

AOC's Gardening Advice Channels Mao

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) wants to extend identity politics to vegetables. For Ocasio-Cortez, some vegetables are too “colonial” to grow.

Community gardens [are a component](#) of the Green New Deal, and having projects “make sense in a cultural context” is important, says Ocasio-Cortez.

Cauliflower and Yuca

If “communities of color” are “resistant to certain environmentalist movements,” perhaps it’s because they are concerned about taxes and jobs? The reason Ocasio-Cortez gives is far different:

When someone says that it’s too hard to do a green space that grows yuca instead of...cauliflower or something, what you’re doing is that you’re taking a colonial approach to environmentalism.

Yuca grows best in hot, dry regions. In many areas of the United States, including her home district of New York City, it would be an enormous challenge to grow yuca. I may like grapefruits, but I wouldn’t plant a grapefruit tree in the cold climate where I live.

Cauliflower [is used in](#) many Caribbean cuisines. Only Ocasio-Cortez knows why some vegetables are “colonial.”

Yuca is a starchy root vegetable with over [double the amount of carbohydrates](#) in a potato. If Ocasio-Cortez cares about the obesity and diabetes problems in her district, she may want to think again about her gardening advice.

What Hubris Leads To

Ocasio-Cortez is not the first member of Congress to offer inane advice. Yet she is fair game because she wants to use coercive force of government to remake the country in the image of her Democratic Socialist and Green New Deal programs.

We may laugh at Ocasio-Cortez's boundless hubris, but let's learn from history. Mao is perhaps history's most famous despot who was eager to dispense agricultural (along with much other) advice. The result? During his Great Leap Forward (1958-1962), at least 45 million lost their lives through starvation, neglect, and violence.

Mao was a despot who had the power of the Chinese military power behind him to enforce his edicts; Ocasio-Cortez doesn't.

Today, some see Ocasio-Cortez as a [brilliant new voice](#) in politics. With enough support, she and her fellow Democratic Socialists might have the power they crave to command people's individual decisions. Ocasio-Cortez will never have absolute power, but she may gain enough power to do real harm.

In his book [The Fatal Conceit](#), F.A. Hayek warned of the "naïve mind that can conceive of order only as the product of

deliberate arrangement.” To such a mind, Hayek wrote,

it may seem absurd that in complex conditions order, and adaptation to the unknown, can be achieved more effectively by decentralizing decisions.

We are all naïve about many things; a dose of humility and respect for the rights of others keeps us out of trouble.

Mao’s “Gardening” Advice

In his book, [*Mao’s Great Famine*](#), historian Frank Dikötter explains the horrors of the Great Leap Forward. Mao was intent on dramatically increasing both industrial and agricultural production, and the Great Helmsman was sure he knew the way forward. Here are some of the agriculture “reforms” commanded by Mao.

Mao commanded the planting of more than one rice crop a year even though the weather didn’t support it:

Mao asked, on a visit to the provincial capital Changsha. “Why do the Hunan peasants still plant only one crop of rice a year?” After Zhou explained that the weather permitted only a single crop a year, Mao pointed out that Zhejiang was on the same latitude as Hunan and planted two crops of rice. “You are not even studying other experiences. That’s the trouble,” Mao continued.

Mao ordered deeper plowing of the soil and destroyed the topsoil in the process:

Deep ploughing was another revolutionary recipe meant to free the farmers from the capricious soil. The deeper the planting, the stronger the roots and the taller the stalk, or so ran the logic behind this experiment. “Use human waves, and turn every field over,” commanded Mao.

Goaded by cadres... villagers now and then burrowed through the earth to bedrock, destroying the topsoil.

Then Mao ordered a heavier concentration of seeds:

Explained Chairman Mao: "With company they grow easily, when they grow together they will be more comfortable"... Villagers, of course, knew better: they had tilled the land for generations, and knew how to care for a precious resource on which their livelihoods depended. Many were incredulous, some trying to reason with the cadres: "You plant the seedlings too closely, there is not enough breathing space between them, and then you add ten tonnes of fertiliser per field. It will suffocate them to death." But advice was ignored: "It's a new technique, you don't understand!"

Mao believed he could conquer nature, but nature had the last word. The killing of sparrows led to insect infestations, worsening the famine:

Sparrows were targeted because they ate grain seeds, depriving the people of the fruits of their labour. In what is one of the most bizarre and ecologically damaging episodes of the Great Leap Forward, the country was mobilised in an all-out war against the birds. Banging on drums, clashing pots or beating gongs, a giant din was raised to keep the sparrows flying till they were so exhausted that they simply dropped from the sky. Eggs were broken and nestlings destroyed; the birds were also shot out of the air. Timing was of the essence, as the entire country was made to march in lockstep in the battle against the enemy, making sure that the sparrows had nowhere to escape.

