



MYTHS OF MODERNITY

Peonage and Patriarchy in Nicaragua

ELIZABETH DORE

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Catarina. Pen and ink drawing, 1995.

For Johnny, Matthew, and Rachel

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Myths of Modernity



Nicaragua. Courtesy of the Cartographic Unit, University of Southampton, England.

INTRODUCTION

Who Controls the Past Controls the Future

Who controls the past . . . controls the future; who controls the present, controls the past.
—George Orwell, *Nineteen-Eighty Four*

This book is a metahistory of a small place. It analyzes class, gender, and ethnic upheavals in rural Nicaragua from the colonial period to the twentieth century. My central premise is that class, gender, and ethnicity can be separated theoretically but not experientially.¹ This is a history of Diriomo, a Nicaraguan municipality adjacent to the city of Granada on the plateau of villages known as the Meseta de los Pueblos. The story of Diriomo throws into sharp relief the everyday struggles of ordinary women and men, and it illustrates the Marxist maxim that people's efforts to make history are conditioned by circumstances inherited from the past.²

Peasant communities frequently exude an aura of timelessness.³ Initially, when I proposed to local leaders that I write a history of Diriomo, they told me that nothing had ever happened there. Diriomo was, in their words, a pueblo without history. They suggested that I write about Niquinohomo, Sandino's birthplace, or Masaya, the cradle of the Sandinista Revolution. But, as I suspected, politics and society in the township had changed fundamentally in the previous one hundred years. Before the twentieth century the vast majority of Diriomeños (residents of the township) were Indian, and virtually all land in the pueblo belonged collectively to the men of Diriomo's Indian community (*comunidad indígena*). At that time, class and ethnic differences in Diriomo were modest, but gender differentiation considerable, as Indian women were excluded from the common property regime.

Between 1870 and 1930 Diriomeños' everyday life turned upside down. The state abolished the Indian community. Private property replaced common property. Planters developed large coffee *fincas* (estates) in the town-

ship, and a majority of Diriomeños were forced into debt servitude. Unlike the Indians of Matagalpa, who in 1881 took up arms to preserve their way of life, Diriomo's Indians confronted change in a different way; they worked to minimize its disadvantages.⁴ Diriomeños accepted ethnic assimilation into the mestizo nation, and they sought to join the private property revolution. By 1930, Diriomo's social order was fundamentally different from before. Out of the indigenous community emerged a society of mestizo peasant proprietors. These upheavals and the ways they transformed class, gender, and ethnic relations in the township is the focus of this study.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, coerced labor laws, landlords' patriarchal power, and growing poverty propelled Diriomeños into debt peonage. Owners of coffee fincas on the Mombacho Volcano, which looms above the township, regularly mobilized the pueblo's women, men, and children to pick coffee. Some Diriomeños were dragged into servitude against their will; others willingly signed up for peonage, their willingness shaped by a labor regime that forced rural men and women to work in plantation agriculture.

The metamorphosis from common to private landed property, from Indian to mestizo, and from freedom to servitude conformed more or less closely to the intentions of Nicaragua's political elite. However, another social transformation was not intentional nor noticed by contemporary observers and historians. Abolition of Indian communities freed females from gendered constraints of customary laws that excluded women from land rights. This change was closely felt in Diriomo; after abolition, many poor women acquired property for the first time. Contrary to the prevailing historical view that females rarely were peasant proprietors in Latin America, at the turn of the twentieth century in Diriomo female land ownership was pronounced in the poorer strata of the peasantry.⁵

This book analyzes changes in the sexual division of land and labor and transformations in the social dynamics of gender. I call planter-peon relations *patriarchy from above* and senior male domination in peasant households *patriarchy from below*.⁶ One of my central arguments is that debt peonage persisted in Diriomo because it was part of a patriarchal system that combined coercion and consent. Patriarchy was not simply an aspect of gender culture; planters' power over peons was shored up by laws extending senior male authority from the household domain to the plantation sector. One of the major conclusions of this study is that patriarchal class relations impeded capitalist development.

Although the power of the patriarch is an old trope in Latin American history, until recently its gendered character rarely was examined. Building on the work of others, this book contributes to a rich literature that analyzes the gendered dynamics of patriarchy in Latin America.⁷ I demonstrate that gender relations were fundamental to the transformation of Diriomo's social order. Consequently, it is impossible to understand the class character of local society without taking gender into account.

