
Socialism, Farming, and Resistance: How Cuban Socialism is Beating the Embargo

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ABSTRACT

Beginning as a minor assignment which ought to have taken two days, it soon ballooned into a three-month project looking at the Cuban political system and the farming sector's role in developing not only Socialist theory but Socialism in practice. As the collapse of Cuban Socialism has been expected for the past four decades by Western scholars and lawmakers, this same inevitability has perplexed its proponents as it continues not to occur. Cuba has been under embargo by the United States for over sixty years, and the COVID-19 pandemic and hurricane Ian have exacerbated the tremendous pressure on the Socialist government. One ought to ask the question, then, how Cuba remains so resilient after the collapse of the USSR. Although not a conclusive reason as to why Socialism remains prevalent in Cuba, this essay looks at one aspect of this new Cuban Socialism and its successes: farming systems. By looking at the roles polycultural cropping and alternative incentive schemes play in Cuba, I conclude that they both play a vital role in developing and reinforcing Socialism in the island nation.

For decades, the inevitable collapse of Cuban Socialism was hailed to be just over the horizon as economic stagnation gripped the island nation through an embargo incrementally intensified by the United States. This embargo, however, has yet to destroy the Castro regime, nor has it succeeded in breeding anti-government sentiments for the most part. Today we see the complete opposite, an international community united in their opposition to the American embargo. Although the theory was simple, to breed resentment by limiting luxuries and food supplies, the latter

has remained stubbornly resilient, and not only that, but it also poses a threat to American Capitalism itself. Simply put, the farming techniques Cuba has developed and implemented over the past decades have kept the island nation afloat and become a form of resistance to American imperialism. This is through several ways, the most notable of which being the astonishing efficiency of polycultural farming being used to circumvent the shortages caused by the embargo, how civil participation in growing local food has united people during this time of economic

stress, as well as how the persistence of Cuban Socialist political discourse has become the antithesis to American-led Capitalism. However, this could not have been managed without eliminating monocultural farming techniques.

It must first be understood what the difference between monocultures and polycultures is. For one, monocultural cropping is farming a single crop in a given area, while polycultural cropping is farming several in a given area. Monocultural cropping is the most prevalent kind of farming in the West, as it is easy to keep track of usable products. In contrast, polycultural cropping inevitably comes across the difficulties associated with sifting through farmland for the primary product, secondary products, and crops planted for their service to the ecosystem. In essence, whether either farming style is better for the environment or more efficient long term does not matter in the case of most agriculture markets, as monocultural farming by Western empires was historically promoted across their colonial holdings for the sake of cheap and easy production. However, Cuba has adopted polycultural cropping, which has brought high crop yields associated with the system. This can be seen in Akhsan et al.'s 2022 research paper on the relationship between farmers' income and the introduction of polycultural farming. By comparing the polycultural and monocultural practices in Indonesian cocoa farms, they were able to study the impact of crop heterogeneity on the production of farmers' crop yields. Their results suggest that using polycultural systems provides a higher income than monocropping and reduces operational costs (Akhsen, 2022). Not only this, but polycultural cropping also reduces the risk of pest attacks and allows farmers to sell secondary crops alongside their primary crops. The efficiency of polycultures on a farmer's yields and reduced operational costs, although at the expense of having to seed and harvest secondary crops, ultimately has proven to have a net gain on farming efficiency, something which Cuba has wisely capitalized on, while America has historically promoted the direct opposite in their imperialist ventures.

In nations such as Nicaragua, the US would intervene whenever their interests were threatened. In Gobat's work *Central America and the United States*, he describes the history of American intervention in Mesoamerica from

