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Historical Analysis

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Summary:

On May 17, 1959, at a ceremony at the La Plata camp in the Sierra Maestra mountains, from where he had led the guerrilla insurrection against Fulgencio Batista, Fidel Castro announced the first agrarian reform law. Present were many members of the Council of Ministers, delegations of farmers from different parts of Oriente province, and representatives of the different revolutionary organizations that had fought in the rebellion. Five months earlier, Batista had fled the country and Castro's triumphant army marched out of the Sierra Maestra, across the island, and into Havana.

The law's nominal objective was to democratize the Cuban countryside by providing greater participation in the nation's wealth to its farmers. This was to be accomplished through the breakup of large estates and the redistribution of land. It superseded the earlier Law No. 3 on Agrarian Reform that Castro had previously proclaimed while the insurrection was still taking place.

Additionally, the law enacted that day established the National Institute for Agrarian Reform (known by its Spanish acronym of **INRA**) as the state organization that would oversee implementation of the land reform. Fidel Castro, whose title in the government at that moment was still that of Prime Minister, was to also become the President of INRA. The newly created institution amassed incredible power over Cuban agriculture, the sugar crop, and even industry and education. In practice, its power would *de facto* exceed the parameters established by the new law.

Eventually, by the time in 1963 that the last of the laws had been implemented, INRA passed into the hands of a centralized state over 70% of Cuban farm land.¹ Rather than analyze this radical transformation in terms of the agrarian reform in and of itself, the purpose of this essay is to demonstrate how overarching ideological objectives were deeply imbricated with the type and speed of the reforms established by the Castro movement.

Introduction:

Our contention is that the National Institute for Agrarian Reform (INRA) was not founded in 1959 in Cuba to promote the agrarian reform law; instead, *the agrarian reform law was announced in order to create INRA*. Although this conclusion may run against the grain of many Cuba studies, it is borne by the facts.

Such as:

- The Cuban agricultural system before 1959 was productive in terms of its service to the Cuban people, and did not require collectivization. Cuba's agricultural system was unique to Cuba and not identical to other Latin American experiences.
- The state collectivization model imposed by INRA had already been proven, in the Soviet Union, to be economically ineffectual, and this evidence was available to Fidel Castro and his top leadership.
- The steps taken before, during and after implementation of the laws clearly indicate the overall objectives of the Regime.
- Statements by this same top leadership and the historical events that followed, show what the long range ideological purpose of the agrarian reform laws was, and how Castro ably used it to maneuver around other revolutionary forces and leaders who had democratic convictions and with whom he initially had to share power.

It is the contention of this paper that the founding of the **INRA** in 1959, did not have as its purpose the administration of the Agrarian Reform acts, promised and enacted (Ley No. 3) by Fidel Castro in the Sierra Maestra during the insurrection, but instead that the May 1959 Agrarian Reform Law had as its true purpose the creation of the **INRA in order to further a transformation of the Cuban countryside that was far more radical than the original Law No.3 contemplated**. In turn, the true mission of the **INRA** was to be **the** cornerstone of the transformation of Cuba into a Marxist Leninist Stalinist totalitarian state.

¹ "Land Reform in Cuba." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 18 Apr. 2020. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Land_reform_in_Cuba#:~:text=The%20agrarian%20reform%20laws%20of,1963%20after%20the%20Cuban%20Revolution.

The **INRA** became a parallel government with total command over Cuba's primary economic resources. It was the mechanism through which Castro and his followers could maneuver around the moderate revolutionary leadership with whom they had been forced to create the early coalition government.

This is particularly important to understand given the repeated assertions by many "Cuban experts" in academia suggesting that Castroism basically stumbled into totalitarianism as a result of tensions with the United States, and not because of an inner ideological commitment leading it in that direction. They argue that the ideals of the Revolution were fundamentally aimed at social reforms and that the political system that ensued was a result not of ideology, but of 'geopolitical realities' or 'unexpected factors.'

No less than President Obama himself expressed these views in his historic 2016 visit to Cuba when he stated at *el Gran Teatro de la Habana*:

So here's my message to the Cuban government and the Cuban people: *The ideals that are the starting point for every revolution -- America's revolution, Cuba's revolution, the liberation movements around the world -- those ideals find their truest expression, I believe, in democracy. Not because American democracy is perfect, but precisely because we're not. And we -- like every country -- need the space that democracy gives us to change.* It gives individuals the capacity to be catalysts to think in new ways, and to reimagine how our society should be, and to make them better.²

On the contrary, an examination of what **INRA** was designed to do and how it implemented this mandate shows the inner militaristic, collectivist and totalitarian objectives of Castroism starting, at the very least, from its very inception as an organizing force in the Sierra Maestra mountains before 1959.

Lucas Moran, an attorney from Santiago de Cuba, was one of the key organizers of the civic resistance against the Batista dictatorship. He recounts in his well-researched book "**La Revolución Cubana: Una versión rebelde**," that in a meeting in September 1958 in the Sierra Maestra with leaders of the urban underground resistance, Fidel Castro was adamant that there should be a strong Rebel Army after Batista was overthrown. The civic leaders insisted that as a democratic country, with no external enemies, Cuba should have only a minimal armed force to

² Obama, Barack. "Remarks by President Obama to the People of Cuba." *National Archives and Records Administration*, National Archives and Records Administration, 22 Mar. 2016. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/03/22/remarks-president-obama-people-cuba>

defend institutions. Fidel Castro retorted that only through a “vigorous Rebel Army” could the socio political changes sought by the Cuban Revolution be carried out.³

One of the academic works cited in this essay is James O’Connor’s classic “**Agrarian Reforms in Cuba.**” Rigorously investigated on the ground in the island, and enriched by O’Connor’s personal witness of **INRA** meetings as well as his ability to interview key leaders of the Revolution, such as Ernesto “Che” Guevara, this monograph became the lens through which the agrarian reform carried out as a result of the 1959 Revolution is still analyzed by many academics. O’Connor was a proponent of the theory that the agrarian reform laws leading to collectivization were a result of successive realities faced by the revolutionaries as they initiated the process of land reform.

“These were not doctrinaire expropriations that satisfied the tenets of some grand historical abstraction at the expense of political or economic or human needs and desires. They were rather grounded in very practical and sometimes obvious considerations,” writes O’Connor. He affirms in his monograph that collectivization was inevitable if Cuba sought to accelerate economic development. Therefore, he adds, INRA land distribution policies “are by and large beyond criticism.”⁴

On the contrary, the evidence indicates that ideology, not the compact experience of Cuban agriculture, guided INRA policies. Additionally, by 1959 agricultural collectivization models were known not to accelerate economic development. Thirdly, how could any public policy be ‘beyond criticism?’ Only in a dictatorship can this be so. And that is precisely what INRA was building. The perspectives, assumptions and omissions of the O’Connor monograph are symptomatic of much that is wrong with Cuban studies to this day.

The INRA was the Embryo of Totalitarianism in Cuba

The Agrarian Reform Laws empowered INRA for the task of reconstructing a plural Cuban society into a collectivistic totalitarian one. Not only do subsequent historical events bear this out, but also the testimony of those who were privileged witnesses of what the real blueprint for Cuba was for Fidel Castro and his inner circle at that moment in the historical process.

Agrarian Reform and Social Transformation

³ Morán Arce, Lucas. *La Revolución Cubana, 1953-1959: Una Versión Rebelde*. Imprenta Universitaria, Universidad Católica, (1980): 266.

⁴ O’Connor, James. “Agrarian Reforms in Cuba, 1959-1963.” *Science & Society*, vol. 32, no. 2, (1968): 183-184.

The Agrarian Reform Law announced by Fidel Castro at La Plata, in the Sierra Maestra on May 17, 1959,⁵ was an important move on Castro's plan to carry out the transformation of Cuba into a totalitarian state.

The previous Agrarian Reform Law "No. 3," drafted by attorney and Rebel Army commander Humberto Sorí Marín, sought to empower the already existing trend in the Cuban countryside towards the transformation of small and middle farmers into entrepreneurs. This reformist measure became a selling point for Castro's movement as it helped consolidate the image of a reformist force which would renovate the Cuban republic and its institutions within a democratic framework.

The Agrarian Reform Law adopted in 1959 ignored the previous legislation drafted by attorney and Sierra Maestra *comandante* Humberto Sorí Marín. It was mostly drafted by intellectuals from the Cuban Communist Party (*Partido Socialista Popular*) and pursued a radical collectivistic approach to agrarian reform that the party itself was not in agreement with.⁶ Three Marxist intellectuals were identified as authors of the legislation: Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, Oscar Pino Santos, and Antonio Nuñez Jimenez.⁷

Interestingly enough, the party line of the *de facto* Cuban Communist Party (the Popular Socialist Party), was more in the direction of "land to the tiller" type reform, as Sorí Marín proposed. At least this was what the Party had defended in its historic letter to provisional President Manuel Urrutia Lleó, on January 28, 1959.⁸

This content of the party's proposal was probably due to the intimate familiarity that the pro-Moscow PSP leadership had with the failure of the Stalinist agricultural collectivization program, as denounced by Nikita Khrushchev in the XX Communist Party Congress in 1956.⁹ The PSP was so enamored of this type of "*land to the tiller reform*" that it initiated a mobilization of its worker base in support of it throughout the island.¹⁰

As to this difference in the proposals, The Regime's main historical website Ecured, cryptically states in its article on the agrarian reform that:

⁵ Ruiz, Leovigildo. *Diario De Una Traición*. Florida Typesetting Of Miami, Inc., (1965): 99. www.latinamericanstudies.org/book/Diario-Traicion-1959.pdf

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.100

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 42

⁹ Personal interview with Juan Felipe Benemelis, August 10, 2020.

¹⁰ Ruiz, p. 51

“The Cuban Revolution enacted two agrarian reform laws in 1959 and 1963, in the drafting of which the sector proposing the more radical reforms, which included Ernesto Che Guevara, triumphed.”¹¹

Beyond the letter of the May 17, 1959 law, its intent was the establishing of the **INRA**, as *the* monolithic institution controlling Cuba’s vital agricultural resources and even overseeing its industries. It marginalized the Ministry of Agriculture, which was led and staffed by two key leaders with democratic convictions: Humberto Sorí Marín and Rogelio González Corso.¹² **INRA’s** functionaries and cadres “were drawn from the officer corps and ranks of the Rebel Army,”¹³ following the militaristic vision that Fidel Castro had presented to the civic underground leaders in the September 1958 meeting in the Sierra Maestra.

Drivers of Agrarian Reform: Economic Necessity or Ideological Urgency?

Cuba had an effective agricultural system before the 1959 Revolution. Reform was needed in order to make that system more just and inclusive.

