

The Avery Diet: The Hudson Institute's Misinformation Campaign Against Cuban Agriculture

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An article written by Dennis Avery, "Cubans Starve on Diet of Lies," was reproduced around the internet in April of this year.¹ Avery is the director of the Center for Global Food Issues at the Hudson Institute, a notorious Right-wing think tank. The financial backers of the Hudson Institute include major agribusiness (e.g. Archer Daniels Midland, ConAgra, Cargill), biotech and pesticide manufacturers (e.g. American Cyanamid, Ciba-Geigy, Monsanto, Syngenta). Avery is a veteran of the State Department and the U.S.D.A. He is a well-known pro-industry pundit, and is an outspoken supporter of genetically-engineered crops, pesticides, food irradiation, industrial farming, and free trade, as well as a long-time critic of organic farming. He famously authored the book *Saving the Planet With Pesticides and Plastic: The Environmental Triumph of High-Yield Farming* (2000).

His article begins with the following phrases:

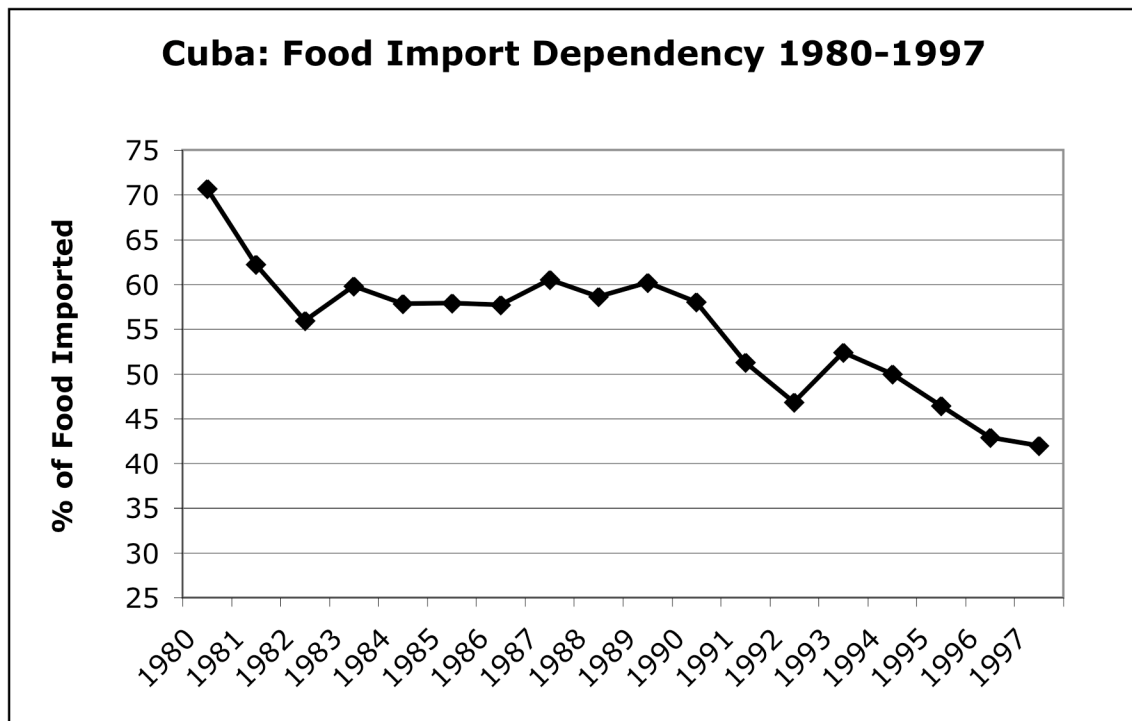
"The Cubans told the world they had heroically learned to feed themselves without fuel or farm chemicals after their Soviet subsidies collapsed in the early 1990s. They bragged about their "peasant cooperatives," their biopesticides and organic fertilizers. They heralded their earthworm culture and the predator wasps they unleashed on destructive caterpillars. They boasted about the heroic ox teams they had trained to replace tractors. Organic activists all over the world swooned. Now, a senior Ministry of Agriculture official has admitted in the Cuban press that 84 percent of Cuba's current food consumption is imported, according to our agricultural attaché in Havana. The organic success was all a lie—a great, gaudy,

¹ For example, <http://www.cgfi.org/2009/04/02/cubans-starve-on-diet-of-lies-by-dennis-t-avery/>

Communist-style Big Lie of the type that dictators behind the Iron Curtain routinely used throughout the Cold War to hornswoggle the Free World."

