

DRAFT DO NOT QUOTE WITHOUT PERMISSION BY THE AUTHOR

Birgit Muller
Laboratoire de l'anthropologie des institutions et organisations sociales LAIOS
Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales
54, bd. Raspail
75006 Paris
bmuller@msh-paris.fr

Favores, ayuda y robo: Peasants' Views of Continuity in Systemic Change in Nicaragua

(Paper presented at the Agrarian Studies Seminar, University of Yale, 19.10. 2007)

Since the times of Somoza, Nicaraguan peasants have been the objects of sweeping changes in governmentality. During the Sandinista period government officials attempted to forge a worker peasant alliance by convincing the peasants that they should enter into a relationship of mutual help with the workers in the city with whom they shared a common identity as revolutionary subjects. When the Sandinistas lost the elections in 1990 to the Chamorro government the peasants were to become independent entrepreneurs acquiring individual land titles and playing by the rules of the free market. After 1996, the corrupt government of Arnaldo Aleman relegated the peasants to the role of non-entities, the poor, absent from government programs and subjected to humanitarian aid from NGOs that flooded the country after the hurricane Mitch. When the innumerable foreign projects and programs to alleviate rural poverty failed, donor governments and the World Bank decreed in 2002 the consolidation of rural community structures, the empowerment of peasants and their participation in integrated regional rural development programs.

What all the different governments shared was a discourse about development and progress towards which peasants were supposed to aspire. Development discourse as Akhil Gupta (1998:41) pointed out, is 'a tale of triumph' in which the overcoming of hardship and poverty provides the development story with an essential coherence. It justifies the moral and political

leadership of those who attempt the regulation of populations, bodies and things in the name of progress and provides the ruling regime with its chief legitimating function, its most important reason of state (Gupta 1998: 34). Teleological images of modernity act like an 'absent presence' in discourses about development. The underdeveloped (*atrasado*) thus becomes the shabby imitation of the developed (Gupta 1998:40). Representations of the past, therefore, are central to development narratives: they prove that progress has, in fact, taken place.

When I returned to Los Cañales, a village on the high plateau of Carazo in 2004 after fifteen years of absence, my acquaintances answered the casual question of how they were doing after all that time with "*lo mismo*", the same! This was all the more surprising, as they had experienced tremendous political and economic changes since 1990 when the Sandinistas lost the elections. The institutional structures that the Sandinistas had created to regulate agricultural production and trade had collapsed, the government of Violeta Camorro, had maintained the land reform while distributing individual land titles. Her successor, the corrupt liberal president Arnoldo Aleman had pushed the restoration of Somozist property relations. NGOs had been in the village especially after the Hurricane Mitch with numerous small development programmes that had taught the peasants techniques of organic agriculture. The Catholic village church was closed and the believers had come under the spell of protestant sects. Some houses in the village had more holes in the roof than fifteen years ago. Instead almost every household now owned a TV set. While I was still wondering why my friends had told me that things had stayed the same "*lo mismo*", I remembered that fifteen years ago, at the time of the Sandinista land reform which had implied land distribution, technical development programmes and central distribution and marketing mechanisms, peasants had also told me that things had stayed the same, when I asked them whether their living condition had improved since the Somoza period.

Lo mismo appears as part of a *métis* discourse contesting the validity of development discourses, in particular the prospect of a bright future, the ultimate arrival of Third World people in consumer heaven or in an egalitarian paradise. It also ridicules the inefficiency of programs and

projects undertaken by governments, NGOs and international organisations to ameliorate the lot of the rural people. *Lo mismo* points out that the big and small projects of the Sandinista revolutionaries and the post-Sandinista reformers have failed to improve the economic situation of the peasants. It is a subversive discourse as it contests the very legitimacy of state and non-state organisations to intervene in people's lives and to attempt the regulation of populations, bodies and things in a supposedly common interest. It points to the unintended consequences of such structured changes and to the contradictions between development plan and practice.

Intrigued by *lo mismo*, I was thus incited to probe deeper into the categories that rural people used when they spoke about the ways in which they were governed. I wanted to find out how their discourse resonated and communicated with the different official discourses on development and with the regulatory frameworks created.

In this paper I want to do two things. First I want to analyse how governments constructed the rural subjects and objects on whom they wanted to intervene. Governance in the sense in which I am using it here is not the preserve of "the government" or the state apparatus. Programs of government are devised also by transnational donors, NGOs, and a host of other authorities (Li 2005 :2). The central category that evolves and changes throughout the different regimes is the category of peasant (*campesino*). How does a 'peasant', become a 'rural labourer', a rural producer', a 'rural poor'? The different policies of rural development that the succession of Nicaraguan governments put across were destined to 'conduct the conduct' of the peasants in the sense that Foucault (Foucault 1983: 212) emphasizes, not through direct coercion but by setting conditions from which a conduct would follow that suited their political objectives. During and after a prolonged civil war in the 1980s the different governments attempted to govern people by making real or bogus concessions to the rural subjects they created rather than by opposing them.

Second, I want to examine to what extent this governance actually corresponded to peoples habits, aspirations and beliefs. To what degree was it effective not only in creating structures of

control and regulation but also in penetrating people's minds and souls. Rural people evaluate official development policies as they arrive in the village and interpret them in terms of their own moral categories of reciprocity and trust. In order to understand how peasants interpret their relationship to the state in the midst of rapid social change and how they try to orient themselves, I analysed the institutional semantics of the different political regimes together with the interactions of the peasants with state and non-state organisations. I complement the analysis of the use of concepts such as 'revolutionary conscience', 'worker-peasant alliance', 'democracy and participation', 'free market' and 'empowerment' that are linked to the development fashion of the day, with the continuity and the change of meaning of the most commonly used expressions with which the peasants characterise their relationships to the political authorities: *Favores* (in the sense of favours), *ayuda* (in the sense of help but also in the material sense of gift) and *robo* (in the sense of theft, but also fraud and deception).

