THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SEXUAL PRACTICES

In Nicaragua one encounters a folk category, the cochón. It can be given as either a male (el cochón) or female (la cochón, la cochóna) noun; either case typically refers to a male. This term is loosely translated as queer or faggot by visiting English-speakers. Educated Nicaraguans, if they are fluent in international terminologies, are apt to freely translate the term in the same fashion, giving gay or homosexual as its English equivalents. It becomes clear on closer inspection, however, that the phenomenon in question is markedly different from its Anglo-American counterparts of whatever shade. In the first place, the term is less clearly derogatory, although it can be derogative and usually is. It can also be neutral and descriptive. I have even heard it employed in a particular sort of praising manner by ordinary Nicaraguans; viz., "We must go to Carnaval this year and see the cochones. The cochones there are very, very beautiful."

Second, and more important, the term marks and delimits a set of sexual practices that overlaps but is clearly not identical to our own notion of the homosexual. The term specifies only certain practices, in certain contexts, and in certain manners. Some acts that we would describe as homosexual bear neither stigma nor an accompanying identity of any special sort whatsoever; others clearly mark their practitioner as a cochón.

If North American homosexuality is most characteristically an oral phenomenon, at least nowadays, Nicaraguan homosexual practice is decidedly anal in preference. The lexicon of male insult clearly reflects this anal basic route of intercourse in Nicaragua, even as the North American lexicon reflects the oral route. But more is involved here than a mere shifting of the sites of erotic practice. With the exception of a few well-defined contexts (e.g., prisons), where the rule may be suspended, homosexual activity of any sort defines the North American homosexual. In Nicaragua, it is passive anal intercourse that alone defines the cochón. Oral or manual practices receive little social attention, and at any rate, nonanal practices appear far less significant in the repertoire of actually practiced homosexual activities.
The term cochón itself appears indicative of the nature of that status and role. None of my informants was certain about the origin of the term; it is a "Nica," or a word peculiar to Nicaraguan popular Spanish. Moreover, one encounters different pronunciations in various neighborhoods, classes, and regions, so there can really be no agreed-upon spelling of the word. I have heard it rendered cuchón, and even colchón. The last suggests the probable origin of the word: colchón, or mattress. That is, as one of my informants suggested when prompted to speculate on the origin of the word, "You get on top of him like a mattress."

This summarizes the nature of that status as well as any phrase could but it also points to the question: "Who gets on top of him like a mattress?" The answer is not, "Only other cochones." Indeed, this type of relationship is relatively rare, and, where it occurs, is generally a short-term affair. It is typically a noncochón male who plays the active role in sexual intercourse: a machista, or hombre-hombre, a manly man. Either term designates a masculine man in the popular lexicon; cochones frequently use either term to designate potential sexual partners. Relationships of this type, between cochones and hombre-hombres, may be of any number of varieties: one time only affairs; purchased sex, with the purchase running in either direction (although most typically it is the cochón who pays); protracted relationships running weeks or months; or full-scale emotional commitments lasting years.

The last sort is preferred but carries its own type of difficulties, its own particular sadness. As one of my cochón informants related:

I once had a lover for five continuous years. He was a sergeant in the military, an hombre-hombre. During this period of time he had at least fifteen girlfriends but I was his only male lover. He visited me and we made love almost every day. You have asked me if there is love and romance in these relations; yes, there is. He was very romantic, very tender, and very jealous. But he is married now and I rarely see him.

The actual range of sexual practices employed by cochones may be wider than sexual ideology would suggest. Many tell me that they are only really comfortable in the anal-passive position. Others alternate between active and passive roles, depending on whether they are having relations with an hombre-hombre (always passive) or with another cochón (passive or active). Very few report practicing oral sex at all and several of my informants—cochones and non-cochones alike—denied having any knowledge of such techniques. Many Nicaraguans express repulsion at the idea of either homo- or heterosexual intercourse of the oral sort. A series of (not necessarily sexual) aversions and prohibitions concerning the mouth seems to be involved here. The mouth is seen as the primary route of contamination, the major path whereby illness enters the body, and sex is quintessentially dirty (sucio). This conception is socialized into children from infancy onward. Parents are always scolding their small children for putting things in their mouths. This anti-oral outlook militates against the possibilities of oral intercourse.

The resultant anal emphasis suggests a significant constraint on the nature of homoerotic practices. Unlike oral intercourse, which may lend itself to reciprocal sexual practices, anal intercourse invariably produces an active partner and a passive partner. If oral intercourse suggests the possibility of
an equal sign between partners, anal intercourse most likely produces an unequal relationship. But this anal emphasis is not merely a negative restraint on the independent variable (homosexuality); positively, it produces a whole field of practices and relations.

