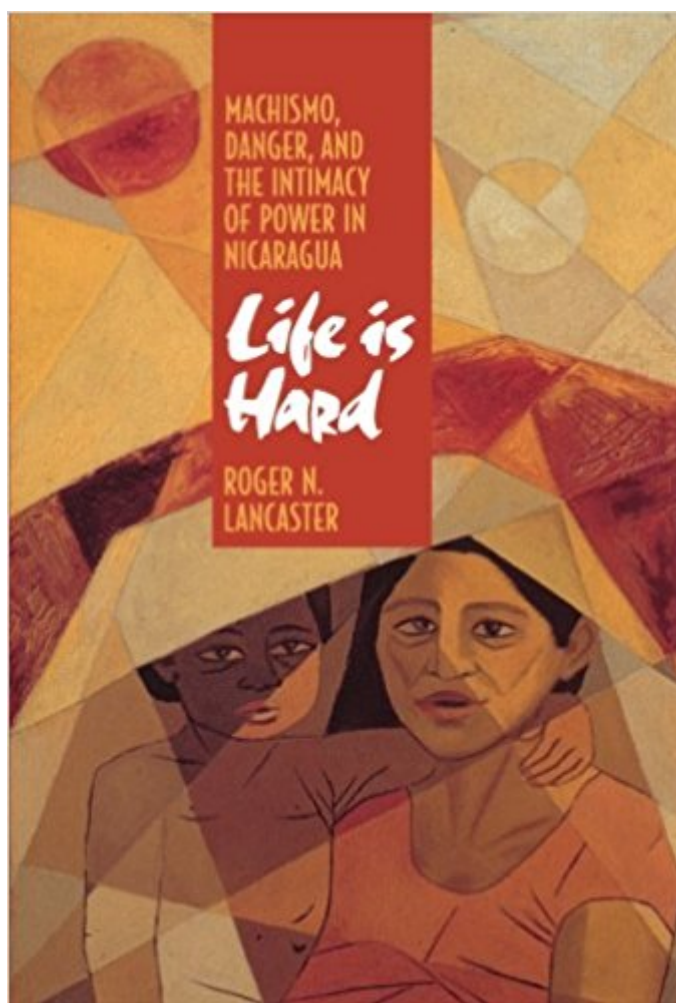


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Life Is Hard: Machismo, Danger, And The Intimacy Of Power In Nicaragua



Synopsis

"Rambo took the barrios by storm: Spanish videotapes of the movie were widely available, and nearly all the boys and young men had seen it, usually on the VCRs of their family's more affluent friends. . . . As one young Sandinista commented, 'Rambo is like the Nicaraguan soldier. He's a superman. And if the United States invades, we'll cut the marines down like Rambo did.' And then he mimicked Rambo's famous war howl and mimed his arc of machine gun fire. We both laughed."#151;from the book

There is a Nicaragua that Americans have rarely seen or heard about, a nation of jarring political paradoxes and staggering social and cultural flux. In this Nicaragua, the culture of machismo still governs most relationships, insidious racism belies official declarations of ethnic harmony, sexual relationships between men differ starkly from American conceptions of homosexuality, and fascination with all things American is rampant. Roger Lancaster reveals the enduring character of Nicaraguan society as he records the experiences of three families and their community through times of war, hyperinflation, dire shortages, and political turmoil. Life is hard for the inhabitants of working class barrios like Doña Flora, who expects little from men and who has reared her four children with the help of a constant female companion; and life is hard for Miguel, undersized and vulnerable, stigmatized as a cochino#151;a "faggot"#151;until he learned to fight back against his brutalizers. Through candid discussions with young and old Nicaraguans, men and women, Lancaster constructs an account of the successes and failures of the 1979 Sandinista Revolution, documenting the effects of war and embargo on the cultural and economic fabric of Nicaraguan society. He tracks the break up of families, surveys informal networks that allow female-headed households to survive, explores the gradual transformation of the culture of machismo, and reveals a world where heroic efforts have been stymied and the best hopes deferred. This vast chronicle is sustained by a rich theoretical interpretation of the meanings of ideology, power, and the family in a revolutionary setting. Played out against a backdrop of political travail and social dislocation, this work is a story of survival and resistance but also of humor and happiness. Roger Lancaster shows us that life is hard, but then too, life goes on.

