Consciousness and Conflict in Nicaragua

The dynamics of the Movimiento Campesino

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**A** **Note on Language**

Doing research on Nicaragua means working with Spanish sources. Even though the state recognizes its English speaking citizens living along the Atlantic Coast, most Nicaraguan subjects don’t know English. Consequently, most Nicaraguan scholarship is written in Spanish. In the writing of this dissertation I have tried to base myself as much on locally or regionally produced knowledge as possible because Spanish-language literature knows little circulation outside of their own networks, despite their quality. As a privileged student I believe that “theory is, in itself, a practice linked to power” (Escobar, 1992). As translator I hold the power to change meanings, even if by mistake. Therefore I decided to literally present others’ work and knowledge as it had been encountered by me. Consequently, in the text below you will often encounter Spanish terms or quotes. If the terms are not clear upon first glance, then I have added their translation between square brackets, [ ]. Quotes from respondents are translated in-text if they are lengthy. A list of the original quotes can be found in “annex 1’’, which I encourage you to read.

All academic research has stood on the shoulders of giants. My frequent us of citations merits a further clarification. I use single apostrophes, ‘ ‘, to refer to concepts of others. Double apostrophes, “ “, are used for literal citations and quotes or to place my own emphasis on words.

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**Abstract**

The protests of 2018 in Nicaragua have sparked many questions about the country’s future. The protests unfolded into a broad citizens struggle against the regime of Ortega-Murillo in defence of their rights and democracy. These days calm seems to have returned to the streets, little of the initial fervour remains after two years of heavy state repression. The opposition movement is still active, but seems to have been captured by elite groups. The citizens struggle’s most prominent activists, the students and peasants, appear to be side-lined. Recently the Movimiento Campesino, claiming to represent the peasantry, has come to the fore by posing an ultimatum to other opposition forces, who are trying to construct a joint political project. This dissertation seeks to analyse the Movimiento Campesino through the concept of “consciousness”. With this lens I performed fieldwork to uncover and explain the histories and processes that lie behind the peasants’ decision to organise themselves and eventually join the citizens struggle. Based on my observations and interviews it will be shown that the movement deals with a range of contentious issues, indicating the high levels of politicisation reached by involved peasants. A discussion on the meaning of the ‘peasant’ and ‘social movement’ will offer a way to interpret the value of the Movimiento Campesino. It has created and extended political space for the peasantry. By enabling civil society to participate in the nation’s politics, the first steps have been taken towards the democratisation of Nicaragua.

Keywords: Nicaragua, Movimiento Campesino, Consciousness, Peasantry, Social Movements, Political Space

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**Introduction**

January 21st 2020, 9 p.m., I felt an air of relief upon leaving Managua’s “Aeropuerto Internacional Augusto C. Sandino”. Outside I experienced a familiar scene: the drumming and unintelligible shouting of chauffeurs, the honking of cars and the hot and humid atmosphere pressing down on your chest. Despite this being already my fourth trip to Nicaragua, I had never been so nervous and worried before. After all, much has happened since I last visited the country in February 2018.

I made my way to the hotel where I met an old friend. After a hearty reunion we set out for a local restaurant as we both felt quite peckish. We continued our conversation over a meal of “carne asada” [grilled meat], plantain chips, rice and beans. Despite the sense of safety within this secured “barrio” [neighbourhood], I felt that nervousness sneak up again. I was deeply frightened to speak what was on my mind. I asked my friend if it was safe to talk politics in public. He reassured me that I needn’t worry. There is no use for self-censorship. Silence and compliance is exactly what they want. I felt somewhat calmer but continued to watch my words. Today, life in Nicaragua exists under a state of repression. It had finally become clear to me how challenging this journey was going to be.

The Protests of 2018

April 18th 2018. Protests in León and Managua, Nicaragua’s largest cities, were violently repressed. So far nothing out of the ordinary. Protesters are used to being harassed by countermanifestants whilst the police just looks on or even protects these violent groups . These ‘shock groups’ or ‘paramilitary forces’ are known to have links to the incumbent FSLN party or their youth wing, the “Juventud Sandnista” [Sandinista Youth] (GIEI, 2018). This time, however, repression backfired. Protests targeted a proposed reform of the national social security service (INSS), which would decrease pensions by 5%. The youth had gone out into the streets to protect their grandparents and their own futures. Soon images of bloodied students and elders spread through social media and caused widespread indignation (Schindler, 2019).

The next day more protests were held and they took place in more cities, including traditional Sandinista strongholds such as Matagalpa. Frightened by the sudden escalation of protests, the FSLN convened a meeting in Managua to discuss their reaction. The verdict according to an eyewitness was that “we must defend the revolution, we will do everything, we will not allow them to jeopardize the revolution”(GIEI, 2018; Schindler, 2019; Francis, 2020). Every measure was sanctioned to prevent the protests from developing into a nation-wide rebellion. That day the first 3 deaths out of many hundreds fell…

Despite the increasing repression, protests kept swelling. People condemned the deaths suffered by a protesting youth at the hands of the state. Soon the struggle unfolded into a general call for the regime of Ortega-Murillo[[1]](#footnote-1) to leave and for a change of the political order. Initially students bore the brunt of repression. Most deaths fell in the vicinity of universities and campuses turned into battlefields and spaces of resistance (GIEI, 2018). This resulted for example in a 50 day siege of the UPOLI university. This violence might be explained by the FSLN’s own history. Sandinism and the subsequent FSLN guerrilla was born out of student activism against the dictatorship of the Somoza family in the 1960s (Zimmermann, 2000). Consequently, the party fears the potential of student revolts.

In three days’ time 44 people had died, but this did not deter protesters. Finally on the 22nd of April Ortega revoked the reforms, but the gesture had come too late. The Ortega-Murillo regime had shown their willingness to turn state forces against fellow citizens in an effort to hold on to power. People from all backgrounds joined the struggle and the students found an unexpected ally amongst Nicaragua’s peasantry. The “Movimiento Campesino” [Peasant Movement, **abbreviated as** **MC**] declared their support for the protests of the so-called ‘autoconvocados’[[2]](#footnote-2) and called for a national strike (Romero, 2018). This movement organised the transport of thousands of “campesinos” [peasants] to join a national march in Managua (Velásquez, 2018). They demanded a seat at the proposed national dialogue to resolve the conflict. And they put pressure on the regime by erecting “tranques” [manned roadblocks] throughout the southern parts of the country, in an effort to quell the free flow of goods and to disperse and obstruct police forces.

The MC had surfaced in 2013 as a peasant movement against a proposed canal through their lands. Initially their fight, which demanded an expropriation law to be repealed, had been a marginal issue, but upon entering the citizens struggle they received nation-wide attention. The tranques became means to protect lives, in the face of the disproportionate violence committed by state and paramilitary forces. By mid-may these defences had sprung up throughout the whole country. Many were manned and managed by the MC. In doing so the remoter interior of the country became integrated into the struggle. Even more importantly the peasantry, a still significant[[3]](#footnote-3) but marginalized section of the population, had become enabled to participate in the struggle as citizens. They made themselves heard and demanded representation in the unfolding of events.

The still ongoing conflict has variously been called an ‘insurrección democratica’ [democratic insurrection] (Schindler, 2019), ‘rebelión ciudadana’ [citizen rebellion] (Baldizon, 2018), ‘revolución democrática’ [democratic revolution] (Mercado, Cortez & Sánchez, 2018) or ‘revuelta’ [revolt] (Builes & Cruz, 2020). The incumbent regime, however, has referred to the protests as a ‘golpe de estado’ [coup d’état] (Ayerdis, 2018). In this dissertation I will denote the protests and ongoing situation as a “citizens struggle”. As a struggle it highlights the processual nature of the conflict. It did not start or end in April 2018, but has a much longer history. Citizens have carried out this struggle. By taking to the streets they challenged the monopoly of the FSLN to decide the nation’s future. Students, peasants, labourers, entrepreneurs, all of them stood up for their rights as citizens of the republic of Nicaragua. They denounced the corrupt political order and demanded their voices be heard.

Alas, change was not meant to be. The national dialogue was used as a means for the regime to reorganize. In June police forces started with the ‘operación limpieza’ [operation clean-up] to dismantle the many tranques and barricades in the country and the protests with them. Opposition leaders, such as the MC’s leader Medardo Mairena, were apprehended and put in prison. Others fled the country, while state repression mounted.

The Origins of the Citizens Struggle

The remarkable thing about the protests was that none saw them coming (Bacon, 2018; Baldizon, 2018; Builes & Cruz, 2020; Lira, 2018). This is not to say that observers didn’t know of the problems and discontent caused by the FSLN and Ortega governments. Already early on in the 90s, the growing authoritarianism of Daniel Ortega fragmented Sandinism into the FSLN and split off parties such as the MRS[[4]](#footnote-4) (Ramírez, 2018). The FSLN came under full control of Ortega and his allies and turned into the ideological stronghold of so-called ‘Orteguismo’ (Bacon; Benites; Meza, 2018). When Ortega returned to power in 2006 this authoritarianism also set into the state apparatus. The ‘Grupo Interdisciplinario de Expertos Independientes’ (GIEI) was tasked by the Organisation of American States, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Nicaraguan government itself to investigate the violent events between April 18th and May 30th. They recognized that the protests:

“were not the result of isolated occurrences, but rather stemmed from years of institutional processes and State practice that gradually restricted the expression of Nicaraguan citizens, compromised public institutions and concentrated power in the hands of President Ortega and Vice-President Murillo” (GIEI, 2018).

People responded to this increasingly autocratic way of governing. Mercado et al.(2018) enumerate 12 themes that have led to major protests since 2006, such as indigenous struggles, peasant movements, electoral fraud, pro-abortionist feminist struggles.

The Ortega-Murillo regime built their return to power upon a controversial pact with the liberal PLC party. An institutionalized dialogue with the corporate council COSEP[[5]](#footnote-5) ensured the support of the country’s capitalists as the regime set a more neoliberal, corporatist course (Baldizon; Benites; Iraheta, 2018). The resulting consensus model allowed the elaboration of a system of social control to prevent dissent. When the INSS reforms were announced they included not just a decrease in pension, but also an increased contributions of both workers and employers. This measure didn’t have the COSEP’s consent and some point to the consequent rupture of the corporate-state alliance to explain the severity of the protests (Benites; Iraheta, 2018).

Schindler (2019) gives an institutional explanation. From the very beginning the revolutionary state embraced democracy, yet party and mass organization structures were plagued with a profound ‘verticalismo’ (ibid.). The population and civil society were expected to receive and execute orders from above, without having their own say. This alienated the FSLN and its leadership from the public. Trust eroded and disenchantment with the revolutionary party accumulated. The government had long persuaded the poorest layers of society with social programs. The problem was that these were financed with Venezuelan aid to countries of the so-called Bolivarian alliance (ALBA). The plummeting of oil prices since 2015 meant less aid which resulted in austerity measures such as the INSS reforms (ibid.). These hit the poorest hardest and caused the social eruption of April 2018.

Similarly Builes & Cruz (2020) point to the ‘moral aggravation’ these reforms caused, which moved young people to protest in defence of their elders who were already struggling to make ends meet. For them the protests are not the start, but the result of change that already set in: “Las insurgencias no tienen un plan, ellas son el plan” [The insurgencies don’t have a plan, they are the plan] (ibid.). Breaking the status quo allows alternatives to surface. The streets became spaces for collective action and for making the people’s demands heard.

The context of the INSS reforms has to be kept in mind. In early March vice-president Murillo wanted to “open a debate” on regulating social media (Salinas, 2018). This caused widespread concern for young people especially. Social media is the main source of information for most Nicaraguans and a space for criticism. Regulating social media is therefore seen as an attack on civil liberties. More important were the protests concerning the wildfire in the reserve “Indio Maíz”. The mishandling of the fires by the government sparked outrage amongst environmentalists and students alike. The government is seen as complicit in the fires, which had started in the beginnings of April 2018. Burnt-down lands lose their status of reserve and become open for colonization and for the extraction of resources, even though they are ancestral lands of indigenous communities. The government also outright rejected a Costa Rican proposal for cross-border help. The fires only ended two days before the reforms were announced, but the damage had already been done. Manifestations were already planned and people were mobilised, which enabled the escalation of events after April 18th. Consequently, many locate the origin of the citizens struggle in the protests of Indio Maíz (Builes & Cruz, 2020; Francis, 2020; Mercado et al., 2018; Schindler, 2019).

Problem Statement

Although all of these explanations help us to understand what is going on in Nicaragua, there is a perspective lacking. The mentioned theories show us the backdrop of the protests. They are the causes, consequences and analyses of a moment that has already passed. The problem is that at the very moment when people took to the streets, they did not possess this bird’s eye view connecting the dots. Still in a situation of incomplete information with no idea where their actions might lead, protesters decided to take matters into their own hands and rebel against the Ortega-Murillo regime. The problems and subsequent criticisms of the regime above were not new to April 2018. How come people decided to finally act in 2018? I wish to understand the processes and histories behind the taking of action. I propose to use the concept of ‘consciousness’ as a lens to understand what is happening in Nicaragua. Consciousness refers to a becoming aware of social reality, as will be discussed in chapter three. I do not aim to construct a holistic and comprehensive framework for the events in Nicaragua, but add to the existing body of work with a new perspective.

The most academically relevant part of my research concerns the main actors under consideration. Campesinos unquestionably play an important role in the citizens struggle, but there is a dearth of relevant material in literature about them. The Movimiento Campesino is the country’s biggest social movement, yet little is known about them. Vázquez(2016) gives an overview of the Movimiento Campesino and locates its origin in a conflict of interest concerning the transoceanic canal megaproject, which is predicated on their dispossession from the land. I believe that by emphasising a “negative” conception, meaning that the MC is analysed in relation to what it opposes, Vásquez is missing the most important aspects of the movement. There is a great democratic content to the movement which enables them to mobilise peasants to participate in the nation’s politics. I argue that by focusing on the MC’s own dynamics, we can realise its true meaning. The movement’s value lies in its potential for opening political space to the peasantry. Antunes(2018) acknowledges the MC’s central importance by stating that “la organización de los pueblos en el movimiento anticanal fue el combustible que ha inflamado el tejido social del país desde 2014 hasta empaparlo lo suficiente para que la reacción explosiva ocurriera en 2018.” [the organization of the people in the anti-canal movement was the fuel that has inflamed the social fabric of the country since 2014 until it was soaked enough for the explosive reaction to occur in 2018]. Sadly, he doesn’t follow through on the same line as this fiery statement. His work barely delves into the complexity of the MC and what it could mean for Nicaragua and the protests.

Keeping all of this in mind I set out to do research in the field. I endeavoured to uncover the processes and histories behind the Movimiento Campesino and their participation in the citizens struggle of 2018. The result of which you find in the fourth chapter. In my efforts to understand the dynamics of the Movimiento Campesino, I developed the central thesis of my dissertation:

**The Movimiento Campesino succeeded in creating and extending political space for the peasantry. Peasants’ participation in politics spreads consciousness to a marginalised section of the population. Peasants see potential in this space to pursue their interests and make their voices heard. Therefore the movement will outlive its central demand as peasants continue to strive for representation in national politics. Consequently, the Movimiento Campesino plays a central role in the democratization of Nicaragua.**

Positionality

My history with Nicaragua dates back to 2013. As a member of a group of 16-year-olds I participated in a two week long cultural exchange program. This was organized as a part of the ‘hermanamiento’ or ‘twinning’ between Nueva Guinea in Nicaragua and Sint-Truiden, my hometown in Belgium. I was so moved by this experience that I decided to join the organising entity, the “Nicaraguacomité” of Sint-Truiden, of which I’m still an executive member today. This non-profit entity is dedicated to maintain and improve the bond between the people and civil societies of both twin cities on other sides of the Atlantic. Our organization stands in direct relation with our civil partner “Luz en la Selva”, a union of social projects and organisations working in the municipality of Nueva Guinea. It is important to note that our “hermanamiento” is fragmented. The municipal governments co-operate directly, whereas the Nicaraguacomité works directly with Luz en la Selva. Our partner renounced working directly with the local Sandinista government, which had limited political and organisational space available to non-Sandinista civil society groups. These experiences introduced me to life in Nicaragua and its history. They honed my Spanish language skills. But above all else, they brought me into contact with local politics.