THE SPECIFIC ROUTES OF STIGMA

There is clearly stigma in Nicaraguan homosexual practice but it is not a stigma of the sort that clings equally to both partners. Rather, it is only the anal-passive cochón that is stigmatized. His partner, the active hombre-hombre, is not stigmatized at all and, moreover, no clear category exists in the popular language to classify him. For all intents and purposes, he is just a normal Nicaraguan male. The term "heterosexual" is inappropriate here. First, neither it nor any equivalent of it appear in the popular language. Second, it is not really the issue. One is either a cochón, or one is not. If one is not, it scarcely matters that one sleeps with cochones regularly or irregularly. Indeed, a man can gain status among his peers as a vigorous machista by sleeping with many cochones in precisely the same manner that one gains prestige by sleeping with many women. I once heard a Nicaraguan youth of nineteen boast to his younger friends in the following manner: "I am very sexually experienced. I have had a lot of women, especially when I was in the army, over on the Atlantic coast. I have done everything. I have even done it with cochones." No one in the group thought this a damning confession and all present were impressed with their friend's sexual experience and prowess.

For that matter, desire is not at issue here and it is irrelevant to what degree one is attracted sexually to members of one's own sex. What matters is the manner in which one is attracted to other males. It is expected that one would naturally be aroused by the idea of anally penetrating another male.

This is not to say that active homosexual pursuits are encouraged or even approved in all social contexts. Like adultery and heterosexual promiscuity, the active role in homosexual intercourse is seen as an infraction. That is, from the point of view of civil-religious authority, and from the point of view of women, it is indeed a sin (pecado or mal). But like its equivalent forms of adultery and promiscuity, the sodomizing act is a relatively minor sin. And in male-male social relations, any number of peccadillos (heavy drinking, promiscuity, the active role in same-sex intercourse) become status markers of male honor.

Nicaraguans exhibit no true horror of homosexuality in the North American style; their responses to the cochón tend rather toward amusement or contempt. The laughter of women often follows him down the street--discreet derision, perhaps, and behind his back, but the amusement of the community is ever present for the cochón. For men, the cochón is simultaneously an object of desire and reproach but that opprobrium knows tacit limits, community bounds. A reasonably discreet cochón—one who dresses conservatively and keeps his affairs relatively discreet—will rarely be harassed or ridiculed in public, although he may be the butt of private jokes. If he is very discreet, his status may never even be acknowledged in his
public presence and his practices will occupy the ambiguous category of a public secret.

The stigma involved here is not at all the same as the stigma implied in the Western or North American concept of "the perverse," meaning "mis-use." It is certainly not the stigma of the fully rationalized, medicalized system of sexual meaning that elaborates a category, the homosexual, to identify both practice and identity. Rather, it is anal passivity alone that is stigmatized and it is anal passivity that defines the status identity in question. Moreover, the social definition of the person and his sexual stigma derive from culturally-shared meanings of not just anal passivity and penile activity in particular but passivity and activity in general. "To give" (dar) is to be masculine, "to receive" (recibir, aceptar, tomar) is to be feminine. This holds as the ideal in all spheres of transaction between and among the genders. It is symbolized by the popular interpretation of the male sexual organ as active in intercourse and the female sexual organ (or male anus) as passive.

Cochones are, therefore, feminine men, specifically, feminized men, not fully male men. They are men who are used by other men. Their stigma flows from this concept of use. Used by other men, the cochón is not a complete man. His passive acquiescence to the active drive of other men's sexual desires both defines and stigmatizes his status. Consequently, when one uses a cochón, one acquires masculinity; when one is "used" as a cochón, one expends it. The nature of homosexual transaction, then, is that the act makes one man a machista and the other a cochón. The machista's honor and the cochón's shame are opposite sides of the same coin. The line that this transaction draws is not between those who practice homosexual intercourse and those who do not (for this is not a meaningful distinction at all in Nicaragua's popular classes) but between two standardized roles in that intercourse. Machistas make cochones out of other men and each is necessary to the definition of the other in a dynamic sense that is very different from the way North American categories of the hetero- and homosexual define each other. While each is defined by his exclusion from membership in some normative category, the cochón is defined by his inclusion in the sexual practices of ordinary men, albeit in a standardized and stigmatized role, and the homosexual by his exclusion from the sexual practices of ordinary men.

This inclusive aspect of sex also has implications for the nature of the cochón status as a political concept, for that category lacks the theoretical independence attributed to Western homosexuality as a distinct category of activity and personal identity. A cochón requires ordinary men and his activity and identity can never be quite independent of them. Defined by its passivity, the status is ever a dependent one.