Latin American historians have argued that the rise of coffee production set in motion capitalist development across the region. Many describe the combination of land privatization, liberalism, and economic growth that accompanied the coffee boom as Latin America's capitalist transition.⁸ Evidence from Diriomo reveals a different history. There the rise of private property and forced labor was part of a great transformation, but not to capitalism. In the era from 1870 to 1930, class relations between coffee planters and debt peons were regulated directly through the exercise of patriarchal forms of coercion and consent, not indirectly by market mechanisms. It is not that the rise of private property and forced labor had nothing to do with the eventual capitalist transformation of the countryside; privatization and peonage overturned old ways of combining land, labor, and power. But struggles between coffee planters and peons over what would replace the old ways produced power relations, patterns of landholding, and a labor system that hindered more than accelerated the emergence of a bourgeois (i.e., capitalist) order. To inscribe Nicaraguan history between 1870 and 1930 within the framework of capitalist development obscures what took place. Capitalism rests on the mass separation of subsistence producers from the land; its development undermines nonmarket relations, and capitalist class dynamics are defined by the buying and selling of labor power, free wage labor. In Diriomo, the coffee revolution accomplished none of these. It gave birth to individual peasant proprietorship; it institutionalized forced labor and fortified, rather than undermined, nonmarket patriarchal relations. Taken together, these impeded more than promoted capitalist development.

The book's central thesis, its red thread, is that the transformation of Diriomo's social order from 1870 to 1930 impeded capitalist development. One of the central hypotheses of this study is that capitalism represents a unique way of organizing property, labor, and market relations. To underpin my historical argument I examine theories of agrarian capitalist development. Notwithstanding my theoretical proposition that capitalist and non-capitalist societies have fundamentally different social structures, in modern

times most societies contain elements of both. The challenge is to understand the dynamics of a particular society, the nature of the prevailing or dominant social relations and how they interact with other social forms. In other words, all social systems are hybrids of one sort or another in which different, sometimes antagonistic, class, gender, and ethnic relations coexist, commingle, and collide. Through this account of Diriomo's historical transformation, I endeavor to illustrate the interplay among forces promoting and retarding capitalist modernization and to explain how these tensions combined to form the fabric of a noncapitalist society.

Capitalism is not a local phenomenon; its development forges national and international markets in commodities and labor power. Consequently, this historical analysis of Diriomo does not pretend to be national history of late capitalist development in Nicaragua. My purpose is to understand the nature of social change in one coffee-producing zone from 1870 to 1930, the era frequently defined as the triumph of Nicaragua's bourgeois revolution.⁹ This is a local history, and the micromethod has advantages and disadvantages. Local history facilitates detailed study of how people are drawn into, come to understand, and struggle to alter the matrix of social relations in which they find themselves, but local studies also raise thorny questions about representation. Does micro history provide a window only on a singular place and time, or does it facilitate broader interpretations of historical change? This dilemma festered in my mind from the project's start to its finish. I finally concluded that counterposing micro to macro history is a false dichotomy. Detailed study of one region provides conceptual tools and empirical findings that facilitate interpretations of, and comparisons with, a wider historical landscape.¹⁰ Fortunately, this book is embedded within an extraordinarily rich Central American historiography that analyzes the ways different regions were drawn into the vortex of the international economy by way of coffee production.¹¹ In the conclusion, I compare my findings with studies of other parts of Central America. Finally, although this local study rarely touches on U.S. imperialism and the country's long neocolonial relationship with Washington, repeated U.S. interventions altered the course of Nicaraguan history.¹²

Social and ideological conflicts in Diriomeños' and Diriomeñas' everyday lives played out against the backdrop of Nicaraguan and Central American politics more broadly. The chronic divide that rent the Nicaraguan elite took the form of party conflicts between Liberals and Conservatives. The rift gave rise to numerous coups d'état and civil wars over the course of the nineteenth

and early twentieth centuries, struggles that undermined the country's political stability over the long term. Yet, paradoxically, on a range of fundamental political issues, the warring factions more or less agreed. In the period from 1870 to 1930, with some exceptions at the margins, elite Liberals and Conservatives aspired to replace common property rights with private property. Successive governments of both political persuasions introduced laws aimed at dissolving Indian communities and eliminating communal landholding. Although often at war with one another, the country's elites more or less shared the belief that private property would promote a modern form of agriculture and bring an end to traditional encumbrances that had long constrained investment, commerce, and growth. Somewhat incongruously, the elites' banner was "Freedom of property," though they sought to abolish the majority's free access to land for household production and consumption. In its stead, they advocated the classical liberal concept of freedom: individual freedom to buy and sell private landed property for profit-making purposes.

