The Challenges of Documenting a Revolution

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“La Revolución y la Tierra” is an ambitious documentary that seeks to offer a narrative of the agrarian reform carried out by Peru’s self-declared Revolutionary Government of the Armed Forces (1968-1980). Screened on the fiftieth anniversary of the enactment of the law that began the process of land reform (1969), La revolución y la tierra has been a meaningful instrument of historical dissemination, attracting a sizeable audience in a country in which historical documentaries rarely receive any attention. Widely studied by academics and vilified by those who opposed General Velasco’s reforms, La revolución y la tierra fills a gap in the public discourse on the military regime and its agrarian reform.

First and foremost, it is necessary to discuss some structural aspects of the film. Unlike most documentaries, there is no off voice providing a cohesive narrate that guides the viewer throughout. Instead, a diverse group of academic figures and political actors offer different narratives of events that led to the 1969 agrarian reform. The criteria for selecting these interviewees seems unclear, as some of them are very familiar with this period, while others are not specialists on the agrarian reform. Figures like Enrique Meyer, a leading anthropologist of campesino livelihoods, provide deep insights about the intersection of the documentary and their scholarship, but other experts do not get the same screen time. The narrative is compounded by the director’s use of fictional films about the agrarian reform and the period at large. On the one hand, the viewer will be introduced to a new world of Peruvian cinema as many of these films are fairly obscure and they are also effective at showing how the question of agrarian reform permeated this nascent industry. On the other, the use of fictional films means that there is less time for showing actual historical footage, essential in an endeavor of this nature.

As the documentary delves into the agrarian reform, it begins by offering a general background on the colonial and early republican periods of Peru’s history. The picture that emerges of mid twentieth-century Peru is certainly accurate, a country governed by an unjust and brutal system. One may criticize, however, how land tenure is reduced to a single question regardless of regional and local conditions. La revolución y la tierra shows almost no differences between the agro-industrial estates in the north, where wage workers were employed and the infamous enanche system coexisted with such capitalist practices, and the almost feudal haciendas of the southern Andes. Given the time constraints of the format, it is impossible to delve into such differences with much detail, but these differences are precisely what made the question of the agrarian reform such a complex one.

Once the army comes into the picture, their motives for overthrowing Belaúnde’s government are explicitly laid out. The documentary does an excellent job at presenting how the International Petroleum Company (IPC) dispute and a desire to avoid “a revolution from above” were important factors in explaining the intervention of the armed forces. More attention could have been paid to the ideological influences – both internal and external – that drove the army into
power, and why it differed from previous military governments. Furthermore, the anti-communism of the armed forces is briefly mentioned, when in many ways it was one of the main driving forces of the “revolution,” and perhaps the least understood by the government’s critics.

The sense of urgency regarding the need of a thorough agrarian reform is thus well established, but there are few specifics as to how it was implemented and received. There is no analysis of the 1969 law and how the army sought to apply it gradually, only to have its armed twisted by the expectations that the very reform generated. Because academics and others dominate the screen, there are no voices to share how the reform was experienced on the ground and how it affected everyday life. A handful of peasant leaders are interviewed, but the peasants themselves are relegated to the background, appearing in cut off scenes with no names and no location. Equally troubling is the absence of another group: the landowners. While the documentary justifiably portrays the existing land regime as unjust, we do not get to hear the other side of the story, as no former landowners or oligarchs are interviewed. The latter are only represented by the clueless and dandified figure of Graña. They might not be most charismatic of figures, but the reasons why they opposed the reform and what became of them is part of the story.

On the international stage, there is no mention as to how the reform was viewed in the rest of Latin America and what was then termed the Third World. At no other point in history was the foreign policy of a Peruvian government more based on its domestic achievements than during the Velasco years, and the agrarian reform gave the Revolutionary Government much prestige in international forums, particularly in the United Nations. Despite showing some footage of the G-77, little is said about this group and how Peru’s leadership in this forum was to a great extent based on Velasco’s revolutionary measures and, particularly, the agrarian reform.

Towards the end, the film analyzes the so called “second phase” of the revolution. Morales Bermúdez’s interview is one of the highlights of the documentary, although some background about the role he played on the first phase of the process would have been welcomed, as he has been usually portrayed as a unidimensional character that betrayed the revolution. The film then concludes by quoting Matos Mar’s desborde popular thesis and the emergence of the “cholo.” Historical footage is used here with great effect, and the viewer will encounter a Peru that is decidedly different from that which is portrayed at the beginning of the documentary.

Those who consider the Velasco years to be inherently evil are unlikely to be swayed by this documentary towards a more nuanced position, but the general public will acquire a greater knowledge of the achievements of the Revolutionary Government. In a country with a feeble historical memory, this is a valuable documentary that will hopefully inspire others to use this format to explore other aspects of Peruvian history.