Shipwrecked Identities

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Chapter 6

Costeño Warriors and Contra Rebels

Nature, Culture, and Ethnic Conflict

The Contra War and the Costeño-Sandinista confrontation received a great deal of attention from scholars and journalists, particularly because it represented a hot spot in the tense cold-war standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union. For leftists around the world, the Sandinista Revolution became a symbol of hope in the losing struggle against unfettered global capitalism. Within the hemisphere the revolution stood for the power of popular nationalist movements against dictators and their traditional US patrons. For the right, the revolution invoked the fear of the domino effect in a region in a perpetual state of brutal civil war in which related national liberation fronts fought against unpopular right-wing governments.

Countering the hostility of the US government against the Sandinistas, an outpouring of support came from leftists throughout the world, including social scientists—some of whom took posts in the new government or offered their services as consultants. The US government turned to right-wing scholars and journalists, enlisting their services in the battle of world opinion that was waged with the pen. The cold-war polarization that characterized this time was, not surprisingly, reflected in the theoretical models of social scientists and others in their analyses of the conflict.

In the Mosquito Coast, the fall of the Somoza dictatorship and the triumph of the FSLN (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, Sandinista National Liberation Front) in 1979 initiated a series of events in Nicaragua that eventually led to the proliferation of, at times, highly
organized and, at times, heavily armed social movements. These movements expressed Costeño aspirations to exercise greater control over regional affairs, as well as their dissatisfaction with the changes brought about by the revolutionary government. Initially, Costeños expressed these aspirations primarily through civil organizations that had some degree of continuity with prerevolutionary groups, as well as Sandinista-sanctioned “revolutionary” organizations promoted by the FSLN throughout the country. Later, however, many Costeños began to organize themselves into anti-Sandinista armed groups. The US government promoted the formation of these groups as part of its destabilization campaign against the government of Nicaragua.

As the civil war escalated in 1981–1984, thousands of Costeños fled to refugee camps in Honduras and Costa Rica (Americas Watch Committee 1986, 5). The budding civil war and the unrest that accompanied it received a tremendous amount of international attention. The assortment of counterrevolutionary armed groups that began to form in and around Nicaragua came to be referred to collectively as the Contras.

Internationally and nationally, the confrontation between the Sandinista government and the Contras was presented as a military and political question related to the continuance of the Nicaraguan National Guard that for almost fifty years had propped up the Somoza dictatorship. However, the armed rebellion of Costeño groups was viewed as an ethnic and indigenous question that was related to the so-called cultural and historical differences between the Pacific and Atlantic regions of Nicaragua. In an environment of increasing polarization, Sandinistas and their allies labeled the Contras as “Somocistas” (Somoza loyalists) and “vendepatrias” (traitors), whose behavior could be explained by purely political factors such as political patronage and foreign intervention. Meanwhile, the same pro-Sandinistas applied the label “separatists” to the insurgent Costeños whose behavior, in their view, needed to be explained by cultural factors.

On the other hand, ardent pro-Contra groups commonly referred to the Contras as pro-Democracy rebels and even (to use the term disseminated by the propaganda machine of the Reagan Administration) “freedom fighters” that were fighting for enlightened principles such as democracy and freedom. Costeño combatants, in contrast, were referred to as warriors and members of separate nations and ethnic
groups who were fighting for “tribal” rights (Nietschmann 1984a; US Department of State 1986b, 193). Their behavior needed to be understood as a manifestation of deeply rooted identification with the land rather than abstract ideals. Whereas both sides predictably leveled accusations of military atrocities, the Reagan administration referred to atrocities allegedly committed on the Atlantic Coast as genocide.4

Clearly, both sides (pro-Sandinista and anti-Sandinista) mobilized a rhetoric that made a consistent and clear set of distinctions between politics vs. culture and ideology vs. identity, and applied this to the geographical distinction of Pacific Coast vs. Atlantic Coast. Thus, culture and identity were perceived to motivate the Indians and ethnic groups of the Atlantic Coast, while politics, patronage, and ideological conviction motivated the northern campesinos (the rank and file of the Contras). The status of the Mosquito Coast, in contrast to the Pacific Coast, as a place inhabited by Indians contributed to use of an exoticizing lens through which to view the conflict.

Undoubtedly, this dual perspective was adopted at least in part as a response to the discourse of Costeño leaders and their advisers, who increasingly couched their aspirations in the language of ethnicity and cultural difference. The tone of the meetings and negotiations between Costeño and Sandinista leaders, beginning in November of 1979, initially expressed hope and mutual accommodation in which commonalities between the Sandinista program and Costeño aspirations were stressed. Costeños, for example, actively accepted the literacy campaign that the Sandinistas promoted nationwide, but they insisted that it be conducted in the languages of the region, Miskitu, Sumu, and English (Shapiro 1987). However, despite this initial accommodation, within two years negotiations became confrontational and polarized as Costeño leaders, disappointed with developments in the region, stressed the need for the national government to respect indigenous and minority demands to territory and political power as ethnic groups and Indians.

Costeños increasingly justified their demands on the grounds of cultural differences that entitled them to particular rights. For example, with the aid of indigenous rights groups in the United States (particularly Cultural Survival of Boston), MISURASATA (the newly reconstituted Costeño Indian organization) demanded control of about one-third of what the Sandinistas considered national lands (CIDCA
MISURASATA did not make this demand as part of the Sandinista agrarian reform that distributed large amounts of lands to both individual peasants and cooperatives in the Pacific. Rather, they demanded the land as “indigenous peoples” who were “descended from the original inhabitants of the area” and possessed a “communal [collective] style of life” that was in a “harmonious ecological equilibrium” with nature (Ohland and Schnieder 1983, 163). MISURASATA affirmed that the “right of the indigenous nations over the territory of their communities holds more importance than the right over the territory by the state” (ibid.).

The Sandinista government, threatened by statements such as these that it interpreted as “separatist,” reacted by jailing MISURASATA leaders, an action that resulted in massive Costeño flight from the region and a surge of Costeño participation in the counterrevolution. Thus, the confrontation between Sandinistas and Costeños was paralleled by the increasing self-assertiveness of Costeño leaders as indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities whose rights devolved from their closeness to nature (“aboriginal rights”) rather than simply from their rights as citizens of Nicaragua. For a country that had historically presented itself as ethnically homogeneous, the fact that the Sandinista government found itself at odds with an indigenous and ethnic movement was both unexpected and enigmatic.

Anthropology on the Warpath in Nicaragua: Cold-War Theorizing

The so-called ethnic conflict in Nicaragua attracted the attention of social scientists throughout the world. Given that cultural and historical elements were considered to be at work in the Atlantic Coast (and presumably not in the Pacific Coast), anthropologists, historians, and geographers (in sum, those social scientists under whose jurisdiction culture and Indians usually fall) focused their attention on the crisis in the Atlantic Coast. Social scientists served as advisers to both the Sandinista government and the Costeño Contra forces, and therefore some of their opinions, analyses, theoretical approaches, and recommendations, far from a matter of purely academic interest, influenced the parties involved in the conflict. For this reason, the following analysis of social-science writing on the Atlantic Coast crisis represents a review of the
perspectives of parties that in more conventional circumstances would be outside analysts but in this case were inside actors in the events involved.