With the rise of coffee plantations, Nicaraguan landowners regularly complained that peasants preferred idleness and leisure over hard work. But their dichotomy was a false one; rural households tended to devote their energies to household production for consumption instead of to coffee picking on planters' fincas. To resolve this problem, successive governments enacted a mountain of laws designed to make peasants work for commercial planters. With some exceptions, which I discuss later, leading Liberals and Conservatives supported policies designed to draw rural people into the labor force for export agriculture. Their partisan differences centered less on whether the poor should be made to work than on how best to accomplish their aims.

Nicaraguan political leaders' faith in the transformative power of the coffee industry was shared throughout Central and Latin America. From the spread of coffee production across the continent in the mid-nineteenth century to the spectacular crash in world market prices in 1930, coffee cultivation in countries as diverse as Brazil, Venezuela, Colombia, and the Central American republics contributed to export growth, expansion in the size and reach of the nation-state, regularization of a rural labor force, construction of ports, railroads, and telegraphs, and the rise of financial institutions. To Latin politicians and landowners these changes represented the march of progress. To many ordinary people, they represented a threat to their way of life.

Symbols of modernity have tended to go hand in hand with capitalist de-

velopment, yet the two are not the same thing. The understanding of capitalism that underpins this study, and which I elaborate in chapter 1, is two-fold: capitalist societies are regulated by competitive markets, and the *sine qua non*, the indispensable condition, for capitalism is the predominance of free wage labor.¹³ Although capitalist societies contain scores of additional features, market regulation and free wage labor are their defining dynamics. Accordingly, it is possible to have features of modernity without capitalism, but impossible to have capitalism without features of modernity. Powerful examples in our time of modernity without capitalism are Saudi Arabia and the Arab emirates.

The prehistory of this book dates from the 1980s. Soon after the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) swept to power in 1979 on a wave of popular insurrections against the Somoza dictatorship, I went to Nicaragua to work for the new government. I had been invited to direct a research project in the Ministry of Internal Commerce (MICOIN) on the production and distribution of basic foodstuffs, a project meant to address the increasingly fraught relationship between the Sandinista government and peasant producers.¹⁴ Traveling throughout Nicaragua to interview producers of corn, beans, and rice, I was met with hostility, but not because I was a *gringa* from the country whose president was trying to overthrow the Sandinistas. Rural producers distrusted me because I was from MICOIN. They blamed the Sandinistas for depressing producer prices to benefit the urban population, and they referred to MICOIN's staff as "the rural police." In the months I spent criss-crossing the country I interviewed people who were angry at the government, not only because of its pricing policy but also because the FSLN refused to give them land. Under the Agrarian Reform Laws of 1979 and 1981 the government confiscated properties of the Somoza family and its allies, but instead of distributing land directly to peasant households, the Sandinistas created state farms and production cooperatives.¹⁵ Most rural producers opposed the agrarian reform and organized demonstrations calling for land to the tiller; nevertheless, the Sandinistas refused to distribute land to the peasantry.

My work drew me into one of the major debates of the Sandinista Revolution concerning the class nature of Nicaraguan society and its implications for agrarian reform. The Sandinista leadership initially opposed land distribution for pragmatic as well as ideological reasons. On the pragmatic side, they attempted to maintain an alliance with sectors of the landed bourgeoisie who feared empowering the peasantry. On the ideological side, they be-

lieved that converting proletarians into peasants through a land distribution program would in effect turn back the historical clock from modernizing agrarian capitalism to traditional peasant production.¹⁶ Leaders of the FSLN maintained that in the nineteenth century coffee planters expropriated the peasantry and forged a rural proletariat (a class of landless laborers), and these events precipitated Nicaragua's bourgeois revolution. Drawing on this vision of the past, the FSLN leadership advocated a state-centered agrarian reform that would create conditions for the development of socialism.

