

Cuba's Agricultural Sector. By *José Alvarez*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004. xxvi + 306 pp. Tables, figures, appendix, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$75.00. ISBN: 0-8130-2754-3.

Reviewed by Ariel Ortiz Bobea

*Cuba's Agricultural Sector* is an insightful and coherent book that tackles a wide variety of topics in order to analyze the evolution of Cuban agricultural and food policies since the 1959 revolution. Needless to say, it is unusual to find balanced perspectives about Cuban agriculture. Except for a few details, Alvarez has succeeded in bringing us a fairly objective diagnosis of this sector, and his work deserves close attention.

This volume is not a history of Cuban agriculture; rather, it is a study of agricultural policies and their results. It clearly demonstrates the inefficiency in Cuba's centrally planned agricultural sector and highlights the limits of the recent economic reforms that took place during the "Special Period" following the fall of the Berlin Wall. The work will be of interest to professionals in a variety of fields, including Caribbean studies, comparative public policy, and agricultural history. The study includes comparative information about foreign investments in agriculture during prerevolutionary times and following the recent economic opening of the 1990s.

The book is well documented and relies on relevant charts and figures drawn from a variety of sources, including official and unofficial as well as local and foreign sources. The use of statistics is an asset, although making at times ponderous reading. The book is thematically rather than chronologically organized, which forces the reader to go back and forth in time.

The first section traces the historical trajectory of Cuban agriculture from the pre-1959 situation to the the 1990s. Making careful use of statistics, Alvarez counters the idealistic vision of some scholars about Fulgencio Batista's period, depicting a corrupt state, the dominance of *latifundia* (very large estates based on sugar monoculture), and the resulting poverty of the rural masses. He argues that Cuba's dependence on the sugar sector (and therefore its vulnerability to world price fluctuations), together with the lack of crop diversification, presented an economic challenge to the new socialist regime.

Nevertheless, the policies of the new leadership were based on *ideological* rather than *practical* criteria.

Alvarez pays considerable attention to a critical aspect of the Cuban revolution's impact on agriculture: the promotion of large-scale, centrally planned farms and cooperatives, rather than reliance on individual or "dispersed" farms. In 1962, Fidel Castro stated that the "division of the *latifundios* could have destroyed the revolution" (p. 32). This certainly explains why the 1959 agrarian reform, designed to give "land to the tiller," was less radical than expected. Alvarez argues that the goal was to establish state farms based on the socialist model, regardless of their pertinence to Cuba. Indeed, the Soviet *sovkhozian* and *kolkhozian* models had already become the highest ideological form of socialist agriculture. The rejection of the individual-farmer model led to the glorification and implementation of "superior forms of production," such as state-controlled cooperatives in which farmers would putatively achieve economies of scale.

However, Alvarez shows that individual Cuban farmers—despite relative isolation and lack of public support—outperform the highly subsidized state sectors in producing most crops. He also points out the ways that individual farmers are able to respond to market incentives and increase production, even with narrow market opportunities. His general observation is that recently liberalized policies haven't changed productivity much: the higher the level of state intervention, the less productive the agricultural units.

In his discussion of the failures of Cuban agriculture, Alvarez refers to recent field research, but regrettably not to the theoretical debate within socialist agricultural models. The German Marxist economist Karl Kautsky praised large-scale farms in his *Agrarian Question* (1899), while Russian Marxist agronomist Alexander Chayanov argued for an agricultural sector formed by individual farmers in his *Theory of the Peasant Economy* (1925). Alvarez's conclusions clearly support Chayanov's line of thinking.

In the second and third sections, Alvarez analyzes specific changes in agricultural and food policies after the fall of the U.S.S.R. Soviet subsidies disappeared even as the U.S. tightened commercial sanctions against Cuba in order to undermine the socialist regime. The Cuban leadership responded to these setbacks by opening the country to foreign investments, establishing agricultural markets (*Mercados Agropecuarios*), and

dividing up the large, inefficient state farms into “basic units of cooperative production,” a euphemism for state-controlled production cooperatives. Although he points out the successes of some reforms, he argues that remaining obstacles (such as *acopio*, the state production and procurement agency, and restrictions on which crops can be sold in the agricultural markets) minimize the opportunities offered by these changes.

Although this is a serious and important study, at times Alvarez falls into some misleading comparisons and generalizations. For example, he asserts that Cuba and Florida are comparable: “both areas have similar production patterns, and both have invested heavily in agriculture. In addition, Cuba has much better soil and climate than Florida for agriculture” (p. 54). Yet this assertion privileges similarities of climate while ignoring differences in agriculture and public policy that long predated the Cuban revolution. Elsewhere Alvarez notes: “if one lists the food products that have been rationed since 1962, it becomes evident that almost all of them were in abundance before the 1959 revolution and were produced domestically” (p. 138). However, this assumption is made without any supporting data and overlooks the ideological factor in the implementation of the rationing system. Nevertheless, these are minor problems in an otherwise consistent study.

The last section is a reflection on the future of Cuban agriculture. Based on his previous analysis, Alvarez advocates a gradual transition from the current centrally planned system to a more market-oriented economy that realizes the goal of creating a “socialist market economy.” He argues that an increase in productivity could be reached through “the privatization of the means of production, including inputs and distribution” (p. 222) without necessarily abandoning the goals of equal distribution of goods. Alvarez agrees with several scholars that the Cuban government should play a vital role in creating markets by guaranteeing contracts and building the institutional base to foster foreign and national investment in the sector. Rather than making reprisals, he urges the Cuban government to experiment with the recent and spontaneous emergence of peasant initiatives, such as the National Alliance of Independent Farmers of Cuba (ANAIC), a Cuban nongovernmental organization that supports and articulates peasant proposals and suggests the “elimination of all control measures that [hinder] the commercialization and movement of agricultural products from the countryside to the cities” (p. 201).

Alvarez is not a free-trade partisan. He is a supporter of a Cuban agriculture made more efficient by accentuating a market orientation. *Cuba's Agricultural Sector* is a carefully documented plea for a more rational agricultural sector that permits individual initiative and ends the massive waste of resources caused by policies based on ideology.

*Ariel Ortiz Bobea is an agroeconomist specializing in rural and agricultural development and an advisor for the Falconbridge foundation. He has conducted field research in postsocialist Ethiopia, and he currently works as a consultant in rural and agricultural development in the Dominican Republic.*