

The Revolutionary (Re-)valorization of ‘Peasant’ Production and Implications for Small-Scale Farming in Present-Day Cuba

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Introduction

‘History is a lie. The one who writes it is always the one who wins the war.’ Cuban in his early ‘80s

As suggested by the elderly man quoted above, and as R. G. Collingwood (1946) argued, history cannot be analyzed apart from the historians who write it. In the histories of Fidel Castro’s revolution, *campesinos* (‘peasants’) have largely been regarded as exploitative and technologically backward. It is useful to consider these assumptions about production and exchange in the small farming sector, especially as they relate to changes that have occurred in the Cuban agrarian economy affecting the apportionment and use of land and labor. By understanding contrasting interpretations of the Cuban agrarian economy during the crucial period between the 1950s and the 1960s, one may begin to understand current challenges affecting small-scale producers in Cuba.

Historical Ideas of *Campesinos* and Exploitation: An Inversion of a Cardinal Polarity of the Cuban National Moral Economy

My first aim is to unpack the assumption that *campesinos* and other private landowners were exploitative in pre-1959 Cuba.¹ Interestingly, this polarity in the national moral economy – the exploiters versus the exploited – came to be inverted after the first few years of the Cuban Revolution. Indeed, before the Revolution and until 1961, the role of exploiters was taken by the foreign owners and their sympathizers, while the exploited were seen as the *campesinos* themselves. It was only after the adoption of the communist line in 1961 that *campesinos* and intermediaries of petty commodity production were regarded, in official circles, as the exploiters of agricultural workers and the population of consumers. We shall return to this second idea of exploitation later. First, we must consider how the polarity of the exploiters/ed came to be inverted in the first place.

Despite the heterogeneous demography of the Cuban countryside, there is a long history in Cuba of nationalist outcries against the exploitation of *campesinos*. This history gains moral substance from the idea that nineteenth-century *mambistas* (ex-slave revolutionaries) and *guajiros* (smallholders) were the primary ‘war heroes’ (*guajiros*) of the first Cuban revolution of 1868. Indeed, since that time, ‘*tierra o sangre!* (land or blood!)’ was the primary revolutionary call to incite nationalist emotions. In the century preceding Fidel Castro’s 1959 revolution, *campesinos* were considered to be ‘*la clase más cubana* (the most Cuban class)’, as one of the ‘emotional narrators’ against imported workers and foreign capitalists called them (Ramiro Guerra y Sánchez, as quoted by Martínez-Alier 1977: 109). Throughout the twentieth century, the need to return lands to their ‘legitimate owners’ (Felipe Cordiés and Martínez 2000: 1) was a political issue in Cuba that led to many organized conflicts, especially in eastern Cuba (Martín

Barrios 1984: 64-66). As with other populist movements in twentieth-century Latin America, land reform in Cuba meant justice (Alexander 1963: 559).

In the 1950s, Fidel Castro utilized such 'pre-existing cultural materials' (Wolf 1999: 275) to argue his case for a renewed emphasis on the national fight against imperialism. Like Julius Nyerere, who used the traditional idea of 'ujamaa' to unify Tanzania, or Jomo Kenyatta, who integrated the culturally-embedded idea of 'brotherhood' into his socialist agenda (Grillo 1993: 64), so Castro adopted the long-held idea of *campesinos* as the most exploited and revolutionary 'class' in Cuban society. Consider Fidel's famous defense at the Moncada Barracks, where he was arrested in 1953. His discourse is worth quoting at length as it highlights many of the assumptions that would later be modified to fit the changing political agenda in post-1959 Cuba:

"Eighty-five percent of small Cuban agriculturalists are paying rent and live under the constant threat of expropriation from their plots of land. More than half of the best productive lands are in foreign hands. In the East, the most expansive region, the lands of United Fruit Company and the West Indian [Company] unite the north and south coast. There are 200,000 *campesino* families that do not have a small piece of land on which to plant one tuber for their hungry sons and daughters and, in exchange, they remain uncultivated, in the hands of powerful interests, about 300,000 *caballerías* (about 3,990,000 ha) of productive lands. If Cuba is an eminently agricultural country, if its population mostly consists of *campesinos*, if the city depends on the country, if the [people of the] country gained us independence, if the greatness and prosperity of this nation depends on healthy and vigorous *campesinos* that love and know how to cultivate the land, of a state that protects [them] and orientates them, how is it possible that this state of things can continue?" [Source: Fidel Castro's 'History will absolve me' speech, Moncada Barracks 1953 (quoted by Otero 1960, 10-12)]

Undoubtedly, Fidel Castro's use of such emotional ideas was due, at least in part, to the influence of well-known writings in Cuba during this period. He was, for example, likely taken by the widely-cited rural survey of the *Agrupación Católica Universitaria* (Catholic University Group) carried out in 1945, which was later criticized for claiming to represent 2,500,000 'impoverished' members of the countryside (Pollitt 1977; Echevarria Salvat 1971: 82). However, according to Brian Pollitt, historian of the Cuban sugar industry, the 1945 survey not only 'confused the issue [of 'misery' in rural areas] with generic references to the "peasantry," though most households surveyed were headed by wage laborers' (Pollitt 1977: 163), but excluded wage laborers living in communities of more than 150 people as well as 'wage workers living in households headed by "farmers and graziers"' (ibid.).

