

Notes and documents

Blueprint for Negro writing*

by *Richard Wright*

1 *The role of Negro writing: two definitions.*

Generally speaking, Negro writing in the past has been confined to humble novels, poems, and plays, prim and decorous ambassadors who went a-begging to white America. They entered the Court of American Public Opinion dressed in the knee-pants of servility, curtsying to show that the Negro was not inferior, that he was human, and that he had a life comparable to that of other people. For the most part these artistic ambassadors were received as though they were French poodles who do clever tricks.

White America never offered these Negro writers any serious criticism. The mere fact that a Negro could write was astonishing. Nor was there any deep concern on the part of white America with the role Negro writing should play in American culture; and the role it did play grew out of accident rather than intent or design. Either it crept in through the kitchen in the form of jokes; or it was the fruits of that foul soil which was the result of a liaison between inferiority-complexed Negro 'geniuses' and burnt-out white Bohemians with money.

On the other hand, these often technically brilliant performances by Negro writers were looked upon by the majority of literate Negroes as something to be proud of. At best, Negro writing has been something external to the lives of educated Negroes themselves. That the

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productions of their writers should have been something of a guide in their daily living is a matter which seems never to have been raised seriously.

Under these conditions Negro writing assumed two general aspects: 1) It became a sort of conspicuous ornamentation, the hallmark of 'achievement'. 2) It became the voice of the educated Negro pleading with white America for justice.

Rarely was the best of this writing addressed to the Negro himself, his needs, his sufferings, his aspirations. Through misdirection, Negro writers have been far better to others than they have been to themselves. And the mere recognition of this places the whole question of Negro writing in a new light and raises a doubt as to the validity of its present direction.

2 *The minority outlook*

Somewhere in his writings Lenin makes the observation that oppressed minorities often reflect the techniques of the bourgeoisie more brilliantly than some sections of the bourgeoisie themselves. The psychological importance of this becomes meaningful when it is recalled that oppressed minorities, and especially the petty bourgeois sections of oppressed minorities, strive to assimilate the virtues of the bourgeoisie in the assumption that by doing so they can lift themselves into a higher social sphere. But not only among the oppressed petty bourgeoisie does this occur. The workers of a minority people, chafing under exploitation, forge organizational forms of struggle to better their lot. Lacking the handicaps of false ambition and property, they have access to a wide social vision and a deep social consciousness. They display a greater freedom and initiative in pushing their claims upon civilization than even do the petty bourgeoisie. Their organizations show greater strength, adaptability, and efficiency than any other group or class in society.

That Negro workers, propelled by the harsh conditions of their lives, have demonstrated this consciousness and mobility for economic and political action there can be no doubt. But has this consciousness been reflected in the work of Negro writers to the same degree as it has in the Negro workers' struggle to free Herndon and the Scottsboro Boys, in the drive toward unionism, in the fight against lynching? Have they as creative writers taken advantage of their unique minority position?

The answer decidedly is *no*. Negro writers have lagged sadly, and as time passes the gap widens between them and their people.

How can this hiatus be bridged? How can the enervating effects of this long standing split be eliminated?

In presenting questions of this sort an attitude of self-consciousness and self-criticism is far more likely to be a fruitful point of departure than a mere recounting of past achievements. An emphasis upon

tendency and experiment, a view of society as something becoming rather than as something fixed and admired is the one which points the way for Negro writers to stand shoulder to shoulder with Negro workers in mood and outlook.

3 *A whole culture*

There is, however, a culture of the Negro which is his and has been addressed to him; a culture which has, for good or ill, helped to clarify his consciousness and create emotional attitudes which are conducive to action. This culture has stemmed mainly from two sources: 1) the Negro church; 2) and the folklore of the Negro people.

It was through the portals of the church that the American Negro first entered the shrine of western culture. Living under slave conditions of life, bereft of his African heritage, the Negroes' struggle for religion on the plantations between 1820-60 assumed the form of a struggle for human rights. It remained a relatively revolutionary struggle until religion began to serve as an antidote for suffering and denial. But even today there are millions of American Negroes whose only sense of a whole universe, whose only relation to society and man, and whose only guide to personal dignity comes through the archaic morphology of Christian salvation.