It is frequently said that politicians rewrite history, yet rarely has the connection between history writing and policymaking been as close as in the Sandinista government. Jaime Wheelock Román, the architect of the Sandinistas' agrarian policy, was also the country's preeminent historian. Wheelock's seminal book, *Imperialismo y dictadura: Crisis de una formación social*, is an interpretation of Nicaragua's transition to capitalism. It argues that early coffee planters became agrarian capitalists by violently forcing workers to accept low wages to increase their profits. As a consequence, agrarian capitalism developed rapidly and the coffee bourgeoisie seized state power at the turn of the twentieth century. In Wheelock's account, the government of President José Santos Zelaya (1893–1909) represented the triumph of the bourgeois revolution. After setbacks in the years 1910 to 1940, occasioned by U.S. occupation and the Great Depression, capitalism developed to a mature stage. Its hallmark was the emergence of finance capital out of a fusion between banking and productive capital in the cotton industry. Wheelock concluded that by the 1970s, one hundred years of capitalist development had forged the social and material conditions for socialism in Nicaragua.

Imperialismo y dictadura is a classic text in Central American history and widely read as the authoritative account of Nicaragua's capitalist transition. However, unlike most historical monographs, it was written as a political manifesto, to convince members of the FSLN that Nicaragua was ripe for socialist revolution. In the introduction Wheelock states, "This book . . . was conceived, organized and written as part of a militant political struggle . . . [within the FSLN over the class nature of Nicaraguan society and its implications for revolutionary strategy]."¹⁷ In 1976, the Frente split into three factions: one believed the FSLN should ally with sectors of the upper and middle classes to form a united democratic front against the Somoza dictatorship. The faction headed by Wheelock argued that because capitalism was mature, the FSLN should lead the working classes in a socialist revolution instead of allying with the dominant classes; another group called for a prolonged

peasant war.¹⁸ Notwithstanding their differences, *Imperialismo y dictadura* became the Sandinistas' official story. The Sandinista leadership recognized the importance of history, and days after coming to power they created the Instituto de Estudios de Sandinismo, a center of historical research. They shared with George Orwell the conviction that "who controls the past . . . controls the future; who controls the present, controls the past."¹⁹

Inside the new government, policymakers in the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform disagreed about the nature of capitalist development and its implications for rural policy. Wheelock headed the Ministry and drew on historical studies to argue that because Nicaragua had long been polarized into the classes of modern bourgeois society, the rural poor predominantly had a proletarian consciousness. Consequently, they aspired to better wages and working conditions, not individual plots of land, he maintained.²⁰ Reflecting this interpretation of past and present, the Ministry under Wheelock's command implemented an agrarian reform that favored state farms.

Other specialists in the same Ministry, working at the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios de la Reforma Agraria, criticized the FSLN's rural policy. In their view, agrarian capitalism had developed from below through social differentiation of the peasantry. This historical process gave rise to an agrarian structure dominated by medium-size capitalists and semiproletarians (a class that straddled the peasantry and the rural working class). Building on this interpretation, they argued that rural people in the main had a peasant consciousness and wanted land for small-scale production and consumption. Accordingly, they advocated a pro-peasant agrarian reform and distribution of land to rural households.

However, events on the ground quickly overtook the policy debate. Increasingly disaffected with government promotion of state farms and a food policy that rested on low prices to producers, many peasants joined the *contras*, a paramilitary force funded by the U.S. government to overthrow the Sandinistas.²¹ In 1986, to win the allegiance of the peasantry, the Sandinistas reversed their agrarian policy and began to distribute land to peasant households. But the change came too late. The FSLN never regained peasant support, and as the contra war dragged on, their popularity in the countryside plummeted. In the 1990 presidential elections, a majority of the rural population voted against the FSLN in part because of its agrarian policies, in part because of the economic collapse precipitated by the contra war, and in part because of a widely unpopular military draft.²²

