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Las Terrazas (Cuba) and the “Second Revolution” in the Sierra del Rosario

Íbamos a tener carro. Íbamos a tener buenas viviendas; íbamos a tener la corriente; íbamos a tener el agua dentro de las casas. Todo lo que se podía tener en otro lugar cualquiera, lo íbamos a tener nosotros. (*Francisco Torres*)

How does a revolution such as the Cuban one arrive at the rural backwaters of the country? How do the citizens in a destitute area relate to a national, revolutionary process, given that “national” and “revolutionary” were hardly concepts that used to apply to their everyday lives? The Sierra del Rosario is today a UNESCO biosphere reserve with the model community of Las Terrazas inside it but prior to the revolution, it was a particularly poverty-stricken area. I would therefore like to suggest a few arguments, based on oral histories recorded in Las Terrazas in 2007 and 2008, as well as further interview sources, to sketch its remarkable development. In short, the argument put forward here is that the development scheme for the Sierra del Rosario, which transformed the landscape and (re)created a community in Las Terrazas, meant that the revolution finally arrived in the Sierra del Rosario, and today its living standards and economic and social success even outperform that of Cuba as a whole. The examples used and the arguments put forward are by no means exhaustive but should serve as part of a debate and hopefully/maybe even spark off further research into the question. All interviews (unless where otherwise stated) were recorded by the author in 2007 and 2008.

Life in the Sierra del Rosario

The Sierra del Rosario, a mountainous region in Pinar del Río province, Cuba, is located circa thirty miles to the west of Havana, and was a destitute area before the revolution. Sugar and coffee crops dominated the landscape for many years, which lead to extensive deforestation. By 1860, almost thirty per cent of the trees in the area had been cut down; a process which continued (on a smaller scale) into the twentieth century.

María Rosa Almendros summarised what the Sierra had looked like before the development scheme, locally simply known as *el plan*, began:

MR: Tú veías las fotografías desde un avión y parecía que era un quemado al que le habían arrancado la piel. No tenían árboles.

At the time, most of the Sierra’s population lived in makeshift huts, and many earned their living *haciendo potrero*, which meant looking after livestock, collecting firewood and trying to make a living any way they could during the *tiempo muerto* (dead period), those seven months outside the *zafra*, or sugar harvest period.

Some of the more skilled in the area were charburners, moving from one place to the next, as Julio Borrego, interviewed by Reynaldo González, tells us:

Yo he pasado en la sierra toda mi vida. Primero, de la parte más llana, en ese lote que llaman El Corojal, Cayajabos. De un lado para otro, haciendo carbón. Un carbonero vivía en la falda de la loma, no tenía casa ni punto fijo y andaba rodando. Tumbaba la leña y la derriscaba para el llano. En ese llano paraba el horno, lo quemaba y llenaba los sacos.

Julio Borrego, father of Polo Montañés, who became a famous singer sever-

al decades later, tells a story similar to that of one of his daughters, whom I interviewed in 2008. Her name is Xista Liñares but she is known to all the locals as *La Negra* (an inoffensive name in this particular region).

X: Hacía carbón, chapeaba potreros, recogía café en los cafetales.

N: *¿A qué hora se levantaba por la mañana?*

X: A las 6.00 a.m. nos levantábamos y ya a las 7.00 a.m. estábamos en el cafetal trabajando sin almorzar hasta las 7.00 de la noche. 12 horas, el día entero, sin descansar.

N: *¿La cosecha del café produjo un tiempo muerto o no?*

X: En esta zona el café ha sido como la caña, siempre ha habido café y también el tiempo muerto.

N: *¿Y como sobrevivieron ustedes en el tiempo muerto?*

X: Con el carbón, con la leña, pasando de monte en monte. No teníamos casa fija, pues íbamos de ranchito en ranchito.

This applied to very many people, and Xista's account is not dissimilar to that of many others. The family's life has been published in more detail by Marisol Ramírez. Others were a little more fortunate, and very few, like Aquilino Mendire, even called a parcel of land their own. These families, though, would be white, and, just as Aquilino Mendire, usually of French descent.

The first few years of the Cuban revolution saw many radical reforms, many of which were milestones along the country's path to socialism. However, the most radical of all reforms was land reform, which abolished *latifundismo* in Cuba once and for all by 1961. Private landownership was limited to 400 hectares, and all land in excess of that amount in the hands of a single private owner was expropriated (includ-

ing that of Castro's own family). In return, every individual was guaranteed a minimum of two *caballerías*, i.e. 26 hectares.