Not surprisingly, pro-Sandinista social scientists employed theoretical and conceptual approaches that were different from those of anti-Sandinista social scientists. Within the anti-Sandinista camp, I identify two approaches: anticommunist and Indianist. The pro-Sandinistas adopted a “deconstructionist” approach that established as its main interpretive problem the explanation of Costeño false consciousness. On the other hand, the anticommunists and Indianists generally adopted an essentialist framework that relied on stereotypical notions of an ahistorical and unchanging Indian identity.

Socialist-leaning analysts in the pro-Sandinista camp, many of whom volunteered to work for the government in Nicaragua as part of an outpouring of international solidarity for the revolution, approached the crisis in the Atlantic Coast as being rooted in the combination of residual effects of British and US colonialism and neo-colonialism, along with the modern manipulations of the US State Department and its Contra proxy army. They stressed the role of exterior factors in predisposing the region to anti-governmental mobilization. These factors included, for example, the British government’s indirect rule of the area during the colonial period, repeated US Marine invasions, the quasi-governmental role of US banana, mining, and lumber companies, the indoctrination of German and North American Moravian missionaries, and the neglect and corruption of the US-backed Somoza dictatorship.

With regard to the actions of the Sandinistas, they echoed the Sandinista government position that recognized that the FSLN had simply made “mistakes” in the region, and that by talking into account the cultural particularities of the region, it would be able to avoid repeating these mistakes. According to the Sandinista government, these mistakes stemmed from their inability to understand and be prepared for Nicaragua’s “national question”—the term for ethnic conflict used in the Marxian tradition. Pro-Sandinista social scientists downplayed the severity of alleged Sandinista human rights violations. Inasmuch as they held the Sandinista government responsible for the crisis, they argued that the Sandinistas’ dogged insistence on viewing the Nicaraguan reality through a class-tinged lens that obscured the importance of ethnic identities was the fatal error of the Sandinistas. They

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encouraged reconciliation and offered regional autonomy as a solution to the crisis.

Paradoxically, pro-CIA/anticommunist cold warriors found themselves allied with supporters of indigenous rights and human rights, if only in their mutual opposition to the Sandinista policies in the Atlantic Coast (Buvollen 1987, 597). This placed the United States (a country with a far-from-stellar record regarding indigenous groups, not to mention human rights in Central America) in the highly ironic position of nominally supporting Indian rights. Meanwhile, human-rights groups and Indian-rights groups (such as Americas Watch and Cultural Survival), as well as Indian groups themselves (e.g., Mohawk Nation, Indian Law Resource Center, and the World Council of Indigenous Peoples), voiced protests and goals similar to those of the Pentagon.

North American Indians were themselves divided over the issue of the Sandinista policies toward the Indians of the Atlantic Coast (Hale 1994b, 272; Dunbar Ortiz 1983). Some Indian organizations, such as the International Indian Treaty Council (IITC), supported Sandinista policies, while others were extremely hostile to the revolution. Clem Chartier (then president of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples) traveled to Nicaragua in 1986 as part of an armed delegation that engaged Sandinista army forces. The trip was later condemned by the WCIP and Chartier was removed as president. Russell Means, hero of the Wounded Knee uprising, was part of this delegation.\(^8\) Means had at one point petitioned the help of the US State Department to recruit and train North American Indian veterans to fight in Nicaragua (Buvollen 1987, 597).

Individuals and organizations that normally would be identified with the left and that under other circumstances would have been more inclined to favor a popular and “anti-imperialist” (to use the Sandinista term) socialist revolution, found themselves divided over the issues of human rights and indigenous rights in Nicaragua. They maintained that the issue of indigenous identity did not fit within paradigmatic cold war oppositions such as left vs. right or socialist vs. capitalist. In their opinion, a completely different vector, which pitted minority and indigenous group claims against those of the bullying central government of a divided country, added a new dimension to these polarized cold-war oppositions.
Warriors and Cold Warriors: The Anticommunist Position

Anticommunists (such as the Contras and the US State Department and their supporters) portrayed the confrontation between Costeños and Sandinistas as being the result of the attempt of a totalitarian state to assert absolute control over an unwilling population: “From the start, the Sandinistas could not tolerate individual expression, whether in the form of a newspaper article that disagreed with their position, or the desire of Indian populations to follow cultural traditions . . .” (US Department of State 1986a, 13). This quotation illustrates a dual perspective with regard to perceptions of Costeño resistance to the revolution vis-à-vis Pacific Nicaraguan resistance to the revolution. Whereas opposition to Sandinista despotism in the Pacific Coast was said to have galvanized around issues such as press censorship (a consummate civil right), in the Atlantic Coast among Indian populations opposition was claimed to have arisen around the necessity to follow vaguely defined cultural traditions. In general, anticommunists focused on the allegedly oppressive policies of the Sandinistas that they argued were the conscious product of aggressive and authoritarian intentions. Not merely a matter of reacting to “mistakes” unthinkingly committed by a young, idealistic, and inexperienced government, the opposition to the Sandinistas directly resulted, according to this perspective, from the automatic and inevitable resistance to authoritarianism.

According to anticommunists, the Nicaraguan government was attempting to reorganize Costeño society away from their idyllic “communal lifestyle” towards Cuban and Soviet communist models (US Department of State 1986a, 3). One anticommunist publication explained: “Historically, there has been little understanding between the peoples of the east and west coasts of Nicaragua. Under the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), relations have not only gotten worse, but they have evolved into open warfare. Shortly after the revolution, the government insisted that Cuban-style block committees replace tribal councils, that religion be supplanted with allegiance to the FSLN, and that Indian lands belong to the state, instead of to community farmers” (ibid., 1).

In this quotation, anticommunists invoked the heuristic value of the region’s separate history and traditions, in this case, tribal councils and
community farming,9 Miskito Indian “cultural identity,” which according to this perspective was inherently incompatible with communism, predisposed them to resist Sandinista programs. Communist-inspired Sandinista collective entities such as the Comités de Defensa Sandinista—militant Sandinista neighborhood organizations built on the Cuban model—clashed with the corresponding Costeño collective entities such as tribal councils that provided the similar function of local self-administration and which were an entrenched part of Miskito culture. Within this framework these Miskito cultural forms were endorsed on the grounds that they were both traditional (therefore legitimate) as well as non-oppressive. (For another example of this approach, see Ortega 1991, 42–45.) For these reasons, anticommunists generally discouraged Miskito negotiation with the Sandinistas. In fact, the Reagan administrations used funds illegally garnered in the Middle East as part of the Iran-Contra affair to pay Miskito Indian leaders to withdraw from negotiations (Lernoux 1985a, 1985b; Pichirallo 1987, 1, 16).

