

Women and Revolution

International Women's Day, Bangor, Wales, March 2008

(1) (Numbers refer to the powerpoint slides)

Bore da i bawb a Ddwrnod Rhyngwladol Merched hapus i chi!

I was thrilled to be invited to talk today about Women and Revolution – or Revolutionary Women – because obviously it's my favourite topic and in fact ten years ago today in this same building I launched my book about women in the Nicaraguan revolution, the biography of Nora Astorga: *No Other Reality*. So it does feel in some sense as if I've revolved – I've come round again - myself.

And first I'd like to play around a little with this word **revolution**. To some the word itself may be inspiring, to others a little threatening, confusing, intriguing: whatever your perspective, I think there's always a little *frisson* when the topic is raised. But what does it actually mean? I checked out a few definitions in the dictionary: **(2)**

- The overthrow of a regime or political system or government by the people governed
- A far- reaching and drastic change, especially in ideas or the way things are done
- A movement in a circle, an orbit or a rotation around an axis
- A cycle of successive events or changes
- *Geology*: (This clearly does not apply to women of any age!) A time of major crustal deformation, when folds and faults are formed...
- And then the noun, a *revolutionary* - a person who advocates or engages in revolution

So let's look at some examples: **(3) Overthrow of a political system**

I'm going to briefly mention two examples from Latin American socialism. Nicaragua got rid of its dictator in 1979 and had a revolutionary government between 1979 and 1990 before the regime changed again - 11 short years. Cuba had its revolution 20 years before that in 1959 and it is still ongoing – the revolution will be 50 years old next year. And the important thing to note about both these revolutions is: they would not have been possible without the participation of women.

No Other Reality

I'll talk about Nicaragua first, I worked there during the 1980s (the revolutionary period) and my daughter was born there, so I still have a special relationship with the country. It was for me a unique and inspiring time. Later I tried to capture some of that by writing about Nora Astorga. **(4)** I don't have time to go into detail. In case you haven't read it, I'll just recap from the synopsis on the back cover to give you a flavour of the story:

“International Women’s Day **1978**. Nora Astorga, a young Nicaraguan lawyer and the favoured elder daughter of upper middle class right-wing family, takes part in an undercover military operation as a member of the Sandinista National Liberation Front. Result: Death of General Pérez ‘the Dog’, right-hand man of the hated dictator Somoza. Nora flees the capital, leaving two daughters, escapes the National Guard’s dragnet and joins the *guerrilla* in the mountains...

“Valentines Day **1988**. Nora Astorga, now Nicaraguan Ambassador to the United Nations, having held high office in the revolutionary government, Public Prosecutor of war criminals, Vice Foreign Minister, dies of cancer at the age of 39, leaving behind four children. Remembered as Ambassador of Love, life and Peace, awarded the title: Hero of the Fatherland, quoted as an exemplary mother and an exemplary revolutionary.”

I published the book in **1998**. The purpose was to celebrate the courage of Nicaraguan women and the vision that inspired them. And the title *No other reality* is from a quote from Nora. What did she mean by this? **(5)** This is really how Nora saw the Nicaraguan revolution:

“I believe there exists today no other reality like ours in which, even with such serious limitations, each of us feels we have an obligation to society and tries to fulfil it with imagination and a sense of humour.”

But this is just one woman’s story and Nora herself emphasised when she was interviewed: “You shouldn’t be focusing on me, you should be talking about all those other women who risked their lives, carrying messages, hiding bombs in their skirts...”

And women contributed to the revolutionary process, that is to say, actually making the changes happen, developing a new society, in a whole number of ways: **(6)**

- They were volunteer teachers in the literacy crusade
- They formed the majority of the health brigades

- They were active in the defence committees protecting and organising the local communities
- They took more of a leading role in agricultural production
- They went into non-traditional jobs such as construction
- They became active in the unions for the first time
- And they provided logistical support for the army

This really shows what revolutionary (or revolting) women can do for society!!

You can see here **(7)** the literacy crusade poster: a young woman teacher, women and men learning together. Literacy, or education more generally, was seen as essential to the revolution, so that everyone could be involved. The literacy programme itself was called *El Amanecer*: the dawn or the “Sunrise of the People”. The poet June Beer, from the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua and so writing in Creole English, described all the work being done (by women and men) as “Busting your ass to defend this sunrise, and keep back the night from falling”. That was the long dark night of oppression - and the dark night of ignorance.