THE MAKING OF A COCHÓN

During my fieldwork in a working class barrio of Managua, I had the opportunity to observe over a period of several months the interaction of boys in the neighborhood with a boy, "Miguel," already labelled a cochón. This label was in very common use. Other children, including his older brother, teased him with the name and, on occasion, even adults would taunt him as such.
At the age of twelve, Miguel bore few characteristics that would distinguish him from other boys his age. He was unusually small, giving the impression of being a much younger child of perhaps eight or nine. He was also quite intelligent, and received good marks in school but not to such a degree that one could say he had thereby marginated himself from his peers. Quite mischievous and always getting into trouble, Miguel was by no means what one would think of as a sissy or "mama's boy."

A typical interaction between Miguel and the other boys would go as follows. They are all playing some game on the sidewalk out front or in the yard behind the house. The competition becomes acute and an argument develops. The argument eventually centers on Miguel versus some other boy or group of boys. Miguel's claim in the dispute is answered by the charge that he is a cochón. He insists, "Yo no soy cochón" ("I am not a cochón"), and fighting ensues, with Miguel typically throwing the first punches. The other boys eventually subdue Miguel and mimic sodomizing him.

In public, Miguel resists the label, in private he is less adamant. It is premature to say whether Miguel will in fact grow up to be a cochón. It appears that public opinion in the neighborhood is attempting to socialize him in that direction. But note that, unlike a North American counterpart labelled homosexual, the boy Miguel, labelled a cochón, is not thereby completely marginated from social activities among boys his age. He plays games and sports with them, fights with them, and at this stage the only thing that distinguishes him from the others is the fact that they call him cochón and pile on top of him in mock intercourse.

Of course, other readings of these actions are possible. Perhaps, seeing that he is small, and vulnerable, and fearing that he might grow up to be a cochón, the community is attempting to avert him from that dishonorable fate by punishing him whenever he shows signs of weakness, dependence, or passivity. It seems to me, however, that he was most likely to be punished by his peers when, as a small person, he attempted to assert his equality with much larger boys. At any rate, the argument is not that this particular case will indeed go on to become a cochón but that it exemplifies something of the rules of that status and its production.

We see this same sort of ambiguous status--stigmatized, yet not fully marginated--concerning adults. One incident in particular illustrates this. I was sitting in front of his repair shop and talking with "Carlos" one afternoon when a young man passed by on the street, riding in the back of a pickup truck that was hauling mechanical equipment. Carlos made obscene gestures at the other man, in effect offering to sodomize him. The man answered with his own gesticulations as the truck drove away. Carlos grinned and said, by way of explanation, that the man in the truck was a cochón, that he had fucked the man before, and that he would probably soon fuck the man again.

These obscene gestures, offers, and childhood games provide insight into the nature of the sexual practices in question and throw light on the social creation of the cochón. The cochón is but a necessary precipitant of the culture of machismo, or aggressive, competitive masculinity. One man offers to sodomize another, in effect, to make of him a cochón, or if he already is one, to use his services. Thus men desire to sodomize other men and fear being sodomized by them (Suarez-Orozco 1982). In the same manner, they
desire to claim status and prestige and avoid being stigmatized. The routes of sexual use and pleasure thereby illuminate the pathways of male status and sexual power. Boys likewise exhibit their virility by labelling one of their members and mimicking anal intercourse with him. The object of sex/power is the same in either case. Those who consistently lose out in the competition for male status, or who can be convinced to dispose themselves to the sexual urges and status plays of other men, or who discover pleasure in the passive sexual role or its social status, are made into cochones.

It is most difficult to get reliable long-range material on the life cycles of cochones. Wrapped in an ambiguous public secrecy, they are both protected and maligned by community gossip. In practice, at the level of neighborhood rumors, this lends itself to both admissions and denials, accusations and defenses. Some men are clearly defined by that status, others are only slightly tainted with suspicion. Some apparently live out their entire life in that status, others successfully masculinize themselves by taking a wife and rearing children—though, in practice, they may (or may not) continue having covert affairs with men. Some develop longstanding covert relationships with particular men. Others become known in male gossip as someone to visit for sexual favors.

RULES IN THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SEXUALITY

These processes in the production of sexuality do indeed bear some resemblance to North American practices, where male power and status are bound around sexual themes but the resemblance holds only up to a point. Both the homosexual and the cochón are objects in a sexual discourse whose real subject is sexual power. But the structure of that discourse, the meaning of its categories, and the language in which it speaks are decidedly different in each case. To the extent that these processes may be seen at work in our own culture, we may summarize that the object is to label without being labelled, but not to use without being used, for it is the homosexual act itself that is prohibited and not any particular role within the act. Some males, especially adolescents, in our own milieu do in fact attempt to label without being labelled and also use without being used. The difference is that in Anglo-American contexts this is seen as a breach of the rule (or, sometimes, an adolescent suspension of the rule), since homosexual desire itself, without any qualifications, stigmatizes one as a homosexual.

