

IN THESE TIMES OPINION

Joseph D. Collins & Frances Moore Lappé

Food and politics: Scarcity amidst plenty

Cuba has always been a land of great agricultural potential. Yet, before the revolution Cuba spent over 20 percent of its foreign exchange to import food that the island's fertile valleys, plains and well-watered pastureland could easily have produced. Even with heavy food imports, most of the rural population had inadequate amounts of rice, beans and two or three belly-filling, low-nutrition, tubers and they had practically no milk, eggs, meat, fruits or vegetables.

Why such scarcity despite potential abundance? First, most of the population had no land: 70 percent of the island's total land was owned by 8 percent of all owners. At the heart of the divorce of agriculture and nutrition were the sugar estates, many American-owned, that controlled 70 to 75 percent of the arable land.

The large estates kept more than half of their land idle. With a limited international sugar market and widespread poverty preventing the growth of a local market for diversified food crops, there was little incentive to plant. Selling the unplanted land to peasants, latifundistas feared, would undercut the labor supply because land-owning peasants might not need to work for the large estates.

Food crop cultivation declined so much in Cuba that by the early 1930s it was necessary to pass a law requiring sugar companies to let employees grow food during the six-month "dead season" when they were not working the sugar plantations. Most companies resisted.

►The food revolution.

In May 1959 the face of Cuban agriculture changed radically. More than 100,000 small tenants and sharecroppers were given the land they had been cultivating. The large latifundia were nationalized.

The first reform allowed private farms as large as 990 acres. But because many of the larger remaining private owners sought to undermine the government by cutting back on production, it became necessary to expropriate all farms over 167 acres in 1963.

These reforms made it possible to diversify and increase food production. In the first three years of the Revolution bean production shot up 136 percent, rice

96 percent, corn 92 percent, potatoes 46 percent—all the most basic staples of the people's traditional diet.

New land was opened up and some land previously given over to sugar was put into food production. Large investments were made in irrigation and machinery to increase food production. Existing dam capacity today is almost five times that of 1959. In all one and a quarter million acres of farmland are now irrigated.

►A role for sugar: Cuba vs. Dominican Republic.

Looking at countries like pre-revolutionary Cuba and Puerto Rico, observers often blame sugar monoculture for the misery of the people. This is superficially true. But contrasting Cuba today with the Dominican Republic, a country that has undergone rapid "sugarization," shows that other considerations are more important.

Estimates indicate that at least three-fourths of all agricultural land in the Dominican Republic serves foreign consumers. Sugar, coffee and cocoa exports alone take up 56 percent of the total cropland. Increasing quantities of fruits and vegetables are exported. A significant percent of the country's pastureland produces meat for export. Moreover, high quality vegetable protein is grown for animal feed.

Despite the urgent need for food for local consumption—and the prior need of so many to have access to land to grow food (over half the country's farmers have inadequate sized farms and an estimated 100,000 rural families have no land at all), the sugar estates over the last 20 years have doubled their acreage. This "sugarization" has been intensified by Gulf and Western, which entered the Dominican Republic in 1967 and is now one of the country's largest landholders.

The promotion of export crop production means that the Dominican Republic's agricultural output has increased an impressive 7.7 percent a year since 1968. But food production for Dominicans may actually be decreasing.

Not surprisingly, in 1969, the diets of 70 percent of all low and middle income Dominicans were below minimum standards for nutritional well-being.

The lives of Cubans before the revolution could be described in similar terms.

Many Cubans had what Che Guevara once referred to as "a fetishistic idea [that] connected sugar with our dependence on imperialism and with the misery in rural areas. At the beginning of the revolution, therefore, not only were food crops promoted but sugar production was neglected in what turned out to be an over-hasty emphasis on import-substitute industrialization. In due time, however, a workable policy emerged through experience. Sugar production for export, it turned out, need not be and now is not the enemy of the people."

After years of experimentation and working to overcome a lack of technical knowledge about food production among rural people whose experience was only in sugar, the Agrarian Reform Institute developed a national decentralization policy in 1969. It combined intensive cultivation of export crops along with production of varied food staples for local self-sufficiency.