I need to pick up on defence and support for the army. The night did fall again. This was because the United States found this revolution threatening – the threat of a good example: this drastic change of ideas. The US put an economic blockade on Nicaragua, they waged a propaganda war against the country and they also funded a counter-revolution. There were other political problems, which eventually led to the downfall of the revolution in 1990.

But the spirit lives on. **(8)** Now women are using those organisational and revolutionary skills to struggle against the so-called ‘free trade’ agreements with the United States (CAFTA - Central America Free Trade Agreements) which tend to benefit the US rather than the women who are working in appalling conditions in the factories - to save enough money to pay for education for their children. Women are saying NO to these practices.

But we can be forgiven for asking (and it’s a question I ask myself because I spent time working for it): did the revolution make any difference in the long term?

Especially now that an old revolutionary leader, Daniel Ortega, is back in power and rights for women have in fact got worse and abortion has been made illegal. Coupled with lack of contraception this really is a question of life and death for young women - as the shocking

sculpture **(9)** by Danish artist Jens Galschiot, used by women's campaigning groups in Nicaragua, shows more eloquently than words can do.

But here is a different picture of gender relations **(10)** from Cuba. I've travelled around Cuba and this is a typical scene: fathers looking after their children and the whole family (they tend to be small families, just mum, dad and one or 2 children) on the bike on a Sunday morning heading for the beach or taking another little trip together.

(11) When I visited Cuba for the first time in 2004, I felt new hope - that **radical change** is possible: that a society can genuinely be built on the concept of **people not profit**. And I think that's the real reason why a lot of people just don't 'get' how Cuba works. I'm not here to tell you that everything's perfect there. But I'm thrilled to have the opportunity to work with the **International Institute for the Study of Cuba**, a new initiative at the London Metropolitan University, which aims to open up Cuba and look at the real evidence. There's a lot of disinformation about Cuba and we hope to assess those different ways of doing things more objectively than usually happens.

I could argue that Cuba is more of an example of **what a revolutionary society can do for women**. Just to compare the reproductive rights of women in Cuba with the Caribbean and the United States. **(12)**

- *Female life expectancy: 80 years (Caribbean: 75, US: 80)*. So, equal to the US.
- *Skilled attendance during childbirth: 99.9% (Caribbean: 87.9%, US 99.0%)*
- A little better than the US and in fact we've had some problems with childbirth reported in the press in Britain recently.
- *Infant mortality per 100,000 live births: 5.8 (Caribbean: 24.8, US: 7.0)*. Better than the US and a lot better than other developing countries in the region.

Now these statistics are from the **Pan American Health Organisation** but actually the best source of statistics on Cuba is the **CIA World Fact Book** which is freely available on the internet on the US Government Department of State website.

And as far as women's participation in Cuba is concerned: **(13)**

Doctors: 51%

Scientists: 53%

Judges: 49%

Politicians: 43% (local and national representatives combined: more at local level)

I don't need to give the statistics for the UK. We know that in Britain as a whole the percentages are a lot less, except in Wales where we have 50% women in the Welsh Assembly government. However we still have, in general, unequal pay and working conditions, unlike women in Cuba.

But I know statistics don't tell the whole story. You need to hear the story from the women themselves. We did meet and talk to a lot of women while we were travelling around Cuba. We hired a car and - because public transport in Cuba is recognised as not so good - the government there encourages visitors to pick up hitch-hikers. What impressed us most was the level of confidence of ordinary Cuban women, farmers, nurses, students, even bored housewives: they way they were at ease with themselves and with strangers and how they were clearly accustomed to speak in their own voice.

One hitchhiker we picked up was a woman in her late twenties. She told us she had left school early (which you can choose to do) got married and had two children. Then she had decided she wanted to do something else with her life and was in the middle of training to become a nurse. When we asked her about people feeling disappointed with opportunities in Cuba, she replied immediately: *'It's their choice. Yes, of course, it's hard work to train and look after your family at the same time. But if you work hard you can become anything you want to be.'*

(14) And as you may know, Cuban doctors and nurses provide service all over the world, especially in Africa and other Latin American countries, but also in emergencies like the Pakistan earthquake a couple of years ago. I ran into a team of 12 Cuban doctors in the Sahara desert north of Timbuktu in West Africa last year. They work where local doctors refuse to go. They are absolutely dedicated and warmly appreciated.