The nature of homosexual transaction in Nicaragua's popular classes seems to bear much greater resemblance to the sexual economy of North America's prison populations (Blake 1971) and, by extension, to the milieu of truckstops (Corzine and Kirby 1977) and public toilet (Humphreys 1970) encounters, where, for purposes of a deviant subculture, one may indeed both label without being labelled and use without being used. Similar rules seem to be in play in either context: passive partners are labelled and stigmatized; active partners are not. The act of intercourse assigns honor to one man, shame to the other. In North American prisons, sex between men becomes a means of exchange because it signifies simultaneously pleasure and power in the absence of access to either by other means. But while suggestive, this comparison should not be overstated or underqualified. Whereas the rules of
prison sexuality represent a deviant and stigmatized subculture—that is, a suspension or even inversion of the normal rules—the rules of sexuality and stigma in Nicaragua represent the dominant culture of the popular classes, a normative rather than deviant set of rules and categories.

Thus, the dominant North American rule would read as follows. A man gains sexual status and honor among other men through and only through his sexual transactions with women. Homosexuals appear as the refuseniks of that system. In Nicaragua, the rule is built around different principles. A man gains sexual status and honor among other men through his active role in sexual intercourse (either with women or with other men). Cochones are (passive) participants in that system.

Again, similar to Northern stereotypes of the homosexual, the cochón is commonly ascribed (and frequently exhibits) such personal characteristics as effeminacy and flamboyance. Feminized by more masculine men, some cochones act out their role in the more extreme form of transvestism. Many more appropriate semitransvestic forms of dress: a shirt just a little too blousy, or pants slightly too feminine in color, fit, or texture. As a normal rule, transvestism and near–transvestism receive the reproach of the community. (I once saw a Nicaraguan girl throw out the dishwater on a cochón who passed by her house in just such a state of near–transvestism.)

However, on the special occasions of certain popular religious celebrations, cochones may publicly exhibit their cross-dressing with the good will and even encouragement of the whole community.

These festivities represent a special niche in the religious life of the lower classes: like Bakhtin’s (1984) carnival, they project the image of a libidinous popular insurrection (Davis 1978) through a spree of stylized rule-breaking. For these ritual occasions, the feminization of men semiotically corresponds to the themes of inversion and reversal that are the core of several popular religious festivities; men dress as women, people take on the costumes of animals, animals challenge human authority, lower classes challenge elite authority, and so on (Lancaster in press). In Masaya’s carnaval, Managua’s Santo Domingo, and other such rituals, the cochón is granted a reprieve from his secrecy and surreptition, given a political voice, and cast in a central role in popular religious festivities.

The popular imagination, then, takes up the cochón in an ambiguous way that imbues him with two different meanings. On the one hand, he is usually an object of amusement and contempt, a passive participant put to the use of others. On special occasions, though, the cochón becomes a subject who offers his parodical commentary on a whole array of social and sexual relations. Frequently taunting machistas and mocking civil-religious authority along the way, the transvestic cochón becomes the polysemic voice of discontent in these processions. In his inversion, object becomes subject, and silence bursts out with a voice that discerns the real powers of the powerless and the used. Through the alchemy of popular ritual, the cochón represents the larger point of view of the dispossessed classes in revolt against established authority.

Again, this points to a striking contrast with the North American homosexual. At his most politically-conscious, the homosexual organizes
himself into a subculture, a subeconomy, a single-issue politics, all of whose logic is quite singular. The cochón, at his most political, represents a very different sort of thing: through the polymorphousness of metaphor, *carnaval* speaks to a multiplication of meanings and social entanglements, not to their compartmentalization and impoverishment.

Where Nicaragua's folk categories and sexual transactions most strikingly parallel Western European/North American rules is not in any deviant subculture of the present but, rather, in sexual categories and practices widespread in the past, before progressive rationalization in the institutions of religion, law, medicine, and psychiatry had refined a category—the homosexual—out of traditional folk constructs (Boswell 1980; Trumbach 1977; Weeks 1977). Like its traditional Western parallels of whatever shade (e.g., bugger, sodomite, faggot, etc.), the cochón represents a stigmatized sexual identity, as yet still minimally administered by the institutions of rational sexual categorization and control, still more or less under the rule of popular categories and controls. But even here the cultural tradition in which we encounter the cochón is different from its Anglo-European counterparts, whose folk-terms often designate the active, not passive, category of practice, identity and stigma. Even as a traditional or nonrationalized construct, the cochón lives in a different cultural stream than "buggers" and "sodomites."