One area might concentrate on sugar cane, another on citrus fruits, a third on livestock, with the farmers cooperating according to an overall national plan. This local specialization increased production and marketing efficiency. But alongside of commercial farms were farms growing vegetables and other food for local consumption.

As a result there have been substantial advances in local food production. From 1971 to 1975, non-sugar agricultural production increased by 38 percent. In the same period vegetable production for the local population more than doubled and fruit production increased by over 60 percent. Egg production amounts to 1.7 billion, more than six times that of 1958. Poultry meat production has increased four times since 1963. Pork production is threefold the 1963 figure and sugar-cane waste products and food wastes have been increasingly used in feeding pigs.

Thus the first major contrast between Cuba today and the Dominican Republic is that in Cuba sugar is no longer produced to the detriment of local food production. Between 1971 and 1974 Cuban food consumption increased 20 percent and with virtually no increase in food prices.

Second, the foreign exchange earnings from exports of sugar play a very different role in the economies of countries like Cuba and Dominican Republic. In Cuba earnings from sugar exports help pay for the import of a broad range of goods for productive, job-producing industries. In the Dominican Republic, foreign exchange earnings are largely squandered on imports of luxury consumer goods. In fact, such imports brought the Dominican Republic close to a trade deficit in 1974, the very year sugar prices went up more than 400 percent.

Third, in countries dominated by privately-owned (often foreign) exporting companies a price rise for the country's commodity is not likely to benefit agricultural laborers. In the Dominican Republic windfall profits for a few caused

by a rise in the world market price for sugar set off inflation at home and reduced the real income of the people. Gulf and Western brags that it has raised a cutter's wages from \$1.26 per ton in 1966 to \$1.75 per ton in 1976. (By working all day very hard a cutter can cut two to five tons, depending on the quality of the crop.) But this 39 percent wage increase is overshadowed by consumer price index rise of 86 percent. The real wage of the cane cutter is less than it was 10 years ago.

The yearly income of the cane cutter is, moreover, much less than these figures, since the sugar season lasts only a few months. The office of the Secretary of Agriculture of the Dominican Republic estimates that the bottom 50 percent of the population actually earns less than 20 cents a day; 18 cents of that must be spent on food that supplies only 60 percent of the calories they need. In Cuba, by contrast, little malnutrition remains as evidenced by the rapid decline in infant death rates associated with poor nutrition during the last decade.

Finally, Cuba's sugar exports are within an altogether different trading framework than that which exists for non-socialist countries. Cuba's sugar production is no longer controlled by private corporations. Thus planning is possible. The greater part of Cuban sugar exports is now handled through inter-governmental economic agreements. Cuba does not make the mistake of relying on this export income to import food needed for the basic well-being of the people. The only major food imports by Cuba today are rice, milk products and wheat, and domestic production of rice and milk are increasing dramatically. From the earliest days of the revolution, the Cuban people have understood that self-determination is not possible without basic food self-reliance.

When thinking of food-dependent and impoverished people, one too often concludes that the problem is resource scarcity. Or, at best, one supposes that feeding everyone instead of only the elite minority would require using every last acre for domestic food production. The latest 20 years of Cuban history have proven this untrue. Even though more than 40 percent of all cropland under public control in Cuba is used to grow sugar, enough food is produced to insure a nutritious diet for every Cuban. When national resources are controlled by all of the people and used in their interest, food self-reliance can be achieved even where agricultural products are major export items.

Frances Moore Lappé and Joseph Collins are codirectors of the Institute for Food and Development Policy. Their book, written with Cary Fowler, *First Food: Beyond the myth of scarcity*, will be published in March. Lappé is author of *Diet for a Small Planet*. Their column appears regularly. Syndicated In These Times.

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Letters

What about Russia and China?

Editor:

In discussing the failure of popular socialism in the U.S., Roberta Lynch mentions (*ITT*, Jan. 26) two possible causes: (1) American workers are bought off by consumerism; and (2) American socialists have failed to present themselves as "serious contenders in the electoral process."

