



# Socialist development according to the Marabú. Multispecies encounters in the ruins of citrus plantations in Sandino, Cuba

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## AAA/CASCA Conference Vancouver 2019

**Panel “Great Human Master Plans and its Non-Human Challengers”**, November 21<sup>st</sup> 2019**Socialist development according to the Marabú. Multispecies encounters in the ruins of citrus plantations in Sandino, Cuba.**

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“Welcome to Sandino where Cuba’s sun goes down”, this sign on the side of the road, marks the entrance of Sandino, the easternmost municipality of the island. Apart from this sign, there is no indication that the sea is so close. While following the road to get to the main town, the eye is caught by massifs of a thorny shrub with dark green leaves. They are all over pastures, forest and fruit tree plantations and even at the edge of the road. It's *marabú*, the challenger of this story. This plant, reputedly invasive, is omnipresent in the media, in official and daily speeches as soon as the issue of the countryside or agriculture is discussed. This shrub is a Legume which proliferates in agricultural wastelands, on poor and open land. It is a typical case of “*farol proliferation*”<sup>1</sup>. In Cuba, it is the symbol of the crisis of agricultural production and the underutilisation the farmland. It is an extremely visible symbol since shrubs are often two or three meters high.

My first weeks of fieldwork in Sandino were filled with ambiguous accounts of the past. People’s narratives were full of nostalgia for the orange tree plantations which, ten years ago, surrounded the city as far as the eye could see. They described to me the immense fields, clean and well maintained, the numerous roads, the trees loaded with fruit where they only had to stretch their hand to taste a juicy orange. Their eyes would lit up, they became talkative, proud, and enthusiastic.

The talked about abundance, the sweet taste of oranges and the beauty of the landscape. I was touched by these narratives and salivated to stories of orange treats. However, their Garden of Eden was a paradise of industrial monoculture, a huge socialist masterplan that had designed their daily lives, aspirations, the economy and the landscape for fifty years.

After these effusive descriptions, followed the tale of the fall: today the orange fields have disappeared invaded by the *marabú* who has closed the roads, obstructed the landscape. Only 1/10e of farmland is now cultivated in Sandino, plantations have also been reverted to pasture, forest plantations or just abandoned<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Lowenhaupt TSING, *The mushroom at the end of the world: on the possibility of life in capitalist ruins*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> ONEI, *Anuario estadístico 2017 - Sandino*, Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas e Información, 2018, p. 59-61.

In Sandino's landscape, the *marabú* has outnumbered humans and eclipsed their masterplans. He is a real challenger to anyone who wants to put the land back into cultivation for his wood is very hard to chop down and he can sprout very quickly from the roots.

Marabú's proliferation is a "*naturalcultural* phenomenon" according to Donna Haraway<sup>3</sup>. Following marabú's ambiguous entanglements, I wish to question the transformations of a model «socialist» plantation. **How does *marabú* participate in shaping the landscape, the economy, perceptions of the past and the aspirations of Sandino dwellers?**

### A Socialist masterplan

Revolutionary discourses in Cuba have insisted, as early as the 1950s, on breaking with the model of *latifundio* and large private land ownership. Capitalist sugar plantations owned by foreign capital were one of the first targets of the new socialist government. Yet the system of monoculture state farms that was established in the sixties in Cuba inherits in part the plantation's model and its "high modernist ideology", as James Scott puts it<sup>4</sup>. The orientation of the Cuban economy towards the export of raw materials, the socio-technical system of intensive monoculture and the social organization based on wage workers, favours and dependency relationships are not questioned by the regime.

Back in the 50s, Marabú, who was introduced in Cuba from Africa during the 19th century, was already a public problem. Following the sugar rush, he proliferates on deforested lands that were abandoned by planters due to the poor quality of the soil. Revolutionaries used marabú's example to point out the failure of capitalist agriculture to make rational use of the land. But they didn't take into account the plantation's "ecological simplifications"<sup>5</sup> which enabled Marabú to spread. They believe they could do better and they generalized this system.