The late Bernard Nietschmann, a cultural geographer from the University of California at Berkeley whose pre-Revolution work in the cultural ecology of coastal Miskito communities was well known, loudly condemned what he called Sandinista “Indian policy.” His criticism reached far beyond the confines of academic ivory towers. In fact, he served as an expert witness to Congress and the Organization of American States, as well as a chief advisor to the Miskito armed insurgency. He also published extensively on the Miskito-Sandinista conflict in academic and popular journals.10 During the tense years of Miskito-Sandinista armed confrontation, he championed the cause of the nation of “Yapti Tasba,” a name for the “Miskito nation” that came into limited use in the 1980s (see B. Rivera 1988, 95–120). He adamantly discouraged Miskito leaders from negotiating with the Nicaraguan government. Rather, he advised “Indian warriors” to settle for nothing less than complete sovereignty and the expulsion of all “invaders in Yapti Tasba” (Nietschmann 1989, 15). Nietschmann’s agenda extended far beyond the Miskito nationalist movement. He supported the armed uprising of all indigenous nations, which constituted “40% of Central America,” because “indigenous nations are a territorial and cultural firebreak to the spread of communism . . .” (ibid., 52).

In contrast to his theoretically more sophisticated and empirically grounded earlier work, Nietschmann’s post-revolutionary work adopted
a crude and conjectural approach to culture and identity—an approach that was firmly grounded in essentialist principles. For Nietschmann, the Miskito-Sandinista struggle represented just one example of a larger phenomena (which he called the “Third World War”) in which indigenous nations, which he estimated number from 3,000 to 5,000 worldwide, struggle to resist incorporation into the “168 states” (Nietschmann 1987, 2). This confrontation between indigenous nations and modern states represented the most important cause of war in the modern world and also the most important threat to indigenous nations. Each of these indigenous nations represented, for Nietschmann, a clearly bounded and easily definable group that could be identified on the basis of objective cultural criteria. He wrote: “Nations are geographically bounded territories of a common people. A nation is made up of communities of people who see themselves as ‘one people’ on the basis of common ancestry, history, society, institutions, ideology, language, territory and (often) religion. Nation peoples distinguish themselves and their countries from other adjacent and distant people and countries. The existence of nations is ancient” (ibid., 1).

The indigenous nation for Nietschmann thus represented an unchanging and transhistorical entity that finds itself threatened by the encroachment of states that aspire to strip members of these nations of their collective identity. The boundaries, both physical and sociological, of these nations were thoroughly unproblematic for Nietschmann.

Regarding the case of the Mosquito Coast, he insisted that the Miskito people fit in every respect his definition of a nation and therefore they should enjoy self-determination. He regarded as unproblematic the fact that the Miskito represent only one population among many in the Atlantic Coast. He also took for granted that those people whom he identified as the Miskito nation should necessarily possess a separate and distinct culture from their Costeño counterparts. It is precisely the centrality that he gives to this simple-minded equation between culture and social group (not his strident support of the Miskito cause as he defined it) that is most objectionable in his work. Predictably, this flawed theoretical framework spilled over into his analysis of the Costeño-Sandinista conflict:

The Indian peoples had their own distinct national systems of identity, economy and property that were different from those of the
Sandinista invaders. What the Sandinistas saw as the ‘Indian Problem,’ the Miskitos saw as ‘the Sandinista Problem.’ Limited by class-based Marxism, the Sandinistas have been unable to comprehend an identity and a resistance based on culture. Culture and homeland unify a people more strongly than do ideology, class, or adherence to a particular political-economic system or group of leaders. (Nietschmann 1989, 28)

Nietschmann’s framework obliged him to view the clash between the Sandinista government and the Miskito people as having resulted from fundamental and absolute cultural differences between the Mestizo Nicaraguan state and Miskito Indians. According to Nietschmann these differences automatically prevented collaboration and understanding between Miskitos and the Sandinista government. What remained absent from this framework that fetishized cultural difference and group identity was a treatment of the interests of the multiple actors (not just the so-called ethnic groups) involved. Also, in postulating a unified and homogenous identity for the Miskito nation, he ignored the tremendous differentiation within the Miskito category, as well as those cultural features that are shared by Costeños.

**Indianists, Indian Rights, and the Miskito Moral Economy**

Indianists, the second subgroup of anti-Sandinistas, made similar claims about the nature of the Costeño-Sandinista crisis as did their anticommunist counterparts. Their motivations, however, were very different. Among the Indianist anti-Sandinistas, I include Harvard-based Cultural Survival (along with other indigenous rights organizations), various so-called Fourth-World organizations such as the World Council of Indigenous Peoples and the Indian Law Resource Center, North American Indian organizations (such as the American Indian Movement), and North American Indian tribes themselves (such as the Mohawk Nation). Throughout the 1980s, Cultural Survival and the Mohawk Nation published articles and updates (which included articles by Nicaraguans as well as North Americans) about the conflict in their respective publications, *Cultural Survival Quarterly* and *Akwesasne Notes.*
Although Indianists by no means adopted the same position with regard to the conflict, they did share the view that the Sandinista government, regardless of what may have been benign initial intentions, enacted programs and policies that had harmful effects on the indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities of the Atlantic Coast. They argued that these policies threatened both the “way of life” as well as the well-being of Atlantic Coast peoples, particularly the Miskitu and Sumu Indians.

During the 1970s, Costeños, who had long been used to calling themselves and being called Indians in certain contexts, entered into contact with a new kind of “pan-Indian” ideology that was being developed in Canada, Mexico, and the United States. Before the revolution, ALPROMISU joined the World Council of Indigenous Peoples, which had been formed in the early 1970s as a self-proclaimed Fourth-World organization. The WCIP promoted a progressive “pan-Indianism” that, it argued, stood in opposition to prevailing doctrines of paternalism and integrationism held by national governments and development agencies. The WCIP and other organizations like it emerged with the explicit goal of defending indigenous peoples and their cultures from destruction at the hands of an economic model relying on modernization and industrialization. These organizations contrasted subordinate and oppressed Indian cultures to oppressive Western cultures. Their philosophy associated indigenous peoples with a distinctive pan-hemispheric Indian ethic, typified by, among other things, harmony with the environment and a communal way of life. In general, firmly anti-imperialist and anticapitalist, pan-Indian ideology saw itself as at odds with Marxism, which was integrationist and ignored and devalued ethnicity (Mohawk 1981; Dunbar Ortiz 1983, 79–87).  

Indianist anti-Sandinistas did not necessarily oppose the heavy-handed integrative programs of the Sandinista government solely because they were communist. Rather, they opposed the Sandinistas on the grounds that the government, regardless of its revolutionary rhetoric, was unwilling negotiate on the issues most crucial to Nicaraguan Indians—specifically the issue of “independent Indian self-determination” (Macdonald 1988, 143; also see IACHR 1984, 126). Notwithstanding the Sandinista accusations to the contrary, Indianist groups and human rights groups (and most importantly Costeños themselves, some of
which I include here among Indianists) were well aware that the non-
Costeño Contras would be no more willing to negotiate on these issues.

