

Nicaragua Notes: The Watchmen, the Hunters and Gatherers, the Street Vendors

April 19, 2013

The Watchmen

In Managua one finds uniformed guards in front of the banks, in the shopping malls like Metro Centro, in the grocery stores, and anywhere else there is likely to be substantial amounts of money. These men have the status bestowed by a uniform and the authority commanded by carrying a pistol. One could say that they are the elite of their profession, but they are far outnumbered by the *lumpenguardia* found on every middle class street of the capital city.

Thousands of men—and I would not be surprised to learn that there were tens of thousands of them—spend their days sitting in front of houses, offices, and small businesses in Nicaragua. Some are old men in their sixties, some men in the prime of their working lives, in their thirties or forties, while others are young men and boys in their teens and twenties. They sit on cans or metal drums, on plastic chairs or folding chairs, or sometimes simply on a piece of cardboard on the ground and perhaps another against a tree for support. Every once in a while one comes across an actual guard shack made of wood or metal, though the guards never stand in them because they are too hot, given that the temperature here is generally between 90 and 99 degrees Fahrenheit.

While a few of these men wear uniforms, ninety-five percent are dressed in civilian clothes, and while every once in a while you come across one with a nightstick, the great majority are unarmed. They are the *vigilancia* or the *guardia* who protect the homes and enterprises of the middle class here. I passed a young man today, perhaps 18 or 20 years old, a fellow I see every day, sitting on his folding chair. I asked him how many days a week he worked. "Seven days," he told me. "And how many hours?" I asked. "Twenty-four hours a day," he replied. "How much are you paid?" I asked. "Two thousand córdobas every 15 days," he told me. That amounts to \$83 for two weeks work. Half of all Nicaraguans live on two dollars a day, or about \$60 a month, though while his wages are slightly higher, it is a quite dead-end job.

The guards are there because of the lack of safety in Managua's streets. While Nicaragua has little violent crime in comparison with other Central American countries or with the United States, it does have smalltime criminals who engage in burglaries and robberies. So virtually anyone who enters in the upper middle class and lives in Managua will if they can hire someone to watch their home or business, to protect them from common crime. For the same reason their houses and shops are surrounded by spiked fences topped with razor wire, and while the guard sits outside, the pit bull stands inside. The crime they fear is, of course, a result of the unemployment, underemployment and low wages which have been the constant features of the Nicaraguan economy for hundreds of years.

The men who sit on the cans and chairs in front of the homes and businesses contribute nothing to the country's productive output. They make nothing and serve nothing. If like the boy I questioned they work seven days a week and 24 hours a day, then they study nothing and learn nothing. These thousands and perhaps tens of thousands of guards represent an enormous waste of human intelligence and energy. They sit, bored and lonely, living testament to the Nicaraguan government's failure to provide either security for the inhabitants of Managua or jobs for the huge number of unemployed men and women.

Hunters and Gatherers

Hunters and gatherers roam the streets of Managua. Men, women and children drag through the streets huge nylon bags like those sacks once used by cotton harvesters in the countryside. The hunters stop at garbage cans and go through the trash looking for recyclable metal and plastic cans. They rifle through the refuse throwing what is salvageable into the sacks and move on through the streets to the next barrel. If they are lucky, they will make a dollar a day doing this. They are not so different from the men and women I have seen doing the same thing in Los Angeles, Chicago and New York.

Just as in the Nicaraguan countryside, here in the capital of Managua one sees men and women scouring the streets for firewood which is used for cooking in the metal shacks that are the typical housing of hundreds of thousands of Managuans. This morning I saw two women, they looked like a mother and a daughter, carrying firewood through the streets, the remains of a tree recently felled in the neighborhood. An older woman told me that she believed that the city had lost many of its trees over the years to the poor who chopped them down to get firewood. They are like others I have seen in Mexico and in Bolivia, men and women carrying cords of wood on their backs and shoulders.

Everywhere one walks in Nicaragua one notices the open holes in the sidewalk that were once covered by iron lids, their absence a constant hazard to the pedestrian. Decades ago early iron hunters and gatherers stole all of the lids and they have never been replaced. Similarly with the plaques placed on monuments to honor the heroes of the revolution; they have all been stolen by the bronze age hunters and gatherers. Almost all of these metal objects were held down by special locking devices and one-way screws, their theft a tribute to the ingenuity of those who stole them.