1904 until the present (Gobat, 2022), wherein the direct military presence of America ensured the reinforcement of large plantation businesses in Nicaragua from 1909 - 1933, and systemic nepotism ensured that the US-created Nicaraguan national guard would also leave General Anastasio Somoza Garcia and his sons in charge of the interventionist forces until 1979. Additionally, after the collapse of Guatemala's dictatorship in 1945, the subsequent presidencies of Jose Arevalo (1945 - 1951) and Jacobo Arbenz (1951 - 1954) (Gobat, 2022) saw the abolition of forced labour drafts in the country, as well as the legal validation of the invasion of expropriated banana plantations by peasant communities. This saw the centuries-old, imperialist-established mono-crop farms occupied by their workers. Unfortunately, individuals such as John Foster Dulles and Allen Dulles, who had connections to the then-invaded United Fruit Company land and individuals in the CIA, ensured that a US-backed coup would depose the Guatemalan democracy and replace it with a military junta (Gobat, 2022). After the Cuban revolution, the United States expanded efforts to control Central American exports in fear of the revolution's spread. While Kennedy would invest heavily in developing the economies of Central American countries, Gobat also acknowledges that these reforms were targeted at prospering American investors at the expense of peasant communities and the environment (Gobat, 2022). This leads us to Cuba today and how its switch to a polycultural crop farming system has ensured the state's survival under near-impossible odds.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Cuba saw its economy, specifically the farming sector, collapse. In the 90s, Cuba posted the worst growth in per-capita food production in all of the Caribbean and was forced to radically change its way of farming to be less dependent on imports (Miguel, 2012). As it decentralized its crop production, dismantling inefficient state-owned farms favouring urban and cooperatives, Cuba would replace its monocultural system with polycultures. As mentioned before, in the case of Indonesian cocoa farmers, polycultural farming in Cuba also led to fewer pest attacks and protected the soil by increasing the equivalent land ratio of crop density (Sharma, 2021). From 1996 - 2005, this change in farming style would see an annual growth rate in food production

of 4.2%; this was also when the annual growth rate in the region averaged around 0% (Miguel, 2012). In Ingrid Hanon's critique of Moishe Postone's interpretation of the Marxist theory, she touches on Cuba's adoption of polycultures and how it led to a farming revolution. She argues that today, this shift to a more participatory farming system goes deeper than just producing more food. Instead, she argues that Cuban Socialism now has the opportunity to establish an alternative organizational and technological agricultural production system that is knowledge-intensive instead of capital-intensive, which opens the door to new grass-roots research-based farming methods (Hanon, 2022). However, Cuba's ability to develop an economical alternative to the farming sector is also an ability to form an ideological alternative to American political hegemony.

Although this paper is on Cuban resistance to American imperialism through alternative farming techniques, polycultural farming has been the sole focus of the discussion thus far. Although the ability to feed one's people ensures the stability of your regime, ideology is just as important, and the participatory nature of Cuban farms is the second half of Cuba's farming successes. Cuban urban farms have shown that farmers require more than profit to incentivize production, with the most straightforward and notable alternative incentive models being based on social recognition and pride. In her work *Cuban Urban Agriculture and the Challenge to Orthodox Western Economic Discourse*, Sharma outlines one of these incentive systems being used by the Cuban government, the Referencia system. She states: "In this system, agricultural units seek designations of municipal, provincial, or national reference, to be referenced as exemplary model units for others to work towards and replicate" (Sharma, 2021). Agricultural units achieve these designations by reaching their respective criteria. One such referenced agricultural unit Sharma describes is UBPC Organopónico Vivero Alamar, which produces 15 different fruits and vegetables and eggs and their seedlings for future sowing seasons (Sharma, 2021). By recognizing and giving pride to such agricultural units, the Referencia system ensures that the primary production driver is civil participation in the Cuban farming sector. Not only this, but by giving communities pride and giving other communities a goal to strive for, urban farming plays an additional

role in indoctrinating citizens into striving for more than just a profit motive.

Additionally, by putting food production in the hands of the community, the work is visibly and emotionally tied to the people who consume it, ensuring that the community is not alienated from the state but an active participant in the state's survival. Whether it be described as nationalism or patriotism, this phenomenon which grows from urban farms, shields the government from protests concerning food production, as people know that they are responsible for their well-being, with or without the US embargo. By doing so, the state has turned something as mundane as grocery shopping into a prevalent ideological tool that opposes American Capitalism.

In a purely Hegelian sense, Cuban Socialism's persistence into the 21st century poses itself as the primary antithesis to American Capitalism, even if it may not seem that way. Although Russia and China continue to be at the forefront of the news cycle, with both antagonists shaking their fists at the heroic West, what must be noted is that what is *not* said can be as powerful as what *is* said. Although Russia and China reflect modes of Capitalism as opposed to that of America, they are still modes of Capitalism, authoritarian or not. Cuba's place as an alien to Western conceptions of organization makes it so that the success of Cuban polycultural farming has been downplayed, if not rendered non-existent in orthodox economic discourse, as was discussed by Sharma. Instead, it is easier to see the adoption of polycultures when accompanied by a profit motive, as Akhsen et al.'s research show that diminishing cocoa production has driven farmers to find other avenues of income. Not only this, but by succeeding where the West expected Cuba to fail, its experiments with polycultural and participatory farming bolsters, develops, and spreads Socialist theory by promoting a palatable and eco-friendly version of Socialism through the works of Western scholars and media. This can be seen through the coverage of Cuba by popular Western outlets.