It was, however, in a folklore moulded out of rigorous and inhuman conditions of life that the Negro achieved his most indigenous and complete expression. Blues, spirituals, and folk tales recounted from mouth to mouth; the whispered words of a black mother to her black daughter on the ways of men; the confidential wisdom of a black father to his black son; the swapping of sex experiences on street corners from boy to boy in the deepest vernacular; work songs sung under blazing suns – all these formed the channels through which the racial wisdom flowed.

One would have thought that Negro writers in the last century of striving at expression would have continued and deepened this folk tradition, would have tried to create a more intimate and yet a more profoundly social system of artistic communication between them and their people. But the illusion that they could escape through individual achievement the harsh lot of their race swung Negro writers away from any such path. Two separate cultures sprang up: one for the Negro masses, unwritten and unrecognized; and the other for the sons and daughters of a rising Negro bourgeoisie, parasitic and mannered.

Today the question is: Shall Negro writing be for the Negro masses, moulding the lives and consciousness of those masses toward new goals, or shall it continue begging the question of the Negroes' humanity?

4 *The problem of nationalism in Negro writing*

In stressing the difference between the role Negro writing failed to play in the lives of the Negro people, and the role it should play in the future if it is to serve its historic function; in pointing out the fact that Negro writing has been addressed in the main to a small white audience rather than to a Negro one, it should be stated that no attempt is being made here to propagate a specious and blatant nationalism. Yet the nationalist character of the Negro people is unmistakable. Psychologically this nationalism is reflected in the whole of Negro culture, and especially in folklore.

In the absence of fixed and nourishing forms of culture, the Negro has a folklore which embodies the memories and hopes of his struggle for freedom. Not yet caught in paint or stone, and as yet but feebly depicted in the poem and novel, the Negroes' most powerful images of hope and despair still remain in the fluid state of daily speech. How many John Henrys have lived and died on the lips of these black people? How many mythical heroes in embryo have been allowed to perish for lack of husbanding by alert intelligence?

Negro folklore contains, in a measure that puts to shame more deliberate forms of Negro expression, the collective sense of Negro life in America. Let those who shy at the nationalist implications of Negro life look at this body of folklore, living and powerful, which rose out of a unified sense of a common life and a common fate. Here are those vital beginnings of a recognition of value in life as it is *lived*, a recognition that marks the emergence of a new culture in the shell of the old. And at the moment this process starts, at the moment when a people begin to realize a *meaning* in their suffering, the civilization that engenders that suffering is doomed.

The nationalist aspects of Negro life are as sharply manifest in the social institutions of Negro people as in folklore. There is a Negro church, a Negro press, a Negro social world, a Negro sporting world, a Negro business world, a Negro school system, Negro professions; in short, a Negro way of life in America. The Negro people did not ask for this, and deep down, though they express themselves through their institutions and adhere to this special way of life, they do not want it now. This special existence was forced upon them from without by lynch rope, bayonet and mob rule. They accepted these negative conditions with the inevitability of a tree which must live or perish in whatever soil it finds itself.

The few crumbs of American civilization which the Negro has got from the tables of capitalism have been through these segregated channels. Many Negro institutions are cowardly and incompetent. But they are all that the Negro has. And, in the main, any move, whether for progress or reaction, must come through these institutions for the simple

reason that all other channels are closed. Negro writers who seek to mould or influence the consciousness of the Negro people must address their messages to them through the ideologies and attitudes fostered in this warping way of life.

5 *The basis and meaning of nationalism in Negro writing*

The social institutions of the Negro are imprisoned in the Jim Crow political system of the South, and this Jim Crow political system is in turn built upon a plantation-feudal economy. Hence, it can be seen that the emotional expression of group-feeling which puzzles so many whites and leads them to deplore what they call 'black chauvinism' is not a morbidly inherent trait of the Negro, but rather the reflex expression of a life whose roots are imbedded deeply in Southern soil.