Far out! Fantastic! Incredible! No-where does she even suggest that a large reason for the failure of popular socialism here is the tarnishing of socialist ideals by Russia, China and other satellites. Don't Ms. Lynch, *ITT* and the New American Movement know that American workers have come to see socialism as the totalitarian monstrosity that exists in Russia and China? For what should American workers give up their rights to dissent, assemble, organize and strike? For Gulag Archipelago and up to 60 million murdered? For a distribution of wealth less equitable than that in most advanced Western countries?

The task of American socialists is clear: to chart out a course independent of Washington, Moscow, and Peking. How many radicals at this moment are willing to do this? Almost all are tied to one of the three and therefore have nothing to offer American workers, many of whom are not so foolish.

There will be no popular socialism in this country until there is a genuinely independent socialist movement untainted by capitalist reformism or by Stalinist bureaucratism. The leadership for such a movement will come not from academics, but from the workingclass itself, which, for all its serious errors, does not confuse totalitarian despotism with socialist democracy.

—Marvin Mandell
W. Rosbury, Mass.

And what about the Arabs?

Editor:

In These Times has demonstrated an independence of thought in a wide range of areas. But despite the general tenor of the journal and despite your explicit promise in your Jan. 12 issue to present a variety of views on the Arab-Israeli conflict, you have yet to present the issues in the Middle East from a left Israeli perspective. Left wing writers like Sol Stern and Barry Rubin could provide a useful contrast to the rhetorical bombast presented by the Middle East Research Project in your Jan. 19 issue.

In the wake of slaughter in Lebanon the article opposes a diplomatic settlement in the Middle East and supports the call for the destruction of Israel. Evidently like Col. Qaddafi the people of MERIP are willing to fight to the last Palestinian. The article is based on a number of assumptions that have generally gone unchallenged in American left wing publications. It makes an analytic distinction between the Palestinians and their Saudi financiers. This would no doubt come as a surprise to Saudi King Khalid, who in a recent trip to France was bargaining his economic support for Giscard d'Estaing in his fight against the coalition of the left in return for further French support for the Palestinians.

The labels of left and right often make little sense in a Middle Eastern context. The warring armies in Lebanon were both led by feudal chieftans. And what precisely is left wing about the Palestinians? How is it that they have shown little interest in experimenting with socialist forms of organization in the areas that have been under their control? That labelling process has mysti-

fied some of the realities of the Middle East like the slaughter of half a million blacks by the Arab Sudanese or the genocidal campaign against the Kurds by the "socialist" government of Iraq. And here within the U.S., have Spiro Agnew and Exxon become left wing through their support of the Arab cause?

The Middle East undoubtedly represents one of the greatest intellectual failures of the new left. In the left press the continuity between the response to Israel by feudal Islamic leaders and the current "revolutionaries" has been obfuscated by sloganeering calls for a secular democratic state. Those slogans were specifically designed for western audiences but have been given little play within the Arab world where (with the possible exception of Lebanon in days gone by) there are no secular or democratic states, let alone both. Similarly the calls for the creation of a Palestinian state obscure the history of the area. What is needed is not the creation of a Palestinian entity but its recreation. There was a Palestinian state in 1948, like Israel a U.N. creation. But it was destroyed in the attack on Israel by the Arab armies. The Arab hostility to Israel preceded and was not created by the mournful existence of the Palestinian refugees, themselves victims of a war launched by their brethren.

In These Times has taken the lead in cutting away some of the stale rhetoric of the last decade in discussing electoral politics, unions and other issues, it should extend the same treatment to the Middle East. The job of socialists is to speak the truth to power, even when that power is cloaked in revolutionary garb.

—Fred Siegel
Brooklyn, N.Y.

And furthermore, what about the IRA?

Editor:

I was extremely interested to read David Moberg's commentary concerning the American tour of the general secretary of Sinn Fein, Marin de Burca (*ITT*, Jan. 12). As Moberg noted, there are some very admirable aspects to Sinn Fein (the political wing of the official IRA) e.g. their opposition to an immediate British withdrawal and their support of the newly emerged peace movement. Compared to the Provisionals, the Officials are saints—please pardon the irony!