I collected the material for this paper during ten months of fieldwork in 1986-87 and several shorter visits of two months each in 1988, 1989 and 1990 in a village in Carazo, which I call Los Cañales. I returned to the village for a short visit in 2000 and did a restudy of two month in 2004. In 2006 I went back to interview state administrators, members of NGOs, trade unions and political representatives of donor governments on the national, regional and local level about the new integrated rural development program Pro Rural that had been commissioned from the Nicaraguan state by the World Bank and other donors.

Constructing the Rural Subject

While the end of the peasantry has been announced to have taken place worldwide by the end of the 1970s (Bernstein 2006: 453), one of the unintended consequences of the Sandinista Revolution has been the re-peasantization of the Nicaraguan rural economy during the 1980s. With re-peasantization I mean the fact that the produce from working the land constitutes an essential part of the family budget and the cultivating of the soil becomes an essential part of

ones identity¹. This development stood in striking contrast to the developments in most neighbouring countries in the 1980s which saw a further expansion of large-scale industrialised production for export at the expense of peasant agriculture. The debate about who is and has been a peasant has filled many pages and I only venture into it because “peasant” became in the 1980s and 90s an important category of self-identification, while the different Nicaraguan regimes used ‘rural producer’, ‘rural labourer’, ‘rural entrepreneur’ and ‘rural poor’ as categories for governmental intervention.

When the Sandinistas took power in 1979, they wanted to keep up and accelerate the rapid industrialisation of agriculture that had characterised Latin American rural development throughout the 1960s and 1970s. These decades had been a period of dramatic changes in the Nicaraguan countryside. The Pacific region of Nicaragua saw the expansion of large-scale production for export and the transformation of small farmers into a rural proletariat or semi-proletariat, or their displacement to the cities (Mechri 2000: 53-55, Hamilton/Kearney 1987:267). In the interior, agricultural land opened up by settlers was shifted to livestock production and the agrarian frontier was pushed further to the East. On the high plateau of Carazo, where I did my fieldwork, the functional dualism (Serres 1986:176-177) between a modern agricultural sector turned towards export agriculture and a ‘traditional’ sector of peasants producing subsistence crops and providing cheap labour for the export sector was not as pronounced as in the sugar producing plains of the Southern Pacific region. In Los Cañales in the 1970s some middle peasants produced coffee and sugar cane milled in local sugar mills, in addition to the staples maize and beans. The smaller producers complemented their farm production with seasonal labour in the local mills and cane fields and with labour migration. Landless labourers cultivated small plots for subsistence that they either rented or cultivated in sharecropping arrangements for some of the larger landowners.

¹

I thus go beyond Edelman’s definition who in contrast to Bernstein sees peasant mainly as a category of self-identification for people who work the land but otherwise engage in a range of artisanal, wages and entrepreneurial activities beyond small-scale agriculture.

The Sandinistas, heavily influenced by the socialist model of the Cuban revolution, intended at first to introduce a collectivist model of agriculture dominated by state farms and cooperatives with rural labourers as the revolutionary subjects. Large capitalist farms owned by Somoza and his allies that covered 25 percent of the agricultural land, were expropriated and converted into state farms producing for export². The Sandinistas hoped to accelerate the accumulation necessary for industrialization by investing massively into the large state-owned farms and by guaranteeing their support to the large capitalist landowners who had not compromised themselves by giving political support to the Somoza regime. Salaries for agricultural labourers were capped as the government deemed that “a general increase in agricultural salaries implies a decline in the funds of accumulation available for increasing the productive base, above all if it is not accompanied by an increase in productivity” (MINDINRA 1982: 6). To calm the hunger for land by landless sharecroppers, tenant farmers and minifundistas, they encouraged them to form cooperatives that would be awarded land to be cultivated collectively (Mechri 2000:193). Sharecropping was prohibited by law, the lease rate for land established at a low rate and land that was left fallow menaced with expropriation. Middle and large producers that efficiently cultivated their land were assured of government support if they produced in the frame of government plans, at set prices. The priority given to industrialised production showed in the price for rice produced on large industrialised farms, either state-owned or private, were set at more advantageous rates than those of the staples maize and beans cultivated by small and medium producers. After inciting peasants and agricultural workers to fight for a better life during the revolutionary struggles, the government was now urging them to practice “austerity and efficiency” (Colburn 1986:120).

However the rural subjects did not function as they should. The peasants discouraged by low

² In 1978 large farms with more than 500 MZ controlled 36,2% of the land (2920000 MZ in 8million MZ). Farms that had between 200 to 500 MZ controlled 16,2 % (1311000 MZ), those of 50 to 200 MZ 30,1% (2431000 MZ), those between 10 to 50 MZ 15,4% (1241000 MZ) and those with less than 10 MZ 2,1% (170000 MZ). In 1988 1326 000 MZ had been distributed to peasants and 948 000 MZ to state farms (Mechri 2000; 405).