Over the years I made three trips to our twin city and likewise I was able to welcome Nicaraguans into my home. During these experiences I developed strong relations with my Nicaraguan friends and family. I also got to know their worries and local issues. I also learned about the Movimiento Campesino and their struggle against the canal megaproject. I even had the opportunity to meet and listen to some of their leaders. Over time I had gotten to know what was brewing in Nicaraguan society. As the government was tightening its’ grip over civil society, it became clear that this situation could not last. At some point people would have to react against the ever more autocratic regime of Ortega-Murillo. However after my last visit in February 2018, I did not expect that two months later the country would erupt into the largest post-revolutionary protests. My head was filled with confusion and disbelieve as I saw the citizens struggle unfold from afar. It all seemed so surreal when new items mentioned the names of peasant leaders I had just met a few month ago. I had definitely underestimated them and their struggle.

Following these developments filled me with a profound sadness. My Nicaraguan friends and family were faced with a dictatorial regime that had finally showed its true colours and had started to violently repress its own people. I, on the other hand, was only faced with a feeling of powerlessness. Unable to affect what was happening or offer some relief to these people I had come to care about, I was left frustrated. These events propelled my decision to switch university careers from engineering to conflict and development studies. Lacking the capacity to act and help, I might at least try and understand what was actually happening over there.

This dissertation cannot be separated from this background. It is as much, or even more so, a personal endeavour as it is an academic one. It is not just about adding to a scientific body of literature, but also a personal quest to come to grips with the many questions and emotions I have experienced. Up to that point my involvement with Nicaragua had been pleasant, enriching and just good fun. April 2018, however, made reality catch up with me. It demonstrated that engagement and solidarity with people in the global south also entails sharing grieve and confronting conflicts. This dissertation has become a means for me to deal with this feeling of powerlessness and puzzlement. It helped to keep the dialogue and my engagement with people, friends and family in Nicaragua going , whilst also increasing my knowledge about this fascinating country.

**Methodology**

This chapter will explain how my methodology was shaped through practice, rather than design. It will show the meaning of a problem-oriented approach for my research, the methods used for this dissertation and it will conclude with some necessary reflections.

Problem-Oriented Approach

The previous chapter introduced the two main problematics I will be considering in this dissertation:

* Why did people decide to take to the streets in April 2018, when none saw it coming?
* Why have peasants come to play such a prominent role in the ongoing struggle?

I decided to approach these problems with a problem-oriented strategy. With this I mean that I search for the conceptual tools and methods necessary to produce knowledge, starting from the problems themselves. Rather than starting from a grand theory and trying to fit data into its frame. This dynamic approach could be termed a form of ‘pragmatism’ according to Snape & Spencer (2003).

There are three reasons behind this approach. First of all, the citizens struggle in Nicaragua is still ongoing. The subjects of my research have only recently started regrouping following the heavy repression, when their leaders were released in May 2019. In these circumstances it is impractical to work with a fixed research design and too many preconceived notions. There was no telling what I would encounter during my fieldwork. For me initially it was all a big blur. Secondly, I do not have a clear identity as a researcher. I was educated as an electromechanical engineer before and now in the master program I picked up diverse notions of social research. This eclectic background makes it difficult to stick with a single theory or method. Thirdly, it was never my intention to find definite answers to the problems above. They served as guides for my fieldwork where I would collect data and come to grips with reality on the ground. It is from the experiences and data of this fieldwork that I wish to build the dissertation. In the process of theorising what I observed, I would also find partial answers to the problems above.

As a result, I developed three theoretical and two applied research questions:

* What is the meaning of ‘consciousness’?
* What is a ‘peasant’?
* What is a ‘social movement’?
* How did peasants become conscious to form the Movimiento Campesino and eventually in 2018 the citizens struggle?
* How to interpret the Movimiento Campesino’s meaning or value for the citizens struggle and for Nicaragua’s future?

The answers to the theoretical questions were necessary to make sense of the data and experiences collected. This process can be found in the next chapter. They were then applied to this data to answer the applied research question, as will be demonstrated in the fourth chapter. Out of all of these questions and answers, the central thesis of this dissertation was developed.

It was during the actual fieldwork that questions and ideas changed. Being physically closer to the people involved helped me untwine the complexity of the situation as it is experienced from afar. So my methodology was not the result of a well thought out design but it took shape in the practice and struggle of researching.

Methods

**Conceptual Choice**

‘Consciousness’[[6]](#footnote-6) is the central concept of this dissertation. By using this lens I try to shift the focus of analysis away from macroscopic factors back to the people involved. In doing so I assume that action does not stand by itself. The economy and political reforms are important but they alone do not explain why people took to the streets. One does not simply wake up and decide to go protest out of the blue. There is a history and process behind action. Once action has been taken it can persuade more people into struggle. What events, experiences and histories explain the mass participation of peasants in the citizens struggle which was initiated by students? With ‘consciousness’ I endeavour to capture this dialectic between action and reflection.

This conceptual choice is particularly interesting in the context of Nicaragua where the FSLN tried to instil people with revolutionary consciousness. Once conscious it was expected that the masses would join their project for the transformation of society. In the conceptual discussion that follows I will also mostly work with leftist thinkers, reflecting this revolutionary heritage.

The choice to theoretically discuss the ‘peasant’ and the ‘social movement’ follows from the need to understand my central subject, the Movimiento Campesino. The questions “who am I talking about?” and “what does it mean to be a movement?” deserve an answer. As will become clear the peasant is a more complex subject, than it may seem at first sight. This complexity will become important for the analysis of the Movimiento Campesino as a social movement. In these overviews I will exclude works stemming from a ‘neoclassical economics’ tradition. The “economic reductionism” prevalent in such work omit the ideological and socio-political content which I deem crucial to relate my subject to the concept of consciousness.

I will end with a final remark. This dissertation does not contain a standalone literature review. The review has been functionalized and can be encountered interwoven throughout the different chapters as a narrative review of literature.

**Data Collection**

The fieldwork I performed represents my main source of data. In the one month I spent in Nicaragua between the 21st of January and 19th of February 2020, I was able to participate in five meetings, I held four focus groups and conducted 23 interviews.

*Observation.* One month is not a lot of time to do fieldwork. As a consequence I was constantly on the move. Though tiring, this gave me the opportunity to witness a lot. In the capital I noticed a substantial increase of police on the streets. Anti-riot squads were positioned at places of particular interest such as universities. Such observations help to contextualize the situation people are in now. People face dire consequences for their actions and this fear plays out in their lives. For instance, during an interview with a local protest leader in Jinotega, I noticed that he was constantly looking over my shoulder into the street outside. When I asked him if he felt nervous, he replied that he did no longer sleep at his home. He was too afraid to stay in one location for too long. They could come arrest him any time if they were to feel like it. He had been a political prisoner after the protests of 2018 and was subsequently tortured. He was adamant not to return to prison.

*Participant observation.* How exactly did I participate in the movement? Following Bryman(2012) I could be considered a ‘Minimally Participating Observer’. First of all, during meetings I was asked to declare who I was and why I was present. At times my presence got incorporated into the debate. Secondly, it is quite the ordeal getting to and leaving from such meetings. One time I had to wake up early, take a two-hour transport in an uncomfortable converted cattle wagon to some community, wait an hour or so, then take another two-hour transport on dirt bike to finally arrive at the destination. Then there was a 30 minute or so walk to the secret meeting location where we had to wait some more hours for everyone to arrive. Then when the sun was at its highest the hours long meeting started, which I had to leave early because I still had to make the journey back in time for the cattle transport. This highly uncomfortable part of my fieldwork is commonplace for the peasants in the MC. It clearly demonstrates the daily obstacles peasants face in organising themselves, yet their strength is shown in them actually pulling it off.

*Semi-structured interviews: field notes + recording.* My main goal was to collect interviews. I wanted to hear and understand the stories behind people’s engagement or lack thereof in the citizens struggle. Of the 23 conducted interviews, two were held with former political prisoners, two with liberal politicians, four with activists from outside the MC and 15 with peasants, of which two belonged to the leadership of the MC. I chose to hold semi-structured interviews based on the “IKAPEG” method (Stroeken, 2019)[[7]](#footnote-7). In most cases I was allowed to record the conversation through a verbal, but also recorded, informed consent. These recordings only serve a secondary purpose to relisten important sections of the interviews, my primary data is situated in the notes I took during the interview. I found that taking notes also helped distract respondents from the phone recording besides them and helped me keep concentrated during interviews that sometimes lasted up to 3 hours. Respondents were selected with the help of personal connections through so-called ‘snowball sampling’, a form of ‘purposeful sampling’ (Patton, 1990).

*Focus groups.* As mentioned, my fieldwork day often consisted mostly out of transport and waiting My primary goal, however, was not to take part in meetings but use them to harvest interviews. It became quickly clear that due to logistical reasons it would be impossible to hold follow-up interviews with members present at the meetings. They still had to make the long journey home and visiting their spread out farms would make the transport/interview ratio unbearably high. Instead, I used the time around the meetings to organize some focus groups. Both during waiting for the meeting to start and after, I tried to convene some members into a group discussion about their backgrounds and engagement in the MC. Two were held with members of the movement, one with three of their national leaders and one with afro-indigenous activists whose plight has consequences for the MC (see chapter four).

*Personal Interactions*. Personal interaction with members, interviewees, guides was valuable to interpret what was happening and what I was observing. Sometimes this can be taken quite literally as I needed some quick translation from “peasant speech” into Nicaraguan Spanish, which I have come to understand quite well. In another way, personal interaction is what made this fieldwork feasible and possible in the first place. The high rate of success of gathering data I have to thank to the network I have been able to build up over the years. My local friends and family went out of their way to support my research. They helped connect me to interesting people to follow and interview. Their introductions also conceded the trust necessary to participate in meetings I might not have been able to access otherwise. At times they handed me documentation. Also they helped with interpretation, sequencing and clarification as the sheer volume of data, facts and experiences was becoming overwhelming during my fieldwork. I have to give special thanks to my host mother, Elba Rivera. She is a locally and internationally renowned activist, who has been organizing civil society in Nicaragua for decades. She is much more than just a ‘gatekeeper’, because she has helped built the gate itself! She helped and influenced the organizing of the peasants into the MC and even before. All of this and more she is doing whilst being the head master of her own school. Just by living in her house for a month I have seen the passing by of numerous activists and organizations. Any attempt to interview and integrate all of them would go beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Reflections

**Research Limitations**

Gender is the biggest limitation of my research. Only two out of 23 interviewees were women, only one focus group consisted predominantly of women and in meetings women were largely absent. Consequently, this male-centric voice in the data follows through in my subsequent writing. This bias should be kept in mind whilst reading. This bias is a consequence of working in the “Machisto” society that is Nicaragua. Male bias is especially a problem in the region under investigation, as it is a recently settled zone where women were cut off from their previous networks and were relegated to hard household labour (Francis, Pineda & Reyes, 2002). Due to Nicaraguan reality and practical reasons I was unable to isolate women for private interviews. Any interaction was purely informal. More research on the topic should investigate this bias and try to include the female perspective because every farming household depends on the woman for its reproduction. Also the Movimiento Campesino has been led by Francisca “Doña Chica” Ramírez, thus making a woman for a long time the face of the movement. This indicates the movements’ emancipatory potential.

Secondly, the length of my fieldwork was too short. By the time I had a good grasp of what was going on and how movements were related to each other in the struggle, it was time to go back home. I left with more questions than I had before I had arrived. Given more time, I would have analysed the Movimiento Campesino’s current contentious issues more deeply (see chapter 4). I would also have attempted to quickly cross the border with Costa Rica, where Doña Chica has built a farming camp for peasants that fled the country after participating in the tranques.

Another important limitation is that I did not have the time to examine sections of the Movimiento Campesino in the country’s pacific zone. These areas have known different histories(and are presumed to be pro-Sandinista), which might change or at least expand the movement’s analysis. I do not believe this to affect the central thesis of this dissertation but it would be interesting to see how these other perspectives fit into the whole. Related to this limit is the lack of FSLN voices among respondents. Even though I have connections with FSLN followers and have met the FSLN mayor of Nueva Guinea several times, I decided not to reach out to them. I had a genuine fear that if I scored an interview, I might become targeted and followed or worse kicked out of the country. The issues under consideration are still fresh and sensitive and the regime attempts to frame the events of 2018 as coup d’état. Also in a context of asymmetric power and representation it is my choice to focus on the story of the oppressed.

**Ethics**

In planning my fieldwork I had to take a number of safety measures into concern. State repression is still a daily affair even though life seemed to have turned to normal. I contacted both local friends and academic acquaintances, who had recently been in the country, for advice. The former assured me that I could travel safely and a friend offered to come meet me when I arrived at the airport to help acclimatise. The latter gave some practical tips about doing fieldwork and suggested to travel under a regular tourist visa, which I did. As the events of 2018 are still fresh and remain sensitive topics, I did not notify any official Nicaraguan instances beforehand about my research.

Concerning data collection and safekeeping I also took measures. I made sure to only discuss political issues in private or in the company of trustees. When I went on excursions to different research sites, I was always accompanied by someone. This was advised to me by the peasant respondents themselves on multiple occasions. It is too dangerous to roam the countryside alone, police is also observing people there. These research partners acted as guides, introducers and at times translators for campesino dialect. Before leaving we accorded us to the same story in case somebody asked us what we were doing in the countryside. For most interviewees I didn’t know in advance what their backgrounds were. So I noticed that at times I bit my tongue in the posing of question, making sure not to be too straightforward in the framing of political matters. I decided not to work with a written informed consent. I didn’t want to leave a paper trail. I opted for a recorded consent before the interview started and almost every interview was subsequently recorded. To protect respondents I made sure to disguise their names via nicknames in my phone. Sensitive messages I deleted. Every evening if the possibility existed, I uploaded all interviews on a back-up and deleted them from any device near me. Field notes were written in a mixture of Spanish, Dutch and English, thus masking their content. In writing this dissertation I abstained from using people’s names when I quote them (except one case, see annex 1).

Despite all measures, not everything can be anticipated. My own safety especially I had not always in hand because of the unfamiliar places I was in and my dependence on partners for guidance. For instance when I got the possibility to interview the current national coordinator of the Movimiento Campesino, I was asked to travel alone to his safehouse. All instruction I received was a time and a landmark near the safehouse. When I arrived there at the specified time I got the next coordinates, which finally led me to the house itself. Apparently he is being watched by the police, which could fall in anytime if they wished to arrest him. In such circumstances, I cannot predict what could happen but luckily everything went smoothly. A final anecdote might better illustrate how tense the situation at times could be. One morning when I was not doing any research, I was alarmed by a friend to come take a look in the school adjacent to the house where I was staying. In the school a church movement that had been critical of the regime was meeting. Outside the gates, across the street police and anti-riot forces had been stationed with their shotguns as a show of force. The state is watching and everyone should know it.

**Theoretical** **Discussions**

On Consciousness

Here I would like to make a quick remark. With consciousness I am not referring to the so-called ‘class consciousness’ of Marxism. I’m not trying to frame the events in Nicaragua as a revolt against the capitalist order in the slow march towards socialism. This does not mean that I dismiss class as a valuable analytical concept. Class remains an important aspect of consciousness but does not fully define it. Also, most thinkers that have inspired my treatment of the concept come from the Marxist tradition. Further, I want to emphasize that I’m not providing an exhaustive list of thinkers who concentrated on consciousness. Nor am I claiming to bring a state of the art on what these thinkers ‘actually meant’. All of these thinkers and ideas have evolved over time, thus making absolute statements counterproductive. Focussing on “what X really meant”, rather than learning from their philosophical legacy would “obscure the important educative task of intellectual history” (Femia, 1981, p.20). What I’m trying to do is use these diverse perspectives on ‘consciousness’ by a selected set of thinkers, to help understand what has happened and is happening in Nicaragua.

Let us start this story with a critique. In ‘The German Ideology’ Marx and Engels(1932) criticize the Young Hegelian movement for their view on the mind and consciousness. In this philosophical tradition all conceptions, be they moral, political or else, are treated as subsumed to religion. It is through reason and thought that people should be emancipated from this ‘religious consciousness’ and attain more freedom. In opposing this idea, Marx calls upon us to “revolt against the rule of thoughts” for these are only phrases opposing other phrases (ibid.). For Marx humans distinguish themselves from animals through their material production. It is in the act of producing their means of subsistence that humans produce their material life and thus their consciousness. Consciousness arises out of the interaction of individuals in their material being, their active life processes: “Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life” (ibid.). Consciousness can thus be seen as a ‘social product’, something that only exists in relation to others. It is in this consciousness of the necessity to associate with others that people discover they are living in a society. Yet the social power of all these people producing together appears in the beginning as something external, a world market controlling them. People do not yet perceive that it is their material activity under the prevailing relations of production, which is creating this social power. In the ‘Communist Manifesto’ Marx & Engels (1969) tell us that consciousness can change if material existence and the relations of production are altered. For this to happen the ‘proletariat’ has to become class conscious and perceive the political power behind this material constellation: the dominance of one class over another. Society is inherently conflictual as the antagonistic classes have to engage in class struggle for the emancipation of the oppressed. The result will be the lifting of class contradictions and the conscious mastery of productive forces.

