Visions of solidarity:
U.S. peace activists in Nicaragua from war to women's activism and globalization /

Clare Weber

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Visions of Solidarity is currently the only study of peace activist's transformation from an anti-war struggle to an anti-globalization struggle. It explores the power dynamics between citizen activists in the North and South, examining efforts at reframing issues of social justice over time, and highlighting transnational feminist politics and agency at the local level.

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When war raged and the goal was peace, grassroots solidarity in Nicaragua was relatively clear-cut: it focused on the urgent need to end the violence. But when the war was over and the causes of suffering became diffuse and global, how did peaceminded organisations recalibrate their focus and actions? Clare Weber explores this challenging question by studying the transformation of two US-based organizations from anti-war activism in Nicaragua to antiglobalisation activism, showing how these organisations have struggled to answer the question and re-frame their work.

US citizen-opposition to official US support for the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua and the subsequent counterrevolutionary war resulted in the formation of two US-based organisations, the Wisconsin Coordination Council on Nicaragua (WCCN) and Witness for Peace (WFP). WCCN connected citizens of the North and South to challenge US policy on Nicaragua, while WFP offered US citizens as unarmed bodyguards for Nicaraguan activists who were under threat. Both organisations’ anti-war activism rested heavily on the privileges of white, middle-class, US citizenship.

But the war ended in 1990, and neoliberal economic globalisation was becoming the new foe of the poor, who lacked the means to engage meaningfully in political and economic arenas. In these new times, WCCN and WFP were forced to re-examine their purpose and adjust their strategies. Together with their Nicaraguan partners, WCCN and WFP began to see that it was no longer sufficient (if indeed it had ever been) to concentrate on challenging imperialist US foreign policy. Rather, they had to connect oppression abroad to oppression at home. Unwittingly, perhaps, they also began to discern the influences of race, class, and gender within their own organisations.

Visions of Solidarity describes the transformation of WCCN and WFP, using personal accounts from leaders, members, and partners in both Nicaragua and the USA. The author, a human-rights activist who has worked in both countries and has intimate knowledge of the two organisations, strives to understand the makeover of grassroots transnational activism in the new age of globalisation. She emphasises the influences of privilege derived from a biased concept of citizenship, and considers how that privilege shapes solidarity from the Global North to the Global South. The book investigates the benefits and drawbacks of using white privilege to access political power, and the difficulty of framing activism across national borders.

Ultimately, Weber makes a convincing case that the two organisations were struggling to move from gender-neutral, anti-war activism (which was ultimately defined by and understood through masculine frameworks) to activism that recognised the gendered effects of neoliberal economics. Within this struggle, WCCN and WFP had to challenge internal disparities of power between men and women, between white people and people of colour, and between those who were richer and poorer. The author maintains that such negotiations are difficult precisely because they demand a personalised reflection on oppression within a society, not solely across North–South borders.

Nevertheless, working through this challenge and transforming organisations can lead to more rewarding transnational activism. With successful re-framing, organisations can maintain their relevance in the new global context, where it is no longer enough to focus on oppression in the Global South without understanding its parallels and ties to oppression in the North. The author posits that for WCCN and WFP both the process and outcome of rethinking their work have ultimately led to more equitable North–South organisational relationships that are successful in advancing justice as a necessary element of peace.

Alas, Weber’s treatment of what ultimately is a very interesting subject—the crossgender, cross-race, cross-class, and crossborder negotiation of solidarity—is narrowly focused on Nicaragua and becomes rather lengthy and somewhat tedious. Given her personal experience with the US–Nicaraguan solidarity movement, one imagines that she could recount many anecdotes that would illustrate her points and at the same time add more depth and texture to the book. The use of testimony from other people involved with WCCN and WFP is valuable, however, and lends legitimacy to her study.

Visions of Solidarity will appeal most to activists, practitioners, and scholars with some knowledge of Latin American and/or international social and justice movements. Such readers are likely to find themselves making connections from the experiences of WCCN and WFP in Nicaragua to other situations. Regrettably, Weber only touches upon such connections and barely considers how other solidarity movements around the world may be shifting. Indeed, if solidarity movements are beginning to realise that their internal practices are as differentially oppressive as global politics and economics, and are beginning to change their strategies as a result, one hopes that Weber’s next book will venture into her thesis more deeply. There would certainly be messages for justice and peace activists to consider.

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