



Making it in Havana, one harvest at a time

Sowing Change *The Making of Havana's Urban Agriculture*

ADRIANA PREMAT

Following the dissolution of the Soviet bloc, Cuba found itself struggling to find its place in a new geopolitical context, while dealing with an unprecedented agricultural and food crisis that experts feel foreshadows the future of many countries across the globe. *Sowing Change* traces the evolution of the officially endorsed urban agriculture movement in the capital city of Havana, considering its political significance for the Cuban government and its import for transnational actors in the field of sustainable development. But the analysis does not stop at official understandings and representations of this movement. Rather, it brings into focus the perspectives of small-scale urban farmers—real men and women who live at the conceptual margins of the Cuban economy and struggle to balance personal needs and dreams with political ideals and government expectations, in a context where those very ideals and expectations continually shift. *Sowing Change* is a timely reflection on the changing agricultural, urban, and power landscapes of post-Soviet Cuba that, finally, queries common presumptions about this socialist nation and its now famous urban agriculture experience.

“Adriana Premat highlights and analyzes a transformative moment in the Cuban Revolution that is not nearly so well known or examined as the Cuban health or educational campaigns. For many outside Cuba, the mobilization of urban Cubans to dedicate themselves to agriculture began and ended with the volunteer work brigades of the 1960s that planted a green belt around Havana. However, with this wonderful study, based on more than a decade of in-depth fieldwork, Premat takes us inside Havana’s urban agricultural movement, showing us how the large-scale state enterprises increasingly gave way to smaller units of agricultural production and finally, with the economic crisis euphemistically known as the ‘Special Period’ that followed the fall of the Soviet Union, to a system of household self-provisioning through cultivation of food crops like cassava, avocados, and plantains along with the keeping of pigs, chickens, and rabbits for the table.

“In a beautifully written book, Premat also details the way that Havana’s urban agricultural movement came to enjoy widespread support from foreign NGOs even as it excited the imaginations and expectations of those who saw in this project—born of necessity—an opportunity to ‘green’ the city by producing not only food, but also a healthier urban physical and social environment.

“Premat’s insightful work captures the many contradictions of this program as the line between the city and the countryside was increasingly redefined by the growth of farming and animal husbandry in the heart of Havana. She assesses the impact of policy making from above and the involvement of foreign aid workers from outside, all the while bringing the reader into the homes, orchards, gardens, chicken coops, pig pens, and local meeting halls of the urban farmers as they test models of cooperation and socialism that were often in contradiction with the dollarization of the economy and the Cuban state’s campaign to attract foreign investment.”

—Judith Adler Hellman, York University, author of *The World of Mexican Migrants*

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Photo above:
Courtesy of the author

Adriana Premat is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at the University of Western Ontario.

“This is an outstanding book. . . . A methodological model in its use of a specific issue, urban agriculture, to provide rich insight into state/citizen/global relationships in contemporary Cuba. The author’s clear, unpretentious writing makes such insight accessible to readers ranging from undergraduate students to academic and policy specialists.”

—Richard Tardanico, Florida International University, coeditor of *Poverty or Development*



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