The picture here is from the film *Salud!* about the Cuban health service, which very movingly reflects the spirit that is at the heart of revolution.

(15) Here's the legendary Che Guevara. This picture is obviously the basis for the Revolutionary Women poster I used at the beginning of the slideshow. There are a lot of posters around in Cuba with slogans taken from Che. This is one of the favourites:

“Seamos realistas, soñemos lo imposible”

The English is: Let's be realistic, let's dream the impossible

(16) If you find that a little obscure, the black American writer Alice Walker made a similar point perhaps in a more accessible way:

“Pay attention to the way you construct the present. It should look like the future that you dream of.”

The resignation of Fidel Castro has been in the news recently and there's a lot of speculation about how things are going to change. Well, my view is this: there are over 5 million women in Cuba working for and benefiting from the revolution: the future of Cuba does not lie in the hands of one person (or one man).

(17)

So, to come back to some of the other definitions of revolution – that relate to the cycles of time and successive events, the seasons, the world in its orbit around the sun and the moon in its orbit around the earth. My daughter was born in Nicaragua in 1987; she's just turned 21. Now I'm working with the revolution again at the Cuba Institute.

And I've been around the world myself quite a number of times since I spoke here in 1998. You could be justified in thinking: “This revolving woman's back here again, slightly different shape, size or colour, and she's still trying to flog us the same old story... Does anything really change?”

I often ask myself the same question. I'm currently in the process of downsizing, planning to sell the house and move back to my native Yorkshire. I'm going through all my old documents and it's very instructive reading. I brought a few with me to share with you:

- *The long march to Equality* – Millicent Fawcett leads the march for equality in **1908** (that's a 100 years ago...)

- **1985** *Cynulliad Merched Cymru / Wales Assembly of Women, United Nations Decade of Women, Reports for the end of decade conference, Nairobi 1985* (If you remember, that was the decade for women, 1975 to 1985)

- *Why are we still waiting? The struggle for women's human rights*, Amnesty International **1991**
- New Internationalist, February **1993** special issue on *Girls and Girlhood: Time we were noticed!*
- In the *Times Higher* May 19, **1993**, Partha Dasgupta, a Cambridge economist says: "You cannot even begin to understand the facts of economic life in the third world without understanding the dynamics of households, the relationships of parents and children and, above all, the nature of women's work."
- European Community **1994** *Women in Decision-Making*. European elections: Vote for balance between women and men. It asks: "Can you imagine a world with 81% fathers and 19% mothers?"
- *Everywoman* March **1995**, "The future of feminism: will it be a piece of cake?"
- Equal Opportunities Commission 1995: Women and Men in Britain: *The life cycle of inequality*
- Of course **1995** was the year of the United Nations Beijing conference on women: equality peace and development. Then we have *Beyond Beijing*: it's a pretty leaflet.
- **1997** Before the election which did promise to bring about change in Britain, the Wales campaign leaflet In Pursuit of Equality (*Ar drwydd Cydraddoldeb yng Nghymru*). TEN QUESTIONS THAT EVERY MP (or every candidate) NEEDS TO ANSWER. For example: "Do you know that 1 in 5 women in the UK have experienced violence?" We need to ask ourselves now: to what extent have these statistics changed in the past ten years?
- We also had the **2020 vision** campaign: *How do you see your daughter's future?* (Golwg hugain hugain: sut ydych chi'n gweld dyfodol eich merch chi?)
- **2000** The Fawcett Society magazine: *Where are the women in the media?*
- *2000 good reasons to march...* the World March of Women **2000**... mmm, is it all beginning to sound a little familiar?

(18) And so back to Britain today. After 30 years in existence, the Equal Opportunities Commission last October was merged with the new Equality and Human Rights Commission. Before they did so they published their final report entitled **(19): The gender agenda – the unfinished revolution, 2007**

"The good news is that we can change things for the future. If we achieve the following goals for women and men in the next 10 years we can complete the revolution:
close the income gap between men and women;
give better support to modern families;

modernise public services so they meet women's and men's needs;
provide equal access to justice and safety;
*and share power **equally** between men and women."*

That's all we need to do, folks!