Farmers were organized into large communes with ignorant political cadres issuing capricious orders based on "little knowledge of agriculture."

In 1959 in Luokang commune a local leader decided to replace the existing crop with sweet potatoes on half of the available acreage, only to change his mind later and substitute the potatoes with peanuts. These were then torn out to make room for rice instead. The previous year the commune had tried deep ploughing, using vast concentrations of manpower on small strips of land to dig deep furrows, much of it by hand. Huge amounts of fertiliser were applied, in some cases up to 30 tonnes a hectare. It all came to nothing. In Kaiping county, Guangdong, thousands of villagers were repeatedly forced to plant a crop in the early spring of 1959 despite bitterly cold weather: the seeds froze on three occasions.

Agriculture was militarized:

The militia movement and a small corps of trained fighters brought military organisation to every commune. All over China farmers were roused from sleep at dawn at the sound of the bugle and filed into the canteen for a quick bowl of watery rice gruel. Whistles were blown to gather the workforce, which moved in military step to the fields, carrying banners and flags to the sound of marching songs. Loudspeakers sometimes blasted exhortations to work harder, or occasionally played revolutionary music. Party activists, local cadres and the militia enforced discipline, sometimes punishing underachievers with beatings.

“Every conceivable kind of nutrient” was used as fertilizer:

Animal and human waste was carried to the fields by endless rows of people, sometimes until deep into the night... Human waste extended to hair, and in some Guangdong villages women were forced to shave their heads to contribute fertiliser or face a ban from the canteen.

Then They Came for the Houses and Tools

The demand for higher yields meant houses were razed for their value as fertilizer:

But most of the time buildings made of mud and straw were torn down to provide nutrients for the soil. Walls of buildings where animals had lived and especially where they had urinated, such as stables, could provide useful fertiliser. At first old walls and abandoned huts were destroyed, but as the campaign gained momentum entire rows of houses were systematically razed to the ground, the mud bricks shattered and strewn across the fields.

Later, houses were wantonly destroyed to make room for new buildings that were never built:

Most quietly stood by, sometimes in tears, as the local leader walked past without uttering a word, simply lifting his finger to mark out a house for destruction. In Dianjiang county, Sichuan, a team of eleven people went around torching hundreds of straw huts. "Destroy Straw Huts in an Evening, Erect Residential Areas in Three Days, Build Communism in a Hundred Days" was the leading slogan. Some villages were emptied altogether, although somehow nobody quite managed to get beyond the destruction phase of the plan.

Pots and pans and farm implements were confiscated and melted down to be used in industrial production:

Many of the farming tools had been destroyed in the iron and steel campaign, labour was still diverted to building dams, and communal granaries in the people's communes were poorly managed. In Liantan, the model commune where a slogan praising the Great Leap Forward had been chiselled in the

mountains to welcome an inspection team, several thousand farmers were conscripted to deep-plough seven hectares during the autumn harvest; as nobody was available to collect the crop, some 500 tonnes of grain were abandoned in the fields.

As starvation spread, ersatz foods such as chlorella and wood pulp were promoted:

In China [chlorella, a form of algae] the watery slime was elevated to the status of miracle food during the famine. It could be cultivated and skimmed from swampy ponds, but more often than not it was grown in vats of human urine, the green stuff being scooped out, washed and cooked with rice.

Prisoners were used as guinea pigs. Besides the green plankton, which sickened the inmates, they were also fed sawdust and wood pulp. Bao Ruowang – also known as Jean Pasqualini, the author of a memoir about life in a Chinese labour camp – remembered how brown sheets of the stuff were ground into paper pulp and mixed with flour. Mass constipation followed, killing the weaker prisoners. But even in the cities the spread of substitute foods caused obstruction of the bowels or rupture of the sphincter.

Villagers “scavenged for carrion, rummaged through rubbish, scraped the bark off trees and in the end turned to mud to fill their stomachs”:

It was a vision of hell, as serried ranks of ghostly villagers queued up in front of deep pits, their shrivelled bodies pouring with sweat under the glare of the sun, waiting for their turn to scramble down the hole and carve out a few handfuls of the porcelain-white mud... Once eaten the soil acted like cement, drying out the stomach and absorbing all the moisture inside the intestinal tract.

A Final Caution

As the country starved, Mao opened a party meeting in the summer of 1959. The party leaders were not hungry. They “referred to the gathering as a ‘meeting of immortals’. Immortals lived far above mere humans, seated on the clouds of heaven, playfully gliding through the mist, unencumbered by earthly restraints.”

Propaganda insisted

the country had witnessed an unprecedentedly rich harvest in 1960, there was absolutely no famine and rumours to the contrary were slanderous.

Humanitarian offers of food aid were rebuffed. The contempt the leaders had for their own countrymen was as boundless as their hubris.

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