There were also famous nationalist works in Cuba that promulgated the idea of Cuban *campesinos* as the most exploited 'class.' Besides mostly oral histories of dispersed struggles against foreign landowners in the east, the idea of the exploitation of *campesinos* drew discursive power from romanticized notions of a native 'peasantry', as depicted in the country's long historiographic and anthropological tradition. Cuban writers such as Fernando Ortíz created imagery which gave form to long-held nationalist sentiments. Ortíz's seminal work, *Cuban counterpoint: Sugar and Tobacco* (1947), used metaphor to align sugar with large-scale, imperialist agriculture, and tobacco with small-scale, indigenous agriculture. Like Castro, who applauds 'vigorous' *campesinos* 'that love and know how to cultivate the land', Ortíz

complemented the creative and masterful work of small farmers in Cuba by contrasting the ‘mysteries’ of tobacco cultivation, from which many seed varieties have sprung, with ‘invariable’ sugar cane, planted not from a long tradition of new seed creations but with cuttings from the same plant (Ortiz 1995: 27).

Ortiz also pre-dates Castro in his admiration for *campesinos* fighting against exploitation by outsiders. In *Cuban counterpoint*, he highlights the Revolutionary spirit of small-scale tobacco planters (*vegueros*), who were the first to instigate insurrections against the Spanish tobacco monopoly in the early 18th century. Moreover, Ortiz links small-scale tobacco cultivation to the communist ‘fight’: ‘Tobacco is sown with a clenched fist, like the symbolic Communist gesture’ (Ortiz 1995: 289) Ortiz’s relation is ironic, given that the post-1959 Cuban communist government was to associate many smallholders – tobacco or otherwise – with the ‘evils’ of market society.

Historical Continuities in Ideas about *Campesinos*: The Guerrilla Movement

Though it is questionable to assume that the pre-1959 Cuban sugar industry exploited all smallholders, there were significant regional differences in the effects of ‘that favored child of capitalism’ (Ortiz 1947, quoted by Mintz 1985: 214). Because western Cuba has the highest percentage of rainfall on the island (Wright 2008: 11), infrastructural development of the sugar industry, coupled with the emergence of a complex and heterogeneous agrarian society, emerged in this region from the mid-eighteenth century. According to Guerra y Sánchez (1964 [1927]: 66-7, 102, 120), the early proliferation of railroads and mills in Havana and surrounding areas led to benefits for sugar workers and *colonos*. With easier access to transport and a wider selection of mills, workers and *colonos* alike, had some bargaining power to improve their sharecropping arrangements, wages and working conditions.

The social, political, economic and demographic situation for smallholders in eastern Cuba was significantly different. The region is mostly dry except in the mountainous regions (Wright 2008: 11), and, as such, was primarily dedicated to cattle ranching and some subsistence agriculture until the spread of the sugar industry in the twentieth century. During the first few decades of the twentieth century, there were few railroads in the east, and most were private. Monopolies over transport and land allowed for monopolies over working conditions and wages (Guerra y Sánchez 1964: 120). Many eastern *campesinos* who lost their lands around the time of the 1912 Afro-Cuban uprising re-settled in the mountainous Sierra Maestra of the Oriente province, a region where many former slaves had once fled. The area was ultimately inhabited by a large group of *desalojos* and *precaristas* (those who have lost previously-owned land(s) and squatters, respectively), who grew mostly coffee and subsistence foodstuffs.

Despite such differences between eastern and western areas of Cuba, it was the Sierra Maestra and its landless ‘peasantry’ that inspired land reform, which was seen as the most important goal of the Cuban Revolution. Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara, one of the most influential figures in the formation of the Cuban national moral economy, despite (or because of?) his death, was the leading voice to romanticize the *campesinos* of the Sierra and their ‘ancient desire for land’ (Al Roy 1967: 88-9). Indeed, as Guevara wrote:

“Simultaneously with the incorporation of peasants into the armed struggle due to their demands for freedom and social justice, a magical word arose which mobilized the oppressed masses of Cuba in their struggle for land ownership: Land Reform (Guevara, quoted by Casteñeda 1998, 101).”

While Guevara romanticized *all* Cuban *campesinos* as exploited, in the 1950s, only one-tenth of smallholders on the island lacked legal claims to land. Not surprisingly, a majority of these people resided in the Sierra (Puerta 1998, quoted by Wright 2008: 1). As noted earlier, most of the country's agrarian population were agricultural workers who were probably less interested in receiving land than in claiming higher wages and a reprise from 'dead time' (the period after the sugar cane harvest when there was no work). Despite the symbolic power given to the *campesino* in many Cuban histories, after the 'triumph' of Fidel Castro's group, the important position of agricultural workers was recognized. Within a few years of the Revolution, the primary focus of land reform shifted from the distribution of land to the universal access to work and, a short time later, food.

