

**WHEN DISORDER IS THE ORDER:
CUBA DURING THE SPECIAL PERIOD**

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Abstract

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The fact that as of 2008 Castro had already succeeded in installing his brother as President and Prime Minister of Cuba -- and that in late 2010 he seemed poised to also hand over the final title of Head of the Communist Party of Cuba to Raul (Franks 2010) -- impresses the Revolution's supporters and appalls its opponents. How is it that socialist Cuba has endured beyond the existence of the Soviet system that shaped it? In this dissertation, I "bring people back in" (Eckstein 2004, 212) to answer this question. I focus on three specific parts of Cuban daily life—productive activity, consumption practices, and humor. Taken together, these areas of human activity provide a window into Cuban daily life and the complex relationship between citizens and the state that offer a more accurate portrayal of the relationship between Cubans and the socialist state than is often encountered, especially in popular media. This work demonstrates that many of the practices of ordinary Cubans during the Special Period and later can be seen as responses to new state policies, which were, themselves, responses to the country's sudden expulsion from Soviet economic support and insertion into the capitalist global economy. Focused mainly on mitigating the economic crisis, Cuban leaders were unable to anticipate or control most of the social transformations that the new laws and policies of the mid-1990s caused.

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CHAPTER 1

WHEN DISORDER IS THE ORDER: CUBA DURING THE SPECIAL PERIOD

Introduction

When Andres Oppenheimer published his critical expose of life in Cuba in 1993, he chose the title “Castro’s Final Hour.” This captured what many observers at the time believed to be true: given the sudden collapse of the USSR and the dire economic and political circumstances into which Cuba had plunged as a result, the end of both Castro and the Cuban Revolution were imminent (Oppenheimer 1993, Kapcia 2008b, 640). But as hindsight tells us, the “final hour” did not come. Castro did not step aside when the Soviet Union fell. In fact, his leadership remained constant until health problems caused him to begin shifting his power to his brother, Raul Castro in 2006, a few years after the worst of the economic crisis had subsided (Kapcia 2008a, 120). In response to the Cold War, Fidel Castro did not significantly change the socialist government’s structure, or even alter his political rhetoric. And no matter how bad conditions got, the people of Cuba didn’t rebel against the Revolution—during the 1990s and 2000s, there was only one significant incident of civil disorder, in Havana in 1994, which Castro ably diffused by engaging protesters and then loosening emigration restrictions (Eckstein and Barberia 2007, 268). To this day no reform movement has managed to take lasting hold of a significant portion of the island’s population.

The fact that as of 2008 Castro had already succeeded in installing his brother as President and Prime Minister of Cuba -- and that in late 2010 he seemed poised to also hand over the final title of Head of the Communist Party of Cuba to Raul (Franks 2010) -- impresses the Revolution’s supporters and appalls its opponents. How is it that socialist Cuba has endured beyond the existence of the Soviet system that shaped it? Isolated in an increasingly hostile hemisphere, how did Fidel Castro maintain his power for so long, and then manage to pass it down along family lines? To answer this, one must look not only at state policy and the international context, but also the role that ordinary Cuban people play in fostering the values and structures of Cuban socialism.

Unfortunately, much of the writing on Cuba is highly polemical and provides rather one-dimensional answers to questions like those above. Some accounts portray Cuban people as the satisfied beneficiaries of a perfectly just society. They are naturally willing to defend the socialist system and Castro’s leadership. This “literature of enthusiasm” peaked in the early 1960s and returned again in the 2000s (Kapcia 2008b, 628, 642). Other accounts posit that an oppressive regime holds down Cubans through violence that keeps existing structures in place. The epicenter of such writing is Miami, home to the largest group of Cuban immigrants, some of whom still strongly oppose the system they left behind. Depending on which account is considered, Cuban society is either perfectly egalitarian or rigidly hierarchical, its state economy

satisfies the needs of all or creates intense deprivation for many, and its education and medical systems are examples for the world or chimeras for the world media. So great are the contradictions between accounts, in fact, it is hard to believe people are speaking of the same island. Each side has refused to acknowledge the complexity of ordinary life during the Special Period, the name Cubans use for the era that began in September 1990 (García Molina 2005, 29), when the Soviet Union collapsed, and ended in 2004, when the GDP and other economic indicators had returned to pre-1989 levels (Núñez Sarmiento 2010). Instead of offering nuance, nearly everyone presents a highly selective view of Cuban life during this time that best shores up his or her political position.