prices refused to sell to the state creating a deficit in staple crops and obliging the government to import food. The workers frustrated by low salaries reduced their productivity and their working hours. The situation was aggravated when many peasants especially in the North and in the interior of the country became involved in the counterrevolutionary struggle often on the side of the US-financed Contra revolutionaries. The peasant trade union UNAG (Union Nacional de Agricultores y Ganaderos) had initially promoted the ideas of the government supporting cooperatives as a superior form of social organisation (Mechri 2000: 230) This changed in 1984, when the union leaders self-declared as peasants and promised to help ‘patriotic’ middle sized producers in their fight against excessive bureaucratization, supporting their demands for capital goods and production inputs (Mechri 2000: 335). In the same year the government decided to give in to peasant demands accelerating the land reform process and to allow the commercialisation of staples through authorized traders on the parallel market. In this second half of the Sandinista period, the government created conditions that allowed especially the middle peasants to prosper economically if they ignored the incessant appeals of the government to their patriotism that should make them sell at least part of the harvest at low prices through the state distribution system. At the same time this system made them increasingly dependent on the state distribution of cheap loans, Green Revolution varieties of maize and beans, subsidized fertilizers and pesticides. Most peasants who had access to transport or traders, chose to profit, however, from high parallel market prices that were secure as the national borders were closed and imports restricted. Cultivating the land became a rewarding activity again not only economically but also socially and politically as the peasants were reminded every day by government propaganda of the central role they played for feeding the country and the soldiers at the front and of the power they had to fulfil or to disregard government demands³. Production levels for basic grains reached their highest level ever in 1988 (Mechri 2000: 320) What peasants perceived as ‘selling on the free market’ was in fact taking place in a closed national economy. They would only confront the ‘free market’ once the Sandinistas lost the elections and Nicaragua

³ The relative advantage of the individual producers did not exist to the same extent in the remote areas of the interior cut off from transport facilities and engulfed in civil war fighting.

hurried to emulate the politics of its Latin American neighbours to open up to the world economy.

In the two months following the elections of 1990 and before the government changed the Sandinistas tried to give the land reform a legal foundation and they distributed for the first time alienable individual and collective land titles that could be inherited and sold. However many Sandinistas and their allies used the opportunity to personally enrich themselves and to attribute each other land titles and real estate. In the course of this redistribution that was soon to be known as *piñata* — a children's' game where the children dance with banded eyes and try to smash with sticks a paper doll filled with sweets — the poorest 43% of the population received 4% of the distributed land while a small minority of 4% of the population received 46% of it (on average 499MZ).

When Violeta Chamorro came to power in 1990, she promised to respect the land titles acquired through the Sandinista agrarian reform, but also those that the Sandinistas had distributed to themselves. Many land-titles attributed to cooperatives were individualised and the members of the cooperatives became independent producers for the market often for the first time in their lives. Land also became an instrument for calming the social tensions created by 20000 demobilised contra-revolutionary fighters, who received 700000 MZ of land mostly from national property and state-farms. The peasants were addressed as independent entrepreneurs operating on the free market, a role that they had claimed for themselves throughout the Sandinista period. The encounter with the free market, however, happened without the safety net and the subsidies that the Sandinista government had extended. The Sandinista practice of pardoning loans that peasants had accumulated ceased instantly as the new government was struggling to bring down the hyperinflation it had inherited from its predecessors. Extension services were downsized, the state distribution system shut down. The input dependent type of agriculture they had become accustomed to in the Sandinista period became extremely expensive as fertilizers and pesticides were no longer subsidized. Their price on the world market put the

peasant at a disadvantage compared to the price fetched for their products. The result was that individual producers and especially the remaining cooperatives rapidly indebted themselves again, losing land and cattle because they were unable to pay back the loans. Sandinista leaders became entrepreneurs claiming that conquering a place in the market was indispensable for exercising some influence in the new social structure and that economic power seemed was a precondition to exercising political pressure. Also the peasant union UNAG thought it necessary to get involved in entrepreneurial activities attempting to replace through the creation of its own enterprises some of the services of storage, commercialisation and extension that the state had ceased to offer (Mechri 2000: 489-90).

The liberal government of Arnaldo Aleman elected in 1996 attempted to reverse the Sandinista land reform and to retrieve the land of Somoza's allies in legal and illegal ways. The state withdrew entirely its support from subsistence agriculture; the two state-owned banks that had offered loans also to small peasants went bankrupt. The main reason was that supporters of Aleman had taken out huge loans for buying enormous landed properties. They never paid them back nor were they made liable for them. Also the president himself obtained for ridiculously low prices several large properties formerly owned by cooperatives that had indebted themselves. With the second structural adjustment plan signed in 1998 and the signature of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (2005), small producers were left without state support to confront the forces of the world market.

During the 1990s a massive wave of labour migration set in from the countryside to the city, to neighbouring Costa Rica and to the US. In special economic zones (zona franca) exempt from taxation, foreign companies especially the Chinese built fabrication sites that employed mainly female rural labour. Cultivating the land by taking out loans and hoping for a good harvest and favourable market prices became an almost invariably ruinous option. Many small and medium producers would have lost even more land if their wage earning children had not bailed them out in time. Henry Bernstein phrased this development in terms of the transition from the rural

question of capital to the rural question of labour when “different types of agrarian capital are increasingly combined or articulated with forms of activity and income in non-agricultural sectors” (Bernstein 2006: 454). The articulation between wage-labour, small commodity production and cultivating the land seems, however, to have been an age-old phenomenon (Murmis 2006:469) what has changed is that peasant agriculture no longer subsidizes rural labour for capitalist farms and enterprises, as expressed in the theory of functional dualism (Serres 1986: 176-7) but that labour and often migrant labour now subsidizes more or less insufficiently the farms of those who stayed at home. Having lost their relevance in terms of providing cheap labour or helping the accumulation process of industrial capital the peasants became for those who governed them simply ‘the rural poor’.