To the previous section I would like to add a reflection made by Polanyi (2001, p.87).

“If we suggest that the study of Speenhamland is the study of the birth of the nineteenth-century civilization, it is not its economic and social effect that we have exclusively in mind, nor even the determining influence of these effects upon modern political history, but the fact that, mostly unknown to the present generation, *our social consciousness was cast in its mold.”* (Italics added)

It was in the apparent paradox between the growing wealth of the English nation and the simultaneous pauperization of the countryside that the 19th-century’s thinkers (like Marx and Engels) based their philosophies. This material ‘problem of poverty’ sparked the discovery of society and the ‘double movement’. For Polanyi individuals or classes didn’t react fully conscious and autonomous. Society as a whole acted to protect itself against the instalment of a market society and its’ needs determined the fate of classes. The resulting class conflicts and contradictions posed an equal problem to the liberal thinker. How to explain and console the coexistence of conflict and harmony, of poverty and affluence? A new set of ideas had to enter people’s conscious for the oppressive material contradictions to persist. Perhaps Gramsci’s concept of Hegemony can be of service to elucidate this “internalization” of the ruling groups’ ideology.

With Gramsci we explore the reintroduction of human subjectivity into Marxist thought. Effective rule does not depend on material power alone but requires the ruling groups to represent the ‘intellectual and moral leadership’ of the people (Femia, 1981). Through ‘Hegemony’ individual behaviour and choices are conformed to that of the prevailing order. With this view Gramsci emphasizes that society is first of all consent-based, and not conflictual. The antagonistic society is hidden from view and class conflict is effectively neutralized through internal control of the population. Further we can distinguish within individuals a double consciousness:

“The active man-in-the-mass has a practical activity, but has no clear theoretical consciousness of this activity. . . , One might almost say that he has two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness): one which is implicit in his activity and which truly unites him with all his fellow-workers in the practical transformation of reality; and one, superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically accepted.” (Gramsci as cited in Femia, 1981).

Unlike Marx who thought that workers would come to consciousness of their place in society just by living their material lives, Gramsci points to the fact that “objective material interests are not automatically or inevitably translated into class consciousness.” (Femia, 1981, P.55). Pure revolutionary action is not sufficient, for it only targets the ‘base’ of society and not its’ ‘superstructure’. Before coming to power the oppressed first have to engage in counterhegemonic activity. But who will lead in this battle of ideas? Gramsci recognizes the importance of an intellectual elite in this struggle. An elite which can instil critical consciousness into the masses. Once enabled the masses can go on to emancipate themselves.

There are others who go against this view of the need for an intellectual elite, which supposedly can inspire the masses into consciousness. Rosa Luxemburg postulates in “The Mass Strike” her belief in the importance of the ‘mass moment’(Scott, 2008):

“In the revolution when the masses themselves appear upon the political battlefield this class consciousness becomes practical and active. A year of revolution has therefore given the Russian proletariat that ‘training’ that thirty years of parliamentary and trade-union struggle cannot artificially give to the German proletariat.” (Luxemburg, 1906)

In other words: it is through action and participation in the struggle to emancipate that individuals, in the form of a mass of people, become conscious. It is through mass action that individuals are won for this struggle. It is not a weapon of the revolution, but a “means, firstly, of *creating for the proletariat the conditions of the daily political struggle* and especially of parliamentarism”(Luxemburg, 1906, emphasis added). Luxemburg highlights the spontaneity of the mass moment. It is not possible to steer consciousness or the revolution from outside the masses. This is not to say that she denies the need of organization and consciousness for a successful revolution. She only refutes the idea that the masses need to be educated by an external elite into conscious thinking:

“But in order to be able to overthrow it, the proletariat requires a high degree of political education, of class consciousness and organization. All these conditions cannot be fulfilled by pamphlets and leaflets, but only by the living political school, by the fight and in the fight, in the continuous course of the revolution.” (Luxemburg, 1906, p.130)

The final thinker I’m going to introduce focuses as well on the educational capabilities inherent to people and revolution. Paolo Freire stresses the centrality of ‘conscientização’ or ‘conscientization’ to the revolutionary project. Consciousness in this sense is a process, it is the learning to perceive the socio-political contradictions and take action against oppression (Freire, 2017). Freire talks about a historical struggle, but he is not referring to the class struggle advocated by Marx. Freire calls upon the conscious struggle for the humanisation of the world. All people are humans but not all are living on equal footing. Humanity is divided into oppressed and oppressors. Through confrontation and dialogue critical radicals have to engage in the ‘pedagogy of the oppressed’ for the liberation of all humans, oppressors and oppressed. The oppressed have to take responsibility and lead this struggle. By means of ‘conscientização’ they will learn that humanity produces social reality and that the future is not set in stone.

“If humankind produce social reality…then transforming that reality is an historical task, a task for humanity. Reality which becomes oppressive results in the contradistinction of men as oppressors and oppressed. The latter, whose task it is to struggle for the liberation together with those who show true solidarity, must acquire a critical awareness of oppression through the praxis of this struggle. One of the gravest obstacles to the achievement of liberation is that oppressive reality absorbs those within it and thereby acts to submerge human beings’ consciousness.” (Freire, 2017, p.25)

In his call for liberation, ‘praxis’ is central. He means the dialectical unity of ‘action’ and ‘reflection’ (critical reflection for him is a form of action): critical reflection will lead to action and this action will become the new object of reflection. This is where the pedagogical nature of struggle and political action comes in:

“However, not even the best-intentioned leadership can bestow independence as a gift. The liberation of the oppressed is a liberation of women and men, not things. Accordingly, while no one liberates himself by his own efforts alone, neither is he liberated by others…The correct method lies in dialogue. The conviction of the oppressed that they must fight for their liberation is not a gift bestowed by the revolutionary leadership but the result of their own *conscientização*. “ (Freire, 2017, p.40-41)

It is thus in a dialogue of equals that individuals become conscious. The coming into being of ‘conscientização’ can be facilitated by educators who use the reality of oppression as an object of reflection. This learning process is a joint responsibility of both educator and educated who together, mediated by the world, create the conditions for ‘true knowledge’ and consciousness to arise.

I want to end this discussion by outlying the meaning and significance of consciousness used in this dissertation. In a general sense, consciousness refers to a state of mind. Consciousness is the becoming, and consequently being, aware of something we weren’t aware of before. But awareness of what exactly? Awareness of the unquestionable, yet invisible, fact that social reality is produced by humans. Poverty and affluence, hunger and plenty, development and underdevelopment, the wealth of nations… All of these things are not natural. They are not the necessary conditions of life, but the result of history. A history of Capitalism and the change it brought. Social reality developed through human action and inaction, choice and oppression.

Consciousness does not mean that we have to understand exactly how our social reality was produced and is being reproduced today. Consciousness is the understanding that the current order of things is not the only possibility out there. There is an alternative. Change is possible and humans can bring it about. The philosophies we have discussed point at both how people become conscious and how it can lead to emancipation. In this sense, consciousness is a process. It does not stop when people become aware of social reality. Awareness of the political projects behind reality can lead to action, to reflection and the further spread of consciousness. Despite their enabling power, the material conditions of lived life do not naturally lead to consciousness. Hegemony obstructs the process. Consciousness can come about in a moment of mass action or it can be inspired through intellectual rhetoric. One thing, however, is clear. The oppressed will have to lead in the march for emancipation.

Armed with this concept I can start investigating what led peasants to take to the streets against the regime of Ortega-Murillo. Before approaching the Movimiento Campesino in this way, however, I still have to get some things clear about my research subject. What exactly is a peasant? And what is a social movement? How should we approach a peasant movement then?

On the Peasantry

I will start the discussion again with a critic. Bernstein (2014) argues that “there are no ‘peasants’ in the world of contemporary capitalist globalisation.” His critique is rooted in 3 main arguments. First, there is an overall messy usage of terms such as ‘farmer’, ‘peasant, ‘small farmer’, ‘family farmer’. They’re interchangeably used in literature, which to him weakens them for analytical purpose. Is a family-owned farm that employs wage labour on 1000s of acres in the US considered to be on par with a 20 acre owning Latin American farmer? Can both be described under the term peasant? Second, there is a tendency to use ‘peasant’ in a normative way. They are often inscribed with ‘presumed qualities’ such as reciprocity, community and egalitarianism for example. Third, since the advent and transition to capitalism there has been a change in the “social character of small-scale farming” (Bernstein, 2010). The development of capitalism has transformed the peasant into a ‘petty commodity producer’. They own some of the means of production but are dependent for their subsistence on “integration into wider social divisions of labour and markets” (ibid.). This penetration of market relations into the countryside has led to the ‘commodification of subsistence’. Therefore, the ‘peasant’ is best relegated to the past. In this materialist conception, farmers are divided among ‘classes of labour’ (Bernstein, 2010) [[8]](#footnote-8).In elaboration of this Bernstein(2010) asks us to consider differentiating between ‘farming’ as a localized act of “what farmers do and have done through millennia” and ‘agriculture’ as the economic sector and interests in capitalism that affect farmers.

Though I follow Bernstein in his first and second strands of reasoning, I have my doubts about the third. The ‘commodification of subsistence’ implies a process that transformed the farmer household from one that was able to supply its own ‘simple reproduction’ into a household that requires the market for survival. First of all, didn’t farmers always depend on others for some of their means of (re)production? The smith and woodworker, for example? Second, this focus on transition implies that there was a tipping point when the dominance of exchange-value over use-value became insurmountable in the countryside. When did this happen? Did this moment take place everywhere at the same time? For instance in 17th-century Holland, farmers had already stopped producing grain for own consumption (van der Ploeg, 2008). This approach makes temporal and spatial comparison difficult as the levels of commodification might differ. Furthermore, this categorization cuts the chord between today’s people that work the land and those that came before.

It is important to mention that Bernstein’s critique is mainly directed at those scholars who bring ideology into the ‘peasant question’. Scholars advocating for ‘food sovereignty’ conceive of peasants as ‘capital’s other’ (McMichael, 2014; Borras, 2019). McMichael(2014) recognizes in food sovereignty a “countermovement [which] expresses a positive antithesis to corporate industrial agriculture”. Being a peasant equals being political and anti-capitalist. The problem with this approach is that again someone else is deciding on who is a peasant or not. Even worse, they have to fit a certain ideological camp and pursue the “correct” political project (anti-capitalism)

I have tried to make clear that ‘the peasant’ can be rooted in both materialism and idealism. Both approaches, however, share a common baseline. They attempt to position the peasantry in relation to the proletariat as either a ‘class of labour’ or as ‘capital’s other’. Consequently, they can be assigned a role in the unfolding of history and possibly a socialist future. There is much history behind these talks about a ‘worker-peasant alliance’. Much of the debate centred around the “ifs and hows” of a socialist revolution in predominantly agrarian societies. I will not delve into this debate. However, I will take a look into one of the earlier writings on the ‘peasant question’: Marx’s “The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon”.

In his examination of the rise to power of French Emperor Louis Napoleon, Marx signalled that peasants formed his power base. The contents of his essay (especially the final chapter) have sparked much debate between Marxist scholars about what were Marx’s actual views on the peasantry (Katz, 1992). The issue centres on peasants’ ambiguous position within the relations of production. On the one hand they are property owners, thus disposing of their means of production. Yet on the other hand they are producers who labour for themselves and their households. Interestingly, Marx made the following remark:

“But let us not misunderstand. The Bonaparte dynasty represents not the revolutionary, but the conservative peasant; not the peasant who strikes out beyond the condition of his social existence, the small holding, but rather one who wants to consolidate his holding” (Marx, 1937).

It is clear that Marx recognizes the revolutionary potential of some of the peasantry. This makes them a valuable asset in the class struggle, which explains the attitude of the scholars above.

In one of the most contentious passages Marx looks further into the peasantries’ social position:

“Thus the great mass of the French nation is formed by the simple addition of homologous magnitudes, much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes. Insofar as millions of families live under conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests, and their culture from those of the other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class. Insofar as there is *merely a local interconnection* among these small-holding peasants, and the identity of their interests forms no community, no national bond, and no political organization among them, they do not constitute a class. They are therefore incapable of asserting their class interest in their own name, whether through a parliament or a convention. *They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented.“* (Marx, 1937; emphasis added)

The reason why I quoted this lengthy piece is that it introduces two important aspects concerning the peasantry. Firstly, there is the problem of distance. Peasants live(d) isolated and in small communities. As such they face(d) great obstacles in organising themselves. There exists again a lengthy debate, which I will not take up, about whether the peasantry constitutes a ‘class-in-itself’ or a ‘class-for-itself’ (Katz, 1992). Secondly, and linked to the first, there is the problem of representation. Who can talk about and for the peasant? I follow Katz (1992) who concludes that “if the peasants' interests ‘must be represented,’ their support still had to be won… peasants themselves, Marx argues, had to decide their fate”. To put it succinctly: what about ‘agency’?

With the development of capitalism, market relations spread across the globe. Life in rural areas was equally affected by the rising dominance of the market over social life (Beckert, 2014; Bernstein, 2010; Federici, 2004; Marx, 1990). Consequently the lives of many became more precarious as peasants became dependent on an external global market over which they had no say. Peasants did not stand by idly. They resisted such change. The many peasant rebellions of the colonial and post-colonial era are an expression of this. Scott(1976) argues, however, that not these rebellions but their *absence* characterise peasant politics. Risk is central to Scott’s perspective on the peasantry. Peasants live within a ‘subsistence ethic’. Fear of starvation forms the basis of peasant politics. This implies that the range of actions available to the peasant is restrained by ”living close to the subsistence margin” (Scott, 1976) Peasants might not engage in profit maximizing but they are rational actors who try to minimize risks.

Scott’s ‘subsistence ethic’ inscribes peasants with values of rationality. There exists also the other end of the spectrum. Tropes such as ‘egalitarianism, ‘traditionalism’, ‘indigenousness’ come to mind. This last one is particularly interesting as the categories of ‘peasant’ and ‘indigenous’ often intersect. Indigenous people often live on the margins of society, excluded from the formal wage sector. Consequently, ‘traditional’ or ‘pre-modern’ farming is often the only means available of reproducing their lives. We have to be careful not to essentialise or reify this connection between indigenous peasants and their ‘traditional’ mode of organizing farming. The question of indigenousness will also play, as we will see, a role in the Movimiento Campesino.

Scott(1976) shows us that peasants have agency, albeit severely constrained. Throughout history exploitation was omnipresent, yet rebellion mostly absent. However, this does not mean that peasants do not resist. The ruling groups may hold the means to coerce and intimidate, but there is “one area of their life over which they do exercise some control: their culture” (ibid., p.231). So-called ‘everyday practices of resistance’ have meaning, because here peasants themselves set the terms. This approach requires me to expand on my notion of consciousness. Consciousness is not only manifested in mass action. It can also be encountered in the symbolic and cultural aspects of life.

Resistance is mostly restricted to everyday life. Rebellion is the exception, not the rule. The trouble with Scott’s argument is that it leads to a certain victimization of the peasantry. They have become the victim of a capitalist regime which has reduced their space of action to the realm of culture. A critic such as Bernstein might object to this perspective. Peasants are not only victims, they have a hand in the current capitalist order. Internal differentiation of the peasantry and a ‘relentless micro-capitalism’[[9]](#footnote-9) mean that peasants also dispossess(ed) other peasants. Capitalism is not outside, but exists within the countryside.