Immediately as Sandinista-Miskito relations began to sour, Akwe-
sasne Notes, whose editors were in contact with Costeño rebels, expressed
its ambivalence over denouncing the Sandinista treatment of Nicaraguan
Indians:

The NOTES reports on this situation with some reservation. The
position by Native peoples that they constitute real nations and their
continued struggle for international recognition as such—is a
difficult one for nation/states to entertain. That this conflict should
come to the point of eruption in recently-liberated Nicaragua, and
at this particularly dangerous time for the beleaguered revolution
there is unfortunate. Certainly, the counter-revolutionary forces
inside Nicaragua (and in the neighboring countries and North
America as well) could find much to manipulate in it. . . . Nobody
wants to play into the hands of the US war machine, least of all in
this instance. (Akwesasne Notes 1981, 11)

For Akwesasne Notes, a Contra victory would not necessarily repre-
sent a solution to the fundamental Indian problem in Nicaragua. The
unwillingness of states, regardless of their official ideologies, to modify a
rigid conception of rights and citizenship, linked to Western notions of
democracy, society, and personhood, lay at the root of the indigenous
problem not only in Nicaragua but all over the Americas, according to
Indianists (ibid., 11).

Indianists endeavored to elaborate a third position that, in their
view, would not fall within any of the political spectrums that were
being employed nationally and internationally: neither left nor right,
neither east nor west, neither Contra nor Sandinista. In their opinion
other analysts committed the error of forcing the Indian position within
foreign, and ultimately Western, models that left no room for a true
Indian perspective. Everyone, according to Indianists, tended to down-
play the agency of Miskito actors, thereby reproducing stereotypical
images of the passive Indian who is easily manipulated by outside agents.
The left and the right portrayed “genuine leaders as either putty or
puppets, molded and manipulated by outside interests” (Macdonald
1988, 111).
Theodore Macdonald, projects director of Cultural Survival (an organization that had contact with Miskito organizations), expressed such an Indianist critique: “Concerned primarily with the political symbolism of the Nicaraguan revolution, many observers chose to portray the Indians as either dupes of imperialist advances or victims of Communist totalitarianism; their perceptions were influenced more by their image of the Nicaraguan revolution than by any analysis of the Indians' actual condition” (Macdonald 1988, 107). According to this position, both Sandinistas and Contras equally misrepresented the Indians of Nicaragua, and each was, or would be, resistant to considering Miskito demands. The Indianist position of the Miskito insurgency attempted to claim immunity from cold-war biases because the insurgents as Indians championed an agenda that transcended cold-war oppositions.

Macdonald, borrowing from James Scott’s notion of the moral economy, traced the roots of Indian resistance in the Mosquito Coast to “a different understanding of their past and somewhat divergent aspirations for the future.” He described Nicaragua as a plural society that was deeply divided on cultural lines (ibid., 111). He attributed the ultimate cause of the civil war in Nicaragua to these cultural differences between Miskitos and Sandinistas. He postulated ethnic identity as a real and tangible possession of the Miskito, the potential loss of which sparked the Miskito Indians to rebellion. Because the “Miskito moral economy,” which consisted of “both subsistence rights and deep emotional concerns regarding land rights and resource rights” (ibid., 122), had never previously been violated, the Miskito had never risen up against the US companies or the Nicaraguan government. He wrote: “Subsistence security was never threatened. So, despite periods of undeniably intensive expropriation, feelings of exploitation were not particularly strong” (ibid., 114). The reason, according to Macdonald, that the Miskito rebelled in the 1980s was that the Sandinista government placed this moral economy in jeopardy and did not respect Miskito ethnic identity.

Referring to the Sandinista hostility to ethnic organizations, as well as their insistence on viewing the history of the Atlantic Coast through the lens of class struggle, Macdonald argued that one of the main goals of the Sandinistas was the “dissolution of ethnic identity.” Upon arriving at the view that their ethnic identity was in danger, the Miskito took up arms. Macdonald explained: “Ethnicity is not simply the cause of racism
and discrimination, it is also the source of a unique, vital self-identity; it is something that Indians will not relinquish simply on the promise of improved social and economic conditions” (ibid., 111). Thus Macdonald incorporated the concept of ethnic identity (specifically Indian identity) into the center of his analysis of the causes of the Costeño-Sandinista crisis. Given the fluid and contextual nature of self-identification in the region, which I have outlined in the previous chapters, Macdonald’s reliance on the concept of identity was limiting. Macdonald and his Indianist colleagues fell into the trap of reifying the boundaries of the social groups in the region to a degree that was not warranted.

**Sandinista Social Science I:**
**The Ethnic Prism, False Consciousness, and Dogmatic Marxism**

In an often-quoted interview that appeared in a Mexican magazine soon after the escalation of the crisis in the Atlantic Coast in 1981, Tomas Borge (FSLN cofounder and Nicaraguan Minister of the Interior during the Sandinista administration) attributed the problems in the Mosquito Coast to the political, economic, and social “backwardness” of Costeños. In his opinion the Mosquito Coast’s unique colonial and post-colonial history lay at the root of this backwardness (Ohland and Schneider 1983, 189–192). He stated: “It is very difficult to fight against backwardness, and this is an extremely backward zone... We are decolonising them. So we are taking roads to them, telephones, medical care, literacy, television; for the first time in their lives they have seen a television image; but two years is a very short time in which to overcome the prejudices, the religious fanaticism, the ignorance, the apathy of centuries” (ibid., 191).

In the eyes of the revolutionary leaders the Atlantic Coast represented a glaring example of the disastrous effects of imperialism. Indeed, the region represented a paradox for the Sandinista leaders: it was a region that had the greatest direct exposure to world capitalism (particularly to wage labor and proletarianization) as well as the most extreme levels of poverty, and yet its inhabitants demonstrated the least revolutionary potential of all segments of Nicaraguan society. Sandinista social scientists became trapped in a limiting paradigm in which they devoted their interpretive energies to addressing this alleged paradox.
Generally, Sandinista analysts employed a two-pronged model that included a deterministic structure-oriented approach and a voluntaristic agency-oriented approach (Hale 1994b, 17). During the crisis in the 1980s, a structure-oriented approach was applied to the historical roots of Costeño ethnic identity, while an agency-oriented approach was employed to explain the increasing ethnic militancy of Costeños, particularly Miskitos. Sandinista analysts brought to the fore the process through which US and British extractive industries created an ethnically based labor hierarchy that pitted ethnic groups against one another in a competition for scarce opportunities and resources (Vilas 1989, 7; Hale 1987a). Also, the Moravian Church’s policy of providing education and proselytization to Creoles in English and to Miskitos in Miskitu drove wedges between Creoles, Miskitos, and Catholic Mestizos. Over time, both of these factors caused ethnic differences to deepen within the Costeño worldview, obscuring the material base of ethnicity, which was regarded as a “superstructural” ideology within the Marxist theoretical tradition.