Negro writers must accept the nationalist implications of their lives, not in order to encourage them, but in order to change and transcend them. They must accept the concept of nationalism because, in order to transcend it, they must *possess* and *understand* it. And a nationalist spirit in Negro writing means a nationalism carrying the highest possible pitch of social consciousness. It means a nationalism that knows its origins, its limitations; that is aware of the dangers of its position; that knows its ultimate aims are unrealizable within the framework of capitalist America; a nationalism whose reason for being lies in the simple fact of self-possession and in the consciousness of the interdependence of people in modern society.

For purposes of creative expression it means that the Negro writer must realize within the area of his own personal experience those impulses which, when prefigured in terms of broad social movements, constitute the stuff of nationalism.

For Negro writers even more so than for Negro politicians, nationalism is a bewildering and vexing question, the full ramifications of which cannot be dealt with here. But among Negro workers and the Negro middle class the spirit of nationalism is rife in a hundred devious forms; and a simple literary realism which seeks to depict the lives of these people devoid of wider social connotations, devoid of the revolutionary significance of these nationalist tendencies, must of necessity do a rank injustice to the Negro people and alienate their possible allies in the struggle for freedom.

6 *Social consciousness and responsibility*

The Negro writer who seeks to function within his race as a purposeful agent has a serious responsibility. In order to do justice to his subject matter, in order to depict Negro life in all of its manifold and intricate relationships, a deep, informed, and complex consciousness is necessary; a consciousness which draws for its strength upon the fluid lore of

a great people, and moulds this lore with the concepts that move and direct the forces of history today.

With the gradual decline of the moral authority of the Negro church, and with the increasing irresolution which is paralyzing Negro middle class leadership, a new role is devolving upon the Negro writer. He is being called upon to do no less than create values by which his race is to struggle, live and die.

By his ability to fuse and make articulate the experiences of men, because his writing possesses the potential cunning to steal into the inmost recesses of the human heart, because he can create the myths and symbols that inspire a faith in life, he may expect either to be consigned to oblivion, or to be recognized for the valued agent he is.

This raises the question of the personality of the writer. It means that in the lives of Negro writers must be found those materials and experiences which will create a meaningful picture of the world today. Many young writers have grown to believe that a Marxist analysis of society presents such a picture. It creates a picture which, when placed before the eyes of the writer, should unify his personality, organize his emotions, buttress him with a tense and obdurate will to change the world.

And, in turn, this changed world will dialectically change the writer. Hence, it is through a Marxist conception of reality and society that the maximum degree of freedom in thought and feeling can be gained for the Negro writer. Further, this dramatic Marxist vision, when consciously grasped, endows the writer with a sense of dignity which no other vision can give. Ultimately, it restores to the writer his lost heritage, that is, his role as a creator of the world in which he lives, and as a creator of himself.

Yet, for the Negro writer, Marxism is but the starting point. No theory of life can take the place of life. After Marxism has laid bare the skeleton of society, there remains the task of the writer to plant flesh upon those bones out of his will to live. He may, with disgust and revulsion, say *no* and depict the horrors of capitalism encroaching upon the human being. Or he may, with hope and passion, say *yes* and depict the faint stirrings of a new and emerging life. But in whatever social voice he chooses to speak, whether positive or negative, there should always be heard or *over*-heard his faith, his necessity, his judgement.

His vision need not be simple or rendered in primer-like terms; for the life of the Negro people is not simple. The presentation of their lives should be simple, yes; but all the complexity, the strangeness, the magic wonder of life that plays like a bright sheen over the most sordid existence, should be there. To borrow a phrase from the Russians, it should have a *complex simplicity*. Eliot, Stein, Joyce, Proust, Hemingway, and Anderson; Gorky, Barbusse, Nexo, and Jack London no less than the folklore of the Negro himself should form the heritage

of the Negro writer. Every iota of gain in human thought and sensibility should be ready grist for his mill, no matter how far-fetched they may seem in their immediate implications.

7 *The problem of perspective*

What vision must Negro writers have before their eyes in order to feel the impelling necessity for an about face? What angle of vision can show them all the forces of modern society in process, all the lines of economic development converging toward a distant point of hope? Must they believe in some 'ism'?