Tania Murray Li (2014) builds further on this theme. Her encounter with indigenous peasants in Sulawesi taught her that a history of shortage and hunger “stimulated them to seek access to cash so they could buy food and meet other needs” (Li, 2015). In their attempt “to join the march of progress promised in modernization narratives” indigenous farmers brought capitalism into the countryside (Li, 2014). Even though the peasants did not look back to the past in nostalgia, they were also not thrilled about the present and prospects of the future were dire. Once capitalism has set in, the ‘dull compulsion’ for survival leads people to reproduce capitalist relations in the countryside. Peasants, just like all people, are subject to ‘path dependence’. Previous decisions helped create the current predicament and as such constrain action and choice today. The problem with this ‘conjunctural approach’ (Li, 2014) is that the past overdetermines the present. If the possibilities for the future are already limited by what has happened in the past, then why bother acting for change? These approaches to peasants’ agency, both risk-aversion and path dependency, complicate the idea of consciousness. How, then, to explain the engagement of peasants in Nicaragua’s citizens struggle? Maybe the writings of Jan Douwe van der Ploeg can break us out of this deadlock.

van der Ploeg starts his discussion on the peasantry by critiquing science: “Science generates both knowledge and ignorance and one of the black holes it has created systematically obscures the ways in which peasants operate within the modern world” (van der Ploeg, 2008). The models of modernization, of both Marxists and Liberals alike, projected onto the farmers what they were *supposed to be*. The result of this movement is the appearance of a ‘virtual farmer’, an abstraction in which no contemporary recognizes herself or himself (van der Ploeg, 1999). What has been overlooked is the specific way farming is practiced by ‘entrepreneurial farmers’, ‘corporate farmers’ and the ‘peasant farmer (van der Ploeg, 2008). What distinguishes the latter is their characteristic ‘peasant condition’. By working the land as a peasant, she or he is engaged in a “*struggle for autonomy* that takes place in *a context characterized by dependency relations, marginalization and deprivation”* (van der Ploeg, 2008).

The peasant struggles for the active construction of ‘room for manoeuvre’ (Long, 1984). They’re not indefinitely stuck in a condition of inherited dependence and marginalization. Peasants act to both distance and integrate themselves into the market, thus creating a ‘relative autonomy’ where “responsibility and agency are manifested” (van der Ploeg, 2008). The peasantry continually has to adapt to new circumstances, as such being a peasant becomes a ‘process’ (van der Ploeg, 2010). Autonomy is not fixed but “it has to be repeatedly created and recreated” (van der Ploeg, 2008).

The importance of this approach is that we let go of the notion of the peasantry as a ‘fixed category’. For sure we are not talking about the same peasants as 100 years ago, the material conditions of life in the countryside have changed. But does the growing importance of commodity relations have to signify that the peasantry has disappeared? Or vice versa, does a peasant really have to abstain from the market or risk losing her or his ‘peasantness’? What unites the peasants of the past with those today is their search for autonomy. Peasants’ consciousness of the political projects that threaten this autonomy can lead to resistance. They struggle to expand their ‘room for manoeuvre’ and as such open up the possibilities for a brighter future.

There is still one crucial factor missing from the discussion above: Identity. According to Starn(1992) it is important “to show how peasant activism represents the active creation of alternative modes of political vision and identity”. Identity is contested, it is political. It is a part of the peasantries’ struggle for emancipation. In Latin-America the identity of the “campesino” is further complicated by the legacy of colonialism:

“Campesino is often imprecisely translated as ‘peasant’. The Spanish term is not an ethnic marker; a campesino could be white, mestizo, Indian, or even a foreign immigrant…The term conveys a sense of social status more than an economic role or ethnic identity. ..In a sense, a ‘campesino’ identity tends to be a hybrid construction that draws on a variety of social, cultural, and economic relations to the dominant culture” (Becker, 2004).

‘Peasant’ does not function as a passe-partout when we talk about people in the countryside or farmers. It is my goal to acknowledge and integrate this complexity into this thesis. Capitalism indeed has brought about a transformation of the countryside and its social life. The boundary between peasant and proletarian or petty commodity produces has become blurry. However, there remains some distinct ‘peasantness’ which gives them a distinct place within capitalism. Their ‘peasant’ or ‘campesino’ identity marker still serves as the basis for activism, which shows its relevance in the world today. Over the centuries, many have recognised the potential of peasant agency. Still today there are endeavours to tie the peasant’s struggle to advance other political projects. The peasantry has not disappeared into history. Their search for autonomy takes place in relation to an ever changing world. It may find expression in symbolism, further integration into capitalism or outright mass resistance. In the case of the Movimiento Campesino, peasants united into a ‘social movement’. What does it mean to be a social movement?

On Social Movements

The discussion below is based on so-called “New Social Movement Theory”(NSMT), which was shaped by the experiences of the late 80s and early 90s (Alvarez & Escobar, 1992). The ending of the Cold War, the failure of the Keynesian and developmentalist state models to bring progress and the rise of neoliberalism to global hegemony characterise this period. The subsequent restructuring of capitalism, often pushed by ‘disaster capitalism’ (Klein, 2007), brought about drastic change in many parts of the world. People in the Global South were hit particularly hard. Latin America experienced a debt crisis and the 80s became locally known as ‘La Década Perdida’ [The Lost Decade] (Alvarez & Escobar, 1992).

To cope with change people got organised into social movements as a means of expressing themselves collectively. NSMT endeavoured to understand the how and why of social movements as an answer to structural change (Alvarez & Escobar, 1992). Nowadays we see similar phenomena at work since the financial crisis of 2007-2008, with a global restructuring of capitalism in which land plays a primary role (Li, 2014). This is why I argue these theories are still valid today.

As explained above social movements originate in the midst of change, when people perceive the state to have failed to bring progress in their lives (Alvarez & Escobar, 1992; Schneider, 1992; Vanden, 2007). Mirroring Said’s ‘Orientalism’, Escobar (1992) asks us to see development as a ‘cultural discourse’. Through it the ‘Third World’ is made knowable and controllable for the West and local elites. Therefore social movements should be “seen equally and inseparably as struggles over meanings as well as material conditions, that is, as cultural struggle.” (ibid.). The crisis of development is not purely economic, but part of a “broader crisis of the civilizational project of modernity” (ibid.). Starn(1992) similarly comments about a peasant movement in Peru that “the rise of rural movements involves the making of alternative political cultures”. Thus the rural world also participates in this process of political innovation. But not all crises have led to social movements. When do they actually form?

Latin American states have failed to supply alternatives to its’ people in response to the crises they face (Calderón, Piscitelli & Reyna, 1992; Starn, 1992; Vanden, 2007). Subsequently, their ability to provide answers to society’s problems has been questioned. Further deteriorating their legitimacy is the lack of representation in prevailing institutions experienced by people. Others emphasize that not legitimacy, but state repression of ‘popular organisation’ is the problem (Hellman, 1992). People were educated to become good citizens and consequently they expected to participate in the functioning of the state. Yet according to Escobar (1992) the modern citizen became not only the ”subject of liberty and equality, of objectivity and efficiency (Homo oeconomicus), but also the disciplined and normalized subject, the policed subject”. In times of crisis and change this status quo breaks down. Social movements arise as alternatives to this “tension between an aging state and a society that wants to grow” (Calderón et al., 1992).

As the state becomes contested, it is also ‘demystified’. Political relations are laid bare and people become conscious that parties do not hold the monopoly on doing politics (Borda, 1992). Similarly, Alvarez & Escobar (1992) argue that social movements become conscious that politics “permeates all social relations”. Through collective action the ‘political space’ accessible to citizens becomes extended or deepened (Calderón et al., Hellman, 1992; Vanden 2007). Paraphrasing Foucault, Borda (1992) tells us that the state is not the only source of power. This is not to say that the state becomes obsolete. Escobar (1992) warns us that the state “is too powerful a social force to be left to the politicians and economic elites”.

How do social movements succeed in both challenging the state and engaging people in politics? Social movements unite around a common identity. This links up with Escobar’s ‘cultural struggle’ over meanings in search of a collective identity. This implies that identity is not primordial but a “social construction”. It is open to contestation and reinterpretation (Escobar, 1992). Identity construction is also taking place in the rural world. In their respective case studies on rural movements in Peru and Ecuador, Starn(1992) and Becker(2004) emphasize the importance of peasant identity construction. In fact both claim that it was a new powerful sense of independent identity which enabled peasant mobilisation. These identities were constructed out of a particular socio-cultural context and were shaped through interaction with the state and other actors. Peasant identity does not originate from a vacuum but “from particular positions within the global village” (Starn, 1992).

Alvarez & Escobar’s (1992) conclusion summarizes the previous paragraphs: “Culture mediates the movement from structural conditions to social and political action”. If identity construction is not the goal of social movements, but merely the means through which unity and action is enabled. What, then, do social movements stand for? How to interpret their value? Social movements strive for the creation of *autonomy* (Alvarez & Escobar, Calderón et al., Escobar, Starn, Borda, 1992). This autonomy is not absolute, but should be interpreted as relative to “more conventional political arenas, such as political parties and the state” (Alvarez & Escobar, 1992). This echoes van der Ploeg’s ‘peasant condition’. Political struggle is no longer merely about access to the state but is also an “attempt to keep a distance from it [the state] in order to reaffirm their identity and find their ‘small’ representativity within their own space” (Calderón et al., 1992). Alvarez & Escobar (1992) called this search for autonomy a “reaccommodation of society”. Civil society steps in where the state failed to bring progress and failed to protect people’s interest. The resulting creation and extension of political space gives social movements the necessary ‘room for manoeuvre’ (Long, 1984) and as Vanden (2007) signalled “civil society became the locus of action”.

Social movements’ relative autonomy is not external to or isolated from the state and ‘conventional politics’. The crisis of party politics might have led to a “fundamental distrust of the traditional parties and formations of the Left” (Hellman, 1992), but it has not made them superfluous. In her work on social movements in Pinochet’s Chile, Schneider(1992) demonstrates how the political work of the local Communist Party was responsible for high levels of consciousness and mobilization. This spillover from political to civil society will come back in the analysis of the Movimiento Campesino, which was aided in the beginning by leftist movements. It reflects Freire’s idea of ‘conscientização’ through pedagogy. There is no clean break from ‘old politics’. There are continuities and transformations involved. Starn (1992) notes how peasant movement both challenges and accept authority from the state. They adopt notions of hierarchy but also transform or even radicalize these same notions. For example these peasants are organised around committees with elected presidents, but they radicalize these ideas with a participatory democratic approach (Starn, 1992). However, this does not mean that we should idealise these movements. Practices of ‘caudillismo’ [warlordism] and sexism can live on (ibid.).

This brings me to the final remark about the relativity of autonomy: the ‘co-optation dilemma’ (Borda, 1992). The concern is that social movements and the political space they enabled will become defused, if they are co-opted into party politics. However, what this perspective misses is that the interrelations can be dialectical with the potential to radicalize conventional politics (Hellman, 1992).

The state and political society have not become obsolete. Rather conventional politics have become discredited and their legitimacy questioned. Consequently social movements rally around a common identity and contest political space. They craft themselves a relative autonomy and through it extend political space to the citizenry or find meaning within their own ‘space of expression’ (Calderón et al., 1992). As such civil society is enabled and can enact change from the government. This is how we should interpret the value of social movements. They help in the spread of consciousness and subsequently allow more people to engage in politics. This makes possible the “democratization of authoritarian social relations” (Alvarez & Escobar, 1992).

On the Peasant Movement

So what have we learned from the abovementioned theoretical discussions? First of all, peasants are complex actors. They cannot be locked into categories of the dialectical materialism used in Marxism. Nor can they be essentialised as anti-capitalist and somehow outside of capitalism. Peasants, however, do contain revolutionary potential. Peasants can be made conscious of social reality and the politics behind it. They get organized in social movements to engage in collective action. Through the creation of a common identity and a relative autonomy from the state they can manage to extend their room for manoeuvre and the political space available to them.

What is the importance of all this? Why bring together these ideas to investigate Nicaragua’s Movimiento Campesino? I argue that we should focus on the concrete practices and implications of these movements as enablers of political space. Both the internal and external dynamics of social movements such as the MC work to spread consciousness and include more and more people into politics. Furthermore, democratic movements have the potential to challenge and counter authoritarianism. At least, the very minimal achievement of peasant movements is the inclusion of an otherwise marginalized section of the people into the affairs of the nation.

This approach contrasts the one used in the recent and renewed academic interest of peasant movements. Particularly the issue of ‘agrarian populism’, as the latest expression of peasant activism, has become a central discussion. The focus lies on the interrelations between agrarian populism and a globally resurgent right (Scoones et al., 2017; Borras 2019; Edelman, 2019; Mamonova and Franquesa, 2019; van der Ploeg, 2020). Though I do not question the importance of such an aggregated view of what is happening in the world, I am missing concrete embedded perspectives from within these peasant movements.

Some activist academics go a step further. They look for ways to turn agrarian populism to left-wing political projects (Scoones et al., 2017; Borras, 2019; Mamonova and Franquesa, 2019). Borras (2019) goes as far as to plead for a “reformulated class‐conscious left‐wing populism as a countercurrent to right‐wing populism, and as a possible political force against capitalism and towards a socialist future”. Though I do not stand inimical towards his “absurdly difficult but not impossible agenda of defeating right‐wing populism and exploring a socialist future” (ibid.), I take issues with the implicit message of this agenda. Peasants are presented as “the swing vote that can be *lured from left‐wing issues to right‐wing populism and vice versa”* (ibid., emphasis added). This instrumentalist approach goes on to define ‘progressive agrarian populists’ as “radically anti-capitalist” (ibid.). The peasant’s voice and complexity is homogenized to make them fit in a scheme for socialist revolution. Although I do not believe Borras to question the intrinsic value of these movements, he definitely prioritizes their potential for socialism. Their own struggles become secondary.

This approach is worrying. We have to remember Escobar’s adage that “theory is, in itself, a practice linked to power” (Escobar, 1992). What we perceive from the outside does not represent the full picture. If we only focus on how peasants can become linked to the political projects of others, than we misinterpret peasant movements’ meaning and value. We omit how this movements spread consciousness and extend political space, which enables the peasantry to become politicised on their own terms.

Peasants may not be the midwives of history. But does this really matter? Peasants are out there and they are struggling. They are trying to make their voices heard. Is there really no internal contestation to this linking of peasant movements to conservative political projects? Rather than assuming that peasants need help from “progressive” populists to be lured to the “good” camp, maybe socialism had better taken a look at the peasant’s own struggle and the ways it can *support them* in their plea.

**Analysis of the Movimiento Campesino**

This analysis will start with an overview of the location of my research. The context shown here will be important to understand the subsequent analysis of the movement. Once all pieces of the puzzle have been exposed, the central thesis will be expounded. This thesis will be substantiated with some contentious issues, which demonstrate how the peasants of the Movimiento Campesino engage in politics.

Research sites

During my month of fieldwork I spent time collecting data in seven different sites (Figure 1). I mostly stayed in the municipality of Nueva Guinea, where I also lived. Outside of the city centre I also investigated three other communities, also called ‘colonias’[colonies], as a part of my research endeavour (Figure 2).

Afbeelding met tekst, kaart

Automatisch gegenereerde beschrijvingAfbeelding met tekst, kaart

Automatisch gegenereerde beschrijving

Figure 1 (left): Administrative map of Nicaragua indicating research sites with red dots. Figure 2 (right): Municipal map of Nueva Guinea indicating research sites with red circles.

As explained in the methodology chapter, my research was given shape in the practice of performing the fieldwork itself. It was not the result of some pre-conceived research design, but neither did my trajectory come out of the blue. I had anticipated to meet and “observe” the current leader of the Movimiento Campesino, Medardo Mairena. I had met him on my last trip and he agreed to introduce me to the movement. However, due to new political developments near the end of 2019 these plans had to be cancelled as he had to go abroad for negotiations. Consequently, I arrived in Nicaragua with no idea where to start my fieldwork. I was planless, but not guideless.

A friend had agreed to meet and accompany me on my first days of fieldwork. We got the opportunity to interview two political ex-prisoners in Matagalpa and Jinotega. This lead to more contacts for more interviews but I decided not to pursue this trail, regardless of how interesting and inspiring it was. I wanted to keep focussing on my initial research object, the Movimiento Campesino. Furthermore I felt insecure about doing fieldwork in an unfamiliar territory, which was also generally considered pro-Sandinista before the events of 2018. So we turned back to the capital.

There I met up with my host from Nueva Guinea, she was passing through Managua the same day. During the seven hour ride we had some opportunity to discuss the fieldwork and after a welcoming dinner there was yet another lucky break. She was asked to participate in a meeting of the Movimiento Campesino the next day and she invited me to tag along. Although I was still tired from the previous four days, it gave a moral boost that the fieldwork was getting underway.

Nicaragua’s Southeast: an overview

The region I have termed Nicaragua’s “Southeast” occupies a somewhat peripheral position within the country’s politics and history. It comprises the contemporary “Río San Juan” department and “Región Autónoma del Atlántico Sur” (RAAS)[[10]](#footnote-10) autonomous region, as can be seen in figure 1. There are two reason why I call this zone a ‘periphery’. The first reason is directly related to the country’s history of colonization. Nicaragua was colonized by both the Spanish and the British during the so-called “age of discovery” in the 16th and 17th century. The Spanish initiated a form of settler colonialism starting from the pacific side of the Central-American isthmus. Whereas the British based their presence on a form of indirect rule, claiming to be the protector of the ‘Mosquitia’ (Domínguez, 2006). The Mosquitia was an indigenous kingdom situated on the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua, which was not incorporated until the end of the 19th century through a set of treaties. Secondly, the Atlantic coast and southeast differ from the rest of the country as they experience a ‘Humid Tropical’ climate (Alcaldía Nueva Guinea, 2011). Consequently this region was covered by a lush rainforest, thus making settlement difficult except for localities along the San Juan river.

