

Lecture 11
Agricultural Development
in Tropical America

Cuba

Until 1900 the island was in an era of hacienda, only few plantations.

A modern plantation developed at the end of the Colonial period.

The modern plantation reached its highest development in preCastro Cuba based on foreign capital (US) and the availability of the US market for sugar.

In 1900 after the Spanish-American war, economic and political control was strongly influenced by the US because of the opportunity of the great market nearby.

With technical and corporate expertise plus a billion dollars to invest, the situation in Cuba changed rapidly.

Land tenure changed (land prices rose rapidly) and small owners were squeezed out to become hired hands on specialized sugar plantations which became field factories.

One half of all land was devoted to sugar (and still is).

Cuba became a convenient source of tropical goods for the US and Cuba became a buyer of US goods.

The political situation was completely corrupt.

After the Castro revolution the US was replaced by the Soviet Union and Cuba became a pawn in the cold war.

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From the Cuban point of view there were certain disadvantages to the rise of the modern plantation system.

All manufactured goods came from the US, packaged and expensive—a kind of economic colonialism and sugar was somewhat restricted with quotas to support the irrigated beet sugar industry in the West and the sugar industry in Louisiana and Florida.

In the 1930s and 1940s, canned Hawaiian pineapple sold in Cuba but no local pineapple was grown.

The pressures to buy American goods was thought to retard industrialization.

Large land holdings (*latifundia*) developed on all the good land but productive capacity was under control of a few corporations.

Following the Castro revolution in 1959, attempts at industrialization failed and Cuba attuned to sugar production, was still dependent on foreign purchase.

The middle class all migrated to Florida and this group (virulently anti-Castro) still has strong political influence that has prevented a *détente* between Cuba and the US.

Despite the fall of the Soviet system, Castro still remains in control.

Agriculture is still almost a monoculture with sugar and tobacco but Cuba has become self-sufficient for its own food.

At one time trade was almost entirely with Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

The present embargo against Cuba by the US has severely harmed the economy. Embargo is supported by Cuban exiles in Florida which remain a powerful political force in this swing state.

At the present time Cuba seems to be drifting toward impoverishment.

However, until recently, social services, especially in rural areas, were much better off and there had been a new pride with local ownership and feeling that at least Cubans controlled their own destiny.

The population of Cuba has been affected by migration of the upper and middle classes after the revolution as well as the export of the criminal population (boat people) to Florida.

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Jamaica

The economy of Jamaica was more developed than Cuba before the collapse of the sugar industry.

Jamaica was considered one of the “jewels” of the West Indies.

Some recovery from the 1800 collapse but sugar, well suited to the area, is still important and under centralized control with a modern plantation operation.

Jamaica had enjoyed some protection in the British market and their bananas are still exported to England.

Tourism has greatly increased in the northern area based on beaches and air travel which made Jamaica within easy reach of many in the eastern United States.

However Jamaica has had many social problems which have dampened the tourist industry.

Deposits of Bauxite, a source of aluminum, have been developed; yet average per capita income is still low.

Population is expanding rapidly with great strain on social services and hampering progress.

Bananas have been the greatest tropical export.

The banana industry started in Jamaica in 1870 when the American trader, Lorenzo Baker, picked up a cargo of banana, and took them to the Northeast (Jersey City, NJ) and sold them at a good profit.

Baker sailed back and urged banana planting which was well received because Jamaica was in the economic doldrums.

Baker started the banana trade which developed into the large United Fruit Company on the basis of the famous cultivar ‘Gros Michel’ (Big Mike), which has large stems and was a good shipper.

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Bananas were grown in the humid northeastern part of the island receiving the trade winds.

The industry developed with small land holders and was adapted because no processing is required and banana can be interplanted with sustenance crops.

In 1880 the export value rose until it surpassed sugar.

Banana remained major export crop until the 1940s.

However Jamaican bananas suffered a number of problems:

- Hurricanes generated in North Atlantic**
- Serious banana diseases**
(Panama wilt and Sigatoka leaf spot)

In the second world war, transport decreased and the banana industry went down hill and almost disappeared.

The banana industry moved to Costa Rica, Honduras, and more recently to Ecuador.

Central America

Typically an *Af* climate with a short dry season.

Here banana became a commodity product.

Large scale plantations developed in the late 1890s.

There were large tracts of unoccupied land and low population because the bulk of the population were centered in the mountains.

The United Fruit Company basically a shipping company established agricultural industries because of the proximity to the great markets of the eastern US.

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The industries developed on the lowland plains (British Honduras to Panama).

Small shipments had begun in the 1870s with the beginning of railroads; bananas plantings were encouraged in order to get a product to ship.

In the 1900s vast development of Central America occurred with the development of the Panama canal; land was cleared, railroads were developed and towns and shipping centers were established.

Labor was imported particularly from Jamaica.

The entire Caribbean coast developed with the banana boom.

The only country which failed to develop into a Banana Republic was San Salvador which didn't have an Atlantic port.

By the 1920s Panama disease set in and production declined; sigatoka followed.

Banana producers shifted from the Atlanta to the Pacific coast.

Because costs were high, and winds were severe many plantations were abandoned.

However the Pacific side is leeward to the trades and is dryer, consequently irrigation was required.

Panama disease eventually moved to the Pacific coast.

Production shifted back to the Atlantic side where flooding was used to control Panama disease.

However, the disease was only conquered with a change in cultivars from 'Gros Michel' to the Panama wilt-resistant 'Valery'.

'Valery' had more tender fruit then 'Gros Michel' which induced a change from stem shipment to box shipment.

Innovations included large refrigerated banana boats and fishy back trailers.

However labor problems for United Fruit were a constant problem.

This brought about a shift to Ecuador and required passage through the Panama canal to reach the East Coast of the US; but shipping was more direct to California as well as Japan.

There were fewer hurricanes in the equatorial zone and at first disease was not a problem.

At the present time banana production is one of the marvels of the horticultural world of the tropics.

Bananas with excellent quality are available year round throughout the world at relatively low prices.