They may feel that only dupes believe in 'isms'; they feel with some measure of justification that another commitment means only another disillusionment. But anyone destitute of a theory about the meaning, structure and direction of modern society is a lost victim in a world he cannot understand or control.

But even if Negro writers found themselves through some 'ism', how would that influence their writing? Are they being called upon to 'preach'? To be 'salesmen'? To 'prostitute' their writing? Must they 'sully' themselves? Must they write 'propaganda'?

No; it is a question of awareness, of consciousness; it is, above all, a question of perspective.

Perspective is that part of a poem, novel, or play which a writer never puts directly upon paper. It is that fixed point in intellectual space where a writer stands to view the struggles, hopes, and sufferings of his people. There are times when he may stand too close and the result is a blurred vision. Or he may stand too far away and the result is a neglect of important things.

Of all the problems faced by writers who as a whole have never allied themselves with world movements, perspective is the most difficult of achievement. At its best, perspective is a pre-conscious assumption, something which a writer takes for granted, something which he wins through his living.

A Spanish writer recently spoke of living in the heights of one's time. Surely perspective means just *that*.

It means that a Negro writer must learn to view the life of a Negro living in New York's Harlem or Chicago's South Side with the consciousness that one-sixth of the earth surface belongs to the working class. It means that a Negro writer must create in his readers' minds a relationship between a Negro woman hoeing cotton in the South and the men who loll in swivel chairs in Wall Street and take the fruits of her toil.

Perspective for Negro writers will come when they have looked and brooded so hard and so long upon the harsh lot of their race and compared it with the hopes and struggles of minority peoples everywhere that the cold facts have begun to tell them something.

8 *The problem of theme*

This does not mean that a Negro writer's sole concern must be with rendering the social scene; but if his conception of the life of his people is broad and deep enough, if the sense of the *whole* life he is seeking is vivid and strong in him, then his writing will embrace all those social, political, and economic forms under which the life of his people is manifest.

In speaking of theme one must necessarily be general and abstract; the temperament of each writer moulds and colors the world he sees. Negro life may be approached from a thousand angles, with no limit to technical and stylistic freedom.

Negro writers spring from a family, a clan, a class, and a nation; and the social units in which they are bound have a story, a record. Sense of theme will emerge in Negro writing when Negro writers try to fix this story about some pole of meaning, remembering as they do so that in the creative process meaning proceeds *equally* as much from the contemplation of the subject matter as from the hopes and apprehensions that rage in the heart of the writer.

Reduced to its simplest and most general terms, theme for Negro writers will rise from understanding the meaning of their being transplanted from a 'savage' to a 'civilized' culture in all of its social, political, economic, and emotional implications. It means that Negro writers must have in their consciousness the foreshortened picture of the *whole*, nourishing culture from which they were torn in Africa, and of the long, complex (and for the most part, unconscious) struggle to regain in some form and under alien conditions of life a *whole* culture again.

It is not only this picture they must have, but also a knowledge of the social and emotional milieu that gives it tone and solidity of detail. Theme for Negro writers will emerge when they have begun to feel the meaning of the history of their race as though they in one life time had lived it themselves throughout all the long centuries.

9 *Autonomy of craft*

For the Negro writer to depict this new reality requires a greater discipline and consciousness than was necessary for the so-called Harlem school of expression. Not only is the subject matter dealt with far more meaningful and complex, but the new role of the writer is qualitatively different. The Negro writers' new position demands a sharper definition of the status of his craft, and a sharper emphasis upon its functional autonomy.

Negro writers should seek through the medium of their craft to play as meaningful a role in the affairs of men as do other professionals. But

if their writing is demanded to perform the social office of other professions, then the autonomy of craft is lost and writing detrimentally fused with other interests. The limitations of the craft constitute some of its greatest virtues. If the sensory vehicle of imaginative writing is required to carry too great a load of didactic material, the artistic sense is submerged.

