

## Book Review

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Karen Kampwirth, *LGBTQ Politics in Nicaragua: Revolution, Dictatorship, and Social Movements*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2022. Illustrations, abbreviations, bibliography, index, 360 pp.; hardcover \$50, ebook \$50.

LGBTQ+ organizing in the Central American region is not a new phenomenon, and activists have been documenting their own lives and struggles in magazines, radio shows, conferences, independent studies, and publications for decades. However, with few notable exceptions, the topic has received little attention from the anglophone academy. Karen Kampwirth's ambitious book *LGBTQ Politics in Nicaragua* argues that the absence of certain factors that scholars have long associated with the emergence of LGBTQ+ rights movements, such as high degrees of urbanization, industrial capitalist development, and democratizing institutions, has precluded LGBTQ+ politics in the region from receiving due attention. Her book offers a necessary corrective, charting the emergence of the LGBTQ+ movement in Nicaragua over half a century of struggle.

The book is based on two years of field research, during which the author conducted hundreds of interviews with LGBTQ+ activists and participated in public gatherings, private meetings, and other events related to LGBTQ+ life in Nicaragua. It proceeds in chronological order, documenting LGBTQ+ politics during three distinct moments in Nicaragua's recent political history: the Sandinista Popular Revolution (1979–90), the era of democratic transition and neoliberalization (1990–2006), and the first decade of the Sandinista National Liberation Front's (FSLN's) return to power (2007–17). For each period, Kampwirth analyzes activists' efforts to organize themselves and effect social change, official and unofficial policies toward LGBTQ+ people, and the shifting relationship between LGBTQ+ organizations and the state, among other themes. Kampwirth achieves an impressively granular account of Nicaraguan politics seen from the perspective of the LGBTQ+ community without losing sight of the broader regional and global context. Throughout, she makes comparisons that enable nuanced theoretical arguments about the conditions for emergence of LGBTQ+ movements and the politics of LGBTQ+ backlash amid the current global wave of authoritarian backsliding.

Chapter 1 is dedicated to LGBTQ+ life during the revolutionary decade (1979–90). Thousands of LGBTQ+ Nicaraguans joined a broad, multiclass coalition in overthrowing the Somoza dictatorship and actively participated in all aspects of the Sandinista Popular Revolution that followed. Kampwirth finds that during those

years, the FSLN was open in recruiting members regardless of their gender expression or sexual orientation. But after the revolutionary triumph, the Sandinistas made a concerted effort to rid Nicaragua of the “sexual disorder” associated with the Somoza dictatorship, which included banning sex work, shutting down gay bars, and as Kampwirth says, “making life difficult for some LGBTQ Nicaraguans” (47). This, however, did not mean that the FSLN adopted a consistent antigay stance. Through the testimonies of LGBTQ+ people, Kampwirth argues that the FSLN deployed many different and often contradictory policies on the matter. The testimonies gathered in this chapter suggest that the experience of gays and lesbians organized within the revolution was highly dependent on their class background, their position in the FSLN, and perhaps most crucially, who their superiors were, alluding to the surprisingly decentralized nature of revolutionary governance in Nicaragua.

Chapter 2 traces what Kampwirth calls the cultural revolution of the 1980s. It considers how LGBTQ+ identities were negotiated in public space and on state television, as well as the role of study abroad opportunities and the International Solidarity movement in consolidating a desire among LGBTQ+ Nicaraguans to organize themselves within the revolution. The chapter shows that when LGBTQ+ Sandinistas with unimpeachable revolutionary trajectories attempted to form pride group in the mid-1980s, they were accused of being counterrevolutionaries or foreign spies and were met with the iron fist of the revolutionary state. Most interestingly, these same activists were called back a few years later by the revolution’s Minister of Health to lead an HIV/AIDS prevention initiative. The experience suggests that the revolution had space for LGBTQ+ activists so long as they were mobilized under the purview of the FSLN and squarely within the tasks set out by the revolutionary vanguard.

In Chapter 3, Kampwirth shows that after the revolution lost power to the right-wing coalition led by Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, members of the LGBTQ+ community, like most Nicaraguans, experienced a loss of economic rights because of the implementation of structural adjustment policies that privatized public goods and decimated public spending. Paradoxically, though, the regime transition also created new opportunities to organize autonomously for civil rights. A burgeoning autonomous feminist movement emerged, and parallel to it, an incipient LGBTQ+ rights movement. However, it was met almost immediately with a conservative backlash. The Barrios de Chamorro administration promoted gender and sexual hierarchies and expanded an existing antisodomy law to include punishing not only sexual acts but even discourse about homosexuality. This produced one of the most homophobic legislations in the hemisphere and curtailed LGBTQ+ organizing. Kampwirth argues that although the antisodomy law’s chilling effect on the movement is difficult, if not impossible, to measure, this context nonetheless produced key alliances between feminist and LGBTQ+ organizations, and LGBTQ+ organizing became increasingly broad in its demands, going beyond HIV/AIDS prevention work to include lesbian, gay, and transgender social, economic, and political rights.