The peasants as ‘the rural poor’, are non-entities in political terms who appear as statistical units in the World Bank’s Nicaragua Poverty Assessment that states that 2/3 of people in rural areas live in poverty, 26% on less than one dollar a day. Indicators are high fertility rates (4,14%), illiteracy (18,7% in 2001), lack of sanitation (13.8% in 2001) no access to paved roads and electricity. These poor are a burden on national development, they are considered potentially dangerous; and their energies should be channelled. The innumerable projects to help them seem invariably destined to fail, so that the World Bank and other donor agencies refused to continue to commit millions of dollars to poverty reduction if the living conditions of Nicaragua’s poor did not improve. Since the Nicaraguan state had withdrawn support from subsistence agriculture throughout the 1990s and had concentrated its planning exclusively on the development of clusters for export agriculture the donors now obliged it to formulate a plan for rural development that reintroduces the needs of the rural poor and claims to consult them on their needs and priorities through participatory processes. The remedies to help the poor rural producers mentioned in the rural development plan Pro Rural propose, however, more of the same: exchange of traditional varieties against high yielding ones through the programme *libra por libra* that menaces to increase their dependence on high costly inputs; easier access to loans through the establishment of new rural loan funds, which corresponds to a real demand but

which may aggravate poverty rather than alleviating it (Legovini 2003); and the consolidation of the land markets through the progressive realisation of a cadastre, which may accelerate even further the marketization of land without increasing tenure security (Broegard 2000).

In the next three sections I will analyze how peasants in a small village on the high plateau of Carazo experienced the outcomes of all these attempts at rural development in their own terms of *favores*, *robo* and *ayuda*.

Favores: Sandinista governmentality in Los Cañales

The high plateau of Carazo in the South West of Nicaragua where I conducted my fieldwork lay outside the war zones of the 1980s. The village Los Cañales is close to the Pan-American Highway, 60 kilometres South of Managua which can be reached easily in two hours. The village had been in the 1980s by no means a model village for its revolutionary zeal, but it played the game by creating the Sandinista institutions, cooperatives, various committees and distribution outlets (*puestos*). The contrast between big and small landowners was not as pronounced here as in other parts of Nicaragua. When I did an extensive survey in 1986 the eight biggest landowners owned 50% of the land though not more than 100 manzanas⁴ each, while 50% of the families did not possess any individual land title. About a quarter of these families had at any one time at least one member in the production cooperative CAS that used land redistributed through the Agrarian Reform. The landless families and small peasants were working in the summer (November to April) on the sugar plantations and small sugar mills of the larger peasants and absentee landowners and cultivated in the winter (June to October) corn and beans. Many families depended before the Sandinista Revolution on seasonal and temporary labour in other parts of Nicaragua or in Costa Rica. During the Sandinista period as the borders were closed their mobility was reduced and agriculture became their main source of income.

⁴ 1 Manzana (mz.) = 1.68 acres

The relationship between the Sandinista guerrilla and the peasants in the 1970s, their logistical support and solidarity during the fight against the Guardia of Somoza had been idealised in all accounts about the revolution and it seemed to have been part of the education of a real Sandinista to have shared at least for a few months the precarious living conditions, the food and the accommodation that poor peasants had to offer. However the Sandinista revolution has not been a peasant movement. It originated in the cities with the support of farm workers in the large cotton plantations in the North West of the country and the support of small farmers in the outskirts of the cities. Also Los Cañales had its 'heroes and martyrs' like Alvaro Ramirez Tellez after whom the local cooperative had been named. He was from one of the wealthier families in the village and had died in the guerrilla war of the 1970s. For those peasants in Los Cañales who had sympathised with the revolution, the Sandinistas were the boys (*chavillos, muchachos*) whom they had given help and shelter during the revolutionary struggles and from whom they now expected understanding and support.

For Rudolfo Gutierrez who had offered his remote farmstead as a safe haven for Sandinista guerrilla fighters, the 1980s became a time of social recognition and economic prosperity. He and his brother were middle peasants who owned a substantial cattle herd and 38 MZ of land until his brother was killed as a reprisal by Somoza's National Guard. The whole family moved into the village where Rudolfo became after the revolution, head of the local Sandinista Defence Committee, which was later renamed Comite Comarcal (village council). Although cattle slaughtering was restricted because the national herds had been considerably decimated during the war, he obtained permission to slaughter a cow every second week and to sell it at set prices to the village population. Buying and selling the beef allowed him to get into a flourishing cattle trade that allowed him also to increase his own herd. His wife Carolina was granted the right to distribute every week food and basic household items on rationing cards and managed to run at the same time a small sales point for other goods of basic necessity. Nobody questioned their privileges as they had taken the risk to openly show their allegiance to the Sandinistas and were

now legitimately rewarded for it. More contested was the permit that the wife of the head of the production cooperative had obtained to sell every week a few crates of beer and low quality rum. Rumours had it that while running her little bar she was working at the same time as a spy for the political police of the Ministry of the Interior.

The Sandinistas attempted at first to break open the structures of dependency that had characterised the social relations since the extension of the sugar and coffee plantations at the end of the 19th century and during the Somoza period. They wanted to end with the structures of favoritismo, the tightly knit bonds of personal and arbitrary relations of exchange of working power and land between the small peasants and the large landlords. Two absentee landlords who did not renovate their sugarcane for years and were supporters of Somoza's party were expropriated. The largest landowner in the village, Don Frederico, who ran his ancient sugar mill right in the middle of the village and was godfather to innumerable children in the village, was however exempted from any exertions as one of his sons occupied an important post in the Ministry of Industry and the second occupied a leading position in the largest state-owned sugar factory in the country. The labourers who helped him with the harvest of sugar cane or on the mill, were generally allowed to cultivate a manzana of land or to sow their beans between the rows of freshly planted sugarcane. Don Frederico respected scrupulously, however, the cap on the salaries of his workers and compensated them — insufficiently as they thought — with three meals a day. They continued nevertheless to work for him as land was scarce and the bonds that linked them to the old man highly complex. One of his workers explained me nevertheless that it was preferable to have several patrons rather than to rely with one's whole existence on a single one.