The relationship between reality and the artistic image is not always direct and simple. The imaginative conception of a historical period will not be a carbon copy of reality. Image and emotion possess a logic of their own. A vulgarized simplicity constitutes the greatest danger in tracing the reciprocal interplay between the writer and his environment.

Writing has its professional autonomy; it should complement other professions, but it should not supplant them or be swamped by them.

10 *The necessity for collective work*

It goes without saying that these things cannot be gained by Negro writers if their present mode of isolated writing and living continues. This isolation exists *among* Negro writers as well as *between* Negro and white writers. The Negro writers' lack of thorough integration with the American scene, their lack of a clear realization among themselves of their possible role, have bred generation after generation of embittered and defeated literati.

Barred for decades from the theater and publishing houses, Negro writers have been *made* to feel a sense of difference. So deep has this white-hot iron of exclusion been burnt into their hearts that thousands have all but lost the desire to become identified with American civilization. The Negro writers' acceptance of this enforced isolation and their attempt to justify it is but a defense-reflex of the whole special way of life which has been rammed down their throats.

This problem, by its very nature, is one which must be approached contemporaneously from *two* points of view. The ideological unity of Negro writers and the alliance of that unity with all the progressive ideas of our day is the primary prerequisite for collective work. On the shoulders of white writers and Negro writers alike rest the responsibility of ending this mistrust and isolation.

By placing cultural health above narrow sectional prejudices, liberal writers of all races can help to break the stony soil of aggrandizement out of which the stunted plants of Negro nationalism grew. And simultaneously Negro writers can help to weed out these choking growths of reactionary nationalism and replace them with hardier and sturdier types.

These tasks are imperative in light of the fact that we live in a time when the majority of the most basic assumptions of life can no longer be taken for granted. Tradition is no longer a guide. The world has grown huge and cold. Surely this is the moment to ask questions, to

theorize, to speculate, to wonder out of what materials can a human world be built.

Each step along this unknown path should be taken with thought, care, self-consciousness, and deliberation. When Negro writers think they have arrived at something which smacks of truth, humanity, they should want to test it with others, feel it with a degree of passion and strength that will enable them to communicate it to millions who are groping like themselves.

Writers faced with such tasks can have no possible time for malice or jealousy. The conditions for the growth of each writer depend too much upon the good work of other writers. Every first rate novel, poem, or play lifts the level of consciousness higher.

Notes on a visit to Nicaragua

The Somoza dynasty

The way from the Augusto Cesar Sandino Airport downtown reveals a city partly destroyed by the earthquake, partly by the war. On both sides of the road one finds fallen roofs and walls, silent witnesses of Somoza's rage against the Sandinistas and the local industrialists who formed with them an Opposition Front. But Coca-Cola, Siemens and other subsidiaries of global corporations have remained untouched. The Somoza dynasty left the population in poverty. The civil war left both industry and commerce in a state of bankruptcy. Commercial losses were estimated at US\$220 million. Eighty per cent of industry, mostly concentrated in Managua, was destroyed. Somoza also left an illiteracy rate of 55 per cent and an unemployment-subemployment rate of 45 per cent.

Until fleeing to the US in July 1979, the Somoza family owned more than 50 per cent of the country's arable land plus 26 of the country's largest companies. Nicaragua's economy has been traditionally based on the export of five commodities: cotton, coffee, meat, sugar and gold. The principal buyer is the US. Two investors were outstanding: the Somoza family and the US transnational corporations (TNCs). Although the strategic importance of Nicaragua for the US exceeded its economic appeal and the absolute amount of US investment was low, TNCs dominated some of the dynamic sectors of the economy, e.g., food processing, agrichemicals, pharmaceuticals, gold mining, lumber

and tourism. By the end of 1978, the country's foreign debt of US\$1.1 billion was 55 per cent of the GNP and one-third of it was loans from US banks. TNCs profited from Nicaraguan cheap labour, they benefited from a corrupt regime where civil liberties and workers' organisations were banned. They helped Somoza build and sustain his personal fortune. 'You just don't do business here', said a US TNC executive to *Business Week* (27 February 1978), 'without offering the General a share in it from the beginning.'