However, Moberg neglected to mention some of the serious shortcomings of the Officials. Firstly, they are an orthodox Moscow-oriented Communist party with a definite Stalinist image. Secondly, while claiming to understand Protestant opposition to a united Ireland, they still advocate such a "solution." Many Northern Irish socialists, including Catholics such as myself, see the issue of an united Ireland as divisive and indicative of a failure to really comprehend Ulster nationalism. For an important discussion of the point, please let me recommend Tom Nairn's fine article in the fall issue of *Liberation*.

—Sean Connelly
Ithaca, N.Y.

Women are still singing!

Editors:

In These Times has qualities I really like: its analyses are thoughtful and it's written in English, not in leftist jargon. But continuing to ignore the women's movement is a mistake; first, because a considerable percentage of those now actively campaigning for change are women, and second, because doing so results in bad reporting.

Steve Chapple's article, "Where have all the folk songs gone" (*ITT*, Jan. 26), seems to have fallen into the latter trap. Women musicians have avoided the economic censorship Chapple laments by establishing their own record companies or working through a company

sympathetic to activists. My favorite Marxist singer-songwriter, for example, is Holly Near (Redwood Records), who was radicalized during the war and went from war protests to feminism and socialism. Her current songs reflect her activism on behalf of women, United Farm Workers, women prisoners, and the unemployed. Certainly you remember the outspoken socialist Malvina Reynolds, the writer of "Little Boxes." She just produced a record with Cassandra Records. Those who have produced records to comfort and encourage feminists in our struggle include Casse Sluver, the Berkeley Women's Music Collective, Chris Williamson, Meg Christian (Olivaria); Kay Gardner (Wise Women); Ginny Clemmens (Open Door); Ami Pierce (Pinewood); Hazel and Alice, the Chicago and New Haven's women's liberation bands, the Arlington Street Women's Caucus (Rounder); and Margie Adams (Pleiades). Many others like Kristin Lems of the National Women's Music Festival seem to be too busy entertaining at demonstrations to produce records.

Our music hasn't degenerated into leftist nostalgia because the movement itself is alive and healthy.

—Carol Dussere
Lexington, Ky.

Still a Jew

Editor:

Jonathan Wolf's letter (*ITT*, Jan. 12) condemning my Middle East column cannot be left unanswered. Wolf, of course, is more than welcome to criticize my ideas. It was the ad hominem character of his reply that troubles me.

Wolf begins by comparing my article to that of a woman or black writing a sexist or racist piece. He generously allows that my anti-Jewishness may be only unconscious! I am deeply offended by such character assassination. My Mid-

dle East perspectives follow definite Jewish (even Zionist!) traditions. My views reflect the socialist bi-national position of Hashomer Hatzair and currently are in substantial agreement with Moked and the Israeli Council for Israeli-Palestinian Peace. Are we to suppose that these Israeli groups were or are "anti-Jewish?"

The Middle East is, of course, a very sensitive issue and emotions run deep. There is, however, no excuse for Mr. Wolf's insinuations.

—Simon Rosenblum
Johnson City, N.Y.

Power to the people

Editor:

In your Jan. 26 issue you picture "gorilla war" against Commonwealth Edison's rate increase request.

The People's Power Project, who organized the demonstration in conjunction with the Illinois Public Action Council, find the rate increase designed solely to promise higher dividend checks to Com. Ed. stockholders. We find questionable the motive of building more nuclear and conventional power plants to generate unneeded electricity at a yet higher cost.

These facts are almost secondary to the tremendous corporate growth of Com. Ed. and other large private utilities, which are all controlled by a few Wall Street banks and large industrial corporations. The nation's electrical energy supply is being treated as a means to enhance profitability instead of as a dwindling natural resource.

We at People's Power Project are working against this flagrant abuse of the public trust by a few who place profits at a higher priority than the needs of people who depend on their services. The PPP gladly invites comments and questions about our activities and welcomes citizen participation for a cause of everyone's concern.

—Frank Kutyla
Chicago (477-5248 or 871-6326)

Coming next week!

"The Factory"

An *In These Times* cartoon strip featuring:



RATSUS ANOTHER YOUNG RAT, WHO WANTS TO BE A REGULAR CAT, MAKE SOME BREAD, JUMP IN BED, DRINK SOME BEER, NOT STAY HERE, AND BUY A TOUGH SET OF WHEELS.