For many landless peasants who could no longer find any land to cultivate, the Sandinista state became the new patron whose conditions were non transparent and difficult to accept. They understood the Sandinista politics as another form of favouritism, which they called *compañerismo* (favouritism among comrades). As Alberto Moraves, the vice president of the

production cooperative CAS (Cooperativa Agrícola Sandinista) explained to me, the term meant that the Sandinistas helped only those with land, loan, chemicals and seeds who organised themselves in cooperatives. In exchange they were expected to sell their production to the state. The production cooperative that cultivated in 1986 the two expropriated plots of land collectively and mostly manually with maize and beans, distributed one part of the harvest for household consumption to the members and sold the rest to the state distribution system ENABAS (Empresa Nacional de Abastecimiento de Alimentos Basicos) for the price set by the state. Alberto who came from a very poor landless family that had previously worked for Don Frederico, entered the cooperative with two of his adolescent sons and was thus capable to correctly feed his extended family and to keep their share of the sales. The owners of sugar mills and cane plantations complained that the cooperative tied up the labour they would have needed in their fields and that the members of the cooperative now felt like the *dueños* (masters) who no longer felt the need to work. In reality, however, membership in the cooperative and the time worked by each member was highly fluctuating and changed from year to year except for a core group of members. Getting involved with the Sandinista system was still experienced as a risk in 1987 and one of the landless peasants told me that he preferred not to become a member of a production cooperative, because who “lived in the heat of Tomas Borge” (the minister of the interior) at the time of the Sandinistas could have a hard time if the government changed: ‘the wheel, the wheel of life it changes, it turns. You have to stay in the flow, otherwise it crushes you.’

The Sandinista rule was characterized after 1979 by the tremendous growth of the state administration and regulation, each regulation bringing with it its exceptions to the rule and privileges. Numerous state administrations had never existed before or had never previously taken any interest in the peasants. The ministry of agriculture MIDINRA (Ministerio de Desarrollo Agropecuario y Reforma Agraria) educated them in intensive production methods, encouraged the use of high yielding varieties, which required large amounts of fertilizer and pesticides. The ministry for internal trade MICOIN (Ministerio de Comercio Interior) controlled

the commercialisation of their products and issued permits for selling them. The state distribution system ENABAS (Empresa Nacional de Abastecimiento de Alimentos Basicos) organised the distribution of a weekly allowance of staple food and centralised state purchases in grain.

The government tried to convince the peasants with the argument of class solidarity between workers and peasants to sell their grain to the state for low prices and offered them in exchange consumer goods, which were cheap but often also of bad quality. The administrators of the National Development Bank explained the unwillingness of the peasants to sell to the state with a lack of revolutionary consciousness for the needs of the society as a whole.

“They show no conscience. We explain to them that we are no producers, that we are consumers and that they have to produce in order to help us, because we in turn help them too with loan and technical assistance.” (Employee of the Banco del Desarrollo Rural 19.12.1986)

Also in meetings with peasants in the village the representative of ENABAS presented the price and loan politics of the government as a personal problem and tried to make the peasants sympathize with their difficulties. The Marxist precept of awakening the consciousness of the peasants was expressed as a moral appeal to the principle of reciprocal help. The peasants thus interpreted the ideological concept of a peasant worker alliance as a personal relationship based on sympathy and compassion. Alberto explained to me after harvest in 1987 that he had felt sorry (*mi duele*) that production cooperative did not sell any grain to the state, as the state had just provided them with asbestos shingles to cover the roof of their new granary, which would allow them to sell the grain progressively throughout the year. Another peasant who had just sold his entire harvest to private dealers explained that the *muchachos* would understand that a poor man had to defend himself (*defenderse*) and that he could not allow himself to sell his production for a low price.

Favoritismo circumscribes the political relations and economic dependences inside the

Sandinista state as personal relations of reciprocity. The political leaders of the FSLN encouraged this interpretation by organising public and half public assemblies, where they stood “with their face to the people” (*Cara al Pueblo*), exposing themselves to criticism and complaints and promising to remedy concrete problems. Political strategies and objectives were disguised under this personalised discourse. In return also the criticism that the peasants had of the political system was not expressed in ideological terms but was concrete and addressed to specific persons and phrased in moral terms. *Robo* (theft, robbery) was one of them.

***Robo*: the rejoinder of the peasants**

Robo includes a wide field of meanings, which goes from robbery and theft to fraud, deceit and usury. When in Sandinista times villagers accused state institutions of *robo* they mostly meant low prices offered by the state for agricultural products, road checks to stop illegal traders and after 1987 also high interests on their bank loans. With the use of the word *robo* to characterize the state distribution system they contradicted the argument of the worker peasant alliance that the Sandinistas used to legitimize low state prices for agricultural goods thereby justifying their own non-compliance.

As staple food was getting scarce in the cities and the army, involved in the fight against the counter revolutionaries, needed to be fed, the ministry of internal trade set up roadblocks to intercept illegal traders and to seize their merchandise. However it was not professional traders who transported the mayor part of the staples like corn and beans into the cities but women and children, the so-called ‘army of ants’ that carried them in sacks on overland buses and sold them in the city at a multiple of the official price. In order to take a sack of beans or corn on a bus a written permit was needed that stated that this food would be used for personal needs. The newspapers were full of heartrending stories about poor women surrounded by crying children, from whom MICOIN had confiscated a sack of beans that they had wanted to sell on the market, because they did not have a permit. When the village women met in the evening in Carolina’s

outlet to fetch the few goods that were distributed on their rationing card, they debated again and again the story of three tortilla bakers, from whom maize had been confiscated that they had just bought in the local production cooperative. The women interpreted the seizure as *robo* and discussed the rumours that the agents of MICOIN themselves were selling the seized goods on the black market. The agents had morally disqualified themselves as they had acted according to the letter of the law but without sympathy and compassion for the poor women who went about earning their livelihood. Counting the thousands of cordobas they had in their pockets but with which they could hardly buy anything now, they recalled with nostalgia how cheap goods had been on the market in Somoza times, implying that the Sandinistas had stolen the value of their money.