It were these two historical circumstances which shaped the southeast as a periphery. The leaders and mestizo people living in the pacific and central regions of the country saw the southeast as a ‘frontier’ within the national territory. In the beginning people used the rainforest as a site of extraction for products such as woods and rubber. Slowly but surely people also cut down the forest and settled the cleared areas for farming purposes. The frontier turned into an ‘agricultural frontier’ (Mordt, 2001), which has kept expanding and brought massive deforestation with it.

This process of incorporation through colonization is exemplified by the history of Nueva Guinea, a young city which was founded in 1965. The expansion of cotton production in Nicaragua’s pacific zone during the 1950s displaced and impoverished many farmers (Vilas, 1986). Subsequently, some poor peasants migrated in search of a better life to the frontier represented by the Southeast. Soon enough the police state installed by the Somoza dynasty recognized the merits of the agricultural frontier. Social pressures were mounting as the masses of impoverished and landless peasants kept on growing. These masses could not be fully proletarianized as the newly created rural labour market for the coffee and cotton plantations didn’t supply the necessary jobs. Exacerbating this situation were the eruption of the Cerro Negro volcano in 1971 and the earthquake of 1972 which devastated Managua. The state saw the frontier as a safety valve to lessen social pressures (Mairena, 2003). They opted to start moving these victims of capitalist change and natural disaster, rather than rebuilding and solving the fundamental problems of capitalist development. The Somoza state began organising and legitimising the colonisation of the southeast by mobilizing resources for transport and distributing land titles to the pioneering peasants (Escobar & Mairena, 2012). Formerly dispossessed farmers suddenly received between 30-50 hectares of land if they came to live and work in the agricultural frontier.

Soon however, peasants became frustrated again as after a few years of sowing basic grains the productivity of the lands dropped. Tropical forest lands are not suited for intensive agriculture as their fertility is linked to the presence of these trees and their deep roots which hold together the soil and nutrients. Clearing the trees exposes the soil to erosion from the heavy rainfalls. The easy solution is to turn the land into pasture and start raising cattle. Most peasants lack the necessary resources and are forced to sell the land, which initiated a ‘3rd wave of migration’ and the agricultural frontier was driven further into the rainforest (Mordt, 2001; Mairena, 2003). Nowadays, the territory of Nueva Guinea has been fully colonized. The rainforest has been reduced to the “Indio Maíz” reserve and there people still attempt to clear more land, while the state deliberately neglects its own legislation and the communal rights of the indigenous[[11]](#footnote-11).

I elaborate on this background because Nueva Guinea lies on the trajectory for the transoceanic canal which sparked the Movimiento Campesino into existence. I will assume that the situation in Nueva Guinea is representative for most of the Southeast and for the “franja canalera” [canal route] in particular. With its population of over 130,000 inhabitants[[12]](#footnote-12) Nueva Guinea represents the most populated municipality affected by the envisioned canal (Alcaldía Nueva Guinea, 2011). Nueva Guinea has a young population with over half the population being 24 or younger, which corresponds to the national figures. The population lives mostly (80%) in rural areas surrounding the “colonias” or villages, with 20% staying in the municipal urban centre (ibid.). This situation is reflected in the economic activities as agriculture forms 70% of local GDP (compared to 15% nationally) and involves most families (ibid.). It is important to note that peasants do not necessarily live isolated on their land. Often they live in the city or village centre and commute to their work via truck or on horseback. They are not completely cut-off from urban space. Most peasants farm for own consumption with the remainder (if there is a surplus at least) going to the market through intermediaries. Cattle raising is the most valuable economic activity in terms of income and is practiced extensively. Subsequently most land (51%) has been converted into pasture, compared to 24% for agriculture and leaving only 12% of the original forest (Escobar & Mairena, 2012). Most peasants, however, cannot afford to become ranchers, land is sold and becomes concentrated under new latifundistas. This process has led many peasants to colonize new plots of land in the remaining rainforest.

There is a final point to be made concerning these peasants’ background. As most came from families that lived in the pacific zone before, they also brought their culture with them. In this sense the people in Nueva Guinea do not differ much from the rest of the country. This eclectic heritage does mean however that people’s identity has not yet crystallized. The thing that binds most locals is their identification as campesinos, but people are still figuring out what it means to be from Nueva Guinea. How this place fits in with the rest of the nation in general and the autonomous region in particular is still an ongoing discussion. This latter aspect is important as the mestizo colonists are perceived as newcomers to the autonomous region. The region’s autonomy, which is still more formal than a reality, was created with respect to the afro-indigenous[[13]](#footnote-13) communities that have called the Atlantic Coast home for centuries (Domínguez, 2006; Gutiérrez, Úbeda & Vásquez, 2009). The mestizos of Nueva Guinea and surrounding territories feel different from these communities, but despite their short presence the younger generations who were born here already experience a strong feeling of belonging (Gutiérrez et al., 2009). Even though the afro-indigenous peoples only represent between 8-15% of the national population (MINED, 2019)[[14]](#footnote-14), with most living in the autonomous regions of the Atlantic coast, their struggle for recognition has had an impact. It led to the 1987 constitution which acknowledges Nicaragua’s multi-ethnic character and obligates the state in theory to respect their autonomy and communal rights. The dynamic between mestizo and afro-indigenous peasants is an important feature that will return in the analysis of the MC.

Origins of the Movimiento Campesino

Figuring out the starting point of peasant mobilizations is a fuzzy undertaking. Members’ understanding of how the movement got underway is predicated on their personal experiences of a complex situation involving multiple actors. What is clear is that the movement’s origin took place in a global context of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (Harvey, 2004). Since the financial crisis of 2008-2009, global finance has been looking for investment opportunities which it found in the form of land and its concomitant resources (Li, 2014; Atia & Rignall, 2017). Rural zones in Latin-America have been hit by a new wave of ‘extractivism’ backed up by both neoliberal and socialist regimes (Cottyn et al., 2016). Also Nicaragua’s land, before and during Ortega’s presidency, was opened up to foreign investments in mining, plantations and mega-projects such as the “Grand Interoceanic Canal of Nicaragua” (Mercado et al., 2018; Rueda-Estrada, 2019).

On the 6th of July 2012 constructing the canal was declared a project of national interest through “ley 800” [Law 800] (Baltodano, 2013; Rueda-Estrada, 2019). The law made expropriation possible but did not stipulate a route, it didn’t cause spark resistance and was little known. When Chinese investors were found the regime rushed a new law through the national assembly in a single week’s time by majority vote along the party line (Doerr, 2015). On the 13th of June 2013 ‘Ley 840’ [law 840] was declared without consulting the public and with all opposition parties denouncing it, whilst its content also violated the constitution and other legislation (Vázquez, 2016; Rueda-Estrada, 2019). Through the law a 116-year concession of national territory was made to the Chinese HKND[[15]](#footnote-15) company for developing the canal. The repeal of this law would become the central demand of the Movimiento Campesino. Their lands were targeted for expropriation[[16]](#footnote-16), because of their insecure titles. The recent history of colonisation and disparate forms of titling under Somoza, the revolution and thereafter, make peasant claims to land uncertain at best.

The first steps in consciousness raising can be encountered here. Peasants affected by these developments decided over their heads, started asking local organisations for help. Church networks and political parties were the first to be approached by worried peasants, which was an easy step as they often were made-up of fellow peasants and local leaders. Quickly they got into contact with environmental and legal movements from Managua who also wished to respond to the new law. It are these progressive and mostly leftist groups who have the longest track record of opposing the FSLN and state policy (Ramírez, 2018; Alemán & Baltodano, 2020). It is therefore not unsurprising that it were these mostly leftist activists that started to ask questions about the legal implications of the law and form connections with peasant groupings. In an interview with a founder of the Movimiento Campesino, who belongs to the left-wing MRS[[17]](#footnote-17) party, he explains how this dynamic worked:

"The peasantry feels helpless and they look to us... We told them that the only alternative was to fight and organize. But how,' they say, 'how do we organize? First of all, we tell them, you have to know the law... "Who's going to explain it?", they say. Well, we told them, let's do one thing then. We'll bring some people from Managua, from the assembly, to explain the law. Let's have a forum." (Personal communication, February 17, 2020)

It was this working together of opposition parties, peasants and environmentalist that led to the organisation of a series of forums and meetings to debate the canal project. The peasantry became informed of the content of the laws. This minority ‘visión critica’ provided information and perspectives that countered the hegemonic propaganda of the Sandinista State (Vázquez, 2016). Elaborating on the negative environmental impacts and criticising the ridiculous economic growth arguments[[18]](#footnote-18) helped develop the critical consciousness necessary to mobilize the peasantry.

Environmentalist groups such as “Popol Na” and “Grupo Cocibolca” set up information campaigns accessible to peasants who in many cases have been deprived of an education due to poor state of Nicaragua’s schooling system. In figure 3 we can see an example of two relatable characters discussing in a down-to-earth way such esoteric material as the rights and powers the Chinese investors have been allocated over local and regional governments. In a passage of the presentation of the booklet, the authors clearly state that: “We believe that we can contribute to the transformation of reality, promoting the development of citizens who, from a critical consciousness, can change themselves and be protagonists of the transformation of society” (Popol Na, 2015).

The impact of these campaigns cannot be underestimated as the following statement from a local peasant community leader demonstrates:

"Personally, I began by seeing the concern of the peasant. I would talk to friends and tell them 'if all Nicaraguans unite, we can prevent this project'. They were beginning to form leaders in the communities and municipalities... There, people were at once pointing to me as a leader. At that time I did not know any kind of academic. I didn't know how to sign. I didn't know how to read and I didn't know how to write.”(Personal communication, February 7, 2020)

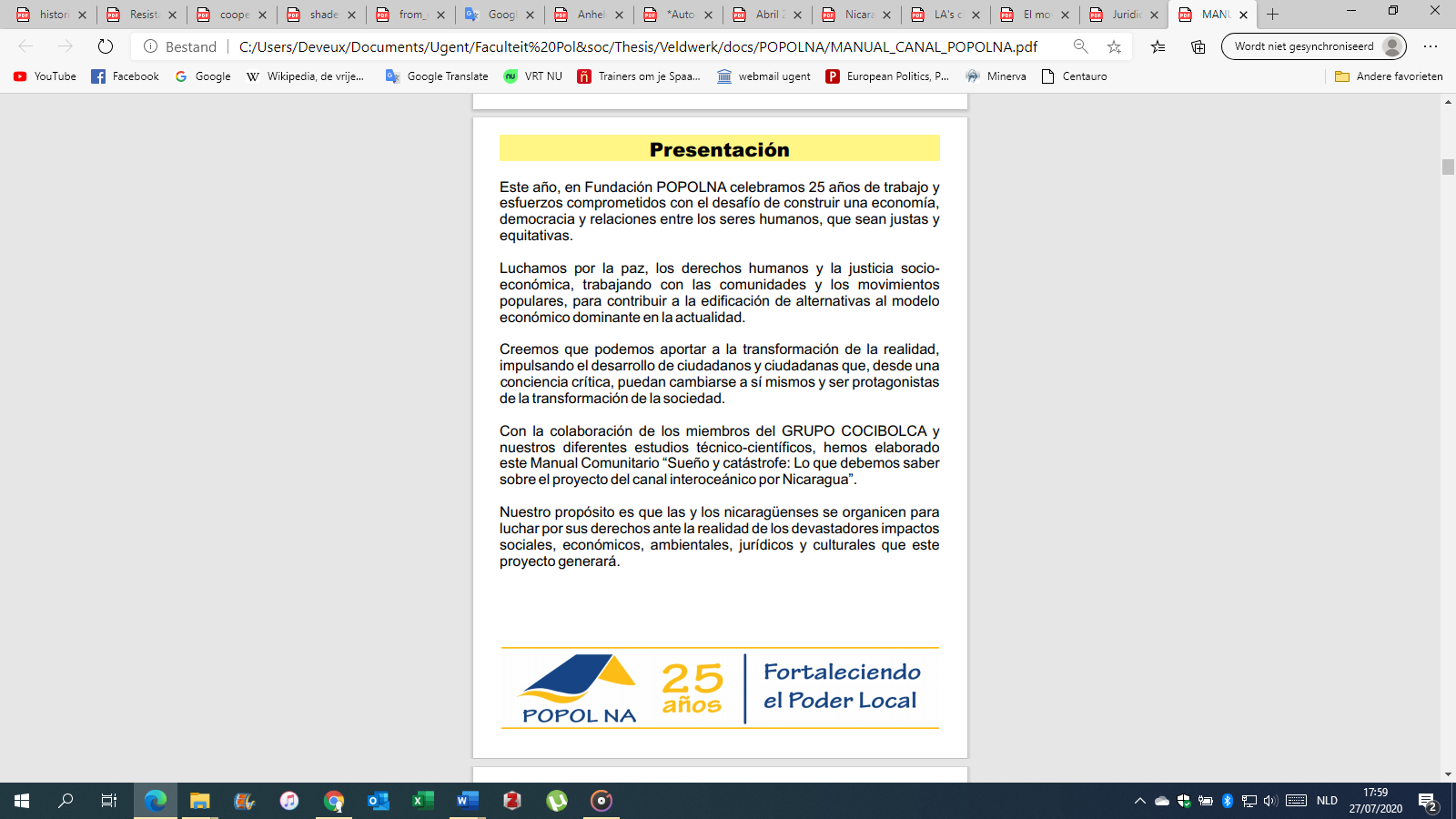
 

Figure 3: presentation (left) and execution (right) of consciousness raising (Popol Na, 2015).

In the theoretical part we already discussed the importance of this spillover from political to civil society. The expertise contained within these progressive organizations and politicized figures has been fundamental for bringing about social movements. Critical pedagogy in the example above develops the necessary skills in people for mobilising and organising the peasantry. Learning to read and write might seem like a small thing but as a local leader he needs to be able to communicate with his constituency and represent them on different forums. Being able to read something so negligible as a Whatsapp message suddenly becomes important.

Once the peasantry was informed they became enabled to organise and mobilise themselves. The first “marchas” [marches] against the canal were organised in local communities but they didn’t get much coverage (Rueda-Estrada, 2019). Things started to pick up the pace when in July 2014 peasants started to encounter Chinese workers on their lands (Vázquez, 2016). These technical teams came to measure and inspect the lands and populations living along the franja canalera. People were shocked by this sudden invasion for which they had received no warning or explanation. Often they reacted violently, thus driving the intruders from their lands. However, these technicians returned but this time under the protection of Nicaragua’s police and armed forces.

The peasant movement got underway and by the 26th of November 2014 a national leadership was conformed from 18 representatives of the affected territories (Torrez, 2020). The Movimiento Campesino was officialy born with as its central aim the repeal of ley 840. The movement became headed by the “Consejo Nacional en Defensa de Nuestra Tierra, Lago y Soberanía” [National Council in Defense of Our Land, Lake and Sovereignty]. Land, Lake and Sovereignty became the rallying symbols for the movement. Land builds on the concerns of the peasantry faced by expropriation. Lake represents the environmental concerns as the canal would contaminate Central-America’s largest freshwater body, lake Cocibolca, from which 200,000 people currently drink (Popol Na, 2015). Sovereignty is a key word in Nicaragua’s history and that of its peasantry. Nicaragua has lived through various periods of outside interference and violation of its sovereignty. Emblematic are the US occupation in the beginning of the 20th century and the following US-backed Somoza dynastic dictatorship (Walker, 1991). Peasant resistance and sovereignty were crucial for their overthrow. In the former case the fight was led by Sandino and his peasant forces and in the latter it was the FSLN who based their struggle on the nationalism and sovereignty embodied by Sandino (Zimmerman, 2000).