**COCHONES AND THE REVOLUTION**

The Sandinista Revolution and its accompanying changes have clearly introduced a variety of contradictory changes in the culture's understanding of sexual practices. It may be that the image of *carnaval* captures and perpetuates the image of revolt so necessary in the imagination of the populace that would be revolutionary but the consolidation of a revolutionary state is anything but an extended carnival. Certainly, the revolution has produced a constraining effect on homosexual practice. The nature of socialist revolution, and perhaps particularly that variety influenced by liberation theology, entails a strong normative or corporatist component. The "New Man" and the "New Society" are envisioned as hardworking, diligent, and studious; pure and without corruption. The aspect of machismo that the New Man embodies is the self-sacrificing side, not the hedonistic one. The cult of the New Man, then, produces a cultural atmosphere in which homosexual practice (and sexual transgression in general) is at least publicly regarded as more suspect than before, tainted with the image of indulgence or corruption, and is perhaps even somewhat less readily available.

More concretely, the revolution has everywhere tried to strengthen the moral force of the community, especially through the Comites de Defensa Sandinista (CDS), the neighborhood defense organizations. Through such organizations and through the sensibility of revolution generally, the gaze of the community is particularly strong and the semiprivate, semipublic status of the cochón is rendered more problematic. Especially in areas of public morality and public order, a variety of activities, such as prostitution, have been actively curbed by the Sandinista Police and the CDS. On a much smaller scale than Havana, Managua once sported an elite and tourist-oriented night-life, including perhaps a dozen total assorted homosexual bars.
exclusive gay clubs, drag shows, and male stripper acts. These serviced Managua's middle class homosexuals, some of its lower class cochones, and gay tourists from other countries. They are gone now and what remains is a small handful of much more discreet bars.

Such closures have affected the traditional cochin much less than the Western-oriented gay or homosexual of professional or middle class origins. As one Sandinista activist from a working class barrio (who alternately and in his mind synonymously described himself as a cochin, homosexual, or gay) put it, "It is true that there are fewer bars now but most of the ones that existed before served only the affluent, not the poor. You had to be rich to get into those nightclubs. It is not so much that they have been closed down by the police or the CDS, as that they have moved to Miami with the rich people."

Not all of the effects of the revolution on cochones have been restrictive. While maintaining a discreet sexual profile, many have participated in the revolutionary process, some rising to positions of great authority in the CDS, the FSLN, (Frente Sandinista de la Liberacion Nacional) and even the government proper. The informant cited above, for instance, had been elected Barrio Director, the highest position in the local CDS. Having fewer family responsibilities and dependents appears to have freed up the time of many politically-conscious cochones to work for the revolution. In the process some have gained recognition and stature in the community in a manner not unlike the charisma that priests derive from a life of celibacy and service.

In Nicaragua, the traditional categories remain the dominant popular ones but they are now coexisting and competing with a Western perception of homosexuality. Sexual education in the schools, social contact with internacionales from the United States and Western Europe, and greater access to international ideas and philosophies all facilitate the acquisition of Western sexual models, especially in elite segments of the populace; i.e., the urban, middle class sectors that look to the United States and Western Europe for educational and cultural values.

In some sections of Managua one now hears such terms as homosexual and heterosexual. For certain members of that narrow stratum of urban elites, these terms are not so misleading. But many of Managua's sexually-active youth, even some of working class origins (like the Dirigente del Barrio cited above), also now call themselves "homosexual," "bisexual," or "gay." New syncretisms are indeed slowly emerging but in practice the dominant logic of the sexual system remains traditional, native, and popular. The casual importation of scientific and even political sexual terminologies serves to confuse casual foreign observers in much the same way that the casual use of those terms in social science confuses issues and assimilates real differences. What a Nicaraguan means when he calls himself "gay" is very different from what a North American has in mind when he uses the same term, even though the two may find themselves in broad agreement on certain particulars. New words like homosexual and gay typically enter the popular vocabulary as synonyms for familiar categories and practices, rather than as new concepts in themselves. This is especially true in the popular
classes; and many Nicaraguans, even in Managua, remain quite unfamiliar with these newly introduced words.