A survey among agricultural workers throughout the island (between 1956 and 1957), which was conducted by the influential *Agrupación Católica Universitaria* (ACU) (Catholic University Association), indicated this:¹⁴

*La inmejorable tierra cubana y el trabajo de nuestro obrero agrícola han producido mucha riqueza a nuestra Patria; pero el obrero agrícola no participa del disfrute de esa riqueza.*¹⁵

The excellent land of Cuba and the work of our agricultural laborers have generated much wealth for our Homeland, but the agricultural worker does not partake of the benefit of this wealth.

¹¹ “Reforma Agraria.” *EcuRed*, 2020, www.ecured.cu/Reforma_Agraria.

¹² Personal interview with Alberto Muller, July 8, 2020. Humberto Sori Marin was later first wounded by Castro forces and later executed while attempting to organize the underground resistance. en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Humberto_Sor%C3%AD_Marin, Rogelio Gonzalez Corzo was also captured and executed together with Sori Marin, on April 20, 1961. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manuel_Artime

¹³ O’Connor, p.170

¹⁴ Alvarez, Jose. “Encuesta De Trabajadores Agrícolas Cubanos, 1956-57.” ufdcimages.uflib.ufl.edu/IR/00/00/19/08/00001/FE29200.pdf

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

The study also asserted that Havana was more prosperous than the countryside:

*La ciudad de la Habana está viviendo una época de extraordinaria prosperidad, mientras que en el campo, y especialmente los trabajadores agrícolas, están viviendo en condiciones de estancamiento, miseria y desesperación difíciles de creer.*¹⁶

The city of Havana is living a time of extraordinary prosperity, while the countryside, and specially the agricultural workers, are living in stagnant conditions of poverty and desperation which are difficult to believe.

Oscar Echevarria Salvat, who coordinated the ACU study, remembered years later that during the course of the study, which focused on 1,000 *campesino* families throughout the island, they found them to be “well fed, that there was no abject poverty in the Cuban countryside, and that Cuban agriculture was efficient and effective,” what it needed most was “infrastructure support from the national government.”¹⁷

Other expert studies at the time indicated that the achievements of Cuban agriculture attained, in terms of productivity and inclusiveness in little over a half-century of Cuban independence, were considerable and could not be dismissed:

*The quantity and quality of land available for cultivation as a proportion of the country's total land area ranked Cuba among the best agricultural nations in the world. This combination of plentiful fertile land and increased industrialization led to Cuba achieving one of the highest growth rates in post-World War II agricultural production in the world (quoting the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization's statistics from 1958). As a result, Cuba became not only self-sufficient with respect to most of its food supplies, but actually became an important exporter of foodstuffs. [Italics added for emphasis in this analysis.]*¹⁸

It is important to delve into these achievements in order to gauge what the true intent behind the creation of the **INRA** was, and what the ultimate results of its policies were.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Personal interview with Oscar Echevarria, August 10, 2020.

¹⁸ Salazar-Carrillo, Jorge, and Andres Nodarse-Leon. *CUBA: from Economic Take-off to Collapse under Castro*. Taylor & Francis, (2017): 86

Eminent Cuban statesman and scholar Dr. Carlos Marquez Sterling had noted that before 1959 Cubans had enacted antitrust and land tenure laws to protect tenant farmers and field workers:

[Before 1959] There existed in Cuba the right of land tenure. This made it impossible for planters, tenants, joint owners, and field workers to be dispossessed even by the State itself, much less by the great monopolies which, in Cuba, as is the case even here in the United States, are always after impoverished areas. They made it necessary for Cuba, just as it was necessary for this great democracy (United States of America) to enact anti-trust legislation to regulate these rights.

Although Cuba suffered inequalities, as do all present day countries, the issues at stake during her armed struggle [1953-59, more specifically 1957-59] originated in a policy that opposed public liberties. But, as can be easily ascertained by anyone who studies the matter, the case was that, concurrent with this struggle for public power, our country was enjoying great prosperity, the year 1957 being the best in all of our history in terms of economic and finances.¹⁹

Dr. Jorge Dominguez, in his seminal work **“Cuba: Order and Revolution” (1978)**, found that, as Dr. Marquez Sterling had stated, “less than one tenth of the Cuban peasants lacked legal claim to the land they tilled.”²⁰

Dr. Marquez Sterling’s statements were confirmed by international missions of technical experts:

In July 1956, the United States Department of Commerce issued ‘Investment in Cuba,’ which said: Subsistence living, so prevalent in many areas of Latin America, is not characteristic of Cuba, whose national income reflects the wage economy of the country. Compensation of employees represented from 56 percent to 61 percent of total national income between 1946 and 1949 and from 59 to 65 percent between 1950 and 1954.²¹

¹⁹Smith, Earl E.T. *The Fourth Floor: an Account of the Castro Communist Revolution*. Random House, (1962): 43

²⁰ Alvarez, Jose. “Transformations in Cuban Agriculture after 1959.” University of Florida, July 2004. edis.ifas.ufl.edu/fe481

²¹ Smith, p.43

*...the Economic and Technical mission of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development stated in its Report on Cuba, 1951: 'The general impression of members of the Mission, from observations in travels all over Cuba, is that living levels of farmers, agricultural laborers, industrial workers, storekeepers, and others are higher all along the line than for corresponding groups in other tropical countries and in nearly all other Latin American countries. This does not mean that there is no dire poverty in Cuba, but simply that in comparative terms Cubans are better off, on the average, than people of these other areas.'*²²

Therefore, as O'Connor notes, in the Cuban countryside **“there was little of the intense land hunger which exploded during the Mexican, Russian, and Chinese revolutions.”**²³

Guevara himself, one of the main ideologues designing the new totalitarian state in Cuba, confirmed, from the viewpoint of his Marxist ideology, the empirical reality of pre-1959 Cuba objectively described by specialists and scientists:

A further exceptional factor was that in most of Cuba the peasants had been progressively *proletarianized* due to the needs of large-scale, semi mechanized capitalist agriculture. They had reached a new level of organization and therefore a greater class consciousness. In mentioning this we should also point out, in the interest of truth, that the first area in which the Rebel Army operated (comprising the survivors of the defeated column who had made the *Granma* voyage) was an area inhabited by peasants whose social and cultural roots were different from those of the peasants found in the areas of large-scale, semi mechanized Cuban agriculture. In fact the *Sierra Maestra*, the site of the first revolutionary settlement, is a place where peasants who had struggled against large landholders took refuge. They went there seeking new land — somehow overlooked by the state or the voracious landholders — on which to earn a modest income. They struggled constantly against the demands of the soldiers, always allied to the landholders, and their ambitions extended no further than a property deed. The peasants who belonged to our first guerrilla armies came from that section of this social class which most strongly shows love for the land and the possession of it; that is to say, which most perfectly demonstrates the petty-bourgeois spirit. *The peasants fought because they wanted land for themselves and their*

²² Ibid, p.43

²³ O'Connor, p.173

*children, to manage and sell it and to enrich themselves through their labor.*²⁴
[Italicized for emphasis]

James O'Connor's observations, contained in his monograph on the Cuban Agrarian Reform Law, are cited in this paper. They are along the same lines as Guevara's, and corroborate the central topic of this analysis. A marginalized, landless, impoverished peasantry was not a feature of the reality of the Cuban countryside.

Cuba was a developing country that had managed to generate, through its historically developed cultural forms of production, urban centers that were experiencing a period of economic take-off. These urban centers depended on an agricultural system where social conditions were not improving, as often occurs in cases of economic development, at the same speed and rate as that of the cities. This lag of the agricultural sector behind the urban centers also varied from province to province, depending on the relations of land tenure and agricultural production of each region. However, the system was productive and displayed multiple signs of increasing inclusiveness in progress.

The question lay in how to preserve Cuba's agricultural productivity in order to make its increasing prosperity more inclusive. In addressing the inequities in the Cuban countryside, the 1956-57 ACU study noted that "The responsibility lies with rulers who have not known how to dictate national legislation that can stimulate greater production and better distribution." (*"La responsabilidad recae sobre los gobernantes que no han sabido dictar las leyes nacionales que sirvan de estímulo a una mayor producción y a una mejor distribución."*)²⁵

Whereas the first agrarian reform measures drafted by Humberto Sorí Marín for liberated territories in the Sierra Maestra mountains during the insurgency sought to address bridging the gap between the factors of production and the producers, the agrarian reform laws enacted after the revolutionary triumph in 1959 had a different, ideological objective.

Dominguez postulates that the focus of the Agrarian Reforms enacted by the Regime from 1959 on, were 'accidental,' the result of the Rebel Army organizing in a region in Cuba where 'atypical rural dwellers' predominated:

This more or less accidental event brought the leaders of the revolution in contact with what was essentially an atypical rural dweller. The revolutionary government's policies in 1959 and thereafter were influenced by this experience, a fact that explains why so much of their early legislation was devoted to solving the problems of Cuba's few squatters, while the

²⁴ Guevara, Ernesto "Che". "Cuba: Historical Exception or Vanguard in the Anti Colonial Struggle." Cuba. 9 April 1961. Speech. www.marxists.org/archive/guevara/1961/04/09.htm

²⁵ Alvarez, "Encuesta De Trabajadores Agrícolas Cubanos, 1956-57."

many more peasants who were not squatters and the even more numerous agricultural workers received less government attention. (pp. 423–424)²⁶

However, Guevara’s speeches on the subject indicate that the revolutionary leadership *did* know that they were dealing with atypical rural dwellers in the Sierra Maestra. It is important, for the thesis of this paper, to return to Guevara’s description:

In mentioning this, we should also point out, in the interest of truth, that the first area in which the Rebel Army operated (comprising the survivors of the defeated column who had made the Granma voyage) was an area inhabited by peasants whose social and cultural roots were different from those of the peasants found in the areas of large-scale, semi mechanized Cuban agriculture. [emphasis added by author]²⁷

The path followed by the agrarian reform was not geared to satisfy the demands of this ‘atypical rural population,’ if it had, it would have continued on the path of further land distribution and intra-class cooperation laid out by Sori Marin in Law No. 3. This path would have been more similar to that of the successful Taiwanese Land Reform model.

Instead, the series of land reform laws initiated in May 1959 squarely aimed to centralize agricultural production in the hands of the state. It is important to explore the ‘why’ of this.