When hyperinflation set in in 1987 the interests for the loans stayed way below the rate of inflation. In 1988, however, the interest rates sky-rocketed but the loans were pardoned at the end of the year to prevent rioting in the countryside. It was thus extremely advantageous for the peasants to take up loans and pay them back as late as possible. The prices the middle peasants, who did not need all their harvest to feed their families, could obtain for their produce on the parallel market allowed them for the first time to build up reserves mainly in the form of cattle. However this sudden enrichment also created a feeling of unease, as a middle peasant who had usually sold part of his harvest for a low price to the state, described it:

“If you make a mistake and your mother punishes you and then comes your father and gives you a kiss, then you no longer know what you are supposed to think. (Manuel Saballo 1987)

He expressed the conviction that many peasants who sympathised with the Sandinistas, shared, that the state was too permissive and inconsistent. Some even thought that the Sandinista did not know their own people and their egotism. As they violated the unwritten law of reciprocity, many peasants were uncertain whether they would be able to keep what they had just acquired. Rumours about new expropriations circulated, that were supposed to affect also the middle

peasants, who did not give to the state, what it rightfully expected from them. Sandinista governance and their credibility was thus not judged according to the laws and formal structures they had instituted, but according to how these were applied *at a just measure* in everyday life, not too strict and not too lax.

The election of the UNO party of Violeta Chamorro threw the peasants who had supported the Sandinistas into a new state of uncertainty. The wheel had turned and the members of the cooperative were uncertain whether they would be allowed to keep the land title that the Sandinistas had attributed to them upon leaving power. What aggravated the matter was that many Sandinista leaders had morally disqualified the Agrarian Reform in the *Piñata*, attributing the major part of the land titles to themselves. Rudolfo would now ridicule Ortega, the Sandinista leader, each time he appeared on television. Besieged by the constant rumours about expropriation and uncertain about the legitimacy of their land-titles, six of the thirteen members sold their part of the title in the beginning of the 1990s at throw-away prices to a large landowner from a neighbouring town. Also members of the new governments participated in the fast sell-out of agrarian reform titles. President Aleman himself forced indebted cooperatives near the village where I did my fieldwork to sell thousands of acres of land near the nature protected coast line substantially below the market price. Then he used public money to have a road built that should open the area for tourism. The road never made it all the way to the coast because before finishing it he was put into prison on corruption charges by his successor and former vice president Bolaños.

Robo became in the 1990s part of daily life. Not only the laws but also the moral principles guiding everyday routine seemed to have lost their force. Carolina slaughtered her chicken out of fear that they would otherwise be stolen by her neighbours. Mango trees on outlying fields could never be harvested because the mangos disappeared shortly before harvest. Since villagers owned TV sets, sometimes refrigerators and always radios, somebody always had to stay at home to make sure that the few possessions did not get stolen. The most common and for the peasants

often tragic form of *robo* menaced them each time when they got into contact with private or public institutions. In the case of a serious illness, a conflict over inheritance or if they took out a loan, they were risking to lose their fragile basis of subsistence. Doctors prescribed expensive treatments against illnesses that the peasants did not have and did not treat those they suffered from. When Rudolfo fell ill for instance in the middle of the 1990s with a slowly progressing paralysis a doctor in the next city promised to heal him with eight injections a week. He sold cattle and was taken to town by a friend every week, only to find out two months later that the doctor had given him nothing but simple vitamin C. Lawyers made legal procedures even more complicated than they were in reality and simulated intense activity while they remained inactive at best or even colluded with the opposing party. Getting land registered in the cadastre was as expensive as actually buying it.

As most of the political parties, except for the MRS a small splinter group from the FSLN that had not participated in the *Piñata*, were identified with the practice of *robo*, it seemed senseless to set one's trust into government institutions or representatives of the government. Villagers had no expectations any more to influence their situation through the state and its institutions. They also did not know their rights, nor did they think that rights could be effective. Their strategy consisted in removing themselves from the state and to get in contact as little as possible with its private and public institutions. Any form of social and political organisation ceased to exist in Los Cañales or was filled with token representatives. Also the official Catholic Church close to the new government lost its members. In Los Cañales 95% of all inhabitants left the church to join protestant sects that preached strict moral rules and formed more or less loose communities. The laws of the state ceased to be effective and each seemed to be thrown back upon himself or upon the closest family.

Ayuda: no reciprocity possible

In the 15 years of my absence the production and sales of corn and beans that had played such an

important role in Sandinista times had lost in economic importance in the village. During the years of the Sandinista rule the peasants had got used to taking up loan before seeding, for buying high yielding varieties, fertilizers and pesticides and in order to rent a tractor for cultivating their land. In the 1990s many peasants who had continued the practice of taking out loans had lost cattle and land to the bank because they were unable to pay back their loans. Now they had to cultivate their even smaller pieces of land borrowing oxen and plough in exchange of part of the harvest. Many peasants continued to cultivate their fields but their main source of income became money transfers from children who had emigrated to the United States or who worked as seasonal labourers in Costa Rica. In many families, children were raised by their grandmothers while their mothers and fathers were working abroad or in Managua. *Ayuda mutua* – reciprocal help — was one of the basic principles of these family relationships.