In december the Consejo Nacional already managed to organise a national march in Managua in which 10,000 campesinos participated (Aléman & Baltodano, 2020). It was in these mass moments that peasants learned to express their demands collectively. The movement grew and became more widespread. The regime did not stand by idly. Protests were often violently repressed and Nicaragua’s peasantry witnessed the perversion of the state long before the protests of April 2018. Peasants became victims of assault, kidnappings and even torture in the infamous prison “El Chipote” (Torrez, 2020). Signature collection campaigns were set-up in which they were aided by human rights organisations such as the CENDIH[[19]](#footnote-19). They managed to plead their case before national and international bodies of justice and human rights (Vázquez, 2016). Over the years prior to April 2018, the MC held over 100 marchas in which about 250,000 people participated (Torrez, 2020). Their movement was already well organised and experienced when the citizens struggle started unfolding. Upon seeing the heavy repression and deaths committed against the students, the Movimiento Campesino decided to act. What drove them in their resolve and persistance against the state’s forces in the ensuing months was something more profound than a possible loss of land. To understand what shaped their consciousness and subsequent actions we have to dig a little deeper into history: Nicaragua’s revolutionary period and the simultaneous civil or so-called “Contra” war.

Consciousness and the Sandinista Revolution

As already mentioned, during the 20th century Nicaragua was ruled by the US-backed Somoza dynasty. From the 1930s until 1979 they ruled the country as a police state through the feared “Guardia Naciónal”. This way they had managed to turn the country into a means of enriching themselves. For example, before their downfall they owned 20% of all agricultural lands (Escobar & Mairena, 2012). In a country where over half of the economically active population worked in agriculture this scant distribution of land was cause for social discontent (Vilas, 1986). In these circumstances the FSLN formed in the 1960s as a vanguard movement of students willing to take action. Their ideological leader Carlos Fonseca[[20]](#footnote-20) sought to found a movement that accorded with Nicaraguan reality. Therefore, the peasantry had to be included in the coming revolutionary struggle. So he amplified Marxism with a nationalist and anti-imperialist vision embodied in the heroic figure of Sandino (Zimmerman, 2000). Sandinism was born and was to be brought into existence via guerrilla warfare as had happened in Cuba (Walker, 1991). To do this it became necessary to organise the peasantry, while the guerrillas operated in rural, mountainous areas. The created peasant networks were supposed to support the guerrilla’s and become conscious of their predicament. Eventually they would have to join the FSLN vanguard into their struggle with Somoza and finally achieve victory. This did not happen.

The event that would become known as the Sandinista revolution was a series of major urban uprisings which started in 1978 after people had finally had enough of state repression (ibid.). Just like in 2018 these mostly spontaneous events were led by students and young people. As the most developed and organized oppositional movement, the FSLN managed to take the general lead of the struggle. When the US pulled back their support for Somoza, he had no choice but to flee the country. The FSLN claimed victory as their guerrilla’s marched into Managua on the 19th of July 1979.

The provisional government was immediately faced with its first contradiction. The FSLN had spent years living in and organising the countryside but the actual revolution lacked the participation of the peasantry (Carey Jr., 2005). Also, near the end of their struggle the Sandinistas had established an alliance with the economic elite to ensure a smooth transition of power. Despite their new focus on developing a mixed economy, they had still promised to change the social relations of production to the benefit of the peasantry and working class. The land reform envisioned by the revolutionary government, however, did not correspond with that which the great majority of peasants had hoped for. In the beginning only the lands of Somoza and his allies were confiscated and used to develop a state sector (Martí I Puig, 2001). Restricted because of their partnership with the bourgeois, the government also prohibited further land takeovers by peasants. Consequently, many felt disappointed and started manifesting against Sandinista policy. Finally in 1981 the government delivered a full agrarian reform. It allowed for peasants to appropriate idle land that could be made productive (ibid.). Subsequently, the ministry would legitimise the appropriated land with a title that was non-transferable (except for inheritance) and non-divisible (to prevent fragmentation through sale). This form of ownership was denounced by many peasants as they didn’t perceive it as real ownership. Also the state showed a clear preference for organising landless and small peasants into cooperatives as these were deemed more productive. (ibid.). Modernisation of Nicaragua’s economy was not grafted on the small peasant working his individual plot. All were expected to dissolve into the nation’s mass of labourers as the forces of production developed.

As the revolution got underway, significant parts of the peasantry did not experience progress in their lives. What they did encounter, was an ambitious state trying to expand its control over the population in pursuit of their revolutionary goals. As Martí I Puig (2001) noticed: “for the first time in the nation's history, state institutions had the necessary finance, technology and capacity to carry out wide-ranging policies”. These interventions were incomprehensible to the small peasant and didn’t stroke with the promises of freedom they had been given. This was especially so at the agricultural frontier where state presence had been negligible. The only outside institution present had been the Church. The new administration suffered from urban bias, it did not bring answers to the problems of the countryside (ibid.). When the state came in to organise production in cooperatives, this was perceived as an attack on the peasant’s way of living. The clash of these opposing visions dislocated life on the agricultural frontier. What was deemed just for one side, was unjustifiable for the other: “many of the 'victims' of confiscation were simply the intermediaries between their society and the former government. Naturally, large landowners and the middle-classes had their estates confiscated, but so too did the finqueros [cattle breeders], to whom everyone owed a favour” (ibid.). As life and commerce were hampered, many peasants became disenchanted with the revolution.

From 1981 onwards, US president Reagan approved the financing and training of counterrevolutionaries through the CIA (Walker, 1991). These “Contras” consisted at first out of the former Guardia Nacional which had fled Nicaragua. Soon they were joined by expropriated landowners who blamed the revolution for their loss. Their incursions made life at the agricultural frontier even harder. Cooperatives were targeted and peasants became the victims of torture and attack. The Sandinistas reacted by forming defensive cooperatives in disputed areas and recruited evermore peasants into the army. Eventually in 1983 they saw the need to install an obligatory military service which fully disrupted peasant life on the frontier. The young were sent off to fight the Sandinista’s battle, rather than staying to work the land. It was this manoeuvre that would leave the greatest trauma and shape people’s consciousness for decades to come. Peasants along the agricultural frontier chose to resist and started joining the Contras[[21]](#footnote-21) (Martí I Puig, 2001). Not because they longed for a return of ‘Somocismo’ but simply to resist the impositions of the revolutionary state. Thus the civil war escalated and the government took another unpopular measurement. The army started to displace communities away from the frontier, both for safety purposes and to prevent them joining the Contras. This also happened around Nueva Guinea which resulted in “Casas abandonadas, bienes, siembras, ganados, etc., que con tanto esfuerzo se habían obtenidos, fueron literalmente abandonados a su suerte.” [Abandoned houses, property, crops, livestock, etc., which had been obtained with so much effort, were literally left to their own devices] (Escobar & Mairena, 2012).

On February 25th 1990, the US-backed UNO coalition wins the elections. Violetta Barrios de Chamorro becomes Nicaragua’s first female president. After a decade of economic blockade by the US, a civil war which left 30,000 dead (1% of the population!) and overall deterioration of living standards, the people were fed up with the revolution (Walker, 1991). The FSLN accepted the electoral outcome, demobilised the Sandinista army and enacted a peaceful transition of power which recognised the revolutionary changes and new constitution (Schindler, 2019). However, they also made sure to transfer ownership of state property to the party and its leaders. This so-called “Piñata” left the new regime with a ruined economy and little assets. What had the revolution actually achieved for the people of Nicaragua?

The revolutionary government had endeavoured to organise the peasantry and instil them with a revolutionary consciousness. They did manage to change peasants’ material existence and the relations of production. But this change was not the one the peasantry had hoped for. Sandinista policy disrupted peasant society on the agricultural frontier and drove many into arms with the Contras. Peasants did organise, but in many cases against the revolutionary government. The FSLN and their ideology had not achieved Hegemony over the whole peasant population. In the subsequent struggle these peasants’ consciousness was shaped. It was shaped to counter revolutionary change, not advance it. The revolutionary state had been biased against them, hadn’t listened to their voices and consequently didn’t represent them. When the war ended in the 1990s, peasants returned to their abandoned and neglected lands. They had built themselves a life on the frontier just 10 to 30 years ago and now in many case had to start all over again. As existence reverted back to how it had been, the need for change dissipated. Contra and Sandinista armies demobilized, subsequently many were left without land and income. Soon they started settling again along the reactivated agricultural frontier.

The transoceanic canal is projected to pass through these newly opened lands. Peasants who were in their twenties during the 80s are now the 50 year olds that make-up the Movimiento Campesino today. Their sons and daughters are the people whose lands and futures are threatened yet again by a Sandinista government led by Daniel Ortega. Consciousness is a process. Even though peasants demobilized, their experiences remained and were passed on to their children: “Evidence of these frightening circumstances suffered by the war of the eighties, of the material and human damage it left, remains in the memory of many others who are silent, but it is not forgotten” (Escobar & Mairena, 2012).

When these same peasants witnessed the events of April 2018, these memories were triggered. People’s consciousness is not a blank slate but already conditioned by the events of the past. Seeing the deaths of a new generation of Nicaragua’s youth recalled the suffering of the civil war and the stories many were brought up with. The FSLN came to fulfil the role of aggressor many had attributed to them in their minds. Current national coordinator of the MC, Medardo Mairena, tell us of how and why they decided to help the students during their protests:

“When we saw that the young were supporting the elderly, then the regime began to harass the young and the students. And what it did was to repress them and we saw that they shot the students with weapons of war. We say that we cannot be indifferent... We made the decision to see how we could help the young people in the municipalities, by making protests, distracting the forces of the regime so that they would weaken a little and not all of it would come to Managua. That's how the famous roadblocks came about that were to be put up as a barricade to safeguard life”(M. Mairena, personal communication, February 11, 2020).

The Movimiento Campesino and Political Space

It has been shown that the Movimiento Campesino emerged in a relatively young and peripheral territory of Nicaragua, which has been shaped by the agricultural frontier. As a periphery, however, it was still influenced by developments and decisions made in the political centre. Both the Pacific and Atlantic regions developed through their interrelations, because the agricultural frontier alleviated social discontent due to capitalist accumulation in the centre. When the state first intervened during the revolutionary period it was met with resistance which escalated the Contra war. The local consciousness was set in the mould of the 80s and the civil war.

The state, this time under neoliberal regimes, undertook new attempts to incorporate the region through capitalist development in the form of extractivism. The canal mega-project, approved under the regime of Ortega-Murillo, once again threatened the peasantry and their ownership of the land they worked. Their consciousness of the 80s resurfaced and with the help of experienced networks of leftist, environmentalist and human rights movements they managed to organise the peasantry into the Movimiento Campesino. It became an autonomous movement by and for the peasantry with great mobilizing capacity. This capacity explains the large role they played and keep on playing in the citizens struggle since April 2018. Peasants were able to set up tranques across the country and resist the state for months before becoming the victims of repression.

Everything discussed up to this point was necessary to comprehend and establish the main thesis I have developed through my research:

**The Movimiento Campesino succeeded in creating and extending political space for the peasantry. Peasants’ participation in politics spreads consciousness to a marginalised section of the population. Peasants see potential in this space to pursue their interests and make their voices heard. Therefore the movement will outlive its central demand as peasants continue to strive for representation in national politics. Consequently, the Movimiento Campesino plays a central role in the democratization of Nicaragua.**

The conceptual tools necessary to understand this conception of the MC as an enabler of political space and consciousness were already developed in the theoretical discussion. The peasant was shown to be a complex subject that could not be easily reduced into a single category or abstraction. Not only were they affected by the development of capitalism. They were the actors that effectively brought capitalism into the countryside. The advancement of the agricultural frontier is a case of ‘relentless micro-capitalism’ (Bernstein, 2014) which was the effect of capitalist accumulation in Nicaragua’s pacific zone. Resistance to exploitation was not always an open affair. Migrating to the frontier was in itself a strategy to obtain an own piece of land and to create a ‘relative autonomy’ (Alvarez & Escobar, 1992) to the state. When that state intervened, however, and disrupted the possibility of life along the frontier, peasants resisted. Their ‘peasant condition’ (van der Ploeg, 2008) made them struggle to recreate their autonomy. In the 1980s they took up arms with the Contras against the revolution. In 2013 they stood up against mass expropriation for the building of a canal.

The failing of the state made the peasants look for an alternative. Political parties have become discredited and demystified as the only means to make peasant demands heard. With the help of other movements from civil society, peasants took to the streets themselves to make their voices heard. Their marches kept growing and so did their reputation. The identity of Campesino resonates deeply within this country. By representing themselves as the defenders of land, lake and sovereignty, the Movimiento Campesino became much more than a means to battle a law of expropriation. It managed to overcome the marginalisation and isolation of the peasant. In doing so it has created and extended ‘political space’ (Hellman, 1992) for the peasantry. The movement has become a ‘space of expression’ (Calderón et al., 1992) where the peasants have built their own mechanisms of representation. But through their new found autonomy they also manage to compete with the state and other political forces. Spreading consciousness to more and more people strengthens civil society. In doing so the movement practices and advances the democratisation of the country. These peasants have witnessed their capacity to engage in politics themselves and are conscious of their own role in deciding their futures.

Political Space in Action

In the remainder of this chapter I will take a closer look at some contentious issues the Movimiento Campesino has to engage with. These are emblematic instances that demonstrate how the Movimiento Campesino acts as a political space. This section is built-up around the interviews, (participatory) observations and personal communications made during my fieldwork as discussed in the methodology..

**External Power Struggle**

The Movimiento Campesino has come a long way since its inception. It has created and extended political space accessible to the peasantry. This has not been a simple ordeal. From the very start they had to struggle for recognition, not only against repression from the state but also for access to public debate. I have shown how they managed to partner up with other movements to break the hegemonic discourse surrounding the canal. But just as the movement was getting under way, their prime opponent fell away. HKND’s primary investor Wang Jing lost most of his fortune, which rendered the entire project implausible (Mao & Schmidt, 2015). In order to keep momentum the movement had to adapt is strategy. They found their answer in stressing the continuing prevalence of ley 840. This means that all land within the country can still be expropriated if investors for projects are found.

This move was crucial to keep the movement around while the direct threat had ceased to exist. For it allowed the MC to keep organized which enabled them to mobilise so rapidly during the citizens struggle of 2018. Their participation and subsequent widespread offensive of setting up tranques across the interior catapulted them onto the political main stage. Suddenly, the opinion of peasants and their leaders became important for the country’s future. The attention and responsibility which this development brought marks the most drastic change in the movements orientation. Here the MC started to outgrow its central demand to repeal ley 840 and began crystallising the political space it represents. Before April 2018 the MC’s struggle was still presented as some peripheral issue, which was predominantly upheld by environmental and other progressive movements. Afterwards, however, their pleas merged with those of the students and others who were being repressed by the regime.

As the citizens struggle unfolded, the protesters began organising as well. In May the regime of Ortega-Murillo accepted the episcopal conference as a mediator for the conflict. Oppositional groups were invited to join a ‘diálogo nacional’ [national dialogue]. Represented were the students, syndicates, private enterprise and civil organisations, amongst which the Movimiento Campesino. Here a delegation of peasants was received as representatives of the nation, which were to be listened to with care. This act by itself already signals the importance the movement has garnered within the country. The dialogue soon broke down, in the meantime the regime[[22]](#footnote-22) had regrouped itself and started its offensive. Leaders of the Movimiento Campesino were apprehended and sentenced to prison in July, others were forced to flee. Later that month the state’s forces initiated ‘operación limpieza’ to regain control of the streets. The opposition got on the defensive and the Movimiento Campesino remained leaderless. Not all was lost, out of the national dialogue grew a new organisation called the “Alianza Cívica por la Justicia y Democracia” [Civic Alliance for Justice and Democracy] (ACJD). The ACJD claims to represent all opposition sectors and the Movimiento Campesino was a founding member.

The ACJD remained active even though repression was growing and resistance dwindling. Through them the MC maintained access to public debate and a foothold on the direction the conflict process was going. The ACJD was not the only organisation that was created in the midst of the struggle. All across the country local resistance groups called “Azul y Blanco” [Blue and White, referencing the national colours] had sprung up as symbols of defiance to the regime. Near the end of 2018 a new movement got underway, which tried to unite these disparate fronts whilst co-opting their struggle under the name of “Unidad Nacional Azul y Blanco” [National Blue and White Unity, UNAB]. They wish to represent all possible sectors and movements of Nicaraguan society which oppose the regime in one united front. But wasn’t this the same intent of the ACJD? Why need two oppositional fronts?

Well the story[[23]](#footnote-23) goes that Nicaragua’s private sector soon got control over the ACJD and marginalised the students and peasantry. As there are definite links between the liberal party, PLC, and these capitalists, the leftist parties and progressive movements felt excluded from the conflict resolution process. They then tried to group the progressives together in the UNAB to counter the dominance of liberalism in public debate. Technically the ACJD became the representative of the UNAB (ACJD was a member at first) in the 2nd national dialogue but by the end of 2019 the two had grown too far apart. In December they finally split up, deciding to go their own ways but together. They presented a political project called the ‘Coalición Nacional’. This national coalition is supposed to finally group all opposition to the Ortega-Murillo regime in one platform which will participate in the elections of 2021 against the incumbent FSLN.

