

***Strategic Visions: Volume 20, Number I***

Johnson Lee, David. *The Ends of Modernization: Nicaragua and the United States in the Cold War Era*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021. xi + 254 pp., \$54.95.

In *The Ends of Modernization: Nicaragua and the United States in the Cold War Era*, David Johnson Lee has complicated historical understandings of modernization theory and its impact on Central American political culture in the late-twentieth century. By exploring the Nicaraguan socioeconomic conditions and the 1972 earthquake that levelled Managua, Lee explains that modernization theory and foreign influence “created the grounds for contestation that led Nicaraguans to challenge US power in their country and beyond” (3). As a result, US intervention and modernization’s socioeconomic failings brought about the Nicaraguan socialist revolution of 1979, which continues to influence the relationship between these two countries.



Lee analyzes the disparity experienced by peasants who populated rural Nicaragua, especially those who lived near the capital city of Managua. Economic stratification within the country appears in the lived experience of Nicaraguans. The 1972 earthquake left the city in a state of disrepair and created a humanitarian crisis. Thereafter, the United States attempted to modernize Managua by reimagining the city as a decentralized economic landscape akin to an American metropolis. Lee argues that the new organization of the city dissolved preexisting meeting places integral to social, cultural, and national identity, stating that “Managua was not becoming decentralized, but de-centered” (64). While these individuals served as inspiration for populist revolution against the Somoza regime, their political activism and identity was rooted in

## ***Strategic Visions: Volume 20, Number I***

an unlikely location: conservative elites who felt they were losing control of the country to Somoza's cronyism.

Elites attempted to give voice to the Nicaraguan masses they believed were being left behind by the influence of US cultural and economic forces. By shifting the narrative to these parties, Lee exposes the autonomy and self-determination experienced by Nicaraguan upper classes, and how that contrasted the socially-determined existence of many poor citizens. By increasing the profile of Nicaraguan national identity and employing cultural exceptionalist arguments, elites mobilized those at the bottom of Nicaraguan society to wrest control from the US technocratic influence. Lee states that "their efforts would bring about the 1979 Nicaraguan revolution and center a revived Cold War in Managua, where the dissonance between the promise and reality of modernization led to revolt against the new city and the

geopolitical order that brought it about" (43). This revolution was embodied in the formation of the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN), otherwise known as the Sandinistas. It was named for national hero Augusto Cesar Sandino, who led Nicaraguans to resist US occupation in the early-twentieth century.

As the Sandinistas successfully installed a socialist government, their national status was immediately thrown into jeopardy by the US reaction. The crux of Lee's argument is that, in attempting to maintain control over the governance and economic structure of Nicaragua, the United States shifted its foreign aid priorities, illustrating that US hegemonic influence was not irresistible. The Nicaraguan people demonstrated that, by asserting their agency and capturing a renewed sense of national self-determination, they could cause even the mightiest giants to change course. Daniel Ortega rose from military ranks to lead the

country through its revolutionary phase, much to the dismay of US officials. Yet causing the United States to change course had unintended consequences that would reverberate throughout Central America.

This act of defiance brought the United States back to more direct intervention. Though US intelligence agencies were no longer legally permitted to cause regime change through assassination or other explicit means, the United States began to alter its methods of distributing financial aid.<sup>1</sup> For instance, Lee points to the fact that “Ronald Reagan in turn laid out the beginnings of what would become a global counterrevolution against the attempts of nonaligned and social democratic nations to reconfigure the structures of global trade and finance” (113). Consequently, the United States began funding a paramilitary group opposed to the Sandinistas: the Contras.

Coupled with international economic sanctions, the US hoped to use its outsized economic influence to overwhelm the Nicaraguans on multiple fronts.

Ultimately, Lee points to a consensus that “[d]espite their differences, revolutionary and counterrevolutionary agreed that national identity – inscribed on the land itself – was scarred by decades of conflict over the meaning of modernity” (147). Irreconcilable differences between extremists in each political wing led to a fizzling of the tensions that brought the Sandinistas to power. This softened the political climate. Democratic elections were held, and revolution and counterrevolution both seemed to come to an end. The book ends with a look at the recapitulation of Nicaragua towards the socialist order that failed in the 1980s. Lee alludes to the “pink wave” that swept through Latin America in

---

<sup>1</sup> The US Congress placed strict limits on the active role that US intelligence agencies could play in regime changes following the findings of the Church Committee (1975) and the Pike Committee (1975).

Findings from these investigations led to legislature that restricted the funding and ability of US intelligence to participate in forcible regime change.

***Strategic Visions: Volume 20, Number I***

the early-2000s, and the return of an Ortega presidency.

A Temple University graduate, Lee is primarily a historian of Latin America, whose research encompasses multiple archives located both within the United States and Nicaragua, as well as several others from Central America and even Europe. One interesting accomplishment is present on the cover of the book, where Nicaragua is given precedence in the subtitle over the United States. This is a welcome surprise that grants an increased degree of agency for the Nicaraguan people in the context of the Cold War. It goes hand-in-hand with his attempt to reclaim Nicaraguan autonomy in their attempts at national self-determination. One criticism of the book, however, is the lack of attention given to women and their role in the Nicaraguan revolution.

Historians of Latin America, US foreign relations, the Cold War, and

economic development will gain the most from reading this book, as it complicates many issues that are currently at the forefront of discussion in these fields. This includes self-determination, pervasive US influence in the late-twentieth century, and unintended consequences of historicized modernization concepts. Lee's book shows scholars that there is a wealth of analytical benefit in the relationship between the United States and Nicaragua.

Joseph Edward Johnson

Temple University