The Australian Institute of International Affairs published an analysis by Antony Murrell on the embargo, wherein he concludes, "Australia can do its part by continuing to join

in the chorus of states opposing the embargo. Safety in numbers means that doing so carries little risk of diplomatic blowback" (Murrel, 2022). Similarly, The Guardian's David Adler asked the question, "If communism is a failed system, then why not let it fail on its terms and let Cubans see for themselves the true face of their revolution? What is Marco Rubio so afraid of?" (Adler, 2022). These are just some of the most *recent* articles against the embargo, and the world continues to condemn its maintenance unanimously. Public sentiments toward the Cuban embargo globally continue to favour Cuba, and the truth is that Rubio (and America as a whole) have something to fear. By lifting the embargo, the US would recognize its failure and legitimize Cuba's successful resistance, becoming another foreign policy blow like Afghanistan or Vietnam. Cuba's development of urban farm systems into a burgeoning system of collective action has become fertile ground for the Socialist experiment. Apart from the initiatives discussed thus far, another is the usufruct of land for public use. In her work *Cuba's Informal Gardens*, Clouse describes these usufruct leases as allowing Cuban growers easy access to state-owned land parcels free of rent, allowing a claim of tenancy rights for 10 - 25 years, as well as on the crops produced on the land (Clouse, 2022). What usufruct offers land, including unused and underperforming parcels in urban environments, including vacant lots, land by roads and river corridors, and those protected for alternative development projects. By allowing the allocation of such land, usufruct allows agricultural entrepreneurs to innovate and develop upon existing farming techniques to increase the efficiency and value of the common land. This form of innovation, separated from the long-term monetization of a suitable public, forms the foundation of an ever-developing system of anti-capitalist incentives.

Clouse goes on to touch on Cuba's public land use policies, saying, "urban design interventions enable people to take control over spaces that they care about, have a measure of input on the shape and form of their cities, protest dominant paradigms, create something fresh, or communicate an idea" (Clouse, 2022). By channelling public discontent into these constructive projects, the government can circumvent addressing protesters in the streets by allowing

them to make the changes they wish to see. Space hijacking, the process by which individuals seize land, is driven by campaigns to transform unused spaces into more appealing community areas, which grows a community's attachment to its geography and gives residents a place they perceive as theirs. Although such spaces do not necessarily have to be for growing food, Clouse notes that efforts to grow food happened organically (pun intended), perhaps representing a form of constructive rebellion (Clouse, 2022). Having the Cuban government embrace this counter-cultural movement as its own, and it could capitalize on a dissatisfied public and turn it into a suitable apparatus by which societal development came both from top-down and bottom-up forces.

Moreover, Clouse suggests that Cuba's adoption of these policies shows a more significant desire globally for similar systems. She states, "like defiant gardening, this form of agricultural engagement is both under-represented in the literature on urban farming and also perceived to be a fringe form of landscape design engagement, even though worldwide interest demonstrated through visible evidence of participation" (Clouse, 2022). Such a desire for public engagement in the community, separate from the monetary incentive, shows the power Cuba's Socialism could wield if the embargo were lifted. The effectiveness of these policies shows its antithesis to American Capitalism. To that end, it can be seen how the farming techniques Cuba has developed in tandem with public land use not only ensured the stability of the Castro regime but also posed a unique threat to America through its ideological resistance.

Cuban Socialism's resilience under the pressures of the American embargo has led to several successes during a time of strife. By developing and implementing over 60 years an alternative to Western farming techniques, it continues to weather out the American storm and threaten Western Capitalist hegemony. Research into the feasibility of polycultural farming techniques compared to the traditional monocultural system has shown its efficiency and promise in studies such as those done with Indonesian cocoa farmers and their incomes. Historically, although many cultures have used polycultural farming techniques before Cuba, Western imperialism's standardization of

monocultural farming ensured the hegemony of such extraordinary powers, including America's intervention in Central American markets like Nicaragua and Guatemala. Cuba's ability to reform itself after the collapse of the Soviet Union saw the island nation become a more participatory and successful example of Socialism under extreme pressure. However, its successes did not purely stem from adopting polycultures but also through grass-roots and cooperative efforts to maintain a dialogue between the government and the people. Economically, this saved the nation and, ideologically, united it. By successfully synthesizing a non-monetary incentive which united the individual's goals with the government's, Cuba has made itself the ideological antithesis of America. Although the embargo still stands, the global community remains behind the island nation, and the desire to adopt similar participatory and eco-friendly systems continues to grow worldwide. For these reasons, America cannot lift the embargo, for it may mistakenly do the right thing and stop the suffering of countless people for the sake of a bygone ideal.

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