What justifies the lengthy elaboration above? As all of this was happening, the Movimiento Campesino did not remain idle. Once their leaders were freed in May 2019, national organisation resurfaced. Even though they are a member of the ACJD, they kept steering their own course. In public debate they joined under their own name and not any other. They refuse to be co-opted by the representatives of private enterprise. These capitalists didn’t join in the protests, they did not call for national strikes (except one partial strike) as this would hurt them financially. They had also remained in support of the government through the consensus model, even while it was becoming ever more authoritarian. They had never denounced the canal project as it would bring in foreign business investment. This distrust runs even deeper for the UNAB. The perception is that the moving force behind them is the Left, which in Nicaragua is mostly made-up of parties that split-off from the FSLN and still call themselves Sandinistas. As shown, history makes association with Sandinistas difficult for many peasants. What all of this means is that these movements that were born in the citizens struggle are not just allies, but also competitors. The struggle and inheritance of 2018 is being co-opted by political forces whilst those that fought and bled are being side-lined (Skurre, 2020). In this process the campesino learned an important lesson according to national leader Medardo Mairena:

“Of course we now feel the need to be organized to defend our rights. And so that we are not abandoned as we have been for all our lives. So even if the law were to be repealed tomorrow, it does not diminish the need for us to be organized to defend our rights so that the next government that comes along, no matter if it is right-wing or left-wing, but if it makes mistakes too, we will not allow this history to repeat itself. And the way we can avoid it is by being organized, by defending our rights and demanding respect for our human and constitutional rights as we have been defending the natural resources, our lands. Like the end for which we organized at the beginning.” (M. Mairena, personal communication, February 11, 2020).

The peasants of the MC have become conscious of the importance of the political space they created. Their relative autonomy has become a way to make their demands heard without depending on political parties. The movement no longer stands for the repeal of law 840 alone. It is the space they created they seek to defend. Upon hearing of the news of the Coalición Nacional they feared being excluded and marginalised in the coming political process. This political initiative was being negotiated between the UNAB and ACJD directly with a great amount of vagueness surrounding it. Consequently, in response the MC set them an ultimatum to show their hands, make the process transparent and open the coalition up to political parties[[24]](#footnote-24). Otherwise, the MC would pull back from the ACJD, which would reinforce the idea that the citizens struggle has been completely captured by elite forces. They eventually capitulated and in February 2020 the coalition was signed by seven entities, including the Movimiento Campesino as an autonomous signatory.

What is remarkable about this manoeuvre is that despite the political content of their actions, the MC still claims to be an apolitical movement. This can be related to the general conception in Nicaragua of what is “politics”. Politics is what political parties do, which is therefore tied up with the self-interest of these parties and their leaders. As explained peasants are wary of parties, which is why they emphasize their identity of campesino in opposition to that of the politician. The peasant is a hardworking and honest citizen of the country. The peasant represents the majority of the people and therefore the peasant has to tell the politician “la verdad, que deben cambiar su actitud y tambien atender la demanda del pueblo” [the truth, they have to change their attitude and also listen to the demands of the people] (M. Mairena, personal communication, February 11, 2020). The Consejo Nacional aspires to turn into a guardian for the interests of the people, capable of acting when these interests are threatened by politicians. But how do these claims add up? Does the Movimiento Campesino represent the voice of the entire peasantry?

**Representation**

The Movimiento Campesino’s constituency is very much linked to its historic origin. As shown the movement originated from the organising of peasants along the franja canalera. At first, local leaders were informally chosen and brought into contact with each other and other social movements. Following this, local assemblies were created on different administrative levels. All communities have the right so democratically select a representative through majority vote in the assembly. These representatives finally make up the Consejo Nacional.

This implies, however, as far as direct representation goes, that outside of the localities along the canal route the MC is absent. During my fieldwork I visited two such locations[[25]](#footnote-25). The first one was a colonia located in the municipality of Nueva Guinea, but it is not projected on the canal route. Consequently, there is no local affiliation of the MC present even though Nueva Guinea as a municipality lies on the canal route. The peasants I talked with do, however, sympathise with those affected. But the reality is that they do not feel necessarily represented by the movement as the voice of the peasantry. Similar stories I heard in the other locality. Here things are more complicated. This other area belongs to a younger section of the agricultural frontier[[26]](#footnote-26), which was settled after the demobilization of the 90s. Most peasants here come from a Sandinista background and remain adherents of the FSLN. This does not mean that they are uncritical. Some peasants I talked with blamed president Ortega, but not the party, for the loss of life since the protests of 2018. Others were disenchanted with the protests themselves as they didn’t understand them and they only resulted in economic hardship. The tranques set up by the MC caused logistics to be disrupted which led to inflation of prices in these isolated communities.

What these observations mean is that the MC gains its strength and reputation from building upon and claiming their peasant identity, whilst their actual base is mostly consisting of the peasants living along the franja canalera. In other places the movement has to contend with other mechanisms of representation such as traditional political parties. In the two localities I visited the liberal and Sandinista parties respectively have strong roots, which the MC still lacks. The Consejo Nacional is aware of this problem. To support their claim of national representation they also set up new divisions in departments in the north and pacific zones of the country. The difference here is that these initiatives were decided in a top-down fashion, representatives for the movement were selected and sent to create local divisions. This is a clear example of how the movement draws on the experience of political parties for setting up local operations.

As shown in the theoretical discussion, the peasant is a complex actor and equally complex are their political expressions. The Movimiento Campesino endeavours to unify this heterogenous group into a single voice by focusing on their common identity as a peasant. The campesino identity is constructed around their importance for an agricultural society, their history of resistance in defence of land, lake and sovereignty and their apolitical character. The Movimiento Campesino is presented as the voice of the common people and the defender of their rights in the face of injustice.

This attempt to homogenize the peasant is not without repercussion. For the movement to include these disparate opinions, it has to be able to act as a plural space where everyone feels represented. In the next section I will examine the internal dynamics of the MC.

**Internal Power Struggle**

As the MC grew and developed as a political force, more decisions concerning more people needed to be made. This deciding power is shared between the movement’s local assemblies and the Consejo Nacional whose authority rests on their bases approval. Slowly the movement’s public actions and statements received more attention in the media. This meant that the leadership also became more known in the country and because of their involvement the peasant leaders have earned some prestige and power. This brings with it that positions on the Consejo Nacional have turned into sites of contestation. Especially the post of coordinator of the Consejo Nacional is important as the person holding it becomes the de-facto face of the movement.

The role of coordinator has brought internal strive with it. The story[[27]](#footnote-27) goes that there are two factions within the Movimiento Campesino. A leftist, Sandinista (MRS, not FSLN) faction advising former national coordinator Francisca Ramírez (Doña Chica) and a rightist, liberal (PLC) faction surrounding current national coordinator Medardo Mairena. Both factions accuse the other of politicising the movement and trying to usurp control over it. The protests of April 2018 only exacerbated the situation as the incumbent group around Mairena got a delegation in the dialogue process, while Ramírez was side-lined. Subsequently, with the unfolding of the citizens struggle Mairena was apprehended and sentenced to prison and Ramírez was forced to flee under threats for her life. Disguised she fled to Costa Rica where she has built a camp for peasant refugees. Because of the repression organisation went on clandestinely. It was not until the release of Mairena in May 2019 that the movement got nationally underway again. He became the new face of the movement, because of his imprisonment. This time, however, the Consejo Nacional started acting independently from its base because it was deemed impossible to hold regular meetings because of police surveillance. Subsequent decisions such as new representatives and the ultimatum were all decided internally without consulting the assemblies. This means that the peasant base of the MC has no clue of what direction the movement is going, nor why.

This autonomous acting of the Consejo Nacional did not go unnoticed. I was invited to a few meetings that were convened by local leaders. The issue at hand was the feeling that the historic base was not being considered by their national leaders. Local leaders endeavoured for them to come down from Managua and explain what is going on in order to receive members’ consent before acting. During one such occasion they simply rang up Mairena to share their worries. The response was that it was simply too dangerous for him to leave his safehouse and make the journey. Not all those present were convinced by this explanation. They kept mobilising to demand their voices be heard and that their leaders come show themselves and explain the situation. This countermovement was again framed by the leadership as being pushed by leftist political forces. And in return the Consejo Nacional is accused of being a liberal stronghold that does not want to include other voices within the leadership. There are even talks of Mairena being in negotiation with the liberal PLC party to become their presidential candidate.

I want to emphasize that this recount is based on informal conversation and rumours, parts of which have been denied to me in person by the people involved. I did not investigate these claims in depth. This was never my attempt and therefore I will not judge what is happening. The fact that these accounts exist is more important than there verity, because the claims made signal that something is going on within the movement. Here I will give my interpretation of the implication of these events.

I do not consider this internal struggle to signal a split of the movement along sectarian political lines. The fact is that state repression has made the convening of meetings harder. Also, the citizens struggle has reached a low because of that same repression. The only political process going on right now is the one co-opted by the UNAB and ACJD. If the Movimiento Campesino wants to outgrow its central demand and become a viable political space that can exist into the future, than it is a valid strategy to participate in the Coalición Nacional. But equally it is a fact that the movement’s base has been largely excluded from this process, regardless of the difficult circumstances for organising. The countermovement is an attempt to remind their leaders of their own rules and promises to represent the peasantry of the franja canalera. It is an attempt by the campesino members not to lose control over the political space they helped created. The fear is that the movement becomes linked to a political party. According to me the internal struggle should be interpreted as an attempt to accommodate different visions within the Movimiento Campesino. When the movement still had a clear central demand, it was able to find unity. Now that the peasants are starting to realise the potential of the political space they helped create, it becomes harder for a single vision to dominate. The endeavour to homogenize the complexity of the peasant into a single voice is not possible if there is no place for plurality within the movement itself. This internal dynamic demonstrates these peasants’ ability to engage in politics amongst each other. It tells us that members, leaders and all in between see the value of the movement to pursue their interests and therefore stake their competing claims to what the movement is supposed to be and how it should function. The way the Movimiento Campesino handles this issue will be crucial for the movement’s future.

**The afro-indigenous question**

The last topic I want to tackle before concluding my dissertation stands out from the rest. I have only sporadically mentioned the afro-indigenous peoples in my overview above and as such it might feel a little out of place here. The afro-indigenous question, however, is important for both the Movimiento Campesino and the political space it embodies. As already mentioned, both afro-indigenous and mestizo communities live in the autonomous regions. The afro-indigenous peoples have called the Atlantic coast home for centuries under the reign of the Mosquitia, whereas the mestizos are newcomers settling the agricultural frontier from the pacific side out. Despite these differences, they share a similar history concerning the revolutionary period.

Under Somoza the afro-indigenous peoples lived in relative peace based on the agreements and treaties that incorporated the Mosquitia into Nicaragua, while recognizing their communal rights to land and self-determination for its inhabitants. However, this does not mean that they weren’t exploited. Along the coast there was established an ‘economía de enclave’ (Domínguez, 2006), which allowed for state and international companies to extract natural resources and minerals from the rainforest and coastal areas. Afro-indigenous people would be employed in these enclaves to perform the hard labour but they could still return to their homes on communal lands, which were left alone by the state. When the Sandinista revolution happened, the new government intended to eliminate all vestiges of Somoza’s rule and subsequently integrate the Atlantic Coast into the national realm. Consequently, the local economy was disrupted and people were confronted with an expanding state. The situation was worsened when the agrarian reform of 1981 declared the land along the coast “Tierras Nacionales” [National Lands] which were distributed to cooperatives and Sandinista leaders for settlement. The afro-indigenous peoples resisted these invasions, which drove them into the arms of the Contras with whom they fought for years.

Similarly as with the mestizo peasants, the state held a different vision to what they were doing compared with the local people. The revolutionary government didn’t understand why the afro-indigenous peoples were taking up arms against them. Eventually both armed groups got into negotiation with each other and it became clear that communal rights were at the centre of the conflict. As a part of the Esquipulas II peace process at the end of the 80s, an autonomy law became incorporated into the new constitution of 1987. The autonomous regions along Nicaragua’s Atlantic Coast were created and a regional parliament ensured that the afro-indigenous peoples would have representation as had been intended with the transfer of the Mosquitia. This was not the end of the afro-indigenous question however. After the civil war and the revolutionary period, the armed troops were demobilised and their demand for land revived the agricultural frontier. This has led to new conflicts with the afro-indigenous peoples whose lands were invaded and who at times were killed by mestizo settlers. The legal case started by the Mayangna indigenous community of Awas Tigni placed pressure unto the national government. The outcome lead to the formal recognition of the authority for communal and territorial governments to manage own affairs (CIDH, 2001). In 2003 a new “demarcation law” was declared which intended to formalise the afro-indigenous claim to land and halt the expansion of the frontier. Lands within the demarcation law are no longer national but communal. The implication is that new settlements or economic projects are subject to communal law and should get the blessing of the local communities who in return would receive financial benefits.

It is this latter part of the law which is important for the Movimiento Campesino. The canal project passes mostly through communal land and directly threatens afro-indigenous communities. As such it is an illegal and unconstitutional initiative because it breaks the state’s own laws. This has not impeded the government because both the autonomy and demarcation process have been marginalized and obstructed by all governments since their inception. For the peasants living along the franja canalera, however, it gives them a legal basis to object to the megaproject. Initially therefore afro-indigenous activists were participating in the organising of the peasantry along the canal route. Their experience in fighting the state in defence of their own rights runs back centuries. Their help was indispensable for the spread of consciousness surrounding the content of the laws that were violated by the canal project. Consequently, the Movimiento Campesino was intended to be a joint initiative of mestizo and afro-indigenous peasants.

This cooperation has largely broken down. The mestizo peasants saw the usefulness of these laws and used them to strengthen their cause. But these same laws also confronted them with their own behaviour. Mestizo peasants have been continuously occupying the afro-indigenous communities’ ancestral lands as the agricultural frontier kept advancing. These laws also implicate responsibilities and limitations for these campesinos and not only for the state. The communal rights are perceived as a way to prevent the mestizo campesino from holding private titles to the land. Although the mestizos and afro-indigenous peasants share a common ground for cooperation against the canal and the state, there is lack of comprehension surrounding the content of the laws in question and the meaning of communal land. Currently the afro-indigenous question has been side-lined within the Movimiento Campesino. The movement is firmly under the control of the mestizo population from the franja canalera.

The afro-indigenous question demonstrates clearly how the Movimiento Campesino enables the creation and extension of political space. There are multiple claimants to the movement, who see it as a way to make their voices and demands heard. For the afro-indigenous communities it was an opportunity to bring their territorial issues into the spotlight and find a common ground with the mestizos to resolve these long lasting problems. For the mestizos this claim was perceived as another threat to their ownership of the land. I consider this afro-indigenous question to be an opportunity for the Movimiento Campesino to solidify its political space. If there can be found a common solution to the issue, than it would demonstrate the movements’ capacity to act responsibly as a democratic space that represents the different voices of the peasantry. The “peasant” or “campesino” identity is complex. This identity is not the monopoly of the mestizo. If the movement wants to grow to become a truly national representative of Nicaragua’s peasantry, than it must become able to accommodate the complexity of the peasantry.

# **Conclusion**

This dissertation started out with a sense of puzzlement. Why did so many people take to the streets and why were peasants present? The lens of consciousness allowed to uncover the histories and processes behind these actions. Applying what was learned from the theoretical discussion traced peasant mobilisation back to the civil war of the 80s. Unhealed traumas from this decade surfaced as the state first threatened their lands and later the lives of the younger generations. This is a remarkable conclusion as this theme is not central to most literature surrounding the events of 2018. My research cannot claim this to be representative for all those who protested. It does show that it is a major theme in the minds of the peasants of the MC.

Nicaraguan society has not come to grips with its past. No political order since the Sandinista revolution has been able to guarantee the peasantry’s rights or representation. Conscious of this situation, the peasants got organised in a social movement to act collectively and democratically. Recognising the potential of the political space it created, the Movimiento Campesino is starting to outgrow its demand to repeal ley 840. The theoretical discussions on social and peasant movements showed how to interpret the value of the MC. Rather than defining the movement in a negative conception of fighting against a canal or interpreting how their plight fits into a certain political projects. Focussing on the peasant movement itself, enlightens us to see how the peasants’ own struggle creates value. The Movimiento Campesino succeeds in spreading consciousness and enabling political space. Strengthening civil society is a necessary step towards the democratisation of authoritarianism (Alvarez & Escobar, 1992). Therefore I would agree with Antunes (2018), that the movement has played an important role in the preparation of people for the events of April 2018. Students have, rightly so, received most attention for their role in the protests, but academic interest should not be limited to them. The peasantry deserves some attention too. Further research should keep in mind the reflections made in the methodology chapter, especially the issue of gender blindness. I would suggest following-up on the contentious issues at hand and how they impact the movement’s development. Also I would expand the research site outside of what I termed the Southeast to see how the movement differs in different localities.

