern lives, but also the nondominant discourses of less powerful social sectors as they embrace "embodied" (often gendered) issues of national development.

In the project of nation-building, the dominant discourses of Sandinista and neoliberal analysts and policy makers are not dichotomous and fixed frames of reference but, rather, constantly negotiated positions and practices. They sometimes converge and other times contradict each other, based on changing circumstances and power struggles. Thus, the Sandinistas have sometimes adopted a developmentalist discourse in order to promote a democratic process, without necessarily abandoning a more revolutionary project (Grosfoguel, Negrón-Muntaner, and Georas 1997:9). Similarly, the governments of Chamorro and Alemán have been characterized by differing degrees of willingness to compromise with the substantial political opposition. And in recent years, the disunity of the FSLN and the willingness of Daniel Ortega as party leader to make pacts with the Alemán government has meant considerable divergence of interest within the party (*Envío* 1999d). Accordingly, shifting and contentious discourses have contributed to a complex political panorama in the country. In general, though, "workers" as a category are expected to build up the economy and society and "women" as a category are expected to maintain home and family in the new socially and politically conservative order.

The working class Nicaraguans I interviewed in Managua reflected some of the views characteristic of the dominant political discourses, not surprisingly as they are citizens and voters who identify with national concerns. However, their narratives are often far more critical and oppositional, and call into question the efficacy and sincerity of the powerful social sectors in bringing about any change for the better. Although they sometimes express the anti-statist view that all governments are alike and cannot be counted on, they also make an urgent appeal for action to alter the situation. While middle class members of government and the political opposition debate how quickly economic adjustment should proceed and what social support should be offered to reduce its harsh effects, working class and poor Nicaraguans name the problem as it is inscribed on their bodies as poverty, hunger, and despair (Fig. 6).
diverse group themselves, these women and men challenge notions of neoliberal development as inevitable and contribute to an understanding of the workings of power in society (Villarrel 1996). At the very least, they speak eloquently to the need for a living wage and social services and, at best, they offer searing critiques of discourses and practices that fail to address the unbearable burdens of adjustment policies. Their awareness of their economic vulnerability, now that the protection provided by the San-dinista safety net has been removed, is paralleled by an evident awareness of the vulnerability of their persons, their bodies, which are also unprotected. Finally, their refusal to accept silently the damaging effects of neoliberalism restores the memory of the revolution, which at its outset held the hope of building an economic democracy, just when such a bold vision has been lost to many in the country.

**Development or National Project?**

Conversations and interviews with Nicaraguans from various social sectors, including government and trade union officials, research analysts, and working women and men have been at the center of this discussion. A more extensive treatment would require the examination at greater length of the vast quantity of print media as well, including newspapers, journals, and reports. Nevertheless, the conversations I heard and participated in represent a fairly broad cross-section of issues that are currently debated in the country. Moreover, my
face-to-face encounters allowed me to hear the unofficial views of public figures as well as the views of working class and poor Nicaraguans who are frequently overlooked. By gathering professional accounts and personal narratives, I had the opportunity to consider the discursive strategies people deploy to give cultural meaning to their political and economic experiences.

María Rosa Renzi, an economist and the executive director of the International Foundation for Global Economic Development (FIDEG), an NGO that conducts studies of the impact of neoliberal adjustment policies, offered an assessment of the situation in Nicaragua. Like many others, she emphasized that the cutbacks in state sector employment and the elimination of social services that had been provided under the Sandinistas brought inflation under control, but at great social cost. Renzi spoke of economic models, employment, and reactivating the economy, but she did not refer specifically to development. Indeed, when I questioned her about current development discourses she responded that Nicaraguans rarely speak of development, or “desarrollo” (María Rosa Renzi, interview, July 23, 1993). Elsewhere in Latin America and the third world, the term is frequently invoked as part of the language of the general population, not just among specialists. In Nicaragua, “desarrollo” is employed in economic and political analysis, but seldom in everyday conversation. In part, this may be because in the post-Sandinista government, the Ministry of the Economy and Development have had far less influence than the Ministry of Finance and the Central Bank. But the lack of engagement with “development” may also follow from the decade of Nicaraguan revolution and the popular resistance to received knowledge and imposed models from the North.