CIDCA (Centro de Investigación y Documentación de la Costa Atlántica), a social science research institute commissioned in the early 1980s by the Sandinista government, identified this propensity to view the world through an ethnic lens as being a crucial feature of Costeño culture that predisposed them to counterrevolution. CIDCA investigators labeled this process, by which Costeños misrecognized the true class basis of their exploitation, the “ethnic prism” (CIDCA 1984, 17).

With regard to the causes of contemporary ethnic radicalization, Sandinista social scientists highlighted the duplicity of Miskito leaders, who manipulated ethnic and indigenous rhetoric in order to promote their personal agendas (as well as, of course, the agendas of US imperialism) at the expense of the great majority of Costeños (Vilas 1989, 132–135; Gudrían 1987, 175; Jenkins Molieri 1986, 315–318). These investigators put their social science theories to the primary task of invalidating the legitimacy and representativeness of the “ethnic discourse” that Costeño leaders developed during the crisis.16 Many Sandinista social scientists placed themselves, and their science, in the highly paternalistic position of demonstrating to Costeños that their cultural movement was both false and ingenuous.

Although Sandinista social scientists explicitly distanced their own interpretations from “dogmatic Marxism” and its alleged reliance on
economic determinism (Gurdián 1987, 172; Hale 1994b, 15), all asserted, in one way or another, that Costeño consciousness (particularly that part of it that predisposed Costeños to oppose the revolution as ethnic groups and Indians) was at some level false. According to Sandinista social scientists, the fact that Costeños organized themselves along ethnic lines indicated that they operated under the assumption that their problems stemmed from their marginalization as ethnic minorities within a country, rather than as workers within a national and international capitalistic economy that exploited them. In this sense, their uprising was based on a fallacious interpretation of their situation because it was based on an ethnic model rather than a class model.

In the following passage, Galio Gurdián, a Nicaraguan anthropologist working at CIDCA who later took a PhD from the University of Texas, clearly expressed this insistence on the primacy of class analysis: “Ethnicity, within this position, should be seen as one particular dimension of social structure, as a form of organization of certain social groups that have a clear class nature, however. In complex societies, ethnic groups are neither distinct from nor independent of the class structure, but are rather the way in which certain classes or class sectors are differentiated in terms of different socio-cultural elements” (Gurdián 1987, 177). Given that ethnicity was an epiphenomenon of class, Costeños drew attention away from, according to Gurdián, the true nature of their exploitation by asserting ethnic demands. Although Sandinista social scientists granted the importance of recognizing ethnic and cultural differences within the nation, they stood by the claim that Costeño ethnic discourse was both politically harmful and ideologically incorrect.

Many Sandinista social scientists made little attempt to hide their contempt for Costeño ethnic discourse. Vilas labeled the positions taken by MISURASATA as “ethnic chauvinism.” He defined this term as “a kind of reductionism that privileges ethnic elements in the analysis of a given social group, including the mystification of its own history.” He added that the main characteristics of Miskito “ethnic chauvinism” include an “oversimplified view of reality and a simplistic, black-and-white schema of confrontation” (Vilas 1989, 126). According to Vilas, ethnic chauvinism had “very little to do with Miskito culture” and was used by Miskito leaders motivated only by the desire to attract international attention and to appeal to Miskito followers. Vilas’s unabashed
paternalism is most apparent when, on a conciliatory note, he conceded that similar kinds of claims are “also found in other social groups in the first stages of their consciousness of themselves as a distinctive social entity” (ibid., 127).

Other Sandinista social scientists manifested similar antipathy towards what they perceived as radical demands by Costeño organizations. They attempted to deconstruct and delegitimize Costeño ethnic discourse. Gurdián, for example, reprimanded Miskito leaders for engaging in an “ethnicist” rhetoric that “preaches an almost mystical exaltation of ethnic traits” (Gurdián 1987, 177). He described this position, which he lamented was “gaining ground in Latin America,” in the following manner: “It is based on an ahistorical romantic vision of ethnicity: on the one hand, it affirms the existence of a millenary ethnic nucleus, invariable in its essence and uncontaminated by the historical process; on the other hand, the ‘superior’ nature of ethnic traits is affirmed in contrast to the decadent nature of all things Western” (ibid.).

Jorge Jenkins Molieri (Nicaraguan anthropologist and militante Sandinista) launched an equally belligerent salvo at Miskito ethnic discourse:

The ethnicist romanticism of this proposal [MISURASATA’s “Plan 1981”] is rooted in the fact that it does not recognize, or portends to not recognize, the general situation of oppression and misery that the Nicaraguan peasantry has lived, not to mention the other disadvantaged classes, as a result of the capitalist development imposed on the country by the liberal-conservative regimes in complicity with imperialism. They claim that being an Indian in itself confers supra-national, incontrovertible and self-evident rights which are above history and social processes—a kind of divine grace that, removed from humanity and its struggles, turns its back on the achievements of national liberation. The infantility of the proposal made by these leaders can only be matched by the religious idea of judgment day—in which they would be seated on the best balcony. (Jenkins Molieri 1986, 313)

For Jenkins Molieri the history of the Miskito was a history of exploitation and manipulation at the hands of British and later North American capitalism. His book on this crisis consisted of an extended
discussion of the negative ideological and social effects this foreign presence had on the Miskito people. This history of foreign exploitation robbed them of the possibility of assuming their true Nicaraguan “national sentiment” (ibid., 22). It also created mutual resentment between “the indigene of the Atlantic and the ladino of the Pacific” (ibid., 23).

A particularly glaring irony of this history for Jenkins Molieri was that foreigners “made the indigene believe in the goodwill [bondad] of his exploiters” (ibid., 26). The inability of the Miskito to recognize the objective fact that they were “brutally exploited” was rooted in two idiosyncratic features of the region’s history: (1) “its early articulation in the English mercantile and colonialist economy,” and (2) “fundamental elements in the ideological formation of the indigene, particularly the interiorization of the Moravian religion” (ibid., 238). It was precisely this aspect of Miskito consciousness (part of what he called their “social backwardness”) that caused them to mis-recognize the boon represented by the Sandinista revolution. Instead they rebelled, thereby failing the revolutionary challenge to “improve the conditions of their pathetic existence” (ibid., 23).

For Jenkins Molieri, Miskito people’s long historical ties to the capitalist world economy and its English and North American agents molded them as a distinctly modern people—a modernity that he argued contradicted their status as Indians. He chided Miskito leaders and their supporters for appealing to indigenous rights because, according to his analysis, this appeal flew in the face of hundreds of years of capitalist exploitation as wage workers. Referring to the Miskito activism of the post-revolutionary period, he stated: “The real problem, which has always been the exploitation of the indigene’s labor and the permanent alienation of his territory, was hidden craftily behind a mask of idyllic ethnicism promoted even by the paternalistic and philanthropic attitudes of anthropologists and religious leaders” (ibid., 239).