The point of this dissertation, then, is two-fold. The first is to use ethnography to capture some aspects of ordinary life during the middle part of the Special Period (1999-2001). The second is to offer a more accurate portrayal of the relationship between Cubans and the socialist state than is often encountered, especially in popular media. While economic shifts and policy changes of the post-Soviet years have been well documented by Susan Eckstein (1994) and others (Bengelsdorf 1994, Brundenius 2002, Alvarez and Mattar 2004, Kapcia 2008b, García Molina 2005, Mesa-Lago 2003, Mesa-Lago 2007, Pérez-López 2005, Spadoni 2004a, Spadoni 2004b, Torres Vila and Pérez Rojas 1997), fewer have written about the profound changes in daily life that accompanied the economic shifts. This dissertation takes that task seriously, considering a detailed description of life in Cuba during the Special Period a worthwhile project in itself. In addition, only through understanding ordinary lives can one accurately explain the endurance of the Revolutionary government and evaluate its effects. As Eckstein writes, “Only by ‘bringing people back in’ to the analysis of state socialism can developments in Cuba (and, by implication, other states that restrict overt challenges to authority) be adequately understood” (2004, 212).

In this dissertation, I “bring people back in” with a focus on three specific parts of Cuban daily life—productive activity, consumption practices, and humor. Taken together, these areas of human activity provide a window into Cuban daily life and the complex relationship between citizens and the state. But it is important to note that the dissertation moves beyond description to analyze the relationship between ordinary people and the state. One thing is clear—the Cuban state endures not only because citizens obey its laws, internalize its norms, believe its leaders’ proclamations, and follow the life course laid out by its institutions in a consistent and reliable manner. Most Cubans violate socialist laws and values as often as they uphold them. The same Cuban citizen who steals from his workplace, sleeps through his shift, plans to emigrate or escape from the country, buys everything on the black market, tells Castro jokes, or trades sex for hard currency, will also march behind Castro at a government rally, attend the neighborhood committee meetings, and passionately defend aspects of the revolution to outsiders. This said, I argue that Cubans are not “faking it” when they operate within the norms and forms of the socialist state, nor are they exposing their “true selves” when they work against them, despite what some critics claim. In his consideration of Moscow in the late socialist period, Alexei Yurchak offers an eloquent analysis of this “as if” or “binary model” of socialist behavior, noting

that it has been produced “either outside of, or in retrospect to, socialism, in contexts dominated by antisocialist, nonsocialist, or postsocialist political, moral, and cultural agendas and truths” (Yurchak 2005, 6). In trying to describe the world as my Cuban friends saw it, as they lived it, I’ve come to realize that their lives had far more complexity than any strict binary can capture.

Methodology

To examine the connection between what happens on the ground in Cuba and the actions of the state and other global actors, I conducted vertically integrated ethnography in the city of Havana (Nader 1980). I used my residence in two neighborhoods – one where only the wealthy lived before the Revolution, the other where only the poorest once lived --as a pivot point to study Cuban production and consumption practices, as well as Cuban humor. The people I studied were economically, politically, and racially diverse, but all were resolutely urban. In a smaller city or rural area I would likely have encountered something very different than what I saw in Havana.

When Mona conducted her ethnographic research in rural Cuba in the late 1980s, she could claim that “no social anthropological studies have been conducted . . . since the work of Oscar Lewis and his team in the late 1960s” (1998, 1). At the time of my ethnographic research, which began in 2000 and lasted 18 months, I was one of a small group of social anthropologists from such countries as the United States, Canada, and Japan working within the city. Unlike Rosendahl, most of us used the opportunity afforded by the new international Cuban tourism industry to conduct ethnography in a more discreet way than she was able to in the 1980s. With more than 1.7 million tourists passing through Havana in 2000 (Mesa-Lago 2003, 106), a foreigner could live for months or years at a time and remain largely unnoticed by any state agency. As an anthropologist, my only institutional affiliation consisted of my dropping off a \$100 check every month at an office near the University of Havana, which may or may not have been necessary to keep current the stamp on my *carnet de identidad*, or identity card, which I, like Cubans, carried everywhere. Rosendahl, on the other hand, sought and received a much more robust state sanction for her anthropological study, which is quite possibly the only way that an anthropologist could have remained for an extended period in Cuba during that time, especially in a rural area. She recounts having been introduced to her informants by the Provincial Minister of Culture, and having been welcomed to town by the head of the local Communist Party (1998, 16-17). That was not my world.