The most common hunting and gathering, of course, is the search for money itself. Every day, whether I am driving or walking, beggars hold out their hands to me. There is the couple, both of whom are crippled, who have begged from me in the neighborhood where I live. There are the old men and women, some walking with canes, who ask, "Will you help me, I need something to eat?" The elderly, the handicapped, and young children line the busy street corners, at the entrances to the markets, and any other busy location. The passersby often give them a few córdobas (it takes 24.4 of them to make a single dollar). If they can collect 50 córdobas in a day, as I said before, they will have the equivalent of the typical wage earned by half of all Nicaraguans.

The Street Vendors

Thousands upon thousands of Nicaraguans prowl the streets of Managua selling goods and services to make a living. The lucky ones ride in carts pulled by horses—there are 15,000 horse carts in Managua—though many others without animals to pull their loads strain their own backs to push or pull carts through the city streets. They shout out their wares as they go: papayas, mangoes, plátanos, bananas, and a variety of other tropical fruits. I saw a woman the other day dragging a cart of pineapples through the streets, her small child asleep in the wagon amidst the fruit. Many children are raised in a cornucopia of fruit, but raised nonetheless in poverty and hunger. Some men and women go through the streets with baskets on their heads selling bread or tortillas. Today a man in my neighborhood was selling pork and sausages from a bag he carried in the 99 degree temperature, reaching in to draw a sample out with his bare hand. Where there is more pedestrian traffic there are the women and men selling lottery tickets, everyone a winner.

At the large intersections, as in so many other large cities throughout the world, young men and boys rush to squirt soapy water on the windshield and then squeegee it off, hoping to earn a few córdobas. One corner I pass frequently has perhaps twenty fellows at the four corners competing to clean the cars windshields. Others, often younger ones, simply come to the window to ask for a

handout, perhaps because they don't yet have the capital to buy a squeegee or perhaps because they don't yet have a long enough reach to do the windows. These window washers are almost universally friendly and polite, painstaking and proud of their work, and take their few coins as their well-earned pay. They seem to be proud to be working, to be earning their keep. Many of these youth should be in school, of course, but they know that finishing school, or at least going as far as they can, won't guarantee them a job. These young men are willing and able to work, and this is the best work that their government and their society can give them.

Finally, we have those who have stands or stalls near the shopping malls and major bus stops or terminals such as that near the University of Central America. Displayed in the stalls are all sorts of little items: cell phone cases, plastic wrist watches, combs, hair clips, you name it. There are always a few electronics stalls selling speakers, power cords, and other items. Where the music is blasting they are selling pirate CDs of all the latest music from Latin America and some from the United States. Another stall nearby sells pirate DVDs of the latest films. The mark-up on these items is small, but in a day, in some of them, the vendors can make several dollars, which is more than one can make in most jobs available to them.

We should also add to this list the streetwalkers, those selling sex, in the "beauty salons" and "massage parlors" and in the "auto hotels," all of them bordellos. In and around the casinos one sees women dressed in provocative clothing and making suggestive remarks to signal their trade. They sell their sexual services at the risk of their safety and health, should they encounter a violent John or a man who failing to use a condom infects them with a sexually transmitted disease. Of course, there are also male prostitutes and transvestites and street sex vendors for all tastes, one simply has to look around. They can be found around the casinos and the nightclubs, but also in the neighborhoods, with services available to every preference and pocketbook.

The world of the watchmen, the hunters and gatherers, and the street vendors is the world of tens of thousands of Nicaraguans who live in the informal economy and some who can't even find a place there. Unemployment in Nicaragua is hard to measure since so many have seasonal, part-time, or temporary employment. But any observer can see that many people's lives are being wasted in underemployment, exploitative employment, or degrading employment which is tedious, trying, sometimes dangerous, and seldom rewarding. If there is someone left who still thinks Nicaragua has a left wing government, simply look around at this waste of human talent, energy, and possibility.

Michael Kelly is an American writer living in Nicaragua. This is the fourth of an occasional series of Nicaragua Notes.