The victorious insurrection

As soon as the Sandinistas took power, they adopted a series of measures to face an emergency period which would last until 31 December 1979. Key economic sectors were nationalised and a new state autarchy took control of 51 per cent of the country's arable land. Plans for a massive literacy campaign were laid down. It is hoped that by the end of 1980 the whole population will be able to read, write and count. The university was made free of charge. Production of basic grains was to be increased. The minimum wage was brought up to 1200 cordobas (US\$120) and a maximum official wage was established at 10,000 cordobas (US\$1,000). Hospitals were reopened and a campaign to combat bureaucracy, corruption and opportunism was launched. A committee to coordinate the distribution of food aid was formed in the Ministry of Social Welfare. A system of yearly resignation of the cabinet was adopted so that the government can be systematically evaluated and ministers can be replaced whenever necessary. Sandinista Defence Committees were created in work places as well as in districts and villages throughout the country with multiple purposes including defence, assistance and cadre formation.

The Sandinista economic strategy

'Nicaragua traditionally served the strategic interests of and supplied cheap raw materials to the imperialist powers', says a Jesuit economist who leads the staff of the Planning Ministry.

It is on this historical basis that we are now designing a new Sandinista economy. The former capitalist dependent economy was under direct imperialist domination. We want to break these ties of domination and create new, egalitarian relations with other peoples. The former economy was extremely centralised and selective. We want to build a new economy that is definitely popular and effectively participatory.

Such a policy implies shifting away from the pattern of imitating the 'Big Brother of the North' that for decades shaped the institutions and attitudes of Nicaragua. It implies a tremendous endeavour to reorganise urban and rural life. It implies structurally breaking the neocolonial

ties which bind Nicaragua to the world capitalist market and to the international division of labour.

It is clear to the Nicaraguan leaders that a major restructuring of the country's values and institutions can only be accomplished over time. In this perspective, the defeat of Somoza and the taking of power by the FSLN (Sandinista Front of National Liberation) was only a precondition for a gradual change in Nicaraguan society. The Sandinistas are firmly determined not to take the easy but self-defeating road of importing social models from elsewhere or of relying mainly on outside resources to rebuild their nation. They have set precise guidelines: first, economic activity will be primarily oriented to the satisfaction of the vital needs of the population. Secondly, the country's development will be planned according to its own interests as a nation and will be based foremost on the full use of its own human and material resources. Thirdly, economic activity will be based on the growing, effective participation of urban and rural workers in both the planning and the implementation of development, as well as on the sharing of the costs and benefits of development. Fourthly, development will be seen as only feasible in the context of collective self-reliance. This means reinforcing cooperation with other countries of the region and endeavouring to create the conditions for a profound restructuring of the Central American Common Market.

The plan

The economic plan for 1980 is being worked by seven teams, including government officials, experts and representatives of popular organisations, coordinated by the Ministry of Planning. The plan has four main axes: reactivation of production and organisation of supply of basic goods to the population; employment; generation of foreign exchange, and the establishment of basic services – literacy, health care and child care. Mainly concerned with the current post-war stage of the economy, it is no more than an emergency and reactivation plan. It aims to bring the economy to the pre-civil war levels of activity by an increase in GNP of 22 per cent and a reduction of unemployment-subemployment to 17-30 per cent.

Agricultural policy

Nicaragua, like most Third World countries, is mainly an agricultural economy, with large but under-utilised resources. In order to activate these, the government has made agriculture the main axis of the country's development.

The agricultural strategy is two-pronged: investment will go primarily to reactivate the production of vital agricultural goods for popular consumption. Special credits for rural development have been allocated by the nationalised banking sector. To prevent speculation in such vital

commodities as beans, currently in short supply, the state will buy all produce of the National Institute of Agrarian Reform (INRA). But the expansion and diversification of export crops, and diversification of their international markets, is also a priority. The purpose is to guarantee a sustainable inflow of foreign exchange, the surplus of which will then be channelled to the sectors producing for mass consumption, thus increasing wages, providing for new job opportunities and increasing productivity.

