Understanding the Revolutionary Success In Nicaragua of the Liberation Front (FSLN)

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Notice that there is no page number on the first page.
In “Structure, agency and the Nicaraguan Revolution,” Phil Ryan uses the actions of the FSLN in Nicaragua to support his approach to understanding the age-old debate of the role of structure versus human agency in determining revolutionary success. Ryan criticizes as overly simplistic the position that claims that human decisions cannot alter or engage with structural forces. He uses the example of the success of the FSLN to assert a sound argument that structure and agency should not be viewed as discreet categories, but must be studied hand-in-hand as interconnected forces that impact a revolutionary group's probability of success.

Ryan introduces his article with the contention that, contrary to common perception, structural and agential forces are not exclusive categories. Because structures are created by human action and because human agency must interact with societal structures, an account of one of these categories must necessarily engage the other. He emphasizes the complexity of the relationship between structure and agency and argues that some individuals and groups do have the capability to interact with and subtly mold structures that seem beyond individual influence, too immense to be swayed. He uses FSLN examples to illustrate his thesis regarding the link between structure and agency.

Ryan details the decisions and strategies of the FSLN and the conditions under which the movement evolved and persisted as evidence for his thesis that structural and agential factors are intertwined. Often he presents his own historical analysis and interpretation as refutation of another scholar's claims. He identifies the repressive nature of the Somoza regime as one important factor that eventually facilitated the regime's downfall at the hands of the Sandinistas. He argues that the creation of Los Doce, a group
of twelve prominent Nicaraguan citizens, including four members with secret ties to the FSLN, constitutes another important factor for the Sandinistas’ success. Los Doce used their influence to gather support and legitimacy for the FSLN through public pro-Sandinista statements that painted the organization in a moderate light, emphasizing its dedication to democracy and distancing it from communism. Ryan points to Los Doce as an example of the FSLN's deliberate construction of a moderate public image for itself, representing the interplay between Sandinista agency and the structural condition of popular opinion. Ryan identifies what most scholars have overlooked—what he claims to be the deliberate “cultivation of a moderate face” as part of a “conscious attempt by revolutionaries to preserve a key structural condition for their project,” that is, to preserve the nature of the Somoza regime (193). According to Ryan, such careful crafting of a legitimate public image had other far-reaching effects, influencing conditions that many scholars would categorize as “structural.” He argues that the Sandinistas' image both won them backing from Panama and Venezuela and influenced President Carter's decision to abstain from military intervention that could have halted the FSLN's 1979 victory over Somoza. The course of such international events and alliances also contributed prominently to the FSLN's success.

Ryan's biggest point of difference from the scholars he challenges is that the strategic decisions of the FSLN directly and consciously interacted with structural conditions and facilitated the movement's eventual success. Not only did the FSLN effectively react to structural conditions, but they also deliberately sought to preserve those conditions most conducive to an FSLN victory. Such a strategy meant sustaining the character of the Somoza regime, particularly its relatively responsive relationship
with business elites, who, if sufficiently frustrated by the regime, could threaten the FSLN's rise to power. Ryan asserts that FSLN leaders were fully cognizant of the need to sustain specific revolutionary conditions that would facilitate their own victory and ascension to power over any other opposition group. The FSLN worked to prevent potential rival opposition groups from rising “prematurely” (before the FSLN was ready) and overpowering the Sandinista movement. The FSLN's manipulation of the specific social groups and its conscious effort to retain revolutionary conditions in Nicaragua until the group was poised to take power demonstrate the organization's extreme attention to specific circumstances and its admirable ability to interpret and shape larger structural forces.

Ryan provides evidence specific to the Sandinistas' situation and actions that support his thesis on the important interplay between structural and agential forces. He intertwines these two forces by logically and effectively linking FSLN strategy to structural realities in Nicaragua and abroad. Not only did the FSLN skillfully adapt to its environment, but Ryan asserts that it also worked actively to preserve and to some extent to manipulate the conditions that were most crucial to their success. The strategies and actions of the Sandinistas, the pre-existing national and international conditions, and the structures that the FSLN was able to influence and control all factored importantly in the Sandinista victory in Nicaragua.