I left Nicaragua in 1984, planning to return soon to examine the history

of class relations in a coffee-producing zone. As it happened, I did not begin research for this book until the 1990s. In the intervening years, persuaded by theoretical debates about gender, race, and ethnicity, I concluded that a focus on class was necessary, but insufficient, to understand social transformations in the countryside. I decided to study Diriomo because in the nineteenth century Granada's oligarchs established large coffee plantations in the municipality, turning the Mombacho Volcano into a small but prized coffee zone. There was another reason to study Diriomo, but I did not know it at first. The pueblo had had an active comunidad indígena, but it ceased to function around 1910. After abolition, Diriomeños never again organized as Indians or called for the reconstitution of their comunidad.²³ Figuring out why Diriomo's comunidad indígena disappeared became an important part of my project. However, when I first visited the township of some twenty-three thousand people, the only inkling I had of Diriomo's indigenous past was a faded billboard outside town that announced *Diriomo: Pueblo de los Brujos* (Pueblo of Witches and Sorcerers).²⁴

An additional reason to focus my study on Diriomo was that I had been told there was a large collection of historical documents in the town hall.²⁵ Following this lead, I found great bundles of papers from the middle of the nineteenth to the middle of the twentieth century stuffed helter-skelter into bags in the municipal storeroom. Later I discovered that Diriomo's municipal archive had survived because successive officials had failed to send their records to the national archive.²⁶ Other local authorities had complied, and their archives were destroyed when the national archive, el Archivo General de la República, was consumed in the great fire following the Managua earthquake of 1931.

Although at first the disorder of what I call here the Archivo Municipal de Diriomo was a liability, it turned out to be an asset. To make sense of the chaotic documentation, I was drawn into constant dialogue between oral history and the written word. Several Diriomeños helped me organize and transcribe labor contracts, property records, transcripts of court cases, official correspondence, minutes of meetings of Diriomo's *junta municipal*—in short, virtually all the official and much unofficial paperwork generated in the municipality over the course of a century. As we worked at a table in the modest town hall, word spread that I had found long lost land records. Many Diriomeños sought me out to locate old property titles and information about their ancestors. Together we read the relevant documents, prompting people to recount disputes over land and labor and their memories of the

past. In addition to these spontaneous, self-selected encounters, I conducted life histories with fifty men and women I chose for their role in Diriomo's history: landowners, politicians, priests, merchants, labor organizers, peasants, peons, artisans, teachers, notaries, feminist activists, midwives, and brujos. In addition, a group of younger Diriomeños organized informal get-togethers where I described my discoveries from the archive and they recounted the stories handed down in the pueblo. This ongoing give-and-take between oral history, memory, and the written word enabled me to understand far more about local history than I could have gleaned from reading documents preserved in an archive at some distance, spatially or spiritually, from Diriomeños' daily lives.

There has been a major shift in scholarly approaches to oral history.²⁷ In the 1960s, with the intention of writing history from below, historians used oral sources to gather information about people who had been hidden by history. However, the postmodern turn brought a reappraisal of the status of oral sources; many historians held that because memories are highly subjective, they speak only to the realm of consciousness and ideology. At the extreme, some have said that it is naïve realism to think that oral history contributes to understanding what happened in the past. Followers of this approach believe that oral sources should be read primarily for their discursive, textual quality.

Starting from the premise that all historical sources are subjective, and all in different ways, I used life history interviews both to understand why people give different meanings to the past *and* to gain knowledge about what happened in the past. Oral sources are partial and highly subjective interpretations of the past filtered through the present and mediated by the interlocutor. I do not pretend that Diriomeños' testimonies supply facts. My aim was to elicit from the life histories an understanding of the dynamics of social structures and relations in Diriomo, as well as of people's perceptions of the past. In other words, my method seeks to bridge the epistemological divide between oral history as recovery and oral history as a variant on cultural psychology.