A successful example for this reciprocal help is the family of Alberto Moraves. Alberto and his two sons managed to hold on to the land titles they obtained when the cooperative was dissolved. Alberto, his sons, daughter and sometimes even his wife left the village for months and years at a time to work as migrant labourers in Costa Rica and as housemaids and cooks in Managua, while the remaining members of the extended household cultivated the fields (10,5 MZ altogether). Alberto hardly ever took out a loan, although he had no problem obtaining one. He mainly financed his farm inputs with money earned with migrant labour. When I last visited them, the extended family had moved into a big house in the centre of the village right next to the thatched roof under which the members of the Mennonite Church and those of the Iglesia de Dios held their services. All the members of the Moraves family had become evangelists belonging to different congregations.

The practice of reciprocal help that so successfully motivated the Moraves family, got lost however in the exaggerated expectations that other families projected on their emigrant family members especially on those who had managed to enter the United States. Each child in the village was able to explain, that a worker earned 10 times more an hour in Costa Rica and that it

was 100 times more in the United States. Some youths refused to even start working for the small salaries that were offered in the village while their fathers were thought to be able to earn easily a multiple of that. These expectations were fuelled by the spectacular home-comings that some children staged for their parents (and their neighbours). On the second day of my brief visit in 2000 I witnessed the unexpected visit of Rudolfo's and Carolina's eldest daughter Leila, her husband and four children. After 15 years of work in the US and a successful hunger-strike by the Nicaraguan community they had finally obtained the Green Card and were allowed to leave the US without losing their status. They arrived in the village with a rented pickup truck filled with household items: a gas stove, a huge TV set plus video, a big refrigerator, a stereo set, an electric rice cooker, a microwave oven, an electric insect killer, clothes, sheets, plastic dishes. Leila obviously had wanted to bring her parents all the comfort and status she had achieved in the US after all these years of hard work. When Leila and her family left that evening to sleep in town as the children refused to use the sanitary installations on the farm, Rudolfo and Carolina stayed back confused. Carolina was wondering how to repair the roof of the house they were living in and how high the electricity bill would be to run all these items. She declared that she would not use the gas stove anyway and continue to cook on her wood fire. The microwave oven was immediately converted into a store for small change and papers. She would have wanted money to pay for urgent repairs but was afraid of selling any of these gifts, so as not to upset Leila. Four years later, when Rudolfo had died and she was taking care of the three children of her other daughter Teresa who hardly contributed to the household expenses nor did she work, Carolina was desperately waiting for money transfers from Leila who by that time was divorced from her husband and had her own difficulties to cope with. The farm had been transferred to two of Rudolfo's sons and Carolina was left to cultivate the 4,5 MZ that were her own, to produce maize and beans for family consumption without getting a hand from the adolescent boys she helped to feed. The occasional money transfers from far away family members, unpredictable as they were, thus created expectations and disincentives for those who were expecting them. They also devalued the painstaking efforts the peasants had to make when they wanted to feed their families at least in part with the fruit of their land. Especially the young generation of the 15 to

30 year olds regarded agriculture as a senseless activity. Land had no productive or symbolic value for them any more.

For some of the migrants however owning land in Nicaragua became a cherished part of their identity, a luxury they were happy to pay for. When the sons of Don Frederico sold his farm and sugar mill, the 100 MZ were acquired by a wealthy emigrant, who asked his father Don Alfredo to build up a model farm on the premises. Don Alfredo lovingly restored the plantations of shade grown coffee at a time when the world market price for coffee was at its lowest and everybody else was uprooting coffee trees. He planted 75000 new hard wood trees, restored 30 avocado trees and planted 27 MZ with native varieties of maize that he had selected himself in companion cropping with watermelons. He wants to raise laying hens, buy ten milk cows and domesticate the swarms of honeybees that lived in his forest in the wild. Constantly armed with two pistols he patrolled his farms making it clear to potential invaders that he would not hesitate to use them if anybody tried to collect wood or steal his fruit. Although he claimed to perpetuate the role of a patron that Don Frederico had played in the village, he cut himself off from the other villagers and concentrated his energies on the farm. The workers he employed had to work regular hours from 7 to 12 o'clock and were supervised closely. They earned slightly better salaries, 40C\$ a day instead of the 30C\$ that most other employers were willing to pay in the village. In spite of the work discipline that he imposed, his farm was neither a capitalist venture nor a hacienda of the traditional kind, but rather a hobby or a life-style investment kept alive by the constant inflow of money from abroad.

Another pretender for the role of a patron was the manager of two local sugar mills. When the Bolaños government introduced under pressure from the World Bank local structures of self-government below the municipality level, he put himself up as a candidate although he did not live in the village. He was elected by his workers to the general indifference of the village. The new local structures, called territorial representations were supposed to determine together with the municipal council the development priorities for their hamlets. Although the representative

for Los Cañales had been a political friend of the mayor of the municipality he quickly developed the ambition to compete with him for his position. The strategy he chose was to make himself a broker for development projects that did not fall under the control of the municipality and that were not linked to any strategic planning. With the help of a political friend who was a deputy in the national assembly and through the Institute for Rural Development and the MARENA he organised a reforestation project for his sector, that would bring, as he said, barbed wire, agricultural tools and cheap seeds. As he cheerfully told me: 'you have to follow the money. If it is not here, it is there, or there or over-there.' Through his broker role he entirely depoliticized the political role he was supposed to play as a local representative, made it a vehicle for his personal ambitions and relegated the villagers once again to the position of mere spectators. One of his former workers commented on his ambitions: 'the only interest that he or the mayors of this municipality have ever had is to make money for themselves'.