We might fruitfully turn, then, from discussions of “development” to the multiple ways that Nicaraguans are constructing and struggling over a “national project” (Field 1998). How likely is it, ten years after the Sandinista government was defeated by an opposition bent on unmaking the revolution and remaking a neoliberal nation, that constructive action will emerge from the current expression of political differences? We might first question how disparate the articulated positions really are between the dominant ideologies and discourses, particularly at a time when the major party leaders—Alemán for the ruling Liberal Alliance and Ortega for the FSLN—have made a pact to gain personal advantage.? In both a national and a global sense, neoliberalism appears to be the only game in town.

Likewise, how different is CONAPI’s recent campaign to encourage consumers to “Buy Nicaraguan” in order to benefit national producers and allow their products to become competitive with imported goods, and PAMIC’s slogan to draw business directly to microentrepreneurs, “From the Entrepre-
neur to the Consumer, All is Cheaper? Both rely on nationalist rhetoric and call for national production and consumption to counter the harsh effects of neoliberalism and structural adjustment. One might argue, of course, that unlike CONAPI, which represents small producers themselves, PAMIC represents government interests trying to placate microentrepreneurs who are likely to be crushed under the neoliberal model. In this sense, CONAPI continues to make efforts, however compromised, on behalf of its constituency, while the PAMIC agenda may be not as much to assist small-scale producers as to serve the state by creating an administrative apparatus to contain dissent.

Raising these questions in the current context of Nicaragua and pointing to the convergence of formerly opposed political ideologies and discourses need not lead to entirely cynical conclusions, however. I have considered some alternative discursive practices in working class Managua, particularly as they are inflected by concerns relating to gender and the body in connection with the economy and the nation. Whereas the discourses of dominant political interests are similar in their invocation of metaphors of illness and pathology—the economy “ailing,” and the country “wounded” following Hurricane Mitch—working class and poor Nicaraguans speak more directly of the effects of these force fields on their own bodies. Women, especially, recognize that their vulnerability to the consequences of low-incomes, increasing violence, and uncertain access to basic needs is heightened. The frequent invocation of women as “mothers,” whether by Sandinistas seeking their solidarity or by governments desiring to reinstate traditional family values (and, often enough, by women themselves), is understood by many to place additional responsibility on women to underwrite the social costs of development and nation-building. Thus, in the midst of rising feminist concern that efforts to reassert patriarchal authority and to curtail reproductive rights pose serious threats, a slogan of the women’s movement, “My body is mine,” resonates loudly.¹⁸

The same electoral outcome that ushered in devastating economic policies and welcomed competition in the free market also opened the political and cultural space for social movements, independent of any single political party, to form and articulate alternative discourses. These emergent movements in civil society including women, indigenous peoples, gay men and lesbians, environmentalists and others, have called for a “new way of doing politics,” and a “new political culture.”¹⁹ Significantly, these groups share a concern for the integrity of the body, the right to live free of violence, hunger, and environmental threat, as well as the right to cultural, sexual, and political expression. Indeed, in view of the challenges to inequalities of gen-
der, race, and sexual orientation, there is some prospect of “changing Nicaragua’s political economy of the body” (Lancaster 1992:230). Attention to the relationship between discourse and power and to the construction of cultural meaning in the building of an oppositional politics is evident in these movements. Women and men in various social sectors, including workers in small and informal businesses, are questioning the conventional wisdom of government authorities, powerful economic interests, and established political parties as they call for an extension of rights to all in the society. Without being overly sanguine, there is some force to the claim that civil society embodies the best prospect of advancing a democratic alternative in the country.20 What the new players will propose to put in place is uncertain, but let us not underestimate the creative spirit of a people who so recently waged revolution on the planet.