Despite the notably bombastic and un-scientific language, his claims deserve examination and rebuttal. He does not cite a source for the 84% figure. Nevertheless, it has been widely reported in the media that Megalys Calvo, Vice Minister of the Economy and Planning Ministry, said in February of 2007 that 84% of items "in the basic food basket" at that time were imported.² However, we believe these percentages represent only the food that is distributed through regulated government channels by means of a ration card. Overall data show that Cuba's food import dependency has been dropping for decades, despite brief upturns due to natural and human-made disasters.

The best time series available on Cuban food import dependency is summarized in the following graph:



Data source: Alvarez, 2004 (data from FAO)

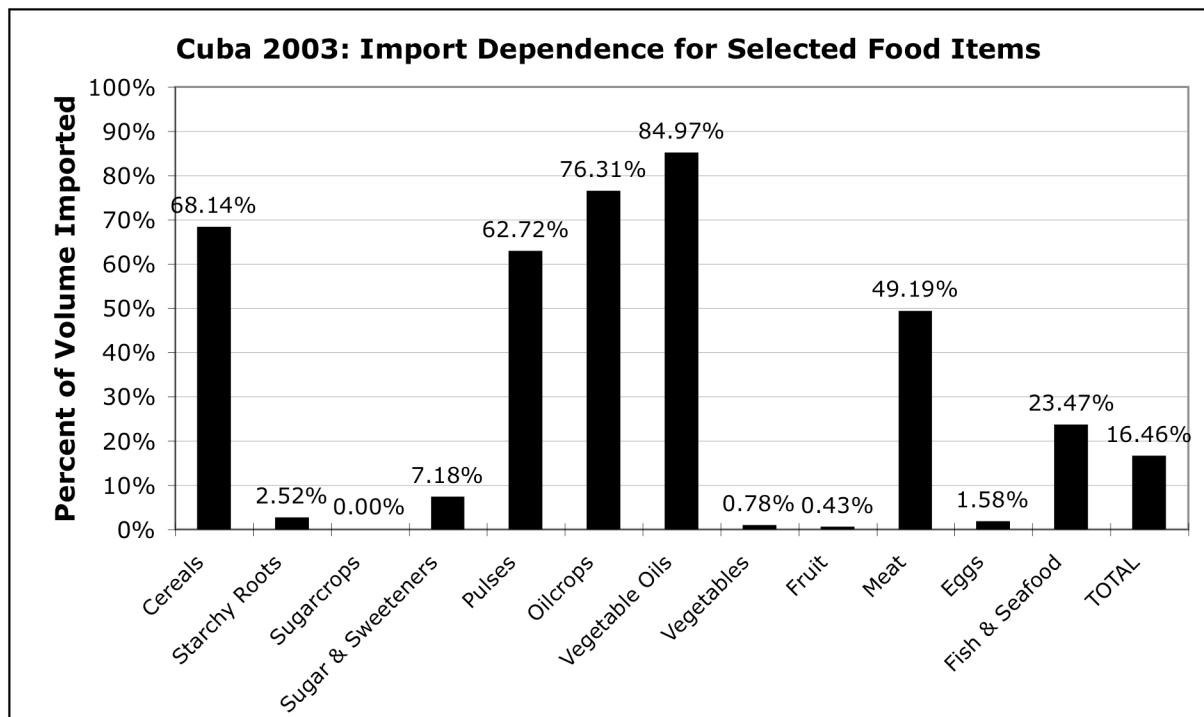
One can see that Cuba's food import dependence actually declined between 1980 and 1997, aside from a spike in the early 1990s, when trade relations with the former Socialist Bloc collapsed.