It is important to note that with land reform, the development of the Sierra del Rosario had not come to its end, but had only begun. Gerineldo tells us (interviewed in 2008):

N: *¿La reforma agraria les entregó dos caballerías a sus padres?*

G: Si, asimismo se les fueron entregadas dos caballerías de tierra. Esas dos caballerías estaban cubiertas de bosques, y hubo que empezar a talar esos bosques para convertirlos en carbón, para poder vivir del carbón. Decirle todo esto no es decirle que al vincularse a esa nueva tarea (de organizar las milicias, el autor) no pasáramos trabajo, sino que ya las cosas eran mejoras. Era a partir de los años 60, y ya las cosas comenzaron a mejorar y mejorar.

Throughout the 1960s, life in the Sierra del Rosario was still characterised by the early stages of the revolution and organising counter-insurgency militias, who struggled to maintain control over the area. Economically, living standards only picked up slowly, and the initial successes of the revolution left the area almost untouched in economic terms, though land reform and major literacy campaigns, which all but eradicated illiteracy in Cuba by the mid-1960s, did have a major social impact.

Yet, María Rosa Almendros Díaz gave up her job at the Casa de las Américas to dedicate herself to a new life as a nurse in the Sierra del Rosario in the 1960s. When she arrived there for the first time, she was shocked by what she saw, and it should be mentioned that her previous experience had included the Spanish Civil War.

La gente era carboneros, muy pobres. Marcia me dijo, - Vete a ver por las casas

para ver si encuentras algo cultural, - y en una casa había una fotografía de carné, ni siquiera de la familia cercana. Lo tenían como un adorno. Eran muy pobres. No había nada que pudieras decir: es rústico, pero era una zona pobrísima y con la revolución esa gente cogió un poco de espíritu. Yo era revolucionaria un poco por ideas y eso, pero la realidad, yo la vi en la Sierra del Rosario.

It is not possible to describe María Rosa's expression while she said this during an interview in 2008 but it may serve as a summary for what life looked like for many before things really changed. These changes in the Sierra del Rosario, which saw the birth of a new community, fell nothing short of a second revolution, the revolution of the Sierra del Rosario.

El Plan Sierra del Rosario

1968 is arguably best known for student uprising across the world, and within the socialist camp, the Prague Spring is probably the best-known event of that year. Yet, in rural Cuba, in the Sierra del Rosario, another revolution started. Osmany Cienfuegos initiated the *Plan Sierra del Rosario*, a rural development scheme, which saw many hills terraced (as a natural means of irrigation), and with the future community of Las Terrazas at its heart.

The plan meant that the land given to the former peasants was collectivised to create a community, with major improvements to the infrastructure, or rather: the creation of an infrastructure where previously hardly any had existed, and where dispersed families and groups had dwelled in the uninhabitable hills. Then the most important changes finally came, as Clara, another local, tells us (interviewed in 2007), among which were the terraces giv-

ing the community its name, and which made the land arable:

Yo vivía en una casita por allá, y así vivían distintos campesinos. Vino Osmany Cienfuegos, el hermano de Camilo, e hicieron una carretera, y ahí fue donde construyeron las casas. Ellos necesitaban la tierra. Nosotros teníamos un pedacito de tierra y un bajarequito que se nos caía. Ya cuando llegaron y empezaron a hacer las casas, surgió la idea de sembrar las áreas de árboles y de café para enriquecer la vegetación, y tenían que hacer terrazas. Necesitaban los lugares donde nosotros estábamos para hacer las terrazas esas, y entonces hablaron con nosotros para si estábamos de acuerdo de venir a vivir a la comunidad: para ellos coger los lugares para la reforestación, y a nosotros nos entregaban una casa amueblada con todo. Entonces, todos los campesinos estuvieron de acuerdo.

Clara was not the only one to compare her current living standards with the deprivation suffered previously, as she continues:

Nosotros no sabíamos lo que era luz eléctrica. Nosotros no sabíamos lo que era un televisor. Nosotros no sabíamos lo que era una casa con pisos de cemento. Nosotros en realidad no sabíamos lo que era. No existía la discoteca, no teníamos médicos, no teníamos nada. Ya nos dieron todas esas posibilidades, e imagínate: ¿Quién no las va a aceptar? Teníamos que aceptar, y ahí fue donde ya empezamos a recibir los beneficios reales de la revolución.

This may be seen as a key passage in the prevailing narrative of the construction of Las Terrazas. First, "we had to accept", which should not be misread as the forced creation of a community: few peasants refused to move to the community; some continue to live outside it even today.

Instead, Clara's statement should be read against the backdrop of what had previously existed and what was promised to the peasants: a decent life, with all the commodities others take for granted. Second, the revolution really came to the Sierra del Rosario in 1968 (or 1971, when the community was inaugurated). This can be seen in the road mentioned above, and it is remarkable that Clara says "the true benefits of the revolution", which still lend a lot of stability to the Cuban revolution even today, whatever its shortcomings in political and democratic terms, as well as human rights.