Sir Hugh Thomas, the great historian of Cuba, answers this by postulating that Fidel Castro had a change of heart with regards to which pattern of land reform would be more productive. According to Professor José Alvarez, Thomas stated that the May 1959 law was signed into effect “as a symbolic gesture, [...] in the mountains of the Sierra Maestra. It proscribed *latifundia* (defined as estates larger than 402 hectares) and it initially distributed some land and encouraged the development of cooperatives on larger estates. It did not, however, break up the large sugarcane plantations and cattle ranches. Thomas (1971, pp. 1216–1217) explains that Castro had already changed his mind regarding distribution of land by the time of the 1959 Agrarian Reform Law. He believed that, rather than dividing *latifundios* into small plots (which would decrease production), they should maintain larger tracts of land under governmental control.”²⁸

²⁶ Alvarez, “Transformations in Cuban Agriculture after 1959.”

²⁷ Guevara, “Cuba: Historical Exception or Vanguard in the Anti Colonial Struggle.”

²⁸ Alvarez, “Transformations in Cuban Agriculture after 1959.”

Thomas' description is interesting for different reasons. Was Fidel Castro's 'change of mind' due exclusively to a pursuit of greater agricultural productivity, as Thomas asserts? If so, why did Fidel Castro disregard the abundant literature demonstrating that the Soviet model of large collective farms under governmental control was disastrous for productivity? Why did he even disregard the public counsel, to the same effect, that Sori Marin, the ACU and the very Communist Party of Cuba (PSP), among others were offering?

This was common knowledge since the 1930s and was certainly known by anyone interested in agrarian reform in the 1950s. Furthermore, why would Fidel Castro not consider the substantial evidence that the Taiwanese land reform model, based on reduction of rents, distribution of land directly to farmers, state-supported collaboration with landowners, and further state support with credits, seeds and infrastructure, had been highly successful in both increasing production and improving the lives of agricultural workers?

The speeches and statements by Guevara early in 1959, the description, by multiple inside witnesses, about the militarism and radicalization of the Rebel Army and the centralization of all command under the autocratic leadership of Fidel Castro as the anti-Batista struggle progressed, as well as the steps taken by Castro himself, from early on after Batista's flight, in order to suppress freedom of the press and civil society, show that the Agrarian Reform Law followed a statist course for purely ideological reasons: the consolidation in power of a totalitarian regime.

Thomas was correct in asserting that the reformist Law No.3 enacted during the insurgency was symbolic. It was one of the multiple symbols manipulated by Fidel Castro to disguise the true objectives of the revolutionary movement. As Guevara himself would describe it, the planned social goal was the destruction of the Cuban individual, of Cuban individualism, and its replacement by a collectivist state with a single leader. That "cosmic force called Fidel Castro," as Guevara would, in all seriousness, describe him.²⁹

The Agrarian Reform Law announced in May of 1959 did not seek to address the historical desire for land to work and grow of Cuba's independently-minded agricultural workers. The goal was to transform the productive base in order to change the consciousness of the *guajiros*. This was paramount since these workers "...thought like capitalists," according to

²⁹ Guevara, "Cuba: Historical Exception or Vanguard in the Anti Colonial Struggle."

one ‘government leader,’³⁰ and the Revolution’s goal was to develop a ‘collective consciousness.’³¹ Guevara complained about the “petty bourgeois spirit” of the peasants.³²

Ideological Aims

This desire to transform the conscience of the rural proletariat exemplifies how the true purpose of the agrarian reform was a radical social transformation designed to create a sociological base for an ideological objective.³³ The purpose of this law was to establish total state control over Cuban agriculture and countryside through an overriding totalitarian, militaristic institution.

All of this was carried out while **THE** top government leader continued to announce that his intentions were **not** to build a totalitarian society. Cuban and American relations were still on a honeymoon. It was approximately **one month before** Fidel Castro carried out a very successful public relations tour of the United States.

Dr. Manuel Antonio de Varona, a prestigious former prime minister, senator and courageous student leader in the struggle against the Machado dictatorship, publicly indicated where the creation of INRA was taking the country. De Varona had also been an outstanding opponent of the Batista dictatorship and was greatly respected in the island. On June 13, 1959 he appeared before a panel of journalists on Havana’s television channel 12.

“The INRA has become more powerful than the State. It has greater command than the President of the Republic or the Council of Ministers. It is false that an Agrarian Reform cannot be done through Congress.”³⁴

Tony de Varona was correct in his pronouncements. The goal of the INRA was to supersede the remaining semblances of republican institutionalism in Cuba. Guevara, who was far more candid than Castro in his ideological pronouncements, had clearly laid out the overarching collectivist aims of agrarian reform in his January 27, 1959 speech on **“The Social Aims of the Rebel Army.”**³⁵

³⁰ O’Connell, p.182

³¹ Ibid.

³² Guevara, “Cuba: Historical Exception or Vanguard in the Anti Colonial Struggle.”

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ruiz, p. 114

³⁵ Guevara, Ernesto “Che”. “40th Anniversary of Workers and Farmers in Power in Cuba.” *Militant*, vol. 63, no. 11, 22 Mar. 1999. www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/43b/103.html

On June 17, 1959 during his official visit to Cairo, Guevara clearly established the consequences of dissent from the Agrarian Reform Law of May. “We will use all necessary force against farm owners who may oppose the agrarian reform. All of the laws of the revolution must be implemented in the interest of our people and we cannot allow any opposition to them.”³⁶ This kind of warning from a man who had already, by this time of that year, overseen dozens if not hundreds of executions, was not to be taken lightly. The Agrarian Reform Laws provided the first pretext used to justify the extension of repression from members of the overthrown Batista Regime to those in Cuban civil society who were now starting to voice opposition to it.

On June 26, the Council of Ministers amended the supposedly provisional Fundamental Law to include the death penalty for what were ambiguously defined as ‘counterrevolutionary acts.’³⁷ That same day, Felix Fernandez Perez, president of the Association of Medium to Small Landowners of the Province of Pinar del Rio, was arrested because of his criticisms of the Agrarian Reform Laws on his local radio program.³⁸ On June 27, Raul Castro proclaimed at the end of a speech in Pinar del Rio: “Agrarian Reform or Death.”³⁹ This harsh escalation by the top leaders of the new regime took place in spite of the fact that, as O’Connor observed, “At no time, however, did INRA provincial and zone administrators encounter political resistance on the part of owner and farm managers to the ‘interventions’ (or seizures) and expropriations of agricultural properties.”⁴⁰

Under the pretext of agrarian reform, as Tony de Varona observed, a supra political organization had been created through **INRA**, under the command of Fidel Castro, to establish the economic base of totalitarian collectivism in Cuba. Furthermore, this totalitarian entity came prepared to impose its dictates through terminal violence even if opposition were to be peaceful.

Dissident voices

Early on, Cuban Catholic bishops identified and denounced the Sovietizing intent and design of the agrarian reform law.⁴¹ The bishops had called for an agrarian reform that aimed to

³⁶ Ruiz, p.116

³⁷ Ibid, p.120

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ O’Connor, p. 173

⁴¹ Conferencia Episcopal Cubana. *La Voz De La Iglesia En Cuba: 100 Documentos Episcopales*. Obra Nacional De La Buena Prensa, (1995): 85

empower peasants in their land rights, and not to subsume these under state control through **INRA**.⁴²

An exceptional historical witness to the interior designs of **INRA** was Dr. Manuel Artime Buesa. A young charismatic officer of the Rebel Army, Artime had graduated as a psychiatrist from the University of Havana and was a significant emerging national Catholic leader. Assigned as deputy administrator of one of the INRA administrative zones, he was a witness to the hidden designs and the culture of falsehoods generated by Castro to disguise the true objectives of **INRA**. Artime was an agrarian reformist, a member of the **ACU** (which had carried out the aforementioned survey of agrarian workers); and as his graphically narrated book demonstrated, he had a keen eye for the social ills present in the Cuban countryside.

In his prophetic 1960 book “*Traición: Gritan 20,000 Tumbas Cubanas,*” published in Mexico by the prestigious Catholic publishing house *Jus*, Artime described what he had been a witness to as one of the top administrators of the agrarian reform:

*Today in my country, poor farmers continue to be poor, but in addition: slaves to the State. Lands taken from the terratenientes (owners of large properties) went to the State, and not to the ‘guajiro’ [Cuban term for farmers]. There is a Machiavellian plan so that slowly, but relentlessly, all land will be taken over by the State.*⁴³

Effectively, as Artime warned, as **Guevara announced** in his 27 January 1959 speech on the social aims of the Rebel Army, and as the ensuing history demonstrates, the revolutionary regime carried out the agrarian reform in phases in order to prevent the emergence of an organized front of landholders that would oppose Castro’s long term totalitarian designs.⁴⁴ Had **INRA** tried to fully implement the full extent of the Agrarian Reform Law from the very beginning, “...an alliance between the large and middle landlords would have almost certainly been forged.”⁴⁵

In late 1959, before publishing his book, Artime addressed Fidel Castro a letter of resignation from both his rank in the Rebel Army (or as Artime described it: “*now become a red*

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Artime, Manuel F. *¡Traición! Gritan 20000 Tumbas Cubanas*. Jus, (1960): 11.

⁴⁴ O’Connor, p.172

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 171

army,”) and as Deputy Director of the O-22 Development Zone of the Agrarian Reform [there were a total of 28 such zones. ^{46]}

Dated November 7, 1959, in the letter Artime alerted public opinion about what was the true blueprint that **INRA** was following. In one of the last acts of a free press in Cuba, the letter was published on the front page of the *Avance* newspaper.⁴⁷

*I do not want to fool the **guajiro** by telling him that there will be land distribution (as you [Fidel Castro] promised in the Sierra Maestra and continue to promise). I know, because you said so in the last meeting of INRA, that we would not distribute land to anyone, that we would only create cooperatives on lands that belonged to the State, but that farmers could not know this. Why aren't you sincere with those farmers who gave their lives to free Cuba and who now expect justice?*

*I refuse to fool the **guajiro** telling him that tomorrow he will be the owner and administrators of cooperatives, while knowing fully well that you have personally told us that the Administrator should always be the State...I have seen on the ground how there is no intention in training and educating farmers so that one day they become administrators. Be sincere with that farmer Comandante, tell him the truth, tell him how he will continue to be a field laborer, now for the State, and that he will not own land.⁴⁸*

Guevara's own speeches and writings corroborate the accuracy of what Artime was stating. Cuban **guajiros** sought to work their own lands and to grow in wealth within a system of individual opportunity and prosperity they had been a witness to. Reform was needed, not ideological oppression.

Events took place as Artime predicted. A widespread rebellion of small and middle landholders began when they saw that they were being transformed into *state serfs*. As stated by courageous *campesino* leader Agapito Rivera, who led a guerrilla force of **guajiros** in a three year uprising in northern Las Villas province, in pre-1959 Cuba, “I had nothing, but I had hope.