The romantic notion of the Indians’ “idyllic” existence, promoted by the self-romanticizing Miskito leaders and their religious and anthropological advisers, was directly contradicted and indeed undermined, in Jenkins Molieri’s view, by their historical exploitation as workers. According to Jenkins Molieri’s formulation, Sandinista social science provided a corrective to the tendency of Miskito leaders and indigenists
to exoticize and “idealize” their own history (ibid., 22). Clearly, his version of this social science operated on the assumption that Indianness is innately pre-modern and pre-capitalist. Departing from this primitivist set of assumptions, he critiqued the genuineness of the assertion of indigenous identity by Costeños, whom he viewed as proletarianized, and therefore un-Indian, Nicaraguans.

It is crucial to note that although Jenkins Molieri aggressively attacked Miskito appeals to rights as Indians on the grounds that these were romanticized and ahistorical, he simultaneously assumed some of the very assumptions about Miskito history and culture on which he argued these appeals were based. He limited his analysis exclusively to indígenas (primarily referring to Miskitos), a category whose boundedness he leaves unquestioned. By relying on the unqualified salience of this term, he unwittingly adopted a fundamental assumption of the position he was trying to deconstruct—namely that the Miskito Indians represent a bounded social group united by race, language, and culture. Despite consistently emphasizing the impact of foreign influence on the Miskito, he nevertheless adopted primitivist language to describe the social structure that resulted from this interaction. That is to say, in his analysis of the Miskito he embraced stereotypical characteristics commonly associated with Indians, such as communal living, harmony with the environment, closeness to nature, and having distinct culture and traditions. He wrote:

In the face of the irrational plunder of the natural resources and the destruction of their environment the Miskitos almost instinctively reacted by maintaining the steadfastness of their communal life, exchange relationships, reciprocity, kinship ties, customs, traditions and language. Granted all of these characteristics were blended with enormous european, north american and caribbean influences in such a way that this group [the miskito] took shape as a motley culture with multiple manifestations but with the stamp of an authentic cultural continuity in continual change. (ibid., 28)

Jenkins Molieri countered Miskito claims to cultural purity and indigenous essence by focusing on their victimization within the world economy. However, in the process he constructed a reconfigured Miskito essence based on stereotypically Indian features. Thus, although
Jenkins Molieri engaged in a deconstructionist project aimed at delegitimizing Miskito claims to indigenous rights, ultimately this project incorporated key elements of these claims within the analysis.

Sandinista Social Science II: The Invention of Tradition, Contradictory Consciousness, and the Anthropology of Liberation

The late Martin Diskin, an MIT anthropologist, published a number of articles that also operated within a modified deconstructionist mode (Diskin 1987, 1989, 1991). In these articles Diskin dedicated himself to examining two separate but related phenomena: (1) the challenge to anthropology represented by the increasing importance of “native self-representation” (Diskin 1991, 157); and (2) the “manipulation of indigenous struggles” by outside actors (e.g., the United States). Diskin argued that these phenomena were integrally related (particularly in the Miskito case) because modern “ethnic discourse” (or “native self-representation”) has become highly politicized as indigenous groups have altered, invented, and reshaped their self-representations in response to external actors and external paradigms of self-representation (Diskin 1989, 11). Echoing Clifford Geertz’s 1960s work on ethnic bloc formation and primordial loyalties in the so-called New Nations (Geertz 1963), Diskin characterized the emergence of ethnic discourse as a creative, modern, and undeniably strategic and tactical tool that is used by formerly isolated or sheltered societies that, caught in the maelstrom of global politics, find themselves being drawn into self-consciously multi-ethnic states.

With regard to the specifics of the Costeño-Sandinista conflict, Diskin concentrated on what he perceived to be the increasingly radical ethnic discourse of Miskito organizations and their leaders, a discourse that he described as a “new voice” in the region. For Diskin, the claim to native and Indian status by Miskito leaders represented an instrumentally motivated attempt to maximize their access to national and international resources. In response to the radical changes in their world (e.g., the Sandinista revolution, pan-Indian activism, and the US support of the Contras), Costeenos simply chose to adopt and propagate an ethnic identity that suited them best in that moment. Diskin wrote: “In the
example of Nicaraguan Costeños, ethnic discourse is employed to alter the historic image of coastal peoples and argue for specific guaranteed rights from the central government. The ethnic discourse, a tool in ongoing social negotiation, is therefore eminently situational. . . . The identities chosen may shift depending on the group’s allies and adversaries of the moment, the resources they seek, and, of course, timing” (Diskin 1991, 157). In his view of the role of ethnic identity formation, Diskin clearly assumed that the modern politicized version of Miskito self-representation (i.e., situational and shifting) departed from a pre-crisis true self-presentation that was devoid of such elements. Armed with this assumption, he went about the business of citing the alleged reality from which Miskito ethnic discourse diverged.

According to Diskin, Costeño ethnic discourse consisted of the claims to: (1) the primacy of ethnic identity over other identities; (2) the Indian identity and nationhood of coastal peoples; (3) the spiritual and cultural identifications of these nations with their land; (4) their communitarian nature; and, finally, (5) their right to self-determination. All of these, he argued were, at best, recent reformulations and reshapings of Costeño ethnic identity. At worst they were, from the privileged perspective of the social scientist, patently false.

For example, Diskin criticized MISURASATA pronouncements (at one point he referred to these as “ideological statements” [Diskin 1989, 20]) in which Miskito leaders referred to the Atlantic Coast Indians as the “original inhabitants” of the region. He explained that “this characterization often ignored the history of coastal people’s interaction with the Caribbean, especially with the British Naval Force” (ibid., 19). Diskin noted that Miskito claims to a history of self-rule and cultural continuity “contradicts other [scholarly] accounts” (Diskin 1991, 169). For example, he reported that the Miskito leaders of MISURASATA refer to the “council of elders” as a distinctly Miskito form of self-governing that they continued to respect during the 1980s. Citing his knowledge of the anthropological scholarship on Nicaragua, he objected that this “group of decision makers, are simply not recorded in the literature.” He added that only the Moravian Church (a consummate outside influence) could have provided any “centralized form of governance” to the alleged Miskito nation, but “that is hardly an aboriginal pattern of governance” (Diskin 1991, 170).
Citing Hale, he insisted that Miskito pretensions of having had a long history of communal land tenure is undermined by the fact that at the turn of the century a British agent actually initiated the practice of communal land claims in order to ease his work load. At the turn of the century, the culturally informed inclination of the Miskito, according to Diskin, was to claim lands as individuals—a fact that Diskin believed delegitimized modern Miskito claims to communal lands. He used Helms’s ethnographic data from her 1971 book, *Asang*, on individually owned cash-producing lands to support the conclusion that “communal subsistence activities are not as widespread as the ethnic discourse insists” (ibid.). These factual inconsistencies, according to the deconstructionist logic of Diskin, are due in large part to Miskito leaders’ contact with indigenous advocacy groups that support a “maximalist statement of indigenous rights” and which were responsible, at least ideologically, for the “consistency and increasing sophistication of Indian demands and maneuvers” (Diskin 1989, 19).