Chapter 4 takes place in the context of Daniel Ortega's return to power in 2007 with a transformed image and rhetoric, fostering alliances with former adversaries, including the leadership of the Catholic and Evangelical Churches. In line with these alliances with conservative groups, the FSLN stripped women of civil liberties through the abolition of therapeutic abortion and advocated for the defense of "family values." However, it also restored some civil liberties to the LGBTQ+ community by eliminating the antisodomy law, codifying antidiscrimination provisions, and making efforts to include LGBTQ+ people in the party through the Sandinista Youth organization. Kampwirth argues that what may appear as a contradictory antiwomen and pro-LGBTQ+ stance can be explained if seen from the perspective of the FSLN's longstanding confrontation with the feminist movement. Feminists had pursued autonomy from the FSLN after the end of the revolution and had largely supported Daniel Ortega's stepdaughter, Zoilamérica Narváez, when she came forward in 1998 and accused him of decades of sexual abuse. Kampwirth sees the FSLN's efforts to incorporate elements of the LGBTQ+ movement into its clientelistic network as a way to undermine the feminist movement by producing a rift between it and "their natural allies in the LGBTQ community" (176).

Chapter 5 reflects on what made the expansion of LGBTQ+ organizing possible during Ortega's first decade back in power, analyzing more closely the relationship between LGBTQ+ organizing and the FSLN party, among other factors. The movement gained visibility for queer people and small but significant advances in civil rights, such as the creation of a special ombudsperson for sexual diversity, the first time such a thing had existed in Central America. But overall, Kampwirth argues, during this decade the FSLN proceeded with simultaneous homoprotectionist and homophobic policies. For example, in 2013, a new family code was passed that explicitly refused to acknowledge the existence of nonheteronormative families. Moreover, persistent efforts by transgender activists to lobby for a gender identity law have been ignored. But for the most part, the FSLN did not repress LGBTQ+ organizing efforts outright, a key factor in the decade's boom.

The book concludes by examining the consolidation of a family regime in Nicaragua and the politics of LGBTQ+ backlash in a global perspective. Kampwirth argues that in contrast with authoritarian projects that have used the LGBTQ+ community as a scapegoat, the Ortega regime's efforts to integrate LGBTQ+ organizations into clientelist networks should be understood as a form of "pinkwashing"—an effort to adopt liberal policies to gain legitimacy with international donors and draw attention away from other problematic aspects of the policy agenda. Overall, Kampwirth demonstrates that it is difficult, if not impossible, to understand Ortega's consolidation of power without considering the regime's LGBTQ+ policies. The pursuit of legitimacy through "pinkwashing," the aim of reducing the threat of the feminist opposition by weakening their alliances, and the attempt to rein in LGBTQ+ demands by co-opting them to appease conservative allies all appear central to this effort.

One of the book's many strengths comes from its long durational approach. Analysts of Ortega's return to power in Nicaragua often understand the new regime as enacting a radical departure from the Sandinista revolutionary tradition. This book's attentiveness to the relationship between the ruling party and social movements across time shows important continuities between the two regimes, including the FSLN's ambivalent position with regard to LGBTQ+ rights and its disdain for autonomous social organizing more generally. LGBTQ+ activists working within or adjacent to the FSLN in the postrevolutionary moment make clear that the party has continued to silo activists to a narrow set of acceptable concerns, including visibility in party-sponsored "shows" and beauty pageants, deferring economic, legal, and political rights for LGBTQ+ people (237). This echoes the FSLN's tolerance of LGBTQ+ activists in the limited context of their role in HIV/AIDS prevention under the purview of the Ministry of Health during the last years of the revolutionary decade. Moreover, while Kampwirth rightly shows that LGBTQ+ organizations could and did organize with relative freedom between 2007 and 2017, chapter 5 also shows that the FSLN attempted to place important constraints on autonomous organizing, including strongarming international donors and forcing the closure of an LGBTQ+-allied organization that played a key role in bolstering organizing during that decade.

Still, some questions remain open for future research. One may ask the extent to which the FSLN's efforts to co-opt the LGBTQ+ movement and produce a rift with its natural allies in the feminist movement were successful, and how durable were the effects of these efforts. Some of Kampwirth's evidence of overlap and innovative collaboration among feminist and LGBTQ+ organizations suggests important forms of resistance to the FSLN's co-optation efforts. The book's epilogue further suggests that LGBTQ+ individuals and organizations were key participants in the 2018 wave of popular protests against the Ortega regime, pointing perhaps to the limits of the FSLN's clientelist practices.

Kampwirth's book is an invaluable resource for any scholar or activist interested in how social movements get made, the legacies of revolution in Nicaragua, and LGBTQ+ politics around the world.

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