⁴⁶ Ruffin, Patricia. *Capitalism and Socialism in Cuba: a Study of Dependency, Development and Underdevelopment*. Macmillan, (1990): 135.

⁴⁷ “Manuel Artime.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 28 Aug. 2020, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manuel_Artime

⁴⁸ Artime, p.15

When I saw the Regime taking away what others had worked and sweated for, I lost hope of having my own. I went to war to recover that hope that one day I would have something.⁴⁹

Rivera, called “El Guapo” (the Brave One), was from a province full of middle and small landowners. He would be wounded five times, lose two brothers, and nine nephews in the struggle, and spend 25 years in prison for standing up for his rights.⁵⁰

This thinking was characteristic of extended *campesino* family units who took up arms in the insurgency against the Communist government (1959-65):⁵¹ “...there was absolutely no chance that I’d go work like a slave on one of Cuba’s state farms,” he added, expressing the mindset of the fiercely independent farmers who refused to bow down to state control.

“INRA’s attitude toward Cuba’s *kulaks* was uncertain and standoffish...”⁵² “While INRA disregarded articles in the law, in other respects, O’Connell acknowledges, implementation of the law was more severe than the law itself.”⁵³

Pro regime agrarian reform literature does not hide this elimination of the rural middle classes as the objective. “The second law, enacted in 1963, reduced the maximum amount of land that a private owner could have to 166 acres. This occurred in the midst of the intensification of the class struggle, which in the mountain chain of the Escambray in the central region of the country, was very violent...” “It was in this manner that the remnants of the rural *bourgeoise* disappeared.”⁵⁴

Guevara himself admitted that the Agrarian Reform was characterized by the ‘confusion, uncertainty and over-militancy’ on the part of INRA’s cadres.⁵⁵ These characteristics were the result of the harsh discipline imposed on them, the dictates of Marxist class struggle and class warfare that many of them had been receiving since the founding of the *Minas de Frio* school for Rebel Army officers in the Sierra Maestra, and the incoherence between what top revolutionary leaders said publicly and what they assured these officers privately.

⁴⁹ Personal interview with Cuban civil war historian Enrique Encinosa on June 30, 2020.

⁵⁰ Personal interview with Agapito “El Guapo” Rivera on June 30, 2020.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² O’Connor, p.188

⁵³ Ibid., p. 172

⁵⁴ De la Cruz, Oria. “La Esencia Radical De La Revolución: Ley De Reforma Agraria En Cuba.” *Alainet.org*, ALAI, 6 Apr. 2019, www.alainet.org/es/articulo/200221.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p.173

Arttime denounced this in his own resignation letter:

*I have heard Che Guevara say that we should be on the lookout for any kind of new industry that is about to get started so that we immediately communicate it to INRA because he did not want any individual getting ahead of the state.*⁵⁶

Civil War

The harshness of the **INRA**, and the totalitarian intent behind it, plunged Cuba into the longest and bloodiest civil war of its 20th century history. Even academic apologists of the law agree that one of its consequences was “...the revival of the civil war after the failure of the invasion of April, 1961, a struggle which found many of the middle farmers on the side of the counterrevolution.”⁵⁷

As Arttime predicted,

The Agrarian Reform approved in May 1959 confiscated all farms larger than 402 hectares and gave lessees and sharecroppers property rights of parcels of up to 26 hectares. The state farms were established in January 1960, with state control superseding cooperatives. As the middle property owners, the main producers of food for the country, were hurt by this measure, there was scarcity of basic products. *It was to be expected that the decrease in agricultural production and its effect on urban consumption would take finances, investment and consumption to zero levels.*⁵⁸

Why was this scarcity and undermining of the Cuban economy carried out if it could be predicted by any rational economic analysis? Because the Agrarian Reform enacted in 1959 had as its ultimate goal the development of a “war communism” economy in the countryside. As described by “Che” Guevara: “*The INRA advanced like a tractor or like a tank, because it is a tractor and a tank, breaking down the fences of land barons and **creating the new social relations of land ownership.***”⁵⁹ This was in marked contrast to what former Costa Rica president José Figueres had advised Cubans in his early 1959 visit to the island. Land reform

⁵⁶ Arttime, p.15

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 188

⁵⁸ Personal interview with Juan Benemelis and access to his unpublished book manuscript on this matter (August 10, 2020).

⁵⁹ Guevara, Ernesto Che. *La Guerra de Guerrillas: a Camilo*. (1965): 63.

was like “strumming a guitar,” Figueres counseled. It had to be very specifically attuned to the specific conditions and culture of each agricultural system, or production would be affected.⁶⁰

Guevara believed that revolutionary struggle and militarism were *the means* through which to attain this ‘greater collective consciousness:’

*We, who at first punished severely anyone who touched the property of even a rich peasant or a landowner, brought ten thousand head of cattle to the Sierra one day and said to the peasants, simply, 'Eat'. And the peasants, for the first time in years and years, some for the first time in their lives, ate beef. The respect which we had had for the sacrosanct property right to those ten thousand head of cattle **was lost in the course of armed battle...***⁶¹

And here one also finds the ideological intent to *declare war* on the Cuban *kulaks*, as Lenin had done in Russia.⁶² Even after the guerrilla resistance in the mountains had been defeated, thousands of *campesino* families were forcibly relocated from the central part of the island to concentration villages in other provinces, known as *pueblos cautivos*.⁶³

The Doctrine of Scarcity

Militarism and scarcity were central tenets of the Castroite movement, muddled together in Fidel Castro’s understanding of not just of how development could be brought about, but how a new political order could be constituted.

Whereas a free republic requires a large swath of the population integrated through its values, associations, interests and ability to generate and distribute wealth in the private sphere, a totalitarian state requires a mass of people directly materially dependent on its designs.

In a probable jab at Sori Marin, the ACU and so many others that insisted that what the Cuban countryside mostly needed was mainly infrastructure support, Fidel Castro stated on February 19, 1959 in an appearance on the highly watched Cuban television news show “Before the Press” (Ante la Prensa), that:

“We don’t want capital to invest in our roads. Roads are useful, but they are not productive. We need it in order to invest in our industries. If we have to spend twenty years

⁶⁰ Ruiz, p.71

⁶¹ Guevara, Ernesto Che. “On Revolutionary Medicine.” *Marxists*, 19 Aug. 1960, www.marxists.org/archive/guevara/1960/08/19.htm.

⁶² Viola, Lynne. *Peasant Rebels under Stalin: Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance*. Oxford University Press, (1999): 16.

⁶³ “Pueblos Cautivos de Cuba.” *Foresight Cuba*, 31 Dec. 2018, foresightcuba.com/pueblos-cautivos/.

eating **Malanga** (*a Cuban root vegetable part of the standard food fare of the Cuban families*), we will do so and save our economy.”⁶⁴

Campesino Insurgency and Foreign Commissars

Most telling as to this actual intent of the law is that *a month before* the Agrarian Reform Law was announced, in early April 1959, Raul Castro had requested, from the Soviet Union, that militant Spanish Communists exiled in the Soviet Union—known as *hispano soviéticos*—be sent to Cuba in order to aid in the organization of military intelligence and in the overall organization of the new revolutionary armed forces.⁶⁵ Dozens of these individuals would be absolutely essential, in addition to German and Soviet advisers, in setting up the extensive intelligence and counterintelligence networks of the Cuban military.⁶⁶

Many of these selfsame advisers had already served the Soviets, on the ground, in crushing the anti-Communist partisans in the Ukraine and the Baltic States.⁶⁷ These advisers played a key role in directing the counterinsurgency against the *campesino* rebels.⁶⁸ They were specially essential in devising the Castroite counterinsurgency strategy against the *campesino* rebellions that were ignited by the abuses of **INRA and the Agrarian Reform**.⁶⁹

Having received a positive response from the Soviet regime, Raul Castro announced, during a rally in Havana on April 13, 1959, the creation of a “political army,” that would constitute *“el pueblo armado,”* (the armed people).⁷⁰ This concept would evolve into the

⁶⁴ Ruiz, p.57

⁶⁵ Aguilera Reynel, César. *El Soviet Caribeño: La Otra Historia de la Revolución Cubana*. Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial, 2018.

⁶⁶ Gonzalez Martell, Roger. “Niños de la Guerra en la Unión Soviética. Hispanosoviéticos en Cuba.” Biblioteca Virtual Miguel De Cervantes, www.cervantesvirtual.com/downloadPdf/nios-de-la-guerra-en-la-unin-sovitica-hispanosoviticos-en-cuba-0/.

⁶⁷ This matter is extensively explored in the book *Los españoles de Stalin* by Daniel Arasa, published in 2005, see particularly pages 232, 374, 376.

⁶⁸ “Bay of Pigs Invasion.” *The Countries Wiki*, nations.fandom.com/wiki/Bay_of_Pigs_Invasion .

⁶⁹ Alba, Álvaro. “El Comunista Español Que Copió Al NKVD En El Escambray.” *Radio y Televisión Martí*. *RadioTelevisiónMarti.com*, 30 July 2015, www.radiotelevisionmarti.com/a/comunista-espanol-ciutat-escambray-nkvd/100953.html

⁷⁰ Ruiz, p.79

farmer's, worker's, and student militias created in October of that year.⁷¹ Why would the revolutionary regime be thinking of founding paramilitary units so early on in 1959 when it enjoyed so much popular support and when a unified Rebel Army was at its command? None of these steps were reactive as Regime apologists would assert, but rather proactive in terms of a specific blueprint.

Praxis

Why, in April 1959, when the revolutionary government was experiencing overwhelming support and understanding from all sectors of Cuban society, would it be requesting the presence of counterinsurgency experts from the Communist bloc? Especially given that the reaction of Cuban landowners to the Agrarian Reform—which was announced a month after this request to the Soviets was made—was peaceful?⁷²

The answer undoubtedly lies in the fact that there was a great gap between what the Regime was promising and what it really intended to do. In April 1959, in the United States, on NBC's Meet the Press, Castro once more declared that he was not a Communist.⁷³ This, despite that Guevara's speeches and Castro's actions at the time clearly indicated that they were on the path to creating a totalitarian state. The Regime knew that it had to defeat the Cuban middle classes in order to collectivize Cuban society; and it knew already that it could not count, for this, on the broad amalgam of armed revolutionaries who had helped it come to power.