As peasants have started to realise their potential for engaging in politics, contentious issues have surfaced. The discussion on the peasantry has clearly shown the complexity of the peasant subject. Attempts to homogenise their voice under a single political denominator are bound to bring resistance. My fieldwork demonstrates how reality quickly stains grand theories and ideas. Abstractions dissolve and consequently the many complexities, interrelations and visions of research subjects are exposed. As consciousness and politicisation grows, also the disparities amongst peasants appear. Currently the accommodation of this plurality has led to tension between the movement’s historic base and their national leadership. Their peasant condition (van der Ploeg, 2008) drives them to defend the autonomy they have created. The countermovement signals the high levels of politicisation and consciousness the peasants of the Movimiento Campesino have achieved. They are calling their leaders to order and demand they respect their own democratic principles. It was for the defence of peasant rights that the movement got underway and peasants will keep fighting for them.

Politics is essentially antagonistic. This isn’t any different for the political space created by the Movimiento Campesino. Different groups lay claim to this space and seek to be represented through it. Internal struggle should not be interpreted as some aberration of what democracy ideally should look like. Democracy involves different ideas and perspectives fighting for control. The Movimiento Campesino is not holier than the pope, there is no reason to obscure this. This reality does not make the movement any less valuable. It only shows the capacity peasants have to engage in politics.

The Movimiento Campesino finds itself on the crossroads of several important societal issues in Nicaragua: the question of land and economic development, the meaning of citizenship, the struggle against authoritarianism, the nearing end of the agricultural frontier and co-existence of different cultures and ethnicities. Peasants are affected by these issues, their participation in politics through the movement might provide answers that actually work. The relative autonomy which the Movimiento Campesino has created to act politically confronts the state and parties with the limitations of their powers. They have shown that civil society can play an important role in the space of national politics. In doing so the movement has taken its first steps in the democratisation of the country. However, the movement still has contentious issues to handle. Whether the Movemiento Campesino will survive this ordeal is still unsure. Anyway, the Movimiento Campesino is not Nicaragua’s first peasant movement, nor will it be the last. Whatever happens, consciousness remains and peasants will keep resisting when their autonomy is at stake. What the future will bring for Nicaragua is still unknown, but one thing is certain. Politics is too important to be left in the hands of politicians.

**Bibliogra****phy**

# **Annex 1: Original Quotes**

In the writing of this dissertation I did not transcribe my interview. Even though most respondents gave explicit permission for use of the interviews and their names, I decided not to do this except for one case. As national coordinator of the Movimiento Campesino, Mr. Medardo Mairena has not told me things that he did not discuss publicly before. Therefore I chose to include his name as an esteemed respondent for my dissertation. Throughout my fieldwork I took multiple safety measures to protect my respondents. It would not be right to expose names and full interviews in the ambit of this dissertation, considering the sensitivity of the topics discussed.

All translation were made by myself and as literally possible, without compromising legibility. The original Spanish quotes and citations are found here, together with the translations made in-text.

**Quote 1** (p.32): Personal communication, February 17, 2020

"The peasantry feels helpless and they look to us... We told them that the only alternative was to fight and organize. But how,' they say, 'how do we organize? First of all, we tell them, you have to know the law... "Who's going to explain it?", they say. Well, we told them, let's do one thing then. We'll bring some people from Managua, from the assembly, to explain the law. Let's have a forum."

“El campesinado se siente desamparado y nos buscan a nosotros... Nosotros les dijimos que la unica alternativa era luchar y organizarse. ‘Pero como’, dicen ellos, ‘como nos organizamos?’. En primer lugar, les decimos nosotros, ustedes tienen que conocer la ley... ‘Quien la va a explicar?’, dicen ellos. Bueno, les dijimos nosotros, hagamos una cosa pues. Vamos a traer una gente de Managua, de la asamblea para que se vengan explicar la ley. Vamos a hacer un foro.”

**Quote 2** (p.33): Personal communication, February 7, 2020

"Personally, I began by seeing the concern of the peasant. I would talk to friends and tell them 'if all Nicaraguans unite, we can prevent this project'. They were beginning to form leaders in the communities and municipalities... There, people were at once pointing to me as a leader. At that time I did not know any kind of academic. I didn't know how to sign. I didn't know how to read and I didn't know how to write.”

“De manera personal empezaba viendo la preocupación del campesino...Conversaba con amigos y les decía yo ‘si todos los nicaragüenses nos unimos podemos lograr impedir este proyecto’...Yo estaré dispuesto a ver en que puedo servir. Empezaban a formarse directivos en las comunidades y municipios... Allí la gente de una vez me señalaban a mi para dirigente. En esa fecha yo no sabía ningún tipo de académica, porque no sabía en esa fecha apenas firmar. No sabía leer y no sabía escribir.”

**Quote 3** (p.38): Medardo Mairena, personal communication, February 11, 2020

“When we saw that the young were supporting the elderly, then the regime began to harass the young and the students. And what it did was to repress them and we saw that they shot the students with weapons of war. We say that we cannot be indifferent... We made the decision to see how we could help young people in the municipalities. We made the decision to see how we could help the young people in the municipalities, by making protests, distracting the forces of the regime so that they would weaken a little and not all of it would come to Managua. That's how the famous roadblocks came about that were to be put up as a barricade to safeguard life.”

“Cuando nosotros miramos que lo jóvenes estaban apoyando a los señores de la tercera edad, entonces el régimen empezó a asediar a los jóvenes y estudiantes. Y lo que hizo fue reprimirlos y ya miramos que les dispararon con armas de guerras a los estudiantes. Nosotros dicemos que no podemos ser indiferente...Nosotros tomamos la decisión de ver como podíamos ayudar a los jóvenes en los municipios. Haciendo protestas, distrayendo un poco a las fuerzas del régimen para que se debilitan un poco y no se vinieron todo para Managua. Así surgieron los famosos tranques que eran para poner como barricada para salvaguardar la vida.”

**Quote 4** (p.42) : Medardo Mairena, personal communication, February 11, 2020

“Of course we now feel the need to be organized to defend our rights. And so that we are not abandoned as we have been for all our lives. So even if the law were to be repealed tomorrow, it does not diminish the need for us to be organized to defend our rights so that the next government that comes along, no matter if it is right-wing or left-wing, but if it makes mistakes too, we will not allow this history to repeat itself. And the way we can avoid it is by being organized, by defending our rights and demanding respect for our human and constitutional rights as we have been defending the natural resources, our lands. Like the end for which we organized at the beginning.”

“Por supuesto que nosotros ahora sentimos la necesidad de estar organizado para defender nuestros derechos. Y para que también no seamos abandonado como hemos sido por toda la vida verdad. Entonces aunque la ley fuera derogada la día de mañana no nos hace menos estar organizado para defender nuestros derechos y que próximo gobierno que venga, no importa si es de derecha si es izquierda quien sea pero si comete errores también, no vamos a permitir que esta historia se vuelve a repetir. Y como lo podemos evitar es estando organizados, defender nuestros derechos y exigiendo respeto a nuestros derechos humanos y constitucionales como vamos a defender los recursos naturales, nuestras tierras. Como el fin de que nos organizamos al principio.”

**Citation 1** (p.32): Popol Na, 2015

“We believe that we can contribute to the transformation of reality, promoting the development of citizens who, from a critical consciousness, can change themselves and be protagonists of the transformation of society.”

“Creemos que podemos aportar a la transformación de la realidad, impulsando el desarrollo de ciudadanos y ciudadanas que, desde una conciencia crítica, puedan cambiarse a sí mismos y ser protagonistas de la transformación de la sociedad.”

**Citation 2** (p.37): Escobar & Mairena, 2012

“Evidence of these frightening circumstances suffered by the war of the eighties, of the material and human damage it left, remains in the memory of many others who are silent, but it is not forgotten.”

“Evidencias de estas aterradoras circunstancias sufridas por la guerra de los ochenta, de los daños materiales y humanos que dejó, quedan en la memoria de otras muchas que se callan, pero no se olvidan.”

# **Annex 2: IKAPEG-Method**

IKAPEG stands for: Identity, Knowledge, Attitude, Practice, Evolution and Group. The idea of this qualitative method is to structure your interview questions around these 6 themes. By answering them you get a clear image of who the person sitting before you is and why and where his actions, ideas come from. For example, the Attitude of the person to a certain issue might change over time through an Evolution, which could be reflected in different Practices. The questions do not have to be posed in a particular order, knowing the intent of the question (Knowledge or Group?, Attitude or Practice?) allows the interviewer to categorise the answers post-interview according to the 6 themes. This way the method can be used for both a structured and semi-structured interview. I chose the latter to stimulate the free flow of the conversation, the questions only served as a skeleton for the interview or when I ran out of interesting questions. The downside of the approach is that certain topics could be obscured by focussing solely on the questions of the IKAPEG frame. The method is strong for comparisons and narrative analysis, when the answers are distilled into a matrix. I did not use this potential because due to the small number of interviewees, the results would lack representativity and consequently would not add much to my analysis.

Through the method I did manage to hold 23 interviews and 4 focus groups, the question framework that guided these instances can be found below. Note: these were not posed in this order.

* **Identity**: When were you born? Were you born in this area? Have you been a peasant? All your life? Were you able to go to school?
* **Knowledge:** What kind of a farmer are you? Were your parents also farmers? Where did they come from? Are there political parties organised in this area? Do you know about the Movimiento Campesino? What do you know about the protests of April 2018?
* **Attitude:** Are you interested in politics? What are the problems of the countryside? Do you feel represented by political parties? By the movimiento Campesino? Do you identify as a Nicaraguan? Do you feel that there is still a place for Sandinism within Nicaragua.
* **Practice:** Are you involved with politics? Why this party? Why are you a member of the Movimiento Campesino, or why not?
* **Evolution:** Have your ideas on politics changed through time? When did you feel them change? What has been the role of April 2018 in your life? What is the sentiment after 2 years of protests?
* **Group:** What has the impact been on the community of recent events? Have their been repercussions for you or your family?

# **Annex 3: Abstract in Dutch**

De protesten van 2018 in Nicaragua hebben veel vragen opgeroepen over de toekomst van het land. De protesten ontvouwden zich tot een brede burgerstrijd tegen het regime van Ortega-Murillo ter verdediging van hun rechten en de democratie. De rust lijkt deze dagen weer te zijn teruggekeerd in de straten, er blijft weinig van het initiële elan over na twee jaar zware repressie door de staat. De oppositiebeweging is nog steeds actief, maar lijkt gecoöpteerd te zijn door de elite. De meest prominente activisten van de strijd, de studenten en de boeren, lijken aan de zijlijn gezet te zijn. Onlangs is de Movimiento Campesino, die beweert de boeren te vertegenwoordigen, naar voren gekomen door een ultimatum te stellen aan andere oppositiekrachten, die proberen een gezamenlijk politiek project op te zetten.

Deze wetenschappelijke verhandeling wil de Movimiento Campesino analyseren door middel van het concept "bewustzijn". Met deze lens heb ik veldwerk verricht om de geschiedenissen en processen die ten grondslag liggen aan de beslissing van de boeren om zich te organiseren en zich uiteindelijk bij de burgerstijd aan te sluiten, aan het licht te brengen en te verklaren. Op basis van mijn observaties en interviews zal worden aangetoond dat binnen de beweging een reeks onderlinge kwesties leven, wat wijst op de hoge mate van politisering die door de betrokken boeren werd bereikt. Een discussie over de betekenis van de 'boer' en de 'sociale beweging' zal een manier bieden om de waarde en betekenis van de Movimiento Campesino te interpreteren. De Movimiento Campesino heeft politieke ruimte voor de boeren gecreëerd en uitgebreid. Door het maatschappelijk middenveld in staat te stellen deel te nemen aan de politiek van de natie zijn de eerste stappen gezet in de richting van de democratisering van Nicaragua.

Sleutelwoorden: Nicaragua, Movimiento Campesino, Bewustzijn, Boeren, Sociale Bewegingen, Politieke Ruimte

1. I will denote the government of Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo, husband and wife, as the Ortega-Murillo regime. It is public knowledge that Murillo has long been involved in the increasingly authoritarian politics of the FSLN before her ascendency to vice-president in 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Self-convened” denotes the spontaneous nature of the protests. The protesters used this name to dispel all accusations that the manifestations were a US-sponsored coup d’état. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. There are an estimated 420,000 rural households (45% of population), 70% of which at least one family member is a farmer (two-thirds of households work for themselves) (Baumeister, 2018) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Movimiento Renovador Sandinista [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Consejo Superior de la Empresa Privada [Superior Council of the Private Entreprises]: a union for Nicaragua’s so-called ‘Grand Capital’. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I have deliberately chosen not to narrow the concept’s scope down by adding adjectives such as political, economic, social,… [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See “Annex 2” for more information [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. “the growing numbers… who now depend — directly and indirectly — on the sale of their labour power for their own daily reproduction” (Panitch and Leys, 2001, as cited in Bernstein, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Bernstein adopted this concept from Mike Davis’s “Planet of Slums” (Bernstein, 2014). It refers to the internalization of market relations and capitalist motives into the countryside. Capitalism is not just spread through large-scale dispossession by big (foreign) companies. Farmers dispossess other farmers. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The RAAS has been renamed RACCS (South Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region) by Ortega. The inclusion of the word “Coast” is seen as an attempt to slowly separate from the autonomous region (50% of national territory) a new “Zelaya Department” for mestizos, which means loss of autonomy rights. Constitutionally, however, the only legal name is RAAS, which is why I employ it. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Over 70% of the reserve is considered ancestral land of the Rama people. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Compared to a national and regional (RAAS) total of 6,200,000 and 380,000 respectively. These numbers are best treated as rough indicators. The last nation-wide census dates to 2005 (INEC, 2005). For instance, projected population in Nueva Guinea was 77,000 which differs significantly from the 130,000 found in the municipal diagnostic of 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I use the term afro-indigenous to refer to the native people of America, the black descendants of slavery and everyone in between as long as they assimilated into these minority cultures, rather than the dominant mestizo culture. These are the people living in a similar plight, marginalized in both politics and history as a consequence of their peripheral position within a process of Spanish-dominated colonization starting from the Pacific. The term does not refer to a self-recognized identity as belonging to an afro-indigenous people. This could be the case but mostly people auto-denominate themselves as an ethnic group such as Miskito or Rama or Kriol. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. In 2005 8.6% self-recognized themselves as belonging to a particular non-mestizo ethnic group. Many however have assimilated to such a degree that they don’t remember to what specific group they belong. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Hong Kong Nicaragua Development, registered in the Cayman Islands, is a company headed by Chinese Investor Wang Jing. There are rumours that the company has links to the Chinese government as the canal would be of geopolitical importance due to its proximity to the USA (Doerr, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The government promised that loss of land would be recompensated with cadastral price, which is about 20% of market value. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Movimiento Renovador Sandinista: originates from an internal split of the FSLN in the 1990s. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. For example the project will not be a big job producer. The canal would displace about 119,000 peasants but only employ 25,000 peasants during the construction works, which is a temporary occupation (Popol Na, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Centro Nicaraguese de los Derechos Humanos [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Fonseca died before the revolution and could not see his ideology and programs implemented. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Locally they were known as ‘la otra gente’ [the other people] or later as the Fuerza Democrática Nicaragua (FDN) [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ortega only showed up for the first sitting after which he realized he had no arguments for what had happened nor could he control the opposition who had the upper hand during talks. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. The description I provide here is based on interviews and informal conversation with respondents and friends. I did not research the claims made and cannot verify nor deny them. Reality will probably not be as black versus white (or left versus right) as explained here. This does not, however, change the importance of the story. Perception is relevant in politics and influences people’s actions and ideas. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. The ultimatum was declared a few weeks before I landed in Managua. This complicated an already complex situation, making fieldwork even harder as important actors left the country for negotiation. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. “Talolinga” and the countryside outside of “Flor de Pino” (Kukra Hill-Laguna de Perlas). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. The social background is also different because of the presence of big Palma Africana plantations, which are full of work camps for rural labourers. Free peasants live on small plots of land spread between and behind the plantations, which mostly cuts them off from roads and markets. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Id. footnote 23 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)