INRA was originally created to manage the ex-Somoza rural domains and agricultural enterprises. Gradually it has expanded its realms of activities and today is an important element in organising and educating the peasants for full participation in rural development. Confiscated land is used for state farms, ensuring employment and a stable salary to rural workers, or for cooperatives, managed by small farmers with peasant participation, or for Sandinista communes, functioning on a self-managed basis.

Industrial policy

Industrial investment is to concentrate primarily on basic manufactured products – food, clothing, medicines, construction materials, industrial and agricultural inputs and export goods. Government policy is to set up a mixed industrial structure, the main agents being the government itself and local private capital. Recently, the Consejo Superior de la Empresa Privada sent a delegation of businessmen to Washington to seek urgent foreign assistance to the industrial and commercial sectors. Local private business has been known to rely mainly on state loans for most of its working capital. ‘All we want them to do’, said the representative of INRA, ‘is to guarantee production.’ Three types of industrial property are foreseen: the ‘people’s property sector’, mixed (government and local private) and private. Strong emphasis is given to the training of workers, through the Sandinista Workers’ Federation and the Association of Peasant Workers, for the purpose of sharing responsibility in industrial and rural planning and management.

Technology and employment

In order to reduce significantly the level of unemployment during 1980 and to reach the target of full employment by the end of 1981, the government decided that the sector of agricultural production for mass consumption will operate with labour-using technology, and that special incentives will be given to industries with increased demand for labour.

Agricultural and industrial production for export, however, will use highly-intensive technology since their immediate role is to generate a maximum of foreign exchange. A nationalised foreign trade sector

will then serve as an instrument to channel the surplus to sectors producing vital goods and services.

Certain guidelines regarding foreign capital have already been established, such as to bring foreign investment to the minimum necessary, to establish its functions clearly, to diversify sources and to treat it as merely complementary to national investment. Policies for dealing with technological transfers by TNCs are still being designed, but certain measures, such as the nationalisation of vital economic sectors, were already adopted to enhance the power to negotiate with TNCs from a position of real sovereignty.

Nationalisation policy

Obviously, to put its policies into practice, the government needs to acquire the instruments and create the mechanisms which can guarantee this. Since July it has nationalised banking, foreign trade, insurance and mining production and marketing. The sector concerned with the purchase of crude oil and distribution of refined products may follow. These nationalisations allow the government to keep vital sectors in line with the economic strategy, to manage the surplus produced by those sectors and to foresee a contractual relationship with local and foreign enterprises whereby the private sector earns a profit but political power remains in the hands of the government.

Wage and fiscal policy

The government sees the prospect of a great shortage of basic goods and capital in 1980 as a challenge to Nicaraguans to activate their own resources and inventiveness. Egalitarian sharing of the costs of reactivating the economy is as important as the just distribution of the benefits. An austere wage policy was adopted, bringing the wage differential in the public sector down to a ratio of nearly 10:1, one of the lowest in the world.

Fiscal policy is another instrument for quick implementation of tactical priorities and for restructuring the profile of income distribution. Due to the emergency state of the economy after the civil war, a balanced budget approach was adopted, coupled with a relative control over the value of the currency. The government also decided not to pay the 13th wage* to the public and private salaried sectors who earn above 3000 cordobas (US\$300). Those earning less than that amount are asked to offer their 13th wage to serve as unemployment compensation to the jobless fraction of the work force. Recently the government approved a 6 per cent tax on all accumulated wealth worth 100,000 cordobas (US\$10,000) or more. Tax on alcohol was increased, while

*An extra month's salary, normally paid as a bonus around Christmas time.

taxes on flour and bread were cut. The surplus, nearly 120 million cordobas, is being channelled to priority sectors such as the literacy campaign and the improvement of health services.

The long-term strategy, however, aims to reactivate and rebuild the economy in a redistributive fashion so as to decrease gradually the reliance on taxation programmes and on foreign aid and loans.

Foreign aid

Foreign aid is badly needed. The government is only interested in loans which are geared to productive investment and are easily recuperable.