The goal of all this was, of course, the collectivization of Cuban society, the destruction of the *criollo* individual *as had autonomously developed in Cuban history*. Guevara did not hide this objective:

*Individualism, in the form of the individual action of a person alone in a social milieu, must disappear in Cuba. In the future individualism ought to be the efficient utilization of the whole individual for the absolute benefit of a collectivity.*⁷⁴

Guevara's verbosity was much less guarded than Castro's, so it is easier to examine in light of what the revolutionary takeover of power progressively revealed itself to be. In the introduction to his manual on guerrilla warfare, he clearly lays out the Agrarian Reform Law as but the tip of the iceberg, *something that had already been planned*, and that he knew the most visionary conservatives in Cuba had already detected:

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² O'Connor, p. 173

⁷³ Ruiz, p.84

⁷⁴ Guevara, "On Revolutionary Medicine."

La ley de Reforma Agraria fue una tremenda sacudida; la mayoría de los afectados vio claro ya. Antes que ellos, el vocero de la reacción, Gastón Baquero, había apuntado con línea certera lo que pasaría y se había retirado a las más tranquilas aguas de la dictadura española.⁷⁵

The Agrarian Reform Law was a great shake up, most of those affected have already seen that. Before them, the spokesman for the reactionary forces, [noted Cuban journalist and poet, author's comment] Gastón Baquero, had clearly laid out what would occur, and had retired to the more tranquil waters of the Spanish dictatorship.

Guevara's thinking, as repeatedly expressed in his speeches and writings, was focused on negating Cuban exceptionalism, on insisting that Cuba was 'one more Latin American country,' of thrusting the Cuban experience into his abstraction of what South America was, in order for it to comply with the grandiose ideological aim of turning the entire region into a platform for the struggle against the United States.

The remarks by Fidel Castro and "Che" Guevara, the chronology of events, the testimony of inside witnesses such as Manuel Artime and informed observers like the Catholic bishops, as well as that of other key witnesses (long dismissed on purely ideological grounds by many reputed Cuban experts), indicate that the founding of INRA was part of a broader plan to wreck the agricultural middle class and betray the proclaimed liberal objectives of the Revolution so as to construct a rigid, collectivist totalitarian state.

Pinar del Rio

There were, of course, clear indications that Cuba's small and medium landowners would oppose collectivization and totalitarianism. Pinar del Rio was the province where Fidel Castro, on March 2, 1959, began a trial run of the agrarian reform.⁷⁶ Small and middle property owners in Pinar del Rio staged a peaceful protest against the excesses of the law in May 1959.⁷⁷ Another peaceful protest against that law took place in that province in June of that year.⁷⁸ It was precisely Pinar del Rio the province where the *campesino* uprisings against Castro began in the

⁷⁵ Guevara, *Guerra de Guerrillas*, p.63.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 61

⁷⁷ O'Connell, p. 172

⁷⁸ Ruiz, p. 107

summer of that year,⁷⁹ as well as where some of the anti-Communist guerrilla forces managed to hold out for the longest period of time.⁸⁰

It must be understood that over 30,000 rural families, and over half of the property owners in the entire island fit into the category of medium and small farms, many of these, in turn, concentrated in the provinces of Pinar del Rio, Havana, Matanzas, and Las Villas. This agrarian middle class had hopes and aspirations different from those of the collectivists in power.

These early rebellions in Pinar del Rio also had another characteristic: many of them were preceded by jail breaks of early dissidents who then took to the hills. These prison escapes could not have occurred if elements within the Rebel Army had not helped out from the inside. Effectively, members of the revolutionary armed forces began to break with the government and head to the hills. The regime knew it needed additional forces in order to contain possible dissidents within its own army.

The Central Front

The rebellions that began in the far Western province of Pinar del Rio became strongest in the provinces of Matanzas and Las Villas. The province of Las Villas, where the Escambray region is, had been the first location in the country where the Communist Party had tried to initiate a Stalinist land reform. Functionaries dressed in *guayabera* shirts ‘with pockets stuffed with pens’ traveled throughout the mountains in order to carry out inventories of what peasants possessed. A pre-INRA state organism called “Acopio” was created in order to monopolize all purchases of crops and products. Lands were not to be distributed to private owners, despite that this had been a major goal of the farmer’s struggle against Batista.⁸¹

Discontent among the farmers led to the organization of the *Primer Congreso Campesino* (First Farmer’s Congress) in the Escambray Mountains. It was held in the hamlet of “Nuevo Mundo,” near the town of Cumanayagua. One of the commanders of the Second National Front of Escambray, Andres Nazario Sargen, and his older brother Aurelio, were long time agrarian activists much respected in the region. During the Congress, they advocated for land distribution and technical support for independent medium and small landowners. They opposed the statist conceptions of the Cuban Communists (*Partido Socialista Popular*) delegates.

Comandante Camilo Cienfuegos who, two months later, mysteriously vanished during an airplane trip, expressed opinions close to those of the delegates to the assembly of farmers. These

⁷⁹ Personal interview with Enrique Encinosa, July 2, 1959.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Redondo, Roger. “El Congreso Campesino en El Escambray .” *Cuba Democracia y Vida*, 9 May 2016, www.cubademocraciayvida.org/web/print.asp?artID=31791

delegates had traveled to the Congress from different regions in the mountains. During the Congress, Cienfuegos found himself at odds with the Communist Party functionaries, led by Ovidio Diaz.⁸²

In spite of the First Congress, the *sovietization* of the central mountains continued and intensified, leading to widespread resistance by the *campesinos*. The Escambray would become the main center of the peasant rebellion against Communism in Cuba, which Raul Castro would one day describe as ‘a second civil war.’

Most telling, the headquarters of the first former Rebel Army officers and detachments who rebelled against the new regime were set up precisely at Nuevo Mundo. The *campesinos* in that area were ready to take up arms after witnessing firsthand the ideological manipulation of the Castro Regime.

Roger Redondo, an officer of the Second National Front of the Escambray, recalled in his memoirs how peasants reacted to the collectivistic impositions of the new revolutionary state:

The Soviet agrarian reform stipulates that when a cow gives birth, its offspring be immediately registered with the government. This was copied in Cuba. Acopio would register every calf and offspring and then hang a seal with a number from one of the ears. The campesino had to take care of the calf, but was not free to do with it as he wished, neither sell it nor consume it. Who did it belong to, then? This situation created much conflict and problems and new categories of crimes were invented by the functionaries that turned the farmers into criminals. A great number of campesinos were fined and jailed. Those were dissatisfied began to leave the crops, dedicating their efforts to things with fewer complications. The fields were abandoned and the bad weeds began to inundate the coffee fields and other crops. To this day, half of Cuba's fertile crop lands are covered by these bad weeds (marabú).⁸³

The Eastern Uprisings

Perhaps most telling is the fact that major uprisings also took place in the very geographic areas and among the same social classes where the Rebel Army had found its first sources of support: the mountains of Oriente. In these eastern regions, the rebellions of farmers were far larger and more dangerous to the Regime than has been duly analyzed (the exception

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

being the pioneering work of journalist Enrique Encinosa). They also dispel another historical myth: that Castro's Revolution was an agrarian one. Abelardo Iglesias, an anarcho-syndicalist thinker and activist in Cuba, pointed this out in a visionary essay published in 1963:

Another widely circulated myth cleverly concocted by the Castro propaganda mill is that the peasants enthusiastically support his 26th of July Movement and 95% of Castro's rebel 'army' were peasants. The fact is, that although Castro's stronghold in the Sierra Maestra was practically encircled by cane fields and sugar factories and there are at least three million peasants in Cuba, Castro's 'army' numbered only 1500 men when the fighting ended with the flight of Batista. Where were the peasant masses? The truth is that the most powerful force upon which Castro depended from the outset was the middle class. Most of the young insurgents came not from the peasantry, but from the middle class. (<https://archive.iww.org/history/library/Dolgoff/cuba/9/>).

In August and September 1960, up to 600 *campesinos* rebelled against the Regime in the area of Baracoa, in remote Eastern Cuba, citing as a primary reason government designs on their land.⁸⁴ Among the insurgents was Amancio Mosquera, a campesino leader known as "Comandante Yarey." "Yarey" is the fabric made of palm leaves, very typical of hats worn in the region and very indicative of the local identity and leadership of Mosquera.⁸⁵

After being released from prison and exiled because of this first uprising, Mosquera infiltrated the region on multiple occasions over the next nine years, waging relentless guerrilla warfare on the Communist government. He had much support among local farmers, who informed, hid, and fed him and his men. Farmers called him a "*cagüeiro*," a legendary shape-shifting creature that is part of the region's mythology. Mosquera would eventually be wounded, captured, and executed in 1969.⁸⁶

Student Revolutionary Directorate (DRE) insurgents organized a large-scale guerrilla network in the Sierra Maestra against Castro in 1961, prior to the Bay of Pigs. They found

⁸⁴ Soler Costafreda, Ariel. "Cicatrices Terroristas En Baracoa." *Radio Baracoa*, 6 Oct. 2011, www.radiobaracoa.icrt.cu/es/especiales/ptiempo/item/3571-cicatrices-terroristas-en-baracoa.html

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

ample support among the *campesinos* in that area. Some 74 men were captured when the substantial arms needed to reinforce the uprising were not properly air-dropped.⁸⁷

Alberto Muller was a student leader, member of the ACU and part of the “Rural Commandos,” who had gone to the Sierra Maestra from Havana in 1958 and 1959 to carry out social work of diverse type with the *guajiros*. He found a prospering area where there were abundant locally grown food supplies for the population. What the area needed most, Muller observed, was infrastructure: roads, school, public hygiene, etc., so that its *guajiro*-owned industries and production could further grow. It needed a comprehensive development plan that a national government could implement. Discontent existed among *campesinos* because they believed that their historic aims of land distribution had been put aside by Fidel Castro due to the pursuit of his own ideological agenda. They resented that the new revolutionary government confiscated land for state purposes, not to distribute it to the farmers.⁸⁸

In mid- and late 1962, hundreds of farmers in the same area prepared for another guerrilla uprising, this time as part of the *Frente Anticomunista de Liberacion* (FAL).⁸⁹ The accelerated collectivization of agriculture had sparked further rebelliousness among the farmers. Once again, the arms promised for the uprising failed to materialize. Dozens of people would be imprisoned or executed in Cuba as part of the August 30, 1962 conspiracy that this purported *campesino* uprising was tied to.⁹⁰

Over 40 different *campesino* guerrilla units fought against the Communist regime in Oriente province. Hundreds of men and their supporters in the mountain populations were active in these different units. According to different sources, both from the government and the rebels, there were substantial casualties on both sides in the warfare in this province.⁹¹

The taking of the cities

If the Agrarian Reform was carried out to create INRA, INRA was created to give Castro control of the cities, especially Havana. Every totalitarian regime needs a

⁸⁷ Fonzi, Gaeton J., and Elizabeth J. Palmer. “Volume X: Anti-Castro Activists and Organizations - IX. Directorio Revolucionario Estudiantil (DRE).” *History Matters*, history-matters.com/archive/jfk/hasca/reportvols/vol10/pdf/HSCA_Vol10_AC_9_DRE.pdf .