Gradually I realized that the apparent disjuncture between oral and documentary sources was not a difficulty to be ironed out, but a cue that alerted me to contradictions I needed to pursue. The oral histories of men and women who had worked as peons on the coffee estates in the early twentieth century altered my initial view of debt peonage. From a reading of debt peonage contracts with onerous terms and conditions, magistrates' descrip-

tions of punishments they meted out to delinquent peons, and texts of successive forced labor laws, I gained the sense that peonage rested singularly on coercion. So, initially, I regarded oral histories with former peons as an opportunity to learn more about the coercive character of the labor regime. In narrating their life histories, Diriomeños described the violence of debt peonage but also their pursuit of a long-term relationship with a good *patrón*. In the beginning, I was deaf to part of their narratives.²⁸ I focused on the oppressive aspects of debt peonage, but when people's memories turned to patriarchal relations, to the favors and material benefits they hoped to receive from their *patrón*, often I wondered whether these accounts portrayed false consciousness. At one point, I told Enrique Rodríguez, who accompanied me on my hikes into the *caseríos* (rural hamlets), that I already had enough information about patronage and clientelism. I asked if he knew people whose memories of peonage focused on its coercive side. However, Diriomeños' accounts of peonage gradually altered my interpretation of the labor regime. Many people described how they and their parents attempted to nurture a long-term relationship with a *patrón* who might help them survive the vicissitudes of peasant life. They talked about *socorro* (succor) and *ayuda* (assistance). With these words ringing in my ears I reread transcripts of court cases between planters and peons and paid closer attention to parts of testimonies that had escaped my attention.

As a result of the interaction between oral history and the written word, my interpretation of peonage changed. Whereas initially I thought that the labor regime was almost exclusively coercive, later I concluded that peonage combined coercion and consent, and that this accounted in part for its resilience. At that time I was reading Steve J. Stern's *The Secret History of Gender*, and his analysis of patriarchal relations in Mexico influenced my thinking. However, in contrast to Stern's emphasis on gender culture, understood primarily as discourses and contested languages of argument, I emphasize, whenever possible, the material and legal foundations of patriarchy.²⁹

Over the years, I returned frequently to Diriomo, and in the interim the project changed as the result of a fruitful interaction between what I learned about the pueblo's history and scholarly debates. Although my central objective remained largely the same—to understand transformations in rural society—I expanded my initial focus on class to include analysis of gender and ethnicity.

From early on, Jeffrey Gould's interpretation of the myth of *mestizaje* (assimilation) in Nicaragua influenced my thinking.³⁰ His emphasis on the re-

silience of Indian identity and memories of forced mestizaje made me think long and hard about why Diriomo seemed so different from the communities he studied. Following land privatization, I came across few references to Indians in Diriomo. Of course, their absence from the official record in part reflected state policy to assimilate Indians, sometimes called “killing Indians by decree.” However, and more enigmatically, few Diriomeños I interviewed knew anything about the *comunidad indígena*. Furthermore, unlike Gould, I found no evidence, written or oral, that Indian identity inspired struggles over land, labor, political rights, or human dignity in the twentieth century. Consequently, it became clear that the important issues to investigate were why Diriomo’s *comunidad indígena* disappeared and how its memory was suppressed.

This history is told, wherever possible, by men and women of Diriomo. The words of peons, planters, and local officials who lived a century ago have survived in court records, official correspondence, estate papers, and the veritable mountain of paperwork generated by the forced labor regime. Alongside voices from the past, contemporary Diriomeños’ life histories contain memories and stories handed down from the epoch of the coffee boom to the present. The diversity of voices, past and present, vividly portrays the dilemmas of everyday life in a community where relations of land and labor, gender and ethnicity were radically transformed in the era when coffee was king.

It is necessary to clarify at the outset several conceptual and terminological issues. The first concerns Diriomeños’ ethnicity. Throughout the colonial period and until land privatization altered class, gender, and ethnic relations in the late nineteenth century, the vast majority of Diriomeños were Indian. According to the census of 1883, 74 percent of the population of Diriomo was Indian, and the rest (26 percent) were *mulattos* and *zambos*, people of African and Afro-Indian descent.³¹

But the census obscured the most important ethnic dynamic in the township: the divide between Indians and non-Indians. Although to official eyes, Diriomo’s non-Indians were of mixed African descent, that identity played no role in the life of the community. The ethnic identity that counted was Indians’ access to common land rights of the *comunidad indígena*, and non-Indians’ exclusion. Within the township, ethnicity was predominantly a signifier of material difference in the form of access to land, not of cultural or biological difference. Diriomo’s artisans, traders, and local elite of rich