Part of the design for projects and small development programmes that NGOs and the World Bank had financed in the village, was to assure the 'participation' of those concerned so that they would become 'empowered' 'to help themselves'. In the end of the 1990s the German Caritas financed such a programme for family gardens, which had an organising committee that administered small sums of money that each participant paid in each month and that distributed donated goods such as clothes, food and garden utensils. The members were cultivating together a vegetable garden and learned the principles of organic agriculture. They produced organic pesticides, practiced companion cropping and made compost. The members of the NGO taught them how to cook with soybeans, and as soybeans did not grow in Los Cañales, they distributed them so that the women could try out the recipes. When the programme ran out and the aid goods stopped coming in, the core of the group continued gardening together for another year and a half until the treasurer built herself a house and plundered the money chest. Then also the common gardening work stopped. The women spoke about the project with a certain amusement. 'It was a nice project, but far too much work, especially the composting. It is a shame, but the recipes for soy cookies are useless now too.' They had been able to participate but did not have a

word to say in the actual planning of the project.

Also unemployed agronomists tried to develop projects for the village, which they hoped, would provide them with a job. The villagers cooperated, when asked, in the applications for all these projects providing copies of their land titles, identity cards and signatures. They did not do it because they hoped that this would improve their living conditions in the long run, but simply because they wanted to get their share — the local expression was *agarar algo*, grab something, whether it was zinc for the roof, barbed wire, medicine, laying hens or vegetable seeds from the cold North.

Neither the generous loan politics of the Sandinistas, nor the aid, the *ayuda*, from the donors corresponded to the idea of dignity that the villagers had. To take something without offering anything in return seemed like *robo*, as immoral and as a relationship that cannot last and that one cannot rely on. It was justified as a means of survival beyond morals. As Alberto Moraves phrased it:

‘The autonomy (autonomia) is the basis for the existence of each person and this autonomy is not respected in this society by those who are in power. Although we have 90% poor people and 10% rich people in Nicaragua, the poor don’t count. All what our elected deputies are interested in, is their salary of 60.000 C\$⁵ a month and not the situation of the people whom they should represent. Help is coming from foreign countries, but the question is what do those who help us expect for their help in return what will they request from Nicaragua in exchange?’ (Alberto Moraves 8.8 2004)

Conclusion:

The semantics that the rural people used to make sense of the different techniques of governmentality that have been tried out on them over the last 25 years, puts the principle of

⁵ In 2004 this was 4000 US\$.

reciprocity in the centre and does not fundamentally distinguish whether state and non-state power is exercised over them. To establish a personal relationship with those who possess the power and economic resources seemed self-evident to them. It was also obvious that this relationship could not be based on the principle of equality or justice, but that they could only hope for a certain transparency and continuity. Their reluctance to endorse the Sandinista agrarian politics had nothing to do with a lack of revolutionary conscience, but with a acute sense for the oscillations of agrarian politics and with the fact that the Sandinistas refused until the end to satisfy their hunger for privately owned land. The attempt of the Sandinistas to enter into the discourse of the peasants and present their politics as a relation of reciprocity between workers and peasants had to go wrong as the peasants could not determine the terms of this exchange and experienced the state prices offered to them as insufficient.

The economic situation and the living standard of the peasants were in 2004 not very different than in the 1980s. The free market, which they had wished for, did not make them independent but on the contrary dependent on the help of their children and the gifts from non-governmental organisations. What they had lost was a certain feeling of dignity that is linked to fact of being able to offer in return, if one has received something. The relationships described with the words *robo* and *ayuda* are today both characterised by the absence of reciprocity and signal that the simple gestures of exchange, of giving and taking are currently not self-evident in the Nicaraguan society.

Remains the question that Alberto asks: what will those foreign donors want in exchange for their help? I leave that to the discussion in the seminar....

References:

Bernstein, Henry 2006 "Is there an Agrarian Question in the 21st Century?" in: Canadian Journal of Development Studies, vol. 27 Nr. 4: 449-60.

Broegard, Rikke 2000 Land Titles, Tenure Security and Land Improvements. A case study from Carazo. Master thesis, Institute of Geography Copenhagen University

Clemens, Harry, Greene, Duty and Spoor, Max 1994 Mercados y Granos Basicos. Hacia una nueva vision sobre produccion y comercializacion. Managua: ESECA

Colburn, Forrest, 1986 Postrevolutionary Nicaragua. State, Class, and the Dilemmas of Agrarian Policy, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Edelman, Marc “ Toward an Anthropology of some new internationalisms: Small Farmers in global Resistance Movements”, in: Miguel Díaz-Barriga, ed. Key Issues in Latin American Anthropology: Social Movements, Mestizaje, Globalisation, and the Politics of Anthropology, London: Blackwell (draft)

Ferguson, James 1990 The Anti-politics Machine: ‘Development, Depoliticization and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Foucault, Michel 1991 Governmentality. In The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality. G. Burchell, C. Gordon, and P. Miller, eds. pp. 87-104. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Foucault, M. 1994, The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences, New York: Vintage Press.

Gupta, Akhil 1998 Postcolonial Development. Agriculture in the Making of Modern India, Durham : Duke University Press.

Hamilton, Nora, Kearney, Michael 1987 “Agriculture and Labour. Introduction” in: Latin

American Perspectives, vol. 14 Nr. 3: 267-70.

Legovini, Arianna, 2003 “The Distributional Impact of Loans in Nicaragua: Are the poor worse off?” in: The World Bank, *Nicaragua Poverty Update*, February 2003 Annex 8,

Li, Tania 2005 Government through community: the World Bank in Indonesia. Invited Paper for the Hauser Colloquium: Globalization and Its Discontent, New York University School of Law, October 18

Murmis, Miguel 2006 “Is there an Agrarian Question in the 21st Century? A Commentary” in: Canadian Journal of Development Studies, vol. 27 Nr. 4: 467-470.

Serres, Pascal 1986 *Analyse de la voie économique sandinist. Perspectives et limites du modèle agro-exportateur*. Doctoral thesis in economics University of Paris VIII

World Bank 2004 Nicaragua Poverty Assessment <http://wbln1018.worldbank.org/LAL/LAL.nsf/PrintView/7CDFB8>