⁸⁸ Personal interview with Alberto Muller, July 8, 2020.

⁸⁹ Villaverde Trujillo, Maria Teresa. “La Masacre del 30 de Agosto de 1962.” *Autentico*, www.autentico.org/oa10031.php

⁹⁰ Personal interview with Pedro C. Remon, July 7, 2020

⁹¹ Encinosa, Enrique. *Héroes Del Escambray*. E-Book, (2010): 114.

productive base, a specific set of economic arrangements, in order to uphold the Regime’s hold on power.

To capture and entrap urban populations, Castro ably used television, mass rallies, and progressive control of media and social organizations.⁹² Indispensable to his efforts was the control of food supplies to the cities, resulting in the state control of production and rationing, which continues to this day. The scarcity and rationing served as a vital component of *the pincer movement* against Cuban civil society. They served Guevara’s vision of creating a permanent wartime atmosphere that would facilitate collectivism. In his own writings, Guevara associated the control of cattle by the rebel forces under a wartime economy as essential to the creation of a ‘collectivist consciousness’ among rebel fighters and *guajiros* in the Sierra Maestra.

In his study, O’Connor recognizes this, but doesn’t associate it with the drive to create a totalitarian state, “*For these reasons, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that the new government as a matter of policy encouraged the expansion of beef production, risking damaging reductions in the stock of cattle.*”⁹³

And yet, in spite of the evidence that he collects, and the undeniable underlying facts that this evidence indicates, O’Connor persists in depicting a revolutionary regime “stumbling” into totalitarianism rather than one carefully and strategically creating it:

*Unwilling to compromise the authority of the new government by modifying the Reform Law to suit the ranchers, INRA was compelled to pursue the radical policy of seizing direct control over more pasture land than was originally intended.*⁹⁴

These measures, when analyzed together with other steps being taken in Cuban society at the time, can clearly be identified as not accidental, but complementary to the effort of subduing Cuba’s middle classes—meaning by middle classes that large swath of population organized in an autonomous manner according to distinct values and interests that are autonomous from the centralized state.

⁹² Clark, Juan, and Miret Germán J. *Castro’s Revolution, Myth and Reality*. Alexandria Library Publishing House, (2016): 201-217.

⁹³ O’Connor, p. 177

⁹⁴ O’Connor, p.178

Augustin Souchy, a veteran anarchist theorist and activist who had been an active participant in the Spanish Revolution and Civil War, traveled through the island extensively during this early period, and clearly identified where the new regime was taking the country:

But in the radiant revolutionary springtime [Souchy wrote before the storms of winter] there are some dark clouds and shadows: censorship of the press, unilateral indoctrination by radio and television, the new foreign policy which is placing the country under the de facto domination of red imperialism, and above all, the organization of a state dominated economy, are naturally not liked by the people [in spite of propaganda to the contrary!]. One has but to speak to Cubans in all walks of life, in the Capital and in the provinces, to plainly see the growing disillusionment and discontent. An infinite number of workers, thousands of people who have always fought for freedom now oppose the policies and conduct of the government.

The Cuban Revolution achieved great social progress for the people, with a rapidity unmatched in any other Latin-American country. But all this is not the work of the people themselves. We must insist that the Revolution is rapidly turning into a dictatorship. The dictators, Mussolini, Peron, Perez Jimenez, (and how many others!) to justify their tyrannies and glorify their names, also built houses etc. for the poor, (public works in Russia).

The social-economic agrarian revolution achieved by INRA [National Institute of Agrarian Reform] are truly remarkable. Protected by privileged legislation the INRA is the most powerful State Monopoly not only in Agriculture, but almost all economic activity. INRA is Cuba's number one trust.⁹⁵

Souchy visited diverse INRA economic and educational projects throughout the island, and keenly identified the distorted theoretical notions that undergirded them:

One of the officials boasted: "This will be the greatest educational project ever built." But quite a few highly qualified educators voiced serious misgivings about the educational value of the project. A well-known teacher whom I interviewed declared:

⁹⁵ Souchy, Augustin. "Chapter 9 - The Cuban Revolution: Anarchist Eyewitness Reports." *The Cuban Revolution: a Critical Perspective*, by Sam Dolgoff, Black Rose Books, 1977. <https://archive.iww.org/history/library/Dolgoff/cuba/9/>

Educationally speaking, to construct an educational apparatus of this magnitude is pure insanity. It would have been far better to build a school in every village in the Sierra Maestre region and the schools would at the same time constitute a local cultural center and a separate technical agricultural school could far more easily and usefully be erected in the provincial capital.

The opinion of the veteran teacher makes sense. To separate 22,000 children from their homes and parents is to deprive the children of the love, affection, and maternal care which is indispensable for their emotional and mental health. The close rapport between the old and the new generations will be loosened and perhaps irretrievably severed. The whole scheme is based on erroneous and distorted concepts. The aim of education is not only the accumulation of technical-scientific knowledge, but also to introduce the youth into the life of adults. In social life, there should be no artificial separation between old and young, but rather, an inter-penetration, a welding together, a social-personal bonding which makes possible the co-education of both the older and the younger generations.

Experience acquired by tradition and confirmed by modern science teaches us that family life, the rearing and education of children must constitute a truly harmonious community of love and mutual understanding.⁹⁶

Souchy understood that the goal of **INRA** was to destroy Cuba's burgeoning civilization and replace it with a fortress mentality: "The School City Camilo Cienfuegos resembles the military training camp of a modern Sparta; not the free community of scholars in the tradition of ancient Athens."⁹⁷

Cuba had natively developed a differentiated society, which is to say an individualized society where free associations of all types had an active part in the different phases of development of the nation as a whole. This social membrane of professional, entrepreneurial, labor and student organizations was fundamentally autonomous from state power. On March 15, 1958 the Cuban civic institutions withdrew any and all support for Batista and urged him to resign. It was a major blow to the government's hold over the country.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ "Conjunto de Instituciones Cubanas Expresa su Opinión al Pueblo de Cuba." *Autentico*, Partido Auténtico, 15 Mar. 1958, www.autentico.org/oa09039.php. www.autentico.org/oa09039.php.

It had broken with Batista but did not stand with Communism. When Fidel Castro spoke to these same Cuban civic institutions a year later, now as the leader of a triumphant revolution, he thanked them for their public manifesto a year earlier against Batista.⁹⁹ He was enthusiastically applauded. He felt compelled to assure them that he was not a communist. “The Cuban Revolution is as Cuban as the palm trees,” he assured them. “Communists are the eternal fifth column of democracy.”¹⁰⁰

As a whole, Cuban civil society was reformist, and not revolutionary. Castro knew that in the 1955 sugar worker’s strike, the **Grau** campaign in the 1954 presidential elections, the 1956 dialogue between the Batista government and the opposition, the 1957 popular rally in support of Batista after the failure of the *Directorio* assault on the Presidential Palace, the failed August 1957, and the April 1958 strikes,¹⁰¹ thousands of Cubans had opted for a reformist, nonviolent transition to democracy in Cuba. The March 1958 document of the civic institutions also indicated this preference.

Castro knew that he had not been the first option of Cuban civil society. He knew that it had not decisively aided his rise to power. But he also knew that he had not taken power through a military conquest of Havana or Santiago, but rather through the general strike carried out in the cities after Batista fled the country. In April 1961, Ernesto Guevara admitted during a speech that “Non revolutionary forces did indeed aid the coming of revolutionary power.”¹⁰²

Cuba’s middle classes had not brought Castro to power, but they were essential to his permanence in power. He was not impressed by the existence of Cuba’s extensive middle classes,¹⁰³ he did not see this as an achievement of Cuban development attained through sustained economic growth in the years since the founding of the republic in 1902. In his mind,

⁹⁹ Castro, Fidel. “Discurso Pronunciado por Fidel Castro Ruz en la Sesión Plenaria Celebrada por el Comité Conjunto de Instituciones Cívicas Cubanas, en el Salón de Actos del Colegio Médico Nacional.” *Fidelcastro.cu*, 16 Mar. 1959. Speech. www.fidelcastro.cu/es/discursos/discurso-pronunciado-en-la-sesion-plenaria-celebrada-por-el-comite-conjunto-de

¹⁰⁰ Ruiz, p.69

¹⁰¹ A Time magazine article of August 19, 1957 noted that “Hotheaded partisans of Rebel Fidel Castro tried to close down the Cuban economy last week, and quickly discovered that well-paid workers do not become ardent revolutionaries. For six days, workers in pro-rebel Santiago de Cuba held firmly to their spontaneous general strike (TIME, Aug. 12) then gradually drifted back to their jobs.”

¹⁰² Guevara, Ernesto “Che”. “Cuba: Historical Exception or Vanguard in the Anticolonial Struggle?” *Marxists*, 9 Apr. 1961. Speech. www.marxists.org/archive/guevara/1961/04/09.htm.

¹⁰³ Castro, Fidel. “Discurso Pronunciado por Fidel Castro Ruz en la Sesión Plenaria Celebrada por el Comité Conjunto de Instituciones Cívicas Cubanas, en el Salón de Actos del Colegio Médico Nacional.”

the existence of a middle class was somehow linked to the existence of poverty.¹⁰⁴ “Very soon we will reduce the rich to the middle class, and elevate the poor to the level of what today we call the middle class,” he said in March 1959.¹⁰⁵

Cuba’s Agrarian Middle Class

INRA’s true mission was intrinsically tied to this objective. A key example lies in what occurred with the middle classes of the **sugar industry**. Cuba’s worldwide standing with regards to the sugar industry, was comparable to that of Saudi Arabia with regard to oil production.¹⁰⁶ The sugar industry had become an engine of development for all of Cuba, a pillar upon which the process of economic diversification of the country could be based.¹⁰⁷ Through the sugar industry Cuba increasingly had a gateway to the latest US technology, and this was a powerful tool in the island’s modernization.¹⁰⁸

Sugar was a bedrock of Cuba’s middle classes. By the late 1930s most of Cuba’s sugar mills belonged to Cubans. Either Cubans or Spanish-Cubans owned 87 mills, while US companies owned 59. Canadian and European owners from different countries owned 11.¹⁰⁹ US-owned mills however, produced a greater amount of sugar because they had better organization and more access to capital and technology.¹¹⁰ This was positive for Cuba as a nation as it generated greater income for the entire island. For most of its republican history,

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ruiz, p.69

¹⁰⁶ Personal interview with Oscar Echevarria, August 10, 2020.

