

Matt Deline

C LT 445

Professor Jaffe

17 December 2008

### **Sandino: Martyr, Hero, *Nation***

#### **Ernesto Cardenal, "Zero Hour"**

Ernesto Cardenal's modern Nicaraguan historical epic "Zero Hour" is undeniably written from a Marxist perspective. The retelling of the rise of corporate presences in Nicaragua to express the destructive effect they had upon class structure and wealth distribution in Nicaragua is chilling. Not only did they drive the gap between the proletariat and bourgeois groups further apart, but the conditions created by the impossible price requirements set on one of the country's main exports (bananas) created a situation "ripe" for the eradication of the entire working class. Cardenal describes "hunger along the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua ... [where] the farmers are put in jail for not selling at 30 cents" (Cardenal 3). This is in direct contrast to a time when the "*campesinos* of Honduras used to carry money in their hats / when the *campesinos* sowed their seed / and the Hondurans were masters of their land" (Cardenal 1). Cardenal shows this difference in order to express a sense of loss, as well as what can potentially be regained.

The oppressive nature of the corporatized state of Nicaragua sets the stage for the main focus of the "story" within "Zero Hour," the conflict between Sandino and Samozá. Sandino who "never owned any property," whom Samozá called "an outlaw," where "at banquets Moncada called him a bandit," and whom the American Minister claims that "he isn't one ... but we call him a bandit technically," is a figure who

represents the marginalized and disenfranchised members of Nicaragua's working class (Cardenal 5-6). Samozá's (and other figures of power) definition of Sandino as a "*bandido*" reflects a particular perspective (Cardenal 5). They use negative terms to discourage support from the Nicaraguan people, much like the recent use of the term "terrorist" as a blanket term used to describe American political threats of varying origins.

However, Cardenal's representation of Sandino and other rebels is one of heroic, yet tragically doomed proportions. When he quotes Moncada stating that "anyone who sets out to be a savior winds up on the Cross," he is foreshadowing the fate of the *first* movement of rebellion against Samozá (Cardenal 4). Cardenal expresses a reverence for the "happy army, with guitars and hugs. / A love song was its battle hymn" (Cardenal 5). The rebels were united by necessity, a desperation forced upon them by the growing depletion of their material resources (they *belonged* to corporate entities). Cardenal's description of their armaments is the most depressing aspect of their struggle. The "hoarding of each bullet as though it were made of gold; / with mortars made out of pipes / ... with hand grenades made of sardine cans," expresses the Marxist slant that serves as a basis for the viewpoint in "Zero Hour" (Cardenal 5). This is because the rebels are not in *control* of the means of production, and therefore closed off from the easiest avenues of obtaining military arms. They can't buy weaponry from the black market without monetary assets, as they have "no pay except food and clothing and arms," and are instead forced to rely on the limited resources *given* to them (Cardenal 5).

This sense of unity present in the rebels is central to Cardenal's vision for a positive future for Nicaragua. The rebels "were all united until they were all killed," but they died together, and in a sense, all wound up "on the Cross" (Cardenal 4-5). While this rebellion appears to be an act of futility, Cardenal uses their deaths as a means to provide hope in the poem. The "kid they caught at night sticking up posters [stating] SAMOZA IS A THIEF" shows a shift in perspective in the Nicaraguan youth (Cardenal 13). The child represents the "seeds" of change within the nation, and the reversal from Sandino to Samozá being referred to as a *bandido* is the growth as a result of that change. This process of natural growth is the image that Cardenal ends "Zero Hour" with. He states that "the hero is born when he dies / and green grass is reborn from the ashes" (Cardenal 13). The hero is both Sandino and his rebels, and the green grass is Nicaragua, and Cardenal leaves the reader with a statement that despite impossible odds, change *can* occur.

### Works Cited

- Cardenal, Ernesto. "Zero Hour." Zero Hour and Other Documentary Poems. New Directions, 1980.