The main problem with Diskin’s approach was not his critical stance towards Miskito ethnic discourse. There can be no doubt that Miskito leaders geared their descriptions of themselves and their culture to suit, or counter, the expectations of outsiders. And there also can be no doubt that the details of these self-descriptions in some cases had very little to do with how the majority of Costeños live and describe their lives. The problem was that Diskin implicitly assumed that there existed a more authentic Miskito ethnic identity prior to the 1980s that became polluted and distorted by the outside interference brought about as a result of the crisis. He assumed that premodern self-representations (ethnic identity) are more genuine because the Indian societies that produced them lacked an analytical sense of self-awareness. This self-awareness, then, only results from the attempt of modern states to insert marginalized Indians into national society as ethnic groups (Hill 1996). Diskin took the newness of this post-revolutionary Costeño cultural production as prima facie evidence of its illegitimacy, the case for which he ironically dedicated his “engaged science of liberation” to prove (Diskin 1991, 17). In his insistence on deconstructing Costeño ethnic discourse, he neglected to analyze this discourse on its own terms in order to understand how it worked within Costeño society.

Although other Sandinista social scientists refrained from frontal assaults on Miskito ideology (like those of Vilas, Gurdián, and Jenkins
Molieri), all of them, in one form or another, worked within an interpretive framework geared towards explaining the paradox of Costeño cultural and political backwardness. Charles Hale, a North American anthropologist who during the 1980s worked with CIDCA and conducted fieldwork in Nicaragua for his PhD dissertation at Stanford University, provided a much more subtle analysis of “Miskitu consciousness” in his dissertation and subsequent book and other publications, but even these teeter at the brink of this paternalistic interpretive trap (Hale 1990, 1991, 1994b). As a self-proclaimed “politically engaged anthropologist” (Hale 1994b, 217) and “quasi-insider within what might be called the revolutionary establishment,” Hale made no attempt to disguise his solidarity with the FSLN and its goals of revolutionary social transformation (ibid., 9). Due to the antigovernment hostilities in the region, Hale found himself in the uncomfortable position (particularly for a North American anthropologist committed to “research, theory and political practice of a radical bent”) of supporting, and working for, a government that was hostile to an anti-state subaltern uprising (albeit a subaltern uprising that temporarily had a powerful ally in the form of the US State Department) with which the majority of his informants in his field site harbored sympathy and with which many directly and indirectly participated (ibid., 7).

The task then became managing to maintain theoretical and practical sympathy for the Miskito while at the same time supporting a Sandinista interpretation of (and solution to) the conflict. Hale attempted to distance himself from what he described as “structural” explanations of the conflict that ignored Miskito agency and focused exclusively “either on the intrusive, repressive character of the Sandinista state or on the interventionist policies of the United States.” Such structural analysis was incomplete because “it offered at best a vague and deductive sense of what Miskitu people understood themselves to be doing” (Hale 1994b, 17). On the other hand, he regarded the “Indian perspective” to suffer from an over-reliance on “people’s motivations.” He stated: “Accounts that began from the ‘Indian perspective’ tended to caricature the structural determinants of the conflict, to portray Miskitu culture in a vacuum, and to neglect how structural conditions had shaped Miskitu people’s consciousness” (ibid., 17). For Hale, the dilemma between focusing on Miskito consciousness in a vacuum and focusing on structural factors that played a crucial role in shaping this consciousness
was symptomatic of a larger theoretical tension in the social sciences between “voluntaristic and deterministic types of theory” (ibid., 18).

On a practical level, his solution to this dilemma was to work as an agent of “conflict resolution” by contributing research that supported the Sandinista-initiated autonomy project (Hale 1994b, 217). On a theoretical level, Hale argued for a compromise in which Miskito consciousness was regarded both as an ideological apparatus with which to resist oppression and a hegemonic ideology that exposed them to other forms of oppression. Miskito insurgency could then be viewed at some level as being rooted in a rational response to real threats as well as a misguided rejection of real opportunities. Both right and wrong, both nearsighted and farsighted, the Miskito were, according to Hale, driven by what he called (inspired by Gramsci’s discussions of hegemony) “contradictory consciousness.”

Miskito contradictory consciousness was composed of two competing and partially intertwined elements that he labeled (1) Anglo affinity and (2) ethnic militancy. Miskito Anglo affinity referred to their historical over-identification with the Anglo-American world. Anglo affinity, more than simply a product of a strategic alliance with English and Americans, manifested itself in a series of beliefs that venerated Anglo-Americans, their cultures, and their companies. As a result of extended contact with Anglo-American institutions and the traders, soldiers, ministers, and managers that led these institutions, the Miskito people “came to accept some of those institutions’ self-justifying premises as their own” (Hale 1994b, 83). Thus, to be Miskito meant to believe that “Americans were benevolent allies, that North American companies brought unmitigated benefits . . . that white people are superior in phenotypes and intelligence” (ibid.).

Miskito ethnic militancy, which emerged and gained strength during the confrontation with the Sandinistas, represented that part of the Miskito worldview that opposed subordination to a “Spanish” central government. According to Hale, Miskito demands for control over eastern Nicaragua stemmed from their ethnic militancy (ibid., 81).

The status of Anglo affinity as an analytical concept remained nebulous throughout his analysis. Distancing himself from the “class/ethnic dichotomy” of some of his Sandinista colleagues, he insisted that this aspect of Miskito consciousness was not false. He explained that it
consisted “of ideas, values and notions of common sense” but was not a “discrete variable or attribute” nor “a set of ideas—much less an ideology.” However this ambiguous concept was defined, Hale found himself in the awkward position of being a White North American anthropologist (and a self-proclaimed radical one at that) who was placing the term “Anglo affinity” at the center of an analysis of a rebellious Indian group.22

Hale argued (in opposition to those who criticized the Indian movement and Indian ideology as false) that Miskito ethnic militancy actually was at one level very rational. Following Paul Willis’s analysis of the role of hegemony among working-class high school children in England, Hale argued that the Miskitos’ analysis of their situation and the reasons for their plight contained true and important “penetrations” as to the causes of their plight (Hale 1994b, 25). He stated: “I contend that the ethnic militancy of the 1980s contained a perceptive critique of the dominant society, an eloquent series of insights into the structural and historical factors underlying Miskitu oppression. It entailed an understanding of the workings of the system and gave rise both to profound feelings of empowerment and an explosive inclination for collective action” (ibid., 83).

On the other hand, these “penetrations” simultaneously manifested “limitations,” where the process of resisting one type of oppression causes one to embrace another form of oppression. Precisely in this Gramscian formulation of hegemony, in which resistance to one form of domination creates susceptibility to another form of domination, Hale offered his solution to the dilemma. An analysis that would incorporate hegemony (so defined) could both explain Miskito so-called backwardness (within a Sandinista framework) and positively analyze the Miskito worldview on its own terms.