Notes

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1. The woman at the meeting, held July 21–23, 1993, identified herself as an organizer and she later led the other women in a consciousness-raising session. Her reference to neoliberalism (spoken of often in present-day Nicaragua) and, especially, postmodernism (rarely mentioned except among intellectuals) set her apart as more highly educated than most of the women present. Nevertheless, it was unclear why she referred to postmodernism except to allude to theorizing as oppressive to non-elites. Her comment has remained in my mind as I have explored how postmodernism may contribute to critiques of neoliberalism.

2. I will occasionally use quotes to call into question the meaning of particular terms. In other places the quotation marks may be understood.
3. To a certain degree, this rethinking stems from my past work, in which I have taken a critical view of Western-defined development, resisting any notion that such development would free Third World societies from poverty and underdevelopment (Babb 1989, 1997). That work has built on the critical writings of Marxist, feminist, and other scholars, a number of them from non-Western societies themselves.


5. For discussion of Latin American social and cultural movements that call for the fundamental “right to have rights” and that include the body, gender, and sexuality in their purview, see Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar (1998) and Balderston and Guy (1997). A fuller treatment of the subject in the Nicaraguan context would need to examine the sexual politics of reproductive rights and of the emergent lesbian and gay movement (Babb, n.d.).

6. See Spalding (1994) and Walker (1997) for further discussion of these policies.

7. For further discussion of the UNO’s conservative gender agenda, see Kampwirth (1996b).

8. This interview with Antonio Chávez of CONAPI was conducted on the same day as the preceding interview with María Hurtado de Vigil in the Ministry of the Economy, presenting an interesting contrast. CONAPI has received almost no attention from writers assessing organizations formed under the Sandinistas. My personal communication with political scientists Tom Walker and Rose Spalding confirms my sense that because the association has had few resources and thus has been weak in comparison with other sectoral and trade organizations, it has gone largely unnoticed. In my own research I had many occasions to visit CONAPI, which I discuss in Babb (forthcoming).

9. We should not be surprised, however, that the left in Nicaragua has not come up with concrete proposals for alternatives to neoliberalism. Throughout Latin America, the left has produced an ideological critique and has called for mechanisms to protect those social sectors in the most precarious positions, but few have clung to “the purity of revolutionary struggle and of socialism” or suggested a new alternative (Zamora 1995:11).

10. For more discussion of the cultural politics of economic development and the free market model, see contributions to Rosen and McFadyen (1995) and Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar (1998).

11. In my forthcoming book, I describe the four cooperatives I followed most closely over the years as well as this barrio in the western part of Managua where I lived for some time and interviewed in several city blocks.
12. See Babb (1999) for further discussion of the changing face of the city of Managua, as a new city center is constructed complete with shopping malls, McDonald's restaurants, and elaborate fountains at traffic circles at the same time that murals and other evidence of the revolutionary past is systematically erased.

13. A number of writers have discussed popular organizations that formed under the Sandinistas, including the Community Movement (Movimiento Comunal) and Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs (Madres de Heroes y Mártires). For a recent review from the vantage point of the mid-1990s, see Walker (1997).

14. In making this argument I do not wish to overlook the fact that working class people are also capable of political analysis and that middle class people somatize their politics as much as workers, as shown elsewhere in this work.

15. A more extensive discussion of economic development and nationhood would also go beyond gender and class to include attention to issues of race and ethnicity. The notion of “Nicaragua mestiza” masks significant cultural differences in the country that continue to limit the prospects of a national project. See Gould (1998), Field (1999), Gordon (1998), and Lancaster (1992) for historical and anthropological works that examine these questions.


17. Alemán seeks to avoid charges of corruption and Ortega seeks continued immunity from charges of long-term sexual abuse made by his adoptive stepdaughter (Envío 1999b).

18. During the last few years, the feminist NGO Puntos de Encuentro has made this slogan well-known though its publication La Boletina, bumper stickers, and so on.

19. For more discussion of popular organizations and social movements in the 1990s, see Walker (1997).

20. For a recent discussion by Nicaraguan analysts of the prospects for a political alternative emerging in the country and a case for civil society as the likely source, having the visionary capacity and the ability to put pressure on political parties and the government, see Envío (1999e). A similar point is made for Latin America in general by Petras and Morley (1992:193), who view the growth of social movements as “the most formidable force for transforming society.”
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