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Nicaragua

A feminist view on the Nicaragua that is "Christian, socialist and based on solidarity"

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MarÃ-a Teresa Bland3n, who comes from a rural area in northern Nicaragua and was a guerrilla in the Sandinista revolution, is today one of the most critical voices of Nicaraguan feminism. We met on the premises of the *Programa feminista la corriente*, a feminist network which, since 1994, has been a reference in Central America for the study of feminist theory: investigations and surveys, training of leaders, alliances for the defence and promotion of women's rights and gender equality. MarÃ-a Teresa Bland3n granted a long interview in May 2016 which is published below, almost in its entirety.

We begin by talking about what might be called "the new aesthetics of the Front", a kind of ideological and visionary renovation that distinguishes the second stage of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), starting, say, from its electoral defeat in 2001: MarÃ-a Teresa Bland3n interprets it as "the result of a detailed analysis of society, very opportunely used for specific political purposes".

"The new symbols are the expression of a syncretism within the Front that is largely disguised. The earlier symbols corresponded to another epoch, to another discourse, and to another ideal, at a moment in history when it was necessary to reinforce the narrative of the heroic guerrilla, of the man - I deliberately say man - who is good, noble, committed, ready to give everything for the country. The earlier symbols corresponded to the story of a heroic guerrilla who was to be admired because he was ready to die for his country and for the ideals of justice ".

MarÃ-a Teresa Bland3n recalls an era "associated with war, death, suffering, with the individual who abandoned his family to build a transcendent revolutionary family." An epoch which no longer exists: it has been supplanted by a supposedly pacified and pacific democracy, by a period of consumption which disguises as political what is purely economic.

"This new political proposal by the Front had been in the making since the 1990 election defeat. In times of neo-liberalism, of consumption, when people want to forget the war, the dead, the wounds caused by the war, when they want in a certain way to leave mourning in peace, this Front which consecutively lost three elections - in 1990, 1997 and 2001 - needed to build new symbols. For whom? For the bulk of the electorate, young people with a fragmented history, because probably their parents did not want to talk to their sons and daughters. Some have an idea of revolutionary purism, others have inherited great resentment towards what the end of this revolution meant. Many stories and narratives depend on where their parents were, but they are fragmented narratives, because in this country we have not succeeded in investing in the recovery of historical memory. There are many narratives, but they do not constitute dialogues, they are not connected. Young people have pieces of history, and this history is in a place where it no longer fits in, where their parents have pushed them to a more individual search so as to satisfy the growing needs in a consumer society.

"The discourses and the new symbols of the Front point to this, in order to appear as a viable alternative for youth, but without this weight of the revolutionary mystique of the decade 1970-1980. More like a joyful, playful proposal, with something that points to solidarity, but starting from very basic tasks that connect with a religious idea. To be Christians, in solidarity with the poor, but without giving up the interests of their own development. What previously could be seen as individualism, we must now make compatible with socialism and symbols must be joyful".

"The red and the black come from mature Sandinism, they were very strong symbols, but also very terrible, associated with the guerrilla struggle in Latin America; they are part of a lineage that is associated with pain, death, suffering, danger, with the very fact of risking one's life.

"Now we have joyous, multi-coloured symbols, with very simple messages and very ambiguous names, in order to talk to young people without questioning the conservative beliefs of the adults. Because one of the themes that affected the Front more in the 1980s was a permanent questioning of certain conservative religious ideas. Indeed, the first theme adopted by the "new" Front is: "We are Christians, socialists and we are based on solidarity". So with "Christians" in the first place, this marks a very important difference in the new symbols and aesthetics of the party. "

The streets of Managua tell us more about the new symbols and the new icons than any expert. The references are no longer to Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, but rather to a Hugo Chávez in an esoteric version which, as the Nicaraguan journalist Sofía Montenegro writes, "with a feathered snake and cheap Christmas trees, is the confirmation of a bad taste that is bomb-proof ".

On the shores of the lake, the FSLN created the Salvador Allende port, a kind of pleasure park with restaurants, bars and nightclubs. The entrance costs five cordobas - "for the maintenance of the park," explains the policeman at the entrance. The complex is (re)presented as an enclave of well-being and relaxation, which seems to materialize the words of María Teresa Blandón: attractive for young people, reassuring for adults. The Allende quay is a place where the inhabitants of Managua can amuse themselves, in accordance with the values of Christian solidarity, a space emptied of any spontaneity and finally also of any excess. In line with the new rhetoric of peace and social security, this park seeks to transmit protection and care. In visiting it, nevertheless, one sees the presence of a disturbing closure of the public space, an artificial enclosure surrounded by metallic barriers which separate this supposed oasis of a happy Sandinista apology from the deserted wasteland that surrounds it.

