

Organic Cuba

Farming & Politics

Citizen Cane

2000

In May, two former Fifth Estaters (turned farmers) will attend an international organic agriculture conference in Havana. Joining us there will be another farmer from Olympia, Washington, and friends from a Mayan community in the Western Highlands of Guatemala.

The event is co-sponsored by the American organizations Global Exchange and Food First, and the Cuban farming organization Grupo de Agricultura Organica (GAO). These groups co-sponsored a similar gathering there in 1996.

Last year, the GAO received the prestigious Right Livelihood Award, sometimes called "The Alternative Nobel Prize." One of four winners in 1999, the GAO was chosen from 80 organizations representing 40 countries.

California-based Food First describes the GAO as a group that "brings together farmers, farm managers, field experts, researchers, and government officials to develop and promote organic farming methods. Its aim is to convince Cuban farmers and policy makers that the country's previous high-input farming model was too import-dependent and environmentally damaging to be sustainable, and that the organic alternative has the potential to achieve equally good yields."

After the collapse of the U.S.S.R., Cuba was forced to transform its agricultural practices from the massive use of Soviet-supplied chemical fertilizers and pesticides to almost entirely organic methods.

The U.S. economic embargo and a continuing shortage of hard currency on the island—combined with a growing awareness in Cuba of the benefits of organic techniques—have spurred on this unique national effort, now about 10 years old.

During the mid-1990s, the hardest years of this transition, food shortages on the island caused the average Cuban to lose thirty pounds, though meager rations supplied by the state ensured that no one starved.

The situation has improved since then, and small organic farms are now thriving, though hunger still persists.

Looming over the Cuban experiment is the specter of the American Midwest. In the Fall of 1999, Republican George Ryan of Illinois became the first U.S. governor to visit Cuba since the 1950s. He was dispatched by his state's chamber of commerce, and during his visit, met with Fidel Castro and denounced the trade embargo.

His purpose, as he stated during a C-SPAN television speech upon his return, was to get a foot in the Cuban door and establish a market for Illinois corn and soybeans, the two crops he mentioned by name. What he didn't mention is that last year, half the soybeans grown in the U.S., and one-third of the corn, was genetically engineered. In January of this year, the giant agro-multinational, Archer Daniels Midland (self-billed as "supermarket to the world"), was lead sponsor in the first U.S. trade exhibition held in Cuba since 1960.

The implications are obvious: U.S. agribusiness is waiting in the wings with its chemical-laced Frankenfood, ready to dump it cheap upon this proud yet hungry island. (A Cuban joke asks what the three greatest accomplishments of the Revolution are: education, medicine, and sports, the answer goes. And the three great failings? Breakfast, lunch, and dinner.)

Putting Aside Rifles

The Guatemalan *companeros* who will attend the conference are demobilized guerrillas who have put aside rifles for hoes, and are trying to rebuild their lives since a 1996 peace treaty ended 36 years of civil war there. They made a down payment on a small old coffee plantation, or *fincas*, and are rehabilitating it as a self-managed livelihood for their community.

Though continued financial assistance from the government was part of the peace accord, it has failed to materialize. The collective coffee venture is still holding together, tenuously.

While picking the magic bean there in 1999, we observed a controversy within the community over the benefits (for them) of growing organically vs. using chemicals, since the former requires significantly more physical labor.

This was no small factor considering that cleaning the skins and pulp off the ripe coffee bean is done there by hand, a laborious and time consuming process that none of the other hierarchically-run *fincas* in the surrounding area used. (Huge and administered from Guatemala City, the big *fincas* all had the capital necessary for machinery to wash the coffee.) In the end, the community chose not to grow organically, but they are sending two representatives to Havana to learn more about the organic option.

The agricultural conference in Havana will run from May 10 through May 24. For a full itinerary of scheduled events, contact Food First, 398 60th Street, Oakland, CA. 94618. Telephone: (510) 654-4400. www.foodfirst.com.

When I submitted the above story, a Fifth Estate member who edited it suggested I include a brief mention of the repressive nature of the Cuban state.

I considered it, but decided the issue was so complex that I didn't see it being "explained" in a few sentences.

The suggestion made me wonder if such an addition is considered necessary only for Cuba, or would governmental analysis be expected no matter where the conference was held? When compared to other nations in this hemisphere, the method the Cuban government chooses to control its population, ironically, resembles that used in the United States: they put those they consider troublemakers in jail for long periods of time.

Cuba doesn't have rampant extra-judicial killings, read death squads, the way U.S. client states like Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Colombia, Peru, etc., etc. all do. Latin America has over 90,000 "disappeared ones," but they're not from Cuba.

The Cuban authorities are still crude enough to disperse nonviolent street demonstrations and detain people for crimes they call political, but as imprisonment goes, it is the U.S. that is the world's leading incarceration nation, locking up a greater percentage of its population than any other country.

Repression in the U.S. takes a different form: the line here, of course, is that there are no political crimes, only criminal ones. Dozens of U.S. cities have passed anti-gang laws, encouraging their police departments to break up groups of black and Latino men congregating on street corners. American policemen and women will often do whatever it takes to lock up those designated social undesirables.

A still-expanding scandal in Los Angeles challenges the cynicism of even the most ardent critic of police abuse. Over 10,000 convictions of mostly minority youth are being reviewed, involving 70 officers accused of stealing and selling cocaine, planting guns and drugs on suspects, intimidating witnesses, perjury, shooting unarmed teenagers, and murder.

A Gulag Landscape

Similar evidence-planting scandals occurred this decade in other big cities, such as New York, Philadelphia, New Orleans, Atlanta, Miami (and who knows where else?). The landscape one contemplates here in the U.S. is systematic railroading of thousands of young men of color into the nearest state penitentiary.

This ever-growing American gulag archipelago dwarfs the repressive apparatus in Cuba. By contrast, dissident groups on the island claim about 340 political prisoners; Amnesty International counts "at least" 350.

Would the FE feel compelled to mention these characteristics of the U.S. governing system in a short notice if the agricultural conference was being held here? Or does the sophistication of North American repressive techniques abrogate the need to bring it up out of context?

I'm not downplaying the crude police-state features in Cuba. I had a small taste of it last year, when I was briefly detained in Havana by arrogant street cops. And later, I had a book and a Cuban military medal given to me by an Angolan war vet friend seized arbitrarily by customs agents at the airport in Ciego de Avila, during repeated searches of my baggage.

Yet, as the U.S. government uses drug war propaganda to plunge deeper into another Latin American conflict in Colombia (the Clinton Administration wants \$1.3 billion in American aid over the next two years, 80% earmarked for security forces with atrocious human rights records), we must not accept simplistic mythologies, but rather critically examine the situation, firsthand when possible, and draw independent conclusions.

Cuba & Detroit

In Cuba, as in Detroit, poverty can be obvious, intense, and widespread.

The numerous extremely poor Cuban neighborhoods do not have the menace that some in Detroit do, however. A flourishing street life makes one feel safe, and in the hot afternoons, everyone opens their doors and windows in a way that simply couldn't happen in this barred and bulletproofed city. Although racism lives on in Cuba, it is not the overwhelming amplifier of street tension as is often the case here.

Another startling contrast: Detroit's African-American infant mortality rate for 1996–1998 was 16.8 per thousand live births, actually down from over 20 for most of the 1990s. Cuba's rate of 6.5 is one of the world's lowest. Put simply, in the last decade, three times as many black babies less than a year old have died in Detroit than in Cuba, a disgraceful commentary on priorities in this wealthy country. This statistic is a continuing obscenity in a city now flush with casino profits and business investment.

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