The remarkable conservatism of culture lies precisely in its ability to animate new words with old ideas. While it is doubtful that one could speak of a pure folk model anymore in Managua, it is clear that the traditional logic of sexuality remains intact for the massive lower classes. What would mark a real change in Nicaragua's sexual culture is not the importation of a new sexual lexicon—which might just as easily be imbued with archaic as with modern meanings—but, rather, the introduction of new terms, along with the proliferation of specialized bureaucratic instruments of sexual regulation to which those terms correspond (e.g., psychology) and the development of a homosexual subculture based on a wider variety of less stereotyped roles and practices. But these conditions clearly have not been met.

WHAT IS A HOMOSEXUAL?

Strathern (1981:682) uses the phrase, "No such thing as a woman," to stress certain theoretical points on the nature of gender studies. Here, I follow her lead and attempt to make similar points in treating the nature and construction of the traditional Nicaraguan folk category, the cochón. We may speculate that this category is the result of a syncretism between Iberian and indigenous sexual role systems. Moreover, based on my conversations with other Latin Americanists, it seems that the cochón exemplifies something of the sexual rules that are generally found in most Latin American countries, where the essential elements of the cochón appear under different names and with somewhat different definitions (Carrier 1976; Parker 1984, 1985; Williams 1986:147-151).

Labels such as homosexual or heterosexual, along with Northern European/North American presumptions about stigma, fail to account for the Nicaraguan sexual constructs that ultimately produce the cochón. Theoretically, this sort of difficulty crimps attempts at writing a general history or anthropology of homosexuality, for such projects must be hedged from the outset with a myriad of qualifications and circumlocutions. At every turn we are always running up against the unintelligibility of foreign practices to our concepts and categories.

But the cochón is by no means as exotic a phenomenon as the cross-gendered (Whitehead 1981) or gender-mixed (Callender and Kochens 1983) native North American berdache, nor are his practices as far from Northern European notions of homosexuality as are the homosexual initiation rites reported for parts of Melanesia (Herdt 1981, 1982). Indeed, it is his very similarity to the North American homosexual that makes the cochón appear at first glance readily interchangeable with him: both are adult males with a stigmatized sexual identity. Only on close inspection can we see that the process of identity- and stigma-production in each case is radically different, governed by different rules, producing a markedly different existential state. We could say, in Wittgensteinian terms, that machismo is a different game, governed by different rules; or we could say, in Marxian terms, that it represents a different sexual economy, a different mode in the production of
sex/gender; or, in Foucauldian terms, we could say that Latin sexuality represents a radically different discursive practice than Anglo sexuality.

The necessity of drawing such distinctions is far from settled in the current literature. Herdt (1981:3, 321) finds "heterosexual adults" in the highlands of Papua New Guinea and Williams (1986) has more recently reiterated the old thesis that the berdache is an Amerindian gay in native drag. Nonetheless, anthropology has been becoming more or less sensitive to phenomenological differences when they exist at these great distances. Until now, though, the nuances that distinguish such phenomena as the cochón from the homosexual typically have been glossed under the misleading terminologies of the latter. Nash (1979:141) identifies persons who appear to be the Bolivian equivalents of Nicaraguan cochones as "men with homosexual tendencies" and Cuba's Santeria cult is sometimes given as a native niche for an otherwise unproblematic Cuban homosexuality (Arguelles and Rich, 1984:688). At best, modifications of that terminology have suggested themselves; e.g., "selective homophobia" to identify the stigmatization of the "passive homosexual" (Murphy 1984). (See also Brandes's [1981:232-234] discussion of the passive role in homosexual intercourse in Andalusia.)

Such terminology, even when modified, obscures more than it clarifies. Nicaragua's cochones are ontologically different creatures of culture than are Anglo-American homosexuals. Both are clearly stigmatized but they are stigmatized in different ways, according to different rules. Nor is it, as it is often maintained, that in Latin America homophobia is of substantively the same sort that one encounters in Northern Europe and North America, only more severe in its operations. It is not that homophobia is more intense in a culture of machismo but that it is of a different sort altogether. Indeed, the word "homophobia," meaning a fear of homosexuals or homosexual intercourse, is quite inappropriate in a milieu where men desire and actively seek homosexual intercourse. An altogether different word is necessary to identify the praxis implicit in machismo, whereby men may simultaneously desire to use, fear being used by, and stigmatize, other men.