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Customer Reviews

"This brilliant ethnography is an important contribution to the study of the Nicaraguan revolution, and may become the definitive analysis of the country's complex extra-economic social relations."--"Report on the Americas

Roger N. Lancaster teaches anthropology and cultural studies at George Mason University, where he directs the Cultural Studies Ph.D. program. He edited (with Micaela di Leonardo) *The Gender/Sexuality Reader* (1997) and is the author of *The Trouble with Nature: Sex in Science and Popular Culture* (California, 2003).

This was required text for my Anthropology course. Well written ethnography. With the kindle edition, the text looks really good. The font is a very classic sans. Well made edition. This doesn't display page numbers, which was annoying for when I have to use it for discussion, but the quality of the book makes me feel like it deserves 5 stars.

When people want to know what everyday life in Nicaragua was like during what Eduardo Galeano has called "the time of beautiful madness," they invariably turn to Lancaster's book. *Life is Hard* gives an up-close, personal, and often poignant accounting of the experiences of three working-class families during the Sandinista period. But this accessible, engaging book is also more than a classic ethnography. The latter chapters (whose theoretical arguments ineluctably flow from the more descriptive chapters) provide a highly readable short course on much of what is most exciting in twentieth century cultural theory: semiotics, deconstruction, neomarxism, and the origins of queer theory. Over the course of the book, the author takes the reader through various vignettes, life stories, and analyses. At the same time, Lancaster reveals different facets of himself, in context-appropriate passages: socialist, Southern working-class origins, white, gay... The result is

an implicit argument about how complex, compound, and contingent identities are. The result is also that alert readers get a very good sense of how the author's experiences shaped his research questions- and how they affected his interactions with Nicaraguan informants spanning a broad social gamut: single mothers, soldiers, adolescent boys and girls, "macho" men, and a number of gay men (clearly quoted, sometimes at length, in the chapter on same-sex relations). Lancaster's overarching analysis is complex. In a feminist vein, he argues that the Sandinista revolution failed, in part, because its leadership failed to undertake an effective renovation of gender relations and family life. In a gay studies vein, the author shows how the everyday stigmatization of male same-sex relations regulates and supports conceptions of "appropriate" manhood (nobody wants to be called a "queer"!)- and how, in no small part, it was this quotidian homophobia that undermined Sandinista efforts at changing family life. The nuanced picture Lancaster draws of family life in a culture of machismo, and the innovative analysis he develops of how same-sex relations function in that culture, have been corroborated by a host of scholars working in different fields: Tomas Almaguer, Ana Alonso, Annick Prieuer, Don Kulick, David Whisnant, Richard Parker, and many others. With good reason, this important book received both the Society for the Study of Social Problems' C. Wright Mills Award, and the Society of Lesbian and Gay Anthropologists' Ruth Benedict Prize. I should add: this book has been used in several undergraduate and graduate courses I've taken. Invariably, students vote this the best-realized ethnography in the class.

An interesting analysis of women in Managua during the Sandinista era takes up most of the book. Lancaster does much to explain how the combination of US aggression and Sandinista ineptitude wearied Nicaraguans and stranded many women. The book is padded with two academic articles. These not only clash in style with the rest of the book, but are based almost entirely on conjecture rather than ethnography. One is on race, the other on homosexuality. Astonishingly, Lancaster who eventually admits (that is the most accurate verb for how HE presents it) he is gay, did not study males who have sex with males in Nicaragua. Joseph Carrier, Don Kulick, Annick Prieur, and others have done ethnographic work with males who have sex with males, while Lancaster just recycles dubious majority culture conceptions of shame and honor. The data on racial conceptions are also very thin. In sum, good on women and how the revolution was lived in a Managua barrio, but the last part of the book is marred by stereotyped fantasies about race and homosexuality.

This book will charm your heart and open your eyes to life, love, and pain in Nicaragua. Written by an anthropologist who was an intimate member of a small, middle class community in Managua, his

stories are full of emotion, power, and a definite ring of truth. If you want to learn more about Nicaraguan culture and life from a verifiable source, this book is for you. A must-read for any traveler or potential immigrant to the region.

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