Looking back on her research, Rosendahl somewhat naively reflects, “Only slowly did I come into contact with other people, some of whom were marginals. I do not think that my relationship with them was hampered by the fact that they knew I was also friendly with the leaders” (ibid, 18). I would argue, however, that everything that Rosendahl experienced was colored by the fact that she was friendly with the leaders, just as everything I was able to learn was colored by the fact that I was not. In my first neighborhood or residence, I lived with a family whose unique history had changed them from high-level party members to outspoken, even virulent, critics of

the Revolution. In my second neighborhood I lived and socialized with members of an emerging youth subculture—*friquis*, aficionados of heavy metal music—which openly, perhaps unwisely, feuded with the leader of the Committee for the Defense of the Revolution. In other words, I lived exclusively among what Rosendahl would call the “marginals.” Yet, by the time I conducted fieldwork, these marginals were ascending to levels of economic and social, if not political, power that she could not have anticipated.

I have taken great pains to conceal the identity of all of my informants in this work. This was especially important given the fact that at the time of my research, criticizing the Revolution to a foreigner was an offense punishable by a 20-year prison term. While in the field, one way that I tried to protect those who agreed to live, work, and talk to me was to be discreet about the fact of the research itself. This meant I tape recorded nothing, took few photographs, and rarely used a notebook to take notes, all of which would have made those around me uncomfortable. As a result of this, there are few direct quotations from Cubans in this book, and any that exist must be understood as recorded from memory after the fact. Everyone did know that “Susana is writing a book about Cuba” and agreed to share their lives and views—or not—depending on their level of comfort with that fact. As part of writing my “book,” I typed up what I could remember in field notes every night, but during the day, I mostly listened and talked. I appreciate all those who put themselves at some risk to teach me about how they understood their world.

Individuals and the State

This work demonstrates that many of the practices of ordinary Cubans during the Special Period and later can be seen as responses to new state policies, which were, themselves, responses to the country’s sudden expulsion from Soviet economic support and insertion into the capitalist global economy. Those policies, and Cubans’ responses to them, are described in later chapters. For now, it is enough to say that Cuba serves as an intriguing case study of the unintended consequences that may arise from even the most prudent policy change. Focused mainly on mitigating the economic crisis, Cuban leaders were unable to anticipate or control most of the social transformations that the new laws and policies of the mid-1990s caused.

Power also works from the bottom up, and in Cuba, like most other places, the state depends on the actions of ordinary people to legitimize and help perpetuate its rule (the exception being those states that rely primarily on repression to remain in power). However, the way that ordinary citizens support state power in Cuba is unusual. Many social theorists have posited that for a state to endure without relying largely on repression, it must, through its agents and institutions, shape the people living there into the sort of citizens that correspond well to the form of that state (Althusser 1970, Anagnost 1997, Borneman 1992). After the start of the Special Period, however, it was apparent that most Cubans did not resemble the sort of good socialist subjects that the institutions of the state had tried since 1959 to create. Many Cubans, particularly in urban areas, became what Althusser (1970) would call “bad subjects,” ones that have failed to internalize the norms and forms prescribed by the state in which they live (181). While Althusser

believed that only a small number of people within any given state are likely to be bad subjects, Cuba seems to be full of them. However, even in the absence of “good” state subjects, the Cuban state endures. Some will argue that the bad subjects are kept in line by fear, but outside of a brief period at the start of the Revolution (Brenner 2007, 11), I will argue that the Cuban state does not rely primarily on repression to maintain its power.¹ While my informants were always cautious, very few expected that they or anyone in their circle would be the object of state violence during the Special Period era. Answering the questions of how and why ordinary Cubans, despite being “bad subjects,” help perpetuate the Revolutionary state, and the implications of this for general conditions of state power, is one purpose of this dissertation.

The dissertation concludes with an analysis of what I call “the forces of rectification” in Cuba. For the most part, it was not the Cuban government that attempted to bring Cuban actors to heel. The state, in fact, found itself able to withstand both the Special Period-era challenges and those that have followed. Instead, transnational players such as the Miami-based dissident community, Western human rights groups, foreign investors, environmentalists, religious missionaries, émigré groups, and the United States State Department were the ones that sought to root out many of Cubans’ chaotic, inconsistent behaviors and attitudes and to replace them with whatever particular brand of consistency they hold sacred. While many of the actors are themselves well intentioned, I will draw on Laura Nader’s notion of coercive harmony (1990) to ask who benefits from the orderliness and control that the forces of rectification seek to implant on the island.