Cuba has been particularly generous, in ways that witness a high spirit of solidarity and little concern for political or economic returns. But Nicaragua insists on inviting aid from other countries, so as to cover all its current needs and ensure autonomy. Social democracy has been sensitive to those needs, particularly the FRG. The Scandinavian countries and the Netherlands have been surprisingly timid and the East European countries, with few exceptions, have been insufficiently flexible.

The response of the US and of the international financial institutions has been sluggish and hesitant. Total US assistance to Nicaragua from 17 July to 30 September 1979, was a meagre US\$23.5 million. Conservative congressmen have opposed the \$100 million aid bill and are delaying the approval of the administration's request for three-fourths of that amount. World Bank officials, in turn, have delayed the approval of US\$51 million in fresh loans to Nicaragua on the ground that the country's per capita income at US\$830 is too high! While Nicaragua tries to convince the World Bank that this is a pre-civil war estimate which takes no account of the devastation caused by the war, the emergency needs of the population remain unattended. This ill will sharply contrasts with the easy approval in 1974 of World Bank and US loans to Somoza, totalling US\$27 million, and the US\$490 million in loans to Somoza from US private banks, which constitute a substantial fraction of the country's current debt.

The World Council of Churches and other church organisations have shown readiness and goodwill in raising funds to help Nicaragua. But much more needs to be done.

Dependence and the debt

In the long run, foreign debt is to be proportionally reduced to the necessary minimum. The government has decided not to allow the debt to go beyond US\$3 billion by 1985. Of the total US\$1.6 billion debt, approximately US\$820 million is particularly harmful to Nicaragua because it involves high interest rates and was contracted with private banks (mostly US) and international finance organisations. The philosophy of the government is, first, to negotiate from a position of power

and, secondly, to avoid all intervention by the IMF and the World Bank. 'For years you helped a country with no credibility and no social stability', says Nicaragua to its creditors.

This is a political more than an economic debt. It must, therefore, be negotiated in political terms. The international community is responsible for Nicaraguan reconstruction as much as it was for Nicaragua's destruction. We come to you not to ask but to demand that special conditions be created (a moratorium of 3 years on interest and of 5 years on amortisations). We are willing to pay all debt which is not linked to the purchase of weapons by Somoza and which was directly or indirectly used inside Nicaragua.

* * *

My overall impression as I left Nicaragua is that, in spite of the difficulties to be faced this year, the prospects are generally very favourable. The leadership is running the country on the basis of realism and an astonishing political maturity. The three tendencies within the FSLN seem today to be welded solidly together. There are no serious disagreements on strategy and the confrontations over the path of reconstruction are dealt with fraternally and tend to strengthen the unity of the Sandinistas. All seem to agree that the process of original socio-political transformation must develop stage by stage, with firmness and no hurry.

The Sandinista political strategy cannot be identified with the Cuban model since it insists on preserving an effective multi-party system and on developing a mixed economy based on an alliance with the local bourgeoisie. The policies of the provisional government clearly tend to favour workers and peasants. This is just one of the areas of potential (and actual) friction with the upper middle classes. The privileged sectors may react negatively to policies and to new structures which force them to share their previous wealth and power with the mass of the population. 'Moderates' may try to push for 'depoliticisation' of the army, especially if they manage to win elections. However, this is at present unlikely. All stakes favour at least another year of government of the Junta and an increasing role for the FSLN and mass organisations in government. If this happens, it is to be seen how the Sandinistas will deal with the delicate problem of the growing identity between the hegemonic party and the state – a problem which has plagued other newly-independent Third World countries with the threat of growing centralisation, bureaucratisation and authoritarianism.

The flexible and realistic Sandinista economic strategy, seeking the cooperation of the local bourgeoisie and of countries of all creeds in the reconstruction of Nicaragua, is a challenge to the private sector,

particularly to TNCs, to the highly-industrialised countries and to international organisations. Here is a country which is endeavouring to implement all the proclaimed changes leading to a New International Economic Order: its strategies aim at social and economic justice based on egalitarian values, structures and institutions, national self-reliance based on people's participation, and collective self-reliance based on cooperation with other underdeveloped countries.

Geneva
November, 1979

MARCOS ARRUDA

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