² For example:

http://www.exonline.com.mx/diario/noticia/dinero/economia/preven_mejora_economica_en_cuba_con_nuevo_regimen/138140

To be fair to Cuba, this should be compared to general tendencies around the world. When Cuba faced the shock of lost trade relations in the early 1990s, food production initially collapsed due to the loss of imported fertilizer, pesticides, tractors, parts, petroleum, etc. The situation was so bad that Cuba posted the *worst* mark in all of Latin America and the Caribbean in terms of the annual rate of growth of per capital food production (-5.1% for the period from 1986 through 1995, against a regional average of -0.2%). But Cuba rapidly re-oriented its agriculture to depend less on imported chemical inputs, becoming a world-class case of ecological agriculture, as has been documented by the present and other authors (see for example, Funes et al., 2002). This was such a successful turnaround that Cuba rebounded to show the *best* performance in all of Latin America and the Caribbean over the following time period, a remarkable rate of 4.2% annual growth in per capita food production from 1996 through 2005 (the most recent year for which statistics are available), a period in which the regional average was exactly 0.0% (FAO, 2006). That still wasn't enough to transform Cuba from a net food importer to a net exporter, as the gap was too large to overcome. However 23 other countries in the region were also net food importers (FAO, 2006), as food dependency is actually the norm for developing countries, a fact which Avery conveniently fails to mention.

Unfortunately this time series for Cuban import dependency does not contain very recent data. The *Food Balance Sheet* of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations offer us a more recent glimpse, in this case for 2003, the most recent year for which they have complete data for Cuba:



Data source: FAO Food Balance Sheet, Cuba, 2003,
<http://faostat.fao.org/site/368/DesktopDefault.aspx?PageID=368>

This reveals a much more nuanced view of Cuba's agricultural strengths and weaknesses after more than a decade of technological bias toward ecological farming techniques. Great successes have clearly been achieved in root crops, a staple of the Cuban diet, and in sugar and other sweeteners, vegetables, fruit, eggs, and seafood. Meat is an intermediate case, while large amounts of cooking oil, cereals and legumes (principally rice for human consumption, and corn and soybeans for livestock) continue to be imported. The same is true for powdered milk, which does not appear on the graph. Total import dependency, however, is a mere 16%, ironically the exact inverse of the 84% figure cited by Avery. Is it possible he inadvertently reversed his figures?

To be fair to him, anecdotal evidence gleaned by the authors on recent trips to Cuba does reveal a probable deterioration of this situation. To the best of our knowledge, after being hit by three hurricanes last year, Cuba imported 55% of the *total* food that it consumes (unofficial figures). There is also the more insidious effect of food imports from the U.S. under the humanitarian food purchase loophole in the trade embargo. It seems that the Cuban government at some point made a political decision to try to enlist support in the U.S. against the trade embargo and against possible military actions toward the island, by purchasing increasingly large and expensive amounts of essentially unneeded food products from American corporations. These growing imports have in recent years depressed national production in Cuba, something which President Raul Castro has stated that he is determined to address.

A Different View of Cuba Agriculture

In our view, Avery has made a scurrilous attempt to discredit the heroic attempts of the Cuban people to reach food sovereignty in the midst of an inhumane US trade embargo, and after the collapse of imports of petroleum, agrochemicals and machinery from the Soviet bloc. Top agricultural Cuban researchers reported in the book *Sustainable Agriculture and Resistance: Transforming Food Production in Cuba* (Funes et al., 2002) how the island was unable to import either food or materials needed for conventional agriculture and thus turned inward to self-reliance. Sustainable agriculture, organic farming, urban gardens, smaller farms, animal traction, and biological pest control all became part of the new Cuban agriculture.