If this criterion allows us to distinguish various systems of sexual signification and power, it may also allow us to generalize a limited number of systems based on the operation of similar rules. Nicaragua's sexual system, with its active-honor/passive-shame dichotomy, exemplifies rules governing male sexual relations not only for Latin America generally but also for cultures throughout the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Numerous and widely variegated subtypes no doubt obtain in what we might provisionally call peasant sexuality, but with its series of dichotomous distinctions--penile-anal, active-passive, honor-stigma--it clearly stands opposed to what we might call the bourgeois sexuality predominant in Northern Europe and its offspring cultures, especially in the Anglophone world. While this latter type has undergone successive degrees of intensification and rationalization, its original peculiarity seems to rest on its blanket condemnation of all same-sex practices and, perhaps, especially active ones (Trumbach 1977). In general, bourgeois sexuality is susceptible to greater or lesser degrees of rationalization in socio-sexual control, whereas peasant sexuality is susceptible to greater or lesser degrees of severity in its prohibitions, constraints or stigmas.
This active honor/passive shame dichotomy recalls something of the logic of homosexual activity for the ancient Greeks, who divided appropriate roles into two age classes, adult activity and youthful passivity, as Foucault (1985:221) observes.

Hence the problem that we may call the "antinomy of the boy" in Greek ethics of aphrodisia. On the one hand, young men were recognized as objects of pleasure—and even as the only honorable and legitimate objects among the possible male partners of men: no one would ever reproach a man for loving a boy, for desiring and enjoying him, provided that the laws and proprieties were respected. But on the other hand, the boy, whose youth must be a training for manhood, could not and must not identify with that role. He could not of his own accord, in his own eyes, and for his own sake, be the object of that pleasure, even though the man was quite naturally fond of appointing him as an object of pleasure. In short, to delight in and be a subject of pleasure with a boy did not cause a problem for the Greeks; but to be an object of pleasure and to acknowledge oneself as such constituted a major difficulty for the boy.

Arguably, the same-sex initiation practices employed in certain Melanesian societies appear to represent a special instantiation of these active-passive rules: (oral or anal) adolescent passivity, (penile) adult activity. But in this case it makes little sense to speak of stigma and Melanesia clearly represents an independent type. The boy's social-sexual status is an absence of manhood; insemination is practiced to correct that, not to perpetuate or reinforce it. And these relationships, as in ancient Greece, ultimately take the form of generalized reciprocity; passive youths become active males vis-à-vis new youths.

Degrees of stigma may vary in both bourgeois and peasant contexts and the practice of labelling may or may not be stringent, depending on historical conditions. But it seems probable that all societies, save those in the Northern European cultural stream, elaborate some passive-active dichotomy for male homosexual practices and that the active role escapes both label and stigma. In none of these cases would we be justified to speak of a homosexual, although there is undoubtedly homosexual activity. In this model, transvestism appears, not as a separate type, as Trumbach (1977) argues, but as a residual one. It may be arrived at in either sexual system by different means or it may constitute a "third gender" (Whitehead 1981) belonging not to sexuality proper but to gender/labor relations more specifically. Unstigmatized and nonstereotyped reciprocal homosexual relations between adolescents may be informally countenanced in all systems save the most rationalized (bourgeois) modes or the most severe (peasant) ones.

The provisional models offered here say little about female same-sex practices. In Nicaragua, as throughout the peasant world, there is little folk interest in categorizing or regulating female same-sex relations and little exists in the popular lexicon to account for it. Surely, Nicaraguans can express censure over female same-sex improprieties but without the refined and specialized vocabulary through which they speak of the cochón. The culture of machismo, which speaks so directly to male practices, can only speak indirectly or inversely of female ones.
CONCLUSION

This paper differentiates apparent similarities in two sexual systems; it diagrams the rules that define the stigmatized Nicaraguan sexual category, the cochón, and contrasts it with the North American homosexual. The cochón is not just one refraction of a larger, universal homosexual category (embedded in nature—or perhaps, in unnature), nor is the English term "homosexual" an appropriate translation of that concept—which must, indeed, remain fundamentally untranslatable. This method of semiotic differentiation is in keeping with prevailing deconstructionist and Marxist (D’Emilio 1983:4) approaches in sexuality studies, but it also represents a straightforward application of basic Boasian principles on the terrain of sex: viz., that what is meaningful about culture is internal, not external, and that cultural meaning rests in specific milieux, not in aggregations of cultures assembled in the light of unproblematic common sense categories. Thus, to study the cochón is also to deconstruct our own universalized category, the homosexual; an act may be called homosexual that involves two men, but what is significant and meaningful about that act lies beyond any a priori assumptions about the nature of homosexual activity.

Seen in these terms, the specific configuration of sex, power, and stigma traced in Nicaragua's popular classes is indeed jarringly dissimilar to the predominant North American configuration. But it is not dissimilar to other configurations. Our critical method need not lend itself only to the endless production of distinctions; it can also elaborate typologies based on the operation of similar rules. I have provisionally proposed: (1) Anglo-Northern European or bourgeois sexuality and (2) Circum-Mediterranean/Latin American or peasant sexuality.