Hale incorporated hegemony into his explanation of the Miskito/Sandinista clash of the 1980s in the following manner. The Miskito were historically caught up in two separate “spheres of inequality”: (1) North American-dominated economy and civil society, and (2) the oppressive Nicaraguan state (Hale 1990, 22). The Miskito had never openly resisted the Nicaraguan government on a large scale because, from the moment of Nicaraguan annexation of the region in 1894, the government had been complicit with United States companies and the United States government. This partnership between their historical allies
(North Americans) and their historical enemies (the Spanish Nicaraguans) caused Miskito ethnic militancy to remain dormant because their Anglo affinity stood in the way of the Miskito developing a critique of their economic situation that would have included the role of the US companies.

After the triumph of the Sandinistas in 1979, who came to power with an outspoken critique of “Yankee imperialism” (to quote the Sandinista epithet), North American capital fled and quickly relations between the Sandinistas and the US government soured. Miskito Anglo affinity no longer stood in the way of the Miskito resisting the Nicaraguan government. In the 1980s they aggressively asserted themselves in defiance of their oppression—an oppression that they now were able to attribute (albeit mistakenly for Hale) to communism and Pacific Nicaraguan oppression, and not North American capitalism. In this process, however, they could not help but “‘lock’ themselves into a cultural form that lacked the basis for critique of ongoing Anglo-American domination” (ibid., 23).

Although providing a more-nuanced explanation of Costeño rebellion against the Sandinista government, Hale’s analysis remained caught up in the Sandinista social science paradigm that posited Costeño backwardness as the key interpretive problem. Ultimately, his elaborate analysis of Miskito consciousness was aimed at demonstrating the irrationality of Miskito rebellion against the Sandinista state. He conceded that Miskito ethnic militancy responded to a real appraisal of a historical pattern of Nicaraguan governmental neglect and marginalization of the region that in part was supported by racist beliefs of Pacific Nicaraguans towards the Miskito (Hale 1994b, 82). However, by resisting this neglect and marginalization through forming affinities with the Anglo-American world, the Miskito exposed themselves to another, equally detrimental, form of oppression—namely, manipulation at the hands of the CIA and the US State Department. Modern Miskito militancy suffered acutely, according to Hale, from “the absence of a critical orientation toward the United States” (Hale 1991, 128). Its negative response to a perceived communist threat was the product of a misguided and thoroughly colonized worldview; to quote the provocative title of Hale’s contribution in a volume titled Decolonizing Anthropology, “They exploited us, but we didn’t feel it.”
It is ironic that Hale, who worked as an anthropologist for a Sandinista government that he admitted often treated the region as an internal colony and that was at war with his subjects during fieldwork (Hale 1994b, 13), should be included in a volume devoted to an “anthropology of liberation” that condemns, in the words of the editor, “anthropology’s collusion with and complicity in colonial and imperialist domination” (Harrison 1991, 1).

Hale’s 1994 book, *Resistance and Contradiction: Miskitu Indians and the Nicaraguan State, 1894–1987*, was widely praised, and many reviewers focused their commendations on his handling of the professional and ethical contradictions of his role in Nicaragua (Diskin 1995; Gudmundson 1995; Herlihy 1994; Weiss 1995). Indiana University’s Jeffrey Gould, for example, wrote that it “should become a model for politically engaged scholarship” (Gould 1995). However, anthropologist Mary Helms, who worked in the Mosquito Coast before the revolution and strongly opposed the Sandinista policies vis-à-vis the Miskito Indians, did not join in the chorus of praise for Hale’s political engagement. She wrote that “Hale’s Sandinista sympathies seem to have led him largely to ignore the most destructive aspects of Sandinista militancy particularly . . . where some forty Miskitu and Sumu communities were totally destroyed and their populations forced to flee in order to create a ‘sanitized’ zone” (Helms 1995).

The case of engaged anthropology in the Nicaraguan revolutionary context puts into uncomfortable focus the much-debated relationship between engaged activism and scientific detachment. Particularly telling is the critique leveled against the activist camp within this debate, to the effect that one anthropologist’s activism is another’s imperialism.

**Summary and Conclusion**

With regard to the crisis in the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua in the 1980s, social scientists and journalists, many of whom joined the groups involved as members or advisers, found themselves divided along cold-war lines. Pro-Sandinistas at times provided an apologist position for the so-called mistakes committed by the revolutionary government. These mistakes were said to be rooted in an alleged Marxian over-reliance on class analysis by Sandinista leaders—a bias that blinded them to the salience of ethnic factors. On a practical level, pro-Sandinistas supported
a reconciliation that would include provisions allowing for regional autonomy. On the level of theory, pro-Sandinistas employed a deconstructionist approach that endeavored to explain the reasons that the Miskito failed to understand the true sources of their exploitation. Pro-Sandinistas fell into a paternalistic interpretive trap in which they uncritically accepted the dilemma of Costeño “backwardness” as a key interpretive problem. Emphasizing the situational and changing nature of the Miskitos’ ethnic identity assertion, they critiqued what they regarded as essentialist approaches to ethnicity on the part of the Miskito and their supporters.

However, this approach did not sufficiently question the boundedness of the ethnic categories in question. In this sense, pro-Sandinistas fell prey to the same sort of essentialism that they vigorously critiqued. Pro-Sandinistas, some more than others, often neglected to fundamentally interrogate the assumption that the Mosquito Coast was divided into separate ethnic groups that each manifest distinct culture. Although many Sandinistas were remarkably sympathetic to the Miskito cause, the use of this deconstructionist theoretical approach was designed at least in part to discredit Costeño and Miskito aspirations.

On the other hand, anti-Sandinistas were divided into two camps that had very distinct motivations but shared a similar essentialist approach. The first camp, anticommunists, attributed Costeño resistance to Sandinista authoritarianism and the incompatibility of communist programs and Costeño culture. In practice, anticommunists made great efforts to prevent Sandinista-Costeño reconciliation.

The second camp, Indianists, opposed the integrative revolution of the Sandinistas on the grounds that, despite ideological differences with traditional nonrevolutionary nation-building projects, the Sandinistas program for the Atlantic Coast reproduced integrationist policies that were typical of governments in the Americas. They tended to admire the fear and respect inspired by Costeño bellicosity, which according to them stood in the face of five hundred years of Indian and African defeat at the hands of European and European-descended society. Wary of classic “regional autonomy” governmental arrangements, which had been routinely practiced with varying degrees of success in regions of the Soviet Union with significant ethnic minorities, they encouraged negotiation with the Sandinistas, but only negotiations
that would put true indigenous self-determination on the negotiating table.

Despite their divergent ideological and political motivations, anti-communists and Indianists constructed a similar framework that relied on romantic stereotypes of native societies. Each camp placed at the center of their respective analyses a set of stereotypical qualities that they presumed to be inherent to native societies. These qualities counter-productively reified ethnic boundaries to the point of ignoring other crucial elements of Costeño society. Rather than attempting to explain the ways in which seemingly “false” Costeño ideological structures (such as Anglo affinity or simply ethnic identity itself) worked themselves out in practice, Sandinista social scientists strove to delegitimize Costeño cultural self-representation.