Agroecological farming is growing and becoming stronger in Cuba. 100,000 families—almost half the population of independent small farmers in Cuba—who are members of ANAP (Cuba's small farmers association), practice agroecological diversification methods in their farms producing much more food per hectare than on commercial, industrial agriculture farms. These family farmers, many of whom are part of the *Campesino a Campesino* (farmer-to-farmer) movement, produce over 65% of the country's food, on only 25% of the land.

Data from such Cuban experiences corroborate research that shows that small farms are much more productive than large farms if total output is considered rather than yield from a single crop. ANAP is giving particular attention to the active participation of small

farmers in the process of technological innovation and dissemination through Farmer to Farmer models that focus on sharing experiences, strengthening local research and problem-solving capacities. As this process advances, more small farmers join this agroecological revolution (the government now is giving up to 13.5 hectares to families interested in becoming farmers: so far there are 100,000 petitions for this land), and the goal is to reach 1.5 million hectares under agroecological management, enough to make the island food sovereign. These developments were corroborated on recent fact-finding visits to Cuba carried out by Altieri and Rosset, where they visited farms in 10 provinces, and talked to hundreds of farmers, agricultural scientists and policy makers.

Cuba's achievements in urban agriculture have also grown and are truly remarkable: 383,000 urban farms, covering 50 thousand hectares of otherwise unused land and producing more than 1.5 million tons of vegetables (top urban farms reach a yield of 20 kgs per square meter of edible plant material using no synthetic chemicals) enough to supply 70% or more of all the fresh vegetables in cities such as Havana, Villa Clara and others. No other country in the world has achieved this level of success with a form of agriculture that reduces food miles, energy use, and effectively closes local production and consumption cycles.

Yes Cuba imports food, as do most other countries in the world. But does this mean that Cuba's agroecological model is on the verge of collapse and that all reports praising Cuba's agroecological achievements are a "Big Lie" as Avery asserts? It is impressive that Cuba has been able to maintain an acceptable level of food self sufficiency despite being the country perhaps hardest hit in the world by climate change, with 3 major hurricanes just last year. In fact, the very prevalence of complex and diversified cropping systems managed by small farmers has been of key importance to the stability of Cuban agriculture and the food security of the island, as structurally diverse farms maintain acceptable productivity levels in the midst of stressful climatic conditions.

As already mentioned, what country does not import part of their food supplies? Let's examine the US industrial agricultural model that Avery exalts as so efficient because only 2% of the population is engaged in food production. Such "efficiency" was reached because four million farms have disappeared in the United States in the last 50 years. Food imports have been steadily rising for years. According to USDA (<http://health.usnews.com/usnews/health/healthday/080115/us-food-safety-the-import-alarm-keeps-sounding.htm>, <http://www.ca.uky.edu/AGC/NEWS/2005/Feb/imports.htm>), food imports to the United States have almost doubled in the past decade, from \$36 billion in 1997 to more than \$70 billion in 2007. In 2008 the U.S. imported more agricultural goods than it exported in June and August, the first monthly trade deficits since 1986, a situation that has slowly been aggravated by the economic recession and the millions of acres devoted to biofuels in the Farm Belt. Let's add to these figures the fact that there are 36.2 million hungry or food-insecure Americans; 50,000 emergency food sites visited annually by 10% of the country's population; 30 million people receiving food stamps (total food stamp spending for 2006 was \$32.8 billion). Farm bankruptcies, foreclosures and forced evictions have driven the farm population to less than 2% of the population or about 2.128 million farms. Tragically, in the USA there are more prisoners

than farmers. In today's economic downturn, farmers face unsustainable levels of debt and small and mid-sized farms are threatened with disappearance in one or two decades, a tragedy of economic, social and ecological dimensions. As in Cuba, family farms in the USA could constitute the cornerstone of the country's food sovereignty and economic development. This is the truth that has been hidden from the US public by Avery and his associates, and *their* lies leave out the likelihood that the situation will get worse. In these times of climate change, uncertain energy prices and financial crisis, surely the USA could learn much from Cuba regarding how to achieve a more energy efficient, sustainable, socially just and resilient agriculture.

Citations

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