The 'Law of Unintended Consequences':² From Exploited to Exploiters

Rather than distributing vast areas of land to small farmers, the first agrarian reform law passed in Cuba in 1961 was actually very similar to more conservative twentieth-century agrarian reforms in other Latin American countries such as Guatemala, Bolivia, Venezuela and Peru. As Juan Martínez-Alier (1977, 95-8) has argued, the first agrarian reform law in Cuba was actually a 'middle-class land reform law.' Indeed, in a report to the American Universities Field Staff in August 1960, Irving P. Pflaum (1960: 5) claimed that the Cuban government assigned official land titles for only 15,400 hectares of the 5,664,400 hectares to be re-distributed.

Given the radical changes in tactics in the early years of the Revolution, Castro and the Cuban government had to abide by what Aguilar refers to as 'the law of unintended consequences': 'When political doctrine is created before action, there is a need to adjust it to new circumstances' (Aguilar 2001: 86). The shift from a populist model of land redistribution to a Marxist-Leninist model required a re-categorization of central cultural ideas in Cuba such as '*campesinos*' and 'exploitation'. Indeed, between 1959 and 1963, the category of *campesino* underwent a complete re-definition, along with the area of land that was considered acceptable for a *campesino* to own. In 1959, all those who owned over 400 hectares were seen as exploitative land owners, the final obstacles to national progress. At this time, *campesinos* were regarded as anyone with less than 400 hectares. When the second agrarian reform was passed in 1963, however, *campesinos* were defined as anyone with 67 hectares or less. Those who owned more than this were considered '*minifundios*' ('feudal' landowners), their lands subject to 'intervention' (expropriation). Like the kulak in late 1920s and 1930s Russia, the *minifundio* represented all who were opposed to the goals of the now socialist revolution, regardless of their economic standing (Scott 1998: 209).

During the following years, the category of *campesino* underwent further changes. In accordance with Marxist-Leninist theory, and more specifically, Stalinism, which was firmly adopted as a model for planning of the Cuban agrarian economy by the mid-1960s, the agricultural sector was regarded as the strategic sector of the Cuban economy (Aranda 1968: 1). Diversification efforts in the early years of the revolution, which would offset 'exploitative' relations with the United States, were soon abandoned for the model of 'primitive socialist accumulation' – that is, the development of a centralized agrarian economy and rapid heavy industrialization on large-scale state and cooperative farms (Corbridge 1988: 103). As a result of the adoption of this model, the two primary aims in Cuban society were the production of sugar and the development of socialism. Emphasis on Cuba's primary export led to a continuation of what Paul Richards has called the Caribbean model (Richards 1985: 19), whereby a

disproportionate amount of land devoted to the production of raw agricultural produce for export forces a reliance on imported (often processed) goods, many of which could be produced domestically.

In recent times, the Cuban government has significantly changed its position towards *campesinos*, incorporating a model that links domestic food production to national security and encouraging certain 'non-productive' members of society (e.g. pensioners) to join cooperatives or lease small plots of land for food crop production. The continued official stance towards private landholdings as exploitative has, however, continued to hinder the development of the small farming sector, thereby impeding Cubans' access to affordable, domestically-produced foodstuffs in non-state outlets such as local markets.

In the national moral economy, high prices in the private sector, as well as large-scale landholdings, have historically been linked to ideas of exploitation. For Fidel, Raul and most other powerful men in the Cuban government, the national food basket for domestic consumption, like the land on which it is grown, should be treated as social property rather than as a means to harness profit in the market.

Conclusion

On 5 August 1994, hundreds of thousands of Cubans protested on the Malecón, the long sidewalk strip overlooking the Bay of Havana. Theirs was a reaction against extreme scarcities of foodstuffs and the lack of official outlets from which food and other essential items could be purchased at reasonable prices, but also an expression of growing contradictions in the way food and other property are valued in Cuba. For these Cubans and undoubtedly many others, it was becoming increasingly evident that the state distributive system was not providing them with foods recognized as essential, such as milk, which could only be found at unobtainable prices from *abusadores* (abusers) on the black market.

As Sue Bridger and Francis Pine (1998: 5) argue for a different but comparable context, such protests are not sudden realizations of a society's contradictions, but 'ritual acts or symbolic expressions of a much longer process.' The 1994 protest on the Malecón marked a climax in the contradiction between two ideas of *campesinos* in Cuban society. As one may note for many other contexts, such historical shifts in theory often have real-life implications.

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Endnotes

- ¹ The idea of *campesinos* as a homogenous 'peasantry' was actually a misnomer, however, for, as in other Caribbean places, the so-called *campesinos* were not a native peasantry at all, but a dispersed group of both 're-constituted peasants' (Mintz 1961, 31-34, e.g. *colonos* or sugar cane sharecroppers) and agricultural workers (Mintz 1985, xxii).
- ² (Aguilar 2001, 86).