In fact, returning to one of the claims made in the introduction, the identity of being a *comunitario* is inseparably linked the revolution, or, in other words, *el plan* is effectively the local execution of the national process called the *Cuban revolution*, as one might understand Tomás Rivero, interviewed by Reynaldo González:

Para callarle la boca a los que decían que la Revolución no iba a llegar nunca al Cuzco, vino esa terraplén, que era una cosa importante. Si usted me pregunta cuál es el cambio más grande que trajo la Revolución, al principio, le digo que fue el camino y el médico.

Not only did *el plan* finally bring the revolution to the Sierra del Rosario, but also it at long last bridged a gap between the area and the rest of the country. Previously, it had been very difficult (if not impossible) to leave the *Sierra*; today, transport to Havana and Pinar del Río is available if and when needed. All the flats in Las Terrazas have running water and electricity and are situated in solid buildings, well above the slum-like standards of some suburbs of Cienfuegos.

Those who prior to 1959 had lived in one of the worst and underdeveloped rural

backwaters of the country now have a model community with living standards that compare to "First World" standards. Possibly this was not a textbook revolution but to the population of the Sierra del Rosario, it felt remarkably like one.

Local cultures of remembrance and the adoption of tourism

Arguably, there exists a distinct culture of remembrance in Las Terrazas, which to a certain extent mirrors the national process on a small scale. One should mention Reynaldo González' *Conversación en Las Terrazas*, a remarkable (and unique) collection of interviews commemorating the construction of Las Terrazas. This in itself is worth noting, as the focus is on the development of the community as such, rather than on the rebellious movement against Batista, on which there are valuable works, and even those have only recently started to appear. However, local histories, and most of all Cuban oral histories are a very recent development, and may be interpreted as a gradual development towards historicising the revolution, exemplified here on a local level. The fact that a book has been published on Las Terrazas therefore also backs up the previous argument of calling *el plan* a revolution in its own right, if limited to a given area.

A further attempt to assert local identity in Las Terrazas can be seen in *El Terracero*, a local 4-page magazine printed at monthly intervals, but written, published and read by the inhabitants of Las Terrazas, with debates on political developments, the community's history, and current successes and failures in political and economic terms.

Further major changes arrived in the 1990s, when an economic crisis shook the

country, with repercussions still visible today throughout the country. In line with Cuba's sudden embracement of tourism as a source of income, a sustainable tourism development scheme was introduced (with Osmany Cienfuegos in charge once again), and several tourist attractions, among them a luxury hotel, *La Moka*, and a vegetarian, organic gourmet-style restaurant, *El Romero*, were built. Tourism today remains the community's most important source of income, and possibly helped secure both its bare survival as well as maintenance above Cuban standards in general. The fact that right from the start Las Terrazas opted for green, sustainable tourism with only a limited number of visitors permitted per day further underlines the model character of a successful community.

Conclusion

Francisco Torres, interviewed in 2007 and one of the community's founding members, summarised the development of Las Terrazas in a few words, which may serve as a conclusion.

Yo te puedo decir que yo lo conocí [a Fidel Castro, el autor], porque nosotros antes no teníamos terreno. Tierra para sembrar no teníamos. Entonces, cuando triunfó la revolución, él inició la reforma agraria, y entonces nos dio dos caballerías de tierra a cada uno de los que no tenían tierra. Cuando él [esta vez refiriéndose a Osmany Cienfuegos, el autor] habló con nosotros, nos planteó la idea de la comunidad, para que toda la gente viviera en una comunidad, para el bien no sólo de los mayores, sino de los niños. Íbamos a tener una escuela en el pueblo, íbamos a tener

un círculo infantil, íbamos a tener todo, todo, todo. Bueno, y así están. Hace 39 años ya que estamos aquí, y no teníamos problema ningún.

Francisco says that they haven't had the slightest trouble. Only few Cubans would gauge their current situation in similar terms. However, the community as such and its recent turn to new sources of revenue have contributed considerably to maintaining their standards above average, and helped secure a well-kept model community, which remains highly attractive for newcomers, too. Having moved to Las Terrazas a few years ago, Joel summarised his impression of Las Terrazas in 2008:

J: Yo me enamoré de esto, primero de mi esposa y segundo de este lugar. Yo digo que yo nací en Cienfuegos, pero este lugar nació en mí.

N: ¿Entonces te volviste un verdadero comunitario de Las Terrazas?

H: Yo, ¡yo soy como el primero!

Las Terrazas was a community born with the revolution, the revolution in the Sierra del Rosario, and a community in which many were reborn or at least permitted for the first time in their lives to live decently and in dignity, which might as well amount to the same thing.

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