2 The First Decade

2.1 AGRICULTURE BEFORE THE REVOLUTION

Although just over half the population lived in urban centres by 1959, Cuba before the revolution was an eminently agrarian country. Agriculture as such accounted for about a quarter of national income and employed some 40 per cent of the workforce. But the most important branches of industry were also firmly rooted in farming.¹

Sugar in particular, whose production straddles both industry and agriculture, overshadowed the economy to an impressive and indeed unwelcome degree, accounting for about 80 per cent of the value of exports and more than a quarter of national income.² On the ups and downs of international sugar prices and domestic production levels hung the well-being of the economy at large.

An agrarian economy, then. But Cuba’s was not a peasant society. Of the rural workforce as a whole, fully 60.6 per cent were wage labourers (see Table 2.1) – the overwhelming majority of them seasonal labourers who sought employment as cane-cutters during the sugar harvest or *zafra*.³ Within Latin America only Chile had a higher proportion of wage labourers among its rural workforce at the time. And many of those classed as urban industrial workers – the labour force of the sugar mills – actually lived in small semi-rural company towns (*bateyes*) where the production demands of their trade ensured lifelong proximity to the countryside.

Yet the degree of ‘proletarianisation’ should not be overstated. It has been pointed out that a significant proportion of those classified as agricultural wage-workers in Table 2.1 had access to a plot of land.⁴ These plots rarely exceeded 2 hectares and were typically between 0.25 and 1 hectare. To reflect the ambiguity of their class status, such wage-workers have been described as ‘semi-proletarians’ or alternatively ‘semi-peasants’. Although this qualification applied to some extent to many other Third World countries, the incidence of wage labour in the pre-revolutionary Cuban countryside was quite unusually high.
Labour and Development in Rural Cuba

\textbf{TABLE 2.1} \textit{Rural employment, 1953 (thousands)}

\begin{tabular}{|l|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
 & Men & Women & total & \% \\
\hline
Farmers and livestock breeders & & & & \\
farmers & 220.5 & 1.5 & 221.9 & 27.5 \\
livestock breeders & 216.5 & 1.4 & 217.9 & \\
 & 4.0 & 0.0 & 4.0 & \\
Agricultural workers & & & & \\
administrators, foremen & 554.9 & 10.1 & 564.9 & 70.0 \\
wage workers & 8.8 & 0.4 & 9.2 & 1.1 \\
unwaged family labour$^2$ & 480.5 & 8.5 & 489.0 & 60.6 \\
 & 65.5 & 1.2 & 66.7 & 8.3 \\
Others$^3$ & 20.3 & 0.3 & 20.7 & 2.5 \\
Total & 795.7 & 11.8 & 807.5 & 100.0 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}

1 Figures in this column are prone to be a gross underestimate. The census results reflect only the 'primary' occupation. Many women who were active for part of the year were registered as 'housewives'.

2 Refers generally to the offspring of peasant farmers employed on land rented or owned by their fathers.

3 Fishermen, hunters, trappers, forestry workers, gardeners.


Another striking feature of the rural scene, though one that was less singular to Cuba, was the endemic un- and underemployment. While a highly unequal pattern of land distribution, exacerbated by a rapid population growth of 2.3 per cent per annum, forced ever-growing numbers on to the labour market, the strong seasonal variations in the demand for labour, imposed by the sugar cycle, meant that the majority of rural workers faced unemployment during the ‘dead season’ (tiempo muerto). In the 1956–7 season, 8–11 per cent of the workforce was idle at any given point during the peak of the zafra, rising to 15–21 per cent during the slack season for an overall average of 16.4 per cent.\textsuperscript{5} Add to this a further estimated 13.8 per cent underemployed and we see that nearly one-third were partially or wholly jobless.\textsuperscript{6}

\subsection*{2.1.1 Land ownership}

Land ownership was extremely concentrated. In 1945, the date of the last agricultural census before the revolution (Table 2.2), the large landlords accounted for only 2.8 per cent of all farms, yet their holdings amounted to 57 per cent of the total. At the other end of the