¹⁰⁷ Cuba fue durante muchos años antes de la revolución el mayor productor y exportador mundial de azúcar. La producción de este artículo constituía la base de su ocupación principal y aunque producía solamente el 12 por ciento de la producción total azucarera del mundo, proveía más del 50 por ciento del azúcar que entraba en el mercado internacional libre (*Report on Cuba*, International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 1951). El país abastecía aproximadamente el 50 por ciento del consumo total de azúcar en los E.U. hasta 1929 y el 30 por ciento desde aquella fecha hasta 1959. Casi una tercera parte de los trabajadores asalariados encontraba empleo directo en la industria durante la zafra, o sea el período de cosecha y molienda de la caña. Entre un cuarto y un tercio del ingreso nacional provenía de la producción azucarera. (J. Álvarez Díaz et. al., *Cuba: Geopolítica y pensamiento económico*, 1964) <http://www.cubancenter.org/uploads/40years02.html>

¹⁰⁸ Personal interview with historian Pedro Roig, August 10, 2020.

¹⁰⁹ Tejera, Eduardo J. *Historia Política y Económica de Cuba (1800-1961): una República en Formación*. Dykinson, (2019): 292-93.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

Cuba had a positive trade balance, with far more exports than imports. This allowed for the progressive diversification and prosperity of the economy.

Essential to the productivity of Cuba's sugar industry were the *colonos*. "The "colono" system decentralized the management of large sugar estates and facilitated the bringing of new areas under cultivation. It usually arose from contracts which bound the *colono* to plant cane on a certain amount of the land and to deliver the product to the *hacendado*, or mill-owner. The latter made advances to the *colono* to cover his expenses during planting, cultivation and harvest, and deducted the advances in settling for the crop. The *colono* took the responsibility for the agricultural operations, under the supervision of inspectors from the mill, employing the necessary field hands, and assuming entirely what may be termed the "agricultural chances" of drought, fire, hurricane or excessive moisture. Frequently the *colono* owned his own land. He was supposed at first to provide oxen and carts. In the western part of Cuba the class was made up largely of the *sitiero*, the small countrymen, and of plantation foremen. It was an economic category, however, more than a class. For the planters who ceased to grind their own cane became tied to the *central* by contracts of precisely the same terms. They too were called *colonos*.¹¹¹ By 1887 it was believed that from 35 to 40 percent of Cuba's crop was gathered and manufactured under the "colono" system."¹¹²

The 1937 **Ley de Coordinación Azucarera** (*Law of Sugar Coordination*), enacted by the Cuban Congress under the presidency of Federico Laredo Brú, was a visionary legislation that strengthened Cuban civil society and made the prosperity of the sugar industry both more inclusive and more stable.

"These and other laws made possible that in the agricultural sector of the sugar industry more than 70,000 *colono* families prospered and that the salaries of workers were increased. On the industrial side, a process of reconstruction of the sugar mills began."¹¹³ The law established proportional participation for mill owners, *colonos* and sugar workers in the profits of the sugar industry.¹¹⁴ Moreover, it recognized the legal representative status of the association of mill owners, the association of *colonos* and the union of sugar workers as partners of the state in the coordination of the key elements of the sugar industry. In this manner, the agrarian middle class acquired a legal participatory status in the island's major industry which solidified the exercise of citizen sovereignty.

¹¹¹ Jenks, Leland Hamilton. *Our Cuban Colony: a Study in Sugar*. Vanguard Press, New York, 1928. <http://www.historyofcuba.com/history/havana/Sugar3.html>

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ "40 Años de Revolución." *The Cuban Center*, www.cubancenter.org/uploads/40years02.html.

¹¹⁴ Baez, Vicente. *La Enciclopedia de Cuba. Gobiernos Republicanos*. Vol. 9, Enciclopedia y Clásicos Cubanos, (1975): 560.

Quite indicative of the ideological lens (a mix of Marxism, Leninism and dependency theory), through which Castro and his followers viewed the Cuban social and economic structure was Guevara's dictate that: "sugar cane is a source of slavery for the Cuban people."¹¹⁵ Guevara had no understanding that, on the contrary, sugar cane had been a driving engine for growth and socio-economic plurality in Cuba, and that a mandated collectivization would ruin what had organically developed in the life of the island nation.

As could be expected, the Cane Growers (colonos) Association, which had 65,000 members, strongly opposed the ideologically-driven collectivization policies. They correctly understood that the lack of incentives for farmers and workers and the improper use of lands would wreck the sugar industry and collapse wages and productivity. The Regime's response was totalitarian. Unable to divide it from within, a 1961 INRA decree changed the name of the organization to National Association of Small Farmers (ANAP), and state appointed functionaries replaced all of the legally elected executives and representatives.¹¹⁶

State farms replaced latifundia, or the large private extensions of land. Sugar production collapsed precipitously year after year, to the point that by 1964 the Castro regime stopped publishing "any data on the production and export of sugar."¹¹⁷ Workers were now submitted to labor conditions and wages "that amounted to a complete abolishment of the conquests made by the labor movement before Castro."¹¹⁸

The Urban Working Classes

On January 20, 1959, Ernesto Guevara further revealed the Revolution's distrust in the organized urban working classes when he said:

"The contribution of workers to the Rebel Army was not fundamental to its constitution, nor towards the construction of the final phase. Farmers were the true supporters of our army."¹¹⁹ But this statement, in itself, was also a symbol projected by Castro and Guevara. The numbers of the Rebel Army did not indicate widespread support among the *campesinos*. The insurgency had been guided by a militant revolutionary vanguard active in both the cities and the countryside. Its manifest aims had been fundamentally political, not social.

¹¹⁵ Salazar-Carrillo, p. 102

¹¹⁶ Salazar Carrillo, p.100

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p.102-03

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p.102

¹¹⁹ Ruiz, p.34

Fidel Castro and his lieutenants knew that this differentiated society did not have militarist, collectivist conceptions. He knew that its civic culture stood in his way of transforming the Cuban people into a “Spartan people.”

“Our people were and are not a militaristic people, our people have never been and will never be a militaristic people; our homeland did not have a military tradition. Cuba was not Prussia. Cuba is an eminently peaceful and civic country. In Cuba we hated military parades, and uniforms, and arms because they were always symbols of oppression and abuse, symbols of privilege, of injustice. Arms and uniforms had not been welcome by us.”¹²⁰

Guevara also publicly stated how the values of this ‘Havana culture’ were an impediment to the collectivist experiment going on in the rest of the country, “It is good that I emphasize for you, the inhabitants of Havana who are present here, this idea; in Cuba a new type of man is being created, whom we cannot fully appreciate here in the capital, but who is found in every corner of the country.”¹²¹

But Guevara was also very much aware that this cultural resistance was not limited to the cities, but also existed in the countryside: “...*muchos campesinos no acaban de acostumbrarse al sistema de cooperativas,*” he acknowledged in a speech at the School of Architecture of the University of Havana as early as July 26, 1959.¹²²

The Cuban people did not want to become a monolithic, collectivist mass. Castro’s repeated problems in trying to control first the University of Havana student government and then the unions, were further corroboration of this. By 1960 the independent leadership of these social nuclei had begun to organize clandestine urban movements to resist the Regime.

The key to controlling this urban class was in controlling its food supplies from the countryside. Therefore, the totalitarian regime had to begin its organization in the countryside. As the sequence of speeches and events show, Fidel Castro and his lieutenants were aware of this from the Sierra Maestra, and the steps they took followed this logical order.

O’Connor justifies the policies of INRA by stating that “It is for these reasons that a collectivized agriculture had the air of inevitability, and it is difficult to see how any government

¹²⁰ Castro, Fidel. “Discurso Pronunciado por Fidel Castro Ruz, Primer Ministro del Gobierno Revolucionario, en Conmemoración del Día Internacional del Trabajo.” *Cuba.cu*, 1 May 1960. Speech. <http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/1960/esp/f010560e.html> .

¹²¹ Guevara, “On Revolutionary Medicine.”

¹²² Ruiz, p. 104

determined to accelerate Cuba's economic development could have escaped the general land policies that INRA was compelled to follow."¹²³

This statement is misleading. By 1959 there existed abundant empirical scientific evidence that collectivization of land following the Stalinist model did not lead to accelerated economic development and led, instead, to great human suffering.¹²⁴ The success of the Taiwanese "*land to the tiller*" agrarian reform, which was based on distribution of land to independent farmers and state support for their labor through infrastructure development and technical support, was already an internationally recognized uncontested success.¹²⁵ Additionally, former President Jose Figueres of Costa Rica had personally traveled to Cuba and recommended this type of land reform, which had been successful in Costa Rica, to the incipient Cuban Revolution.¹²⁶

The Castro regime leadership did not embrace this model of agrarian reform, opting for the Soviet model precisely because it had overall ideological objectives, not because it seemed to be the best solution for the realities of the Cuban countryside.

To this day, the regime maintains such strict control of independent farmers and their products so as to not lose control of the population, so as to deprive Cuban citizens of an economic base and a self-sufficient independence of the state that would empower the natural life form of civil society.

Consequences

The changes carried out through the **INRA** by the Castro Regime had devastating consequences affecting Cuba to this day. First of all, Cuban sugar, cattle, tobacco and rice production had been engines of the amazing Cuban economic growth from 1902 to 1959. "These were well-organized and highly efficient production units."¹²⁷ Their efficiency was based on personnel at all levels who were intimately knowledgeable of the land they worked on and of the specific production criteria that had been developed over many years to make that land grow in abundance. In all cases of the industries mentioned above, the ideological imperative of

¹²³ O'Connor, "Agrarian Reforms in Cuba, 1959-1963."

¹²⁴ Selden, Mark. "The Crisis of Collectivization: Socialist Development and the Peasantry." *Core*, core.ac.uk/download/pdf/43541583.pdf

¹²⁵ *Taiwan Today*, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of China (Taiwan), taiwantoday.tw/news.php?unit=10&post=15716 .

¹²⁶ Ruiz, p.71

¹²⁷ Salazar-Carrillo, p.96

collectivization resulted in lands destined for a specific purpose unscientifically deviated for other uses, resulting in dramatic and even catastrophic, such as in the case of the cattle and sugar industries, reductions in productivity. This immediately led to growing scarcity and consequent rationing of goods, starting with meat.¹²⁸

At all levels, as collectivization and state control of farms increased relentlessly, ideologically suited INRA managers proved to be incompetent in the administration and coordination of agriculture. Entire sectors of the population who were vital actors in a culture that knew how to “strum the guitar” of the Cuban countryside were extinguished through civil war, exile, lack of motivation to continue with their work, and escape from the collectivization of the fields through migration to the cities. What happened between 1959 and 1964 as a result of these policies was an across the board collapse in production of what had been one of the most fertile and efficient agricultural systems in the region.¹²⁹

The new economic system did not bring the promised prosperity to Cubans. Instead, it resulted in widespread poverty and lack of basic freedoms. The elections that Fidel Castro had promised within 18 months of January 1959 were never held. The new controlled economy did provide an efficient means, however, through which to control and indoctrinate Cubans and to use their island as an international platform for the struggle against the United States.