This is what happened in the municipality of Sandino, an area of marginal forest plain, sparsely populated and exploited to the west of Cuba. While foreign investors had failed to establish sustainable monocultures oriented towards export before the 1960s, socialist planning transformed it into a huge citrus plantation in the 1960s and an agro-industrial complex intended for export production for the Soviet Union.

Sandino became a symbol of 'socialist rural development'. In the middle of the fields, they created a city from scratch, designed to fill all the needs of the "new men" that is: access to modern housing, education, healthcare, culture, sports facilities. The replacement of small-scale family agriculture by

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<sup>3</sup> Donna J. HARAWAY, *When Species Meet*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> James C. SCOTT, *Seeing like a state: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*, Yale University Press, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Reinaldo FUNES MONZOTE, « La conquista de Camagüey por el azúcar, 1898-1926. El impacto ambiental de un milagro económico », *Tiempos de América: revista de historia, cultura y territorio*, 8, 2001, p. 3-28; Reinaldo FUNES MONZOTE, « Azúcar, deforestación y paisajes agroindustriales en Cuba, 1815-1926 », *Varia Historia*, 21-33, 2005, p. 105-128.

wage labour also meant the inclusion of women and the reduction of racial inequalities. The plantation was both an infrastructure<sup>6</sup> and an ideal model of a ‘better life’ allying high modernism, technological progress and significant improvement of living conditions.

Although this process is experienced as a positive transformation by most of the locals, it is based on the production of abstractions (through land and economic planning) and forms of alienation. As Anna Tsing puts it: alienation occurs when human and non-human beings are disconnected from the “entanglements of living” to which they belong and become self-contained mobile and interchangeable units<sup>7</sup>. Indeed, Sandino prospered on forced displacement of peasants from the Escambray Mountains - which were suspected of supporting a counter-revolution in the 60s – and planned displacement of recently graduated students to supply the municipality with a qualified workforce. It implied the importation and the selection of high yield varieties of citrus and the transformation of landscape with dams, roads and new settlements for workers and displaced dwellers. It also relied on free labour from students. 33 *escuelas al campo* (countryside boarding schools) were built, where thousands of young people from the age of 12 were spending half of the time studying and half of the time weeding, pruning and harvesting the citrus trees.

### **Crisis: disconnection and reconnection of more-than-human entanglements**

The disintegration of this plantation system in the 1990s, following the end of the exchanges with the USSR, is the result of disconnection processes within «more-than-human entanglements» which made the plantation exist daily. The departure of students from the *escuelas al campo* who carried out most of the maintenance tasks, the disinvestment of workers due to the lack of means of production and the focus on survival strategies loosened the daily care relations with the trees. To face food shortage, workers started to focus on growing their food. They would use the inputs of the plantations or exchange them in the black market and so on. This left room for the emergence of new interspecies relationships. The spread of the citrus greening disease from China - which affected all the main areas of citrus production including Florida - was linked to the *huanglongbing* virus carried by a wasp. Insecticides were scarce to control the wasp and workers say that when it reached Cuba, trees were already in bad shape due to the lack of care. Experiments were made to graft productive citrus varieties to autochthonous varieties of bitter orange tree. It worked but it meant to replace all the trees. In some areas of Cuba, an Israeli company invested and they succeeded to maintain the production. But no foreign company invested in Sandino and the plantations were gradually abandoned. Then *marabú* could spread without obstacles.

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<sup>6</sup> Kregg HETHERINGTON et Jeremy M. CAMPBELL, « Nature, Infrastructure, and the State: Rethinking Development in Latin America », *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology*, 19-2, 2014, p. 191-194.

<sup>7</sup> A. L. TSING, *The mushroom at the end of the world*, *op. cit.*

He even received the help of the digestive system of the cows kept by the inhabitants to ward off the threat of famine. The cows love marabú fruits but can't digest the seed, so they naturally spread them with a fair amount of organic matter. A lot of cows' owners let them graze freely in the wasteland since barbed wire is scarce in the centrally planned economy. Plus they don't have to worry about feeding them.