"The symbols are syncretic, because this society is syncretic: that comes from a very conservative religious belief, quite old, which coexists with a certain imaginary where the theme of colours, stones, tarots is also part of a way of trying to explain the world and what is happening there. It is a mixture of all that: it is interesting to note that this is not the product of a debate but that it is authentic because the ideologist of the Front par excellence is Doña Rosario Murillo and she really believes in all these elements. (...) She is a woman who is very much the expression of the cultural syncretism of Nicaraguan culture and she translates this personal experience into an ideological and discursive experience. She eventually managed to have that experience expressed in the entire structure not only of the party, but of the government. "

Speaking of Rosario Murillo - wife of Daniel Ortega and coordinator of the Communication and Citizenship Council - as the intellectual author of the principal changes made by the Front in recent years, I spontaneously ask why "La Chayo" has not sought a rapprochement with feminists, why she has not attempted to co-opt this movement into her aesthetics and her logic. "Because it is not possible," says María Teresa Blandón, "because she is very intelligent: her strategy is to create a counter-movement of women who can reproduce this logic of love, in the most traditional idea of the family unit, the woman capable of encompassing children, men and companions ".

"She tried to do it. But it was not possible, not only because of the merit of the feminists, but because machismo is very crude, very obvious, because it causes much suffering. This discourse on the role of women as protectors and nurses of the private space, although coming from the religious framework, is confronted by very terrible experiences: sexual abuse, violence, abandonment by fathers, exploitation of women's work, harassment in the streets, sexual harassment at work. This is a lot and it has not fallen into a vacuum, because in this country feminist ideas circulate, they have not stopped circulating during the last forty years, feminists have not ceased to denounce this situation and there are collectives of women almost everywhere. So the discourse of reconciliation, love and forgiveness comes up against a daily experience of discrimination and is confronted by a feminist discourse that denounces machist abuse.

"Rosario thought, I think, that it would be easy to marginalize the feminist collectives, but she did not succeed, neither in her discourse nor in reality. However, everything was done. First, they began by threatening to imprison our leaders. I remember when, in 2006-2007, they threatened to imprison nine leaders of the movement for helping a

child who had been raped to have an abortion. It was the first campaign against feminists that had been launched by the government. A campaign of defamation and persecution began in 2008-2009 against certain organizations; the Autonomous Women's Movement, the Women's Network in Matagalpa and the Venanca Group. We had an enormous capacity for denunciation and mobilization, so then there began a low-intensity campaign to encourage all the organizations of the Front and the institutions of the state to close all the doors and all the possibilities of cooperation and information to the feminist groups. And then came the present strategy, more silent but more targeted, aimed directly at preventing NGOs and development cooperation from financially supporting women's organizations.

"They have tried everything to make our lives difficult by preventing us from organizing marches, such as the one on March 8, which, over the last three years, has been regularly organized, and it is a constant battle. Rosario knows that there is a very hard and very strong leadership in the feminist movement, and that it is very disenchanted with the Front. She knows that there is an incurable wound, the denunciation of Daniel Ortega by Zoilamrica, [1] and she knows that feminists, after this denunciation, will never again negotiate with the leadership of the Front. It is an old and deep wound, without a solution. Feminists have publicly denounced Daniel Ortega for sexual abuse and Rosario as an accomplice. There is a sort of open war: we are denounced more than prosecuted, I would say. There are no feminist prisoners, threatened with death, murdered for being feminists, but there is enormous hostility on the part of governmental and party structures towards feminists. "

This brings us to the theme of the denunciation of machismo and of the feminicides that constitute an open wound throughout Central America, but which are not given the proper attention. "Are we talking about feminicides in Nicaragua? I ask.

"Yes, feminicides, that is the term used here.... Every year, 70 to 90 women are murdered in a country of six million inhabitants, it is a horror. And the trend is increasing. Now we have had 30 cases this year: most of them happen within the framework of couples or engagement relationships. Recently, in a neighborhood of Managua, a 14-year-old boy murdered a 12-year-old girl out of jealousy. They were engaged, and the boy was told that she was seeing someone else, and he killed her. These facts are directly connected with macho nature in all its excesses. In this country, harassment in the streets, physical and psychological violence within the family and sexual abuse are very strong. And all women, regardless of their nationality, feel that it is very difficult to walk the streets of this country. "

The situation presented by Mara Teresa Blandn confirms that, as everywhere in the world, in "Christian, socialist and solidarity-based" Nicaragua, the binomial romantic love-patriarchal oppression continues to plague all of couple and gender relationships.

"The truth is that in this question of love, men and women are being taken for a ride. We work with men and women on themes that relate to sexual and reproductive rights and one of these themes is love. From an ideal-unreal-oppressive love, constructed on a sexist key, by the deceitful discourse on eternity, fidelity, total involvement, of course women are the ones who come out losers, because we are the ones who are most disgusted by the reproduction of this narrative that makes love the synonym of plenitude. Women are more involved than men in this relationship between romantic love and violence; and it is very difficult for women to unlearn this deceptive narrative of romantic love, this need to love a man and to be loved. As Kate Millet said, "Love is the opium of women." This is what happens with romantic love. And strangely, it was thought that now with this supposed sexual freedom, this conservative ideology of romantic love would change, but it has not. On the one hand, we find ourselves with an antiquated,-oppressive,-ill-intentioned ideology of love as the main source of fulfillment of women and as the most wonderful state in the world and, on the other hand, with demands made in the context of the sexuality of desire, of hedonism. But this other demand is not widespread and it has a class feel about it: it is not offered to poor, Black and Indian women. They propose sex without love, erotic liberties to the women of the middle class, with a certain capacity for consumption. "

Thus, by proposing the destruction of romantic love, María Teresa Blandón advocates the rebuilding of a love freed from patriarchal bonds for all women, non-exclusively.