In December 1964, met with left wing journalists at the Cuban Mission before the United Nations. He had earlier delivered a fiery anti-imperialist speech before the General Assembly of that institution. During the meeting, Guevara spoke wondrously about the ‘madness of the Revolution,’ and the need ‘for many madmen.’ He also admitted to the grave mistakes the regime had made in the economy, mainly in agriculture.¹³⁰ “We did not have a previous preparation. We made mistakes in agriculture. We made mistakes in industry,” he said at this meeting and repeated at other press interviews.¹³¹ The failure was too evident to deny or to hide. There was widespread scarcity in Cuba, and thousands of people were fleeing.

Guevara pointed to the re-organization of the state as the one great success of the Revolution. That was true. They had structured a rigid, monolithic, highly repressive state that

¹²⁸ Ibid., but also for an excellent explanation of how the ideological collectivization destroyed Cuban agriculture, please see p.95-103 of “Cuba: From Economic Take-Off to Collapse under Castro,” by Jorge Salazar-Carrillo and Andro Nodarse-León.

¹²⁹ Salazar-Carrillo, p.99

¹³⁰ “Che Guevara in New York, USA 1964 - Interview.” *Youtube*, 16 Dec. 1964, www.youtube.com/watch?v=qRuH_8W1bwY

¹³¹ “Face the Nation” interview, 13 December 1964, *CBS*, www.latinamericanstudies.org/che/che-interview-12-13-1964.pdf

had turned Cuba into a giant prison. To uphold this state a massive army and repressive system had been established. The “robust armed forces” Castro alluded to at the September 1958 with civic leaders in the Sierra Maestra had been achieved. The Cuban countryside had paid for it dearly.

Soviet subsidies upheld the Regime in spite of its economic failures. In spite of this increased dependency on foreign assistance, the ideological mandate of the Regime was confirmed again and again over the years. The Regime repeatedly opted for a centralized, rigidly controlled economy over the production of abundant food supplies for the population.¹³² It has experimented with very limited degrees of economic liberty for the Cuban population only when its own economic shortcomings have proven unmanageable and internal popular discontent and US sanctions have forced it in that direction. Whenever limited private production increased and more products were available to Cubans, the regime’s policies rolled back these limited spaces in order to prevent the emergence of any private sector not dependent on the Regime.

This has occurred repeatedly. All the mistakes acknowledged by Guevara in 1964 were repeated in 1970, when Fidel Castro destined all of Cuba’s human and material resources to the single purpose of a 10-million ton sugar harvest, to the detriment of all other agricultural production. Once again, and never having fully recuperated from the 1959-1964 disaster, Cuban agricultural production plummeted.¹³³ It happened again in 1986, when the Free Farmer’s Markets that were allowed to exist after the popular discontent expressed through the Peruvian Embassy and Mariel Boatlift were closed down¹³⁴, because of Castro’s fears about the rebirth of a campesino entrepreneurial class. It also occurred in 1992, when similar measures made the crisis over the disappearance of Soviet subsidies even worse for the Cuban population.¹³⁵

“After the Fall of the Soviet Union, from 1993 until today, the Castro Regime has legislated a series of decrees (142/1993, 258/2008, 300/2012 y 358/2018), to preserve the ownership of the land by the state, allowing only for its rental use (*usufructo*) by private farmers, instead of carrying out an effective agrarian reform that would give property of the land to those who work it. Or wish to work it.”¹³⁶

¹³² Chaviano Montes, Hildebrando. “El Mercado Libre Campesino.” ASCE, 30 Nov. 2014, www.ascecuba.org/asce_proceedings/el-mercado-libre-campesino/.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ “Mercados Libres Campesinos.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 6 June 2018, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mercados_Libres_Campesinos.

¹³⁵ Chaviano Montes, “El Mercado Libre Campesino.”

¹³⁶ Méndez Castelló, Alberto. “Cuba: ¿De Qué Han Servido 60 Años de ‘Reforma Agraria’?” *Cubanet*, 17 May 2019, www.cubanet.org/opiniones/cuba-agricultura-reforma-agraria/.

What Could Have Been?

Comparative politics are difficult, but necessary. No two nations, cultures or peoples are identical. However, there are common denominators to all of humanity, and some nations have great similarities and overlapping areas that can be compared. The islands of Taiwan and Cuba are two such countries, which although in different parts of the world and immersed in distinct cultures, have many objective aspects in common. Both are islands, both are former colonies, both were heavily dependent on sugar production, and both began to build new political and economic orders after civil wars. Land reform became the basis for the construction of the governments in both countries. Taiwanese land reform aimed at empowering citizen farmers of the Republic of China on Taiwan. Between 1949, when the Nationalist government moved from the mainland to Taiwan and 1958, Taiwanese land reform had impressive results.

“As a result of these successive land reforms, 71 per cent of the 360,736 *chia* (864,583 acres) of public and private leased farm land throughout the province has been transferred to private ownership of the tenant farmers.”¹³⁷ Agricultural production dramatically increased as the farmers felt legally and psychologically reinforced. “Stimulated in the constant interest in his land as a landowner, the farmer put all his energy into farming.”¹³⁸ In Taiwan, the ideal of farm land owned by farmers was realized.¹³⁹

Consequently, Taiwan went from having one of the lowest gross national products in the world in 1962, to having a GNP of developed countries, and being considered as such, by 2011.¹⁴⁰ The brutal collectivization policies Cuba endured resulted in precisely the opposite effect.

Conclusion

Land reform in Cuba did not emerge from the existing needs and potentialities of Cuban agriculture. It was designed and became the main pillar in the construction of a totalitarian state not just in the island, but also in other Latin American countries.

This can be gleaned not only from studying the agrarian reform per se, but by putting it in both the theoretical context of the real thinking of the Sierra Maestra leadership and the compendium of analysis of the set of measures and policies undertaken by the Regime to transform Cuban society. A study of the statements and speeches of the top revolutionary leaders

¹³⁷ Cheng, Chen. “Land Reform in Taiwan .” *China Publishing Company*, (1961): 82.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.83

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.82

¹⁴⁰ “Taiwan.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taiwan#Economy.

shows that scarcity was not only something they expected, but something they desired in order to build a new order. Whether they expected it to last as long as it did or to weaken the Cuban economy so profoundly cannot be determined.

Its consequences were scarcity, the dramatic reduction, to this day, of the productivity of Cuban soil,¹⁴¹ the plunging of the countryside into a long and bloody civil war, the destruction of the native culture of the Cuban guajiros, and the establishment of a totalitarian regime that has endured for over 60 years. Experts note that “Cuba’s productivity remains one of the lowest in the world and, therefore, the Cuban economy is unable to provide for the well-being of its people.”¹⁴² What was once a flourishing country that provided for its people and was generating a greater horizon of prosperity, is now a stagnant, even regressive economy. The median income in the island is lower “even in nominal dollars, than it was before the Revolution fifty-six years ago. Such stagnation is nearly impossible to find anywhere else in the world.”¹⁴³

The destruction of the Cuban agriculture, the misuse of Cuba’s fertile lands, and the permanent impoverishment of the island have been the measurable consequences of the policies of the INRA.¹⁴⁴ These, in turn, have facilitated the permanence in power of a monolithic totalitarian regime.

A broad range of educated perspectives from the 1959-60 period, from Catholic social reformers like the Cuban bishops and Dr. Manuel Artime, to anarcho-syndicalist theoreticians and activists, with substantial access to what INRA was doing, coincided in predicting how this unnecessary strategy would wreck Cuba’s carefully constructed path to a better future. The consequent historical facts would further prove them right.

A review of these facts clearly establishes that totalitarianism did not arrive in Cuba by accident, but by design. Ernesto “Che” Guevara himself indicated that the failure of US policies towards Cuba had their roots in this myth of **‘totalitarianism by accident.’**

In his speech on whether the Cuban Revolution was an exceptional event (which was also descriptive of Guevara’s theoretical attempt to subordinate the exceptionalism of Cuban development to what he thought to be the uniform structural reality of Latin America), Guevara himself pointed to this myth as essential to the triumph and survival of the Castro Regime in Cuba: “The condition we would describe as exceptional was the fact that U.S. imperialism was disoriented and was never able to accurately assess the true scope of the Cuban Revolution. This

¹⁴¹ Méndez, “Cuba: ¿De Qué Han Servido 60 Años de ‘Reforma Agraria’?”

¹⁴² Salazar-Carrillo, p.137

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Salazar-Carrillo, p.95-103

partly explains the many apparent contradictions in U.S. policy,”¹⁴⁵ he added “By the time the imperialists wanted to react — when they discovered that the group of inexperienced young men marching in triumph through the streets of Havana had a clear awareness of their political duty and an iron determination to carry out that duty — it was already too late.”¹⁴⁶

Policies towards the island based on the original myth of totalitarianism by accident are doomed to fail in the pursuit of democracy. The Castroite Revolution was inspired by collectivist, totalitarian conceptions and its survival course has always depended on this understanding of power and of the control exerted through scarcity. It consciously and necessarily resists any attempt at evolution and opening for this reason.

As the historical analysis of the Agrarian Reform Laws indicate, the Regime was not led by social reformers who stumbled into totalitarianism as a result of internal and external pressures, but instead consisted of totalitarians who used social reform, particularly agrarian, as symbol to justify totalitarianism.

A country that not only fed itself, but also successfully exported agricultural products, today depends on imports of food from the United States, both bought and donated,¹⁴⁷ in order to survive.¹⁴⁸

Cuba’s current *nomenklatura* is acutely aware that the specific type of economic system that upholds their political power can be changed only at the risk of losing that power. The collectivization of land under strict state control was a system built to uphold a closed-order society directed from above by a military caste. It was not accidental. It did not result from outside-in pressures, but rather from the inside-out construction of the radical revolutionaries led by Fidel Castro. There lies the often misunderstood tragedy of Cuba.

¹⁴⁵ Guevara, “Cuba: Historical Exception or Vanguard in the Anti Colonial Struggle.”

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Salazar-Carrillo, p.132

¹⁴⁸ “2019 US Exports to Cuba.” *U.S. - Cuba Trade and Economic Council, Inc.*, 10 Feb. 2020, www.cubatrade.org/blog/2020/2/10/rz4cmop6qhirmd7gqp15o439zn3pv5 .