But cows also love marabú sprouts, so when grazing is intensive, marabú remains like lawn, although he is still there. The grip of former State plantation on human and non-human actors was hegemonic. It created and relied on ambiguous and precarious entanglements. The grip of marabú is unambiguous, it spreads everywhere if he is not contained.

### Weediness

Today, State policies aiming at boosting agricultural production are clashing with the "weediness"<sup>8</sup> of the inhabitants, the cows and the *marabú* who have become used to living on their own, using the resources of what remains of the plantation system.

Meet Angela and Osvaldo. They live in a small wooden cabin which used to be a prisoners dormitory. Prisoners were sent to work in the state farm and Osvaldo used to work there as a guard. When the State farm stopped to run these lands, Osvaldo retired but he stayed there and turned the dormitory into his house. He enclosed a small plot around the house and started to grow fruit trees and to raise chicken and pigs. Osvaldo and Angela make money from making charcoal with marabú. The resource is abundant and they can sell charcoal for a good price on the black market.

They also sell it to a state enterprise that recently developed an exportation industry of "organic charcoal" to European countries and the US. It's the first commodity to be exported to the US in sixty years. Charcoal has always been a way to make quick money outside of the formal economy in the countryside since a lot of people still rely on it to cook.

Like them, a lot of former state workers are now appropriating state buildings to make houses and living from a mix of charcoal production, poaching and picking in the lands that remain under production or cultivating on small plots.

Since the 90s, the Cuban State is trying to channel and control this weediness and to externalize the responsibility of agricultural production to individuals and cooperatives. A lot of people received small plots of land in usufruct. You can make good money from agriculture but most of them are struggling to cultivate their new land.

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<sup>8</sup> Ashley CARSE, « Dirty Landscapes. How Weediness Indexes State Disinvestment and Global Disconnection », in Gregg HETHERINGTON (dir.), *Infrastructure, environment, and life in the Anthropocene*, Durham London, Duke University Press, 2019, p.

Getting rid of the marabú is always a big issue alongside input shortages or commercialization problems. Most of these "new peasants" just have axes and oxen to clean the land. Marabú pervasiveness favours persons that have resources and can rely on strong networks to rent private or state machinery. Marabú is also used as a disciplining tool by state bureaucrats that manage the distribution of land. When they receive a plot, farmers commit to clean the land from marabú within 6 months. Marabú is a state indicator of land underuse, inspectors are looking at it to assess the good use of the land and judge normatively the farmer's effort and goodwill to produce for country. There is no consideration of the arrangement people can have with marabú: it provides shade, and since it's a legume it fertilizes the soil. Scientists also say it's better not to cut marabú if you are not able to make intensive use of the land because he can grow stronger and multiply and it's harder to get rid of him.

Farmers mostly don't agree with state official orders, although they rarely say it out loud. But their point is not about the best way to tackle land ecology. According to them, if the State wants them to clean the land, it has to give them tractors, bulldozers, chainsaws. After all, the State and its masterplans are responsible for this situation.

Sandino dwellers maintain ambiguous relations with the masterplan. Despite their criticism of the hierarchical system of dependence within state enterprises, they are mostly nostalgic of that time. Although they have developed many other ways of living, they seem unable to imagine a "better life" without plantations. The prospect of the arrival of a mega-tourism project and new crop opportunities for export reinvigorates this desire and arouses a startling enthusiasm linked with the feeling of reconnecting with the global world.

Marabú acts as a physical as well as a perceptual barrier: you can't see around like before, he obstructs the view of the landscape as he seems to obstruct the future, the ability to look beyond this barrier. It participates in impeding Sandino's dwellers to imagine other forms of "good life" outside of high modernism and the plantation model. It seems to reflect their powerlessness regarding things that are too big and too pervasive such as the marabú or "the State". Marabú while taking care of the damaged soils and allowing weedy forms of life in the margins of the socialist system, is also kind of a conservative force which participates in the reproduction of State power and modernist aspirations.