"Solidarity between women disappears for other reasons: consumption and the neo-liberal ideology foment rivalry between us, and not in relation to a man, because this man belongs to nobody: fidelity is a completely conservative commandment; nobody takes anything away from anyone, why should we make such a drama out of it? Let us teach this woman that if her man no longer wants her because she no longer attracts him or for whatever reason, throughout her life she will be able to have many loves and that this disappointment will not take away her capacity for pleasure. Of course, she will feel unhappy, abandoned, as we have all felt when they rejected us, but we are not going to die from love or the lack of it.

"We have to be realistic: I cannot tell a woman to be in solidarity with me because she does not suffer, I have to be able to face the fact that I can stop desiring a man - if we are talking about a heterosexual relationship - and that I can stop being desired: we must teach girls that desire is ephemeral and that love has many aspects. This helps us to be more free, to take apart the fallacious side of romantic love. Women waste too much time, very precious time when we should be busy creating, struggling, fighting, thinking. Women invest too much time in loving relationships, especially with men. I am working at least on this: okay, this break was painful, but a woman learns to recover and does not feel bitter, she learns to recognize her body and helps it to strengthen her capacity for love And orgasm: if the two things go hand in hand, then that's great, but if they don't, that's how it is. "

"Is it so difficult for this discourse to be accepted and disseminated in this country," I ask her, to conclude this discussion.

"Difficult? Horrible! We need to prepare young women to have experiences as many times as necessary, without them feeling bad, unworthy, so that they feel comfortable in their capacity for experience and that they get up again after a disappointment. In our radio programme, we have been saying this all the time, for the past three years. It is the radio of the Central American University, run by the Jesuits We pay for space and they have never bothered us: and we speak about absolutely everything: homosexuality, transgender, orgasm, abortion, love and falling out of love. We are aware that it is painful, that we are deluding ourselves, that romantic love has a part that is boring and wonderful, but we say that we must look at things critically and not let ourselves be eaten alive, and devote less time to men. That we are not forced to have sex if we do not want to, that girls do not feel that they are put under pressure, that they do not let themselves be carried along by what is fashionable if they do not feel comfortable about it. That they should not be carried away by the pressure of their group, because there, generally, those who set the tone are men.

"Neither by sermonizing about romantic love, nor by the fashion of living together without commitment. That is why we do educational courses with young people on sexual and reproductive rights and on violence. There is one session every month, for six months. Each session lasts two days and we seek to diversify the groups: Afro, Mestizo, Pacific Coast, Caribbean, hetero and homosexual, lesbian... well, it is open to anyone who wants to join. And we also do campaigns, we publish a guide "to good loving relationships" which has been a resounding success, with radio messages, signs by the roadside and on the back of buses. We have had about forty presentations with young people at a national level, they were delighted. And although we cannot always be on campaign, because it is hard going, especially economically, we do not stop working: it is an effort by all of us, ongoing work, a constant effort. This is what we do. "

They are already doing that. It is a lot, but it's not enough. Although the feminist movement, like the peasant movement in the canal zone - which we will discuss in another article – is moving ahead, it is not sufficiently strong to change the reality of Nicaragua. This country, which will have presidential elections in November under the watchword of the "Christian, socialist and solidarity-based Republic", is marked by obvious structural differences, by

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the excessive power of the leaders, Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo, and by a gross and dangerous machismo. Nevertheless, although the path of change is long, there is no shortage of people who are committing themselves to it, and it is not by chance that the most active figures in this struggle are women. During the recent events in South-east Mexico, the Zapatistas constantly reminded people: "If there are no women, there is no revolution".

PS:

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[1] Zoilamérica Narváez Murillo is the daughter of Jorge Narváez and Rosario Murillo, who is at present the wife of Daniel Ortega. In March 1998, the stepdaughter of the president - Ortega was then a member of the National Assembly of Nicaragua - denounced him in the Nicaraguan press for having inflicted sexual abuse and various forms of physical and psychological aggression, starting when she was eleven years old and continuing until the date she denounced him. Ortega then asked the judge of the First Criminal Court to dismiss the complaint, claiming that he enjoyed the privilege of immunity under Article 139 of Nicaragua's Political Constitution and that the offenses allegedly imputed to him supposedly took place between 1978 and 1982, and therefore fell under the statute of limitation on the date of the denunciation. During this trial, which effectively ended with the court accepting Ortega's argument, the feminist movement accompanied and supported Zoilamérica's denunciation, condemning not only Ortega, but also his wife for failing to denounce him and for covering up this offense. This gave rise to the incurable rupture of which MarÃ-a Teresa Blandón speaks. (Author's Note)