This analysis of the cochón and the concomitant typology it draws differ from previous typologies on one significant account. Earlier typologies have classified same-sex practices in terms of simple variations on the repressive principle. For instance, Bullough (1976:25) accounts for the stark presence of role-differentiated homosexual activity in the Mediterranean by the relative absence of available heterosexual outlets. His logic is very simple: sexuality, like water, is an a priori force; dammed up in one outlet, it will invariably seek out another. In contrast to such simple hydraulic models of sexuality, our analysis of the cochón, and our elaboration of a broader cochón type, flows from our emphasis on a productive (not repressive) paradigm (Foucault 1978:3–13). That something in machismo other than scarcity of women (and certainly other than extreme homophobia) precipitates the cochón (as opposed to masturbation or abstinence), shapes his behavior, defines his identity. That something is a configuration of sex/power along the active/passive dimension. It renders certain organs and roles "active," other body passages and roles "passive," and assigns honor/shame and status/stigma accordingly.

This mapping of the body, its accesses and privileges, is at once a map of pleasure and power. And the relationship of the cochón to power, as to the grammar of sex, constitutes a different cultural ensemble than that configuration which we call the homosexual. The object-choice of the homosexual marginates him from male power, except insofar as he can serve

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as a negative example and thus mark off the circuitry of power; a breaker of rules, he is positioned outside the operational rules of normative (hetero)sexuality. That of the cochón casts him in the role of object to machismo's subjectivity; that is, it puts him in a stigmatized but by no means margined relation to sex/power. Each is defined by a play of sex/power but the homosexual is a margined subject, divested of power, around whom power flows, while the cochón-type is an object through whom power flows and who is therefore, paradoxically, the locus of power's investment in itself.

NOTES

1. An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the 1986, 85th Annual Meetings of the American Anthropological Association in Philadelphia. For their comments on earlier drafts, I am grateful to Marie Boutte, Sue Estroff, Robert Fernea, Byron Good, Richard Parker, Philip Pincus, Leonard Plotnicov, and Nancy Scheper-Hughes. Data for this article derive from fieldwork in Managua carried out in three periods totaling ten months, from December 1984 to June 1986. Funding was provided by the Center for Latin American Studies and the Tinker Foundation, a Graduate Humanities Research Grant from the Regents of the University of California, and three small grants from the Lowie Funds of the University of California Department of Anthropology at Berkeley. Write-up of these and other findings was generously supported by a stipend from the Institute for the Study of Social Change.

2. Called "the festival of disguises," Carnaval is a religious celebration held annually in the large agricultural market town of Masaya. It marks the climax of a series of religious festivals in that town, not the approach of Lent. An important presence among the elaborate masks and disguises of Carnaval is that of the cochones, who don female attire and parade alongside other participants in the day's procession.

3. My spelling throughout conforms to the only spelling I have ever seen in print, in a Nuevo Diario (6 December 1985) editorial.

4. For instance, some Middle Eastern cultures cast these active-passive rules in terms of active adults and passive youths (Trumbach 1977: 8).

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MALE homosexuality occurs very widely, but the extent to which it becomes a social problem varies with the attitudes taken towards it by different cultures. One of these special attitudes is that which distinguishes sharply between the active homosexual and the passive. Either one or the other may be the object of strong social condemnation and hence must live as an outcaste, while the other is given a recognized role in society.

Among certain American Indian tribes of the last century, the *berdache* or passive homosexual was protected, encouraged to adopt the social and sexual roles of women, sometimes to assume sacred responsibilities, and, less often, allowed to cultivate with social approval the lewd conduct that we attribute to professional prostitutes. His “husband” was not considered as a homosexual but merely as a man who could make no more advantageous match. The active homosexual, however, who sought young partners, was an object of contempt. On the other hand, among the contemporary Tanala of Madagascar (communication from Ralph Linton), the passive homosexual arouses no comment at all provided he assumes the dress and occupations of a woman and eventually “marries” a man. In our own culture homosexuals have incurred disapproval whether they were active or passive; understandably enough, therefore, homosexuals are not so clearly differentiated into these two types as they are in cultures which distinguish sharply between them.

In the Negro community of Bahia, in northern Brazil, unusual circumstances encourage certain of the passive homosexuals to forge a new and respected status for themselves. Both individual and social changes have resulted which are important and easy to observe; but their special interest to psychology lies in demonstrating the way in which an outcaste group has made a new adaptation by taking advantage of changed circumstances.

In Brazil, condemnation of passive homosexuals puts them into the outcaste group while their partners pass unremarked.