When Gordon Brown first took over the office of Prime Minister last summer everyone was talking about a 'revolution in government'. Well, you know I wasn't convinced at the time... Last month the Guardian (Feb 19th 2008) reported the results of a Mori Poll carried out for the Fawcett Society: 71 percent of women polled felt the government had not done enough to ensure equal pay is achieved.

And so we come to another definition of **revolution (20)**. We can see it as an old record turning or rotating at 33 or 45 revolutions per minute. And we can recall the title and the lyrics from Lennon and McCartney, which these days may sound a little cynical: "Talking 'bout a revolution. Well, you know, we all wanna change the world..."

So what's the answer? How do we manage? How can we transcend? Because clearly the system we live in is not working well enough for us. But without actually taking up arms and going to the barricades: How can women be revolutionary rather than just revolving?

I went back to the dictionary and found the origins of the verb **revolve: (21)**

Latin: to turn over (in your mind)

Middle English: to change direction

Old French: to reflect upon, to ponder

I think it's in this way that **revolution** can be seen not as an endless circle or a downward spiral but as a constant movement towards the light.

It **is** about literacy, about education, the dawn, the sunrise (going back to the image used in Nicaragua) and though he's now resigned from office Fidel Castro says: "I continue to be a soldier in the struggle of ideas..."

And so:

- We continue to inquire about and analyse the world as we experience it
- We share the same struggle: in 1995 we had a conference about women in Wales and women in Nicaragua and I think the title is still relevant

- We continue recording our own and other women's stories: there's a real importance in keeping the archives
- We now have access to the internet: a great way of networking, exchanging ideas and empowering women
- We pass on our inspiration to the younger generation – to our daughters and our daughters' friends. To quote a young friend from my brief foray into online journalism recently: "It's inspiring – despite your age and everything (!!!) you've not become cynical: you really do still believe in the dream..."
- It's important to acknowledge the impact and the influence that other women, our friends, family and colleagues can have on the rest of us.

Finally, of course, the importance of **Women's Studies**.

I'd like to come back here to the example of Christine Hurst whose revolving spirit was able to transcend life and death in order to leave us her work on women and madness. (Let's not forget madness is said to be related to the orbit and the phases of the moon). Although Christine fell ill, she was determined to finish her dissertation before she died. I've had the opportunity to read Christine's dissertation **Out of the attic** and it serves our purpose here today very well.

She talks about women's reactions to the male dominated system of sex inequality that we live in and how our reactions have been variously diagnosed as madness, hysteria, emotional instability (we can go further: dismissed as PMT, the menopause). This diagnosis is of course made by men –as a way of controlling or suppressing our otherness, our sexuality, our passion, our **female rage** against male norms.

And so through history vocal women have been consigned to the attic (like the madwoman in Jane Eyre) or the asylum, the madhouse, the special unit, the rehab clinic...

But then Christine looks at madness (or perhaps we could just call it feminism) as a deliberate choice of women. She draws on the novel *The Four Gated City* by Doris Lessing (**22**) who at over 80 and I don't know how many novels - has just been awarded the Nobel prize for literature. Here she suggests that: "*Madness is necessary to escape patriarchal constructions of femininity... those patriarchal definitions that intervene between a woman and herself.*"

Christine also quotes from Nina Baym, professor at the University of Illinois who says the problem arises because we live in **(23)** “... a society that cannot obliterate the innate disruptive revolutionary force of the female...” (It’s so nice I’ll say it again) “... a society that cannot obliterate the innate disruptive revolutionary force of the female...”

Logic dictates that (as Baym continues) “...since society is bad, this force is good.” In other words, we are revolutionary by nature and everything we do is revolutionary.

So, Christine suggests that we bring madness out of the attic and put it centre stage - where we belong!

To sum up then, out of all these definitions and my own experience, perhaps for me revolution is about continuing to challenge myself, continuing to ask questions:

Who defines my reality? And what choices do I make? Every morning when I wake up: Will I go round and round on someone else’s record? Will I listen to someone else’s song or dance to someone else’s tune? Or will I be true to my own revolutionary nature? Do I choose, however hard it is (and we all *know* how hard it is!), do I still choose to live the dream?

Happy international women’s day, everyone.

Patricia Daniel

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Also, blogs on Cuba and equality at:

<http://patriciadaniel.blogspot.com/search/label/Latin%20America>