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Cuban Agriculture

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Until the late 1980s, Cuba's agricultural economy was a Soviet wannabe, based on heavy mechanization and use of chemicals; the Soviet state-socialist model of agriculture, at least ideally, was as if Cargill or ADM had turned the farms of an entire country into one giant agribusiness plantation, and then the state had expropriated the corporation and put it under a state ministry. But with the collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989 and of the USSR itself in 1991, and the cutoff of their "fraternal assistance," the Cuban economy was deprived of the inputs necessary for a Soviet-style agricultural model. There were drastic cutbacks in electric power and transportation, in the fuel and spare parts for those big gee-whizzy combines, and the oil necessary for chemical inputs. Left with an economy largely geared toward cash crops of sugar, and deprived of the Soviet-bloc markets for that sugar at subsidized prices, Cuba suffered something like a one-third reduction in average daily caloric intake. Many people lost considerable weight. But more than a decade later, Bill McKibben notices a difference:

Now, just by looking across the table, I saw that Fernando Funes had since gained the twenty pounds back.

In fact, he had a little paunch, as do many Cuban men of a certain age. What happened was simple, if unexpected. Cuba had learned to stop exporting sugar and instead started growing its own food again, growing it on small private farms and thousands of pocket-sized urban market gardens—and, lacking chemicals and fertilizers, much of that food became de facto organic. Somehow, the combination worked. Cubans have as much food as they did before the Soviet Union collapsed. They're still short of meat, and the milk supply remains a real problem, but their caloric intake has returned to normal—they've gotten that meal back.

In so doing they have created what may be the world's largest working model of a semi-sustainable agriculture, one that doesn't rely nearly as heavily as the rest of the world does on oil, on chemicals, on shipping vast quantities of food back and forth.

I should add, I'm only interested in this at the level of technique. As far as I'm concerned, if that works it stands on its own, independently of Cuba's larger social-political system. If anything, the fact that something like this can be made to work in a state socialist prison like Cuba should, *a fortiori*, be promising for large grass roots alternative economics movements in comparatively free societies.

It's certainly an example of how quickly a capital- and chemical-intensive agricultural system can be decentralized and shifted to a labor-intensive and largely organic production model in the event of a sudden loss of inputs (can anyone say "Peak Oil"?).

Addenda: Buermann, at Flagrancy to Reason, recently posted on an Oxfam study of Cuba's economic transition after the Soviet aid cutoff, and drew similar general lessons for an energy-scarce economy.