The Revolution

Before I discuss the ethnographic chapters that make up the bulk of this dissertation, I will pause to review the story of the Cuban Revolution, the unique economic and political system it created, and the changes made in response to the unexpected collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. In no sense will this account be comprehensive—it is a thumbnail sketch of fifty years of Cuban history, politics, and economics that will hopefully make the rest of the work more comprehensible to readers who do not specialize in Cuba.

In many senses, the conditions for revolution were in place in Cuba in the late 1950s. High levels of unemployment (16% in the 1956-1957) and underemployment (14% that same year), little industry, a dependency on one export—sugar--which left the national economy susceptible to booms and busts, plus overwhelming US ownership of capital that drained profits out of the country (García Molina 2005, 22) all set the stage for Castro’s arrival. By 1959 dissatisfaction with the US-backed dictator Fulgencio Batista had blossomed into active opposition that was organized into several groups, most of them in urban areas (Brenner 2007, 7).

Within this context, the Cuban Revolution began on July 26, 1953 with an armed attack on the Moncada Barracks in Santiago de Cuba, at the far eastern end of the island (Bonachea and San Martín 1995, 17). Fidel Castro, a Jesuit-trained lawyer and fierce critic of President Batista, led the attack (ibid 10). Castro and his 150 men, the core of what came to be known as the 26th of

¹For an opposite viewpoint, see Pérez-Stable 2007.

July Movement, hoped to broadcast propaganda from a radio station at the Moncada military base to help topple the Batista regime (De la Cova 2007). Batista's soldiers at Moncada easily defeated the rebels, who lacked military training. Nine of them died in battle, eighteen more were captured and executed within hours and one hundred and twenty-two others were brought to trial in Havana (De la Cova 2007, 119, 205). At his trial, Castro thrilled a nationwide radio audience by conducting his own defense, concluding one speech with his now famous phrase, "Condemn me, it does not matter. History will absolve me" (Castro [1953] 1963). Castro was found guilty and sent with the other insurgents to a panopticon-style prison on Cuba's Isle of Pines (ibid 225).

Within two years, growing public pressure caused Batista to free all political prisoners, including Castro and the rest of the Moncada crew (ibid, 243). Exiled from the country, Castro and his brother Raul went to Mexico, where they met Che Guevara and began military training alongside other Batista opponents (Ramonet and Castro 2006, 635). On December 2, 1956, eighty-two men, including the Castro brothers and Guevara, sailed from Mexico to Cuba aboard a ship called the *Granma* (Leonard 2004, 35). Upon landing they encountered an immediate attack from the Cuban Air Force. The Castro brothers and Guevara survived; 42 men were killed or captured and 21 deserted (ibid). Guevara and the Castros reunited with Batista opponents on the island and waged a two-year guerilla campaign against army bases in the mountains, attracting increasing peasant support as they went. After defeating several waves of soldiers sent to attack them in the mountains, Castro's forces were able to descend into the towns and small cities in the eastern part of the country, where they were welcomed by an urban population that was thoroughly dissatisfied by Batista's rule (Bonachea and San Martín 1995, Dolgoff 1976, 24). The rebels marched westward, and when the military officers in the city of Santa Clara surrendered to Castro without resistance, Batista took notice and fled to the Dominican Republic (Bonachea and San Martín 1995, 403). On January 8, 1959, Castro and his forces entered Havana without firing a shot, and Castro assumed the position of Prime Minister of Cuba (Dolgoff 1976, 92).

No one knew what to expect from the new Prime Minister. According to Carollee Bengelsdorf (1994), "The Cuban Revolution, unlike any socialist revolution the world had to that point experienced, came to power without a party, without a coherently articulated ideology, and with a rather ragtag army, which numbered 3,000 people at its very height in the last weeks before seizing power. Moreover, it achieved power in a startlingly brief space of time" (67). If Castro planned a socialist revolution in 1959, he kept that fact private, especially when speaking to the US press (Depalma 2006, Matthews 1970). There was reportedly no talk of socialism among Castro and the men and women of the 26th of July Movement during their six-year military campaign. And prior to 1959, Castro had no connection to the small Communist Party that existed in Cuba (Matthews 1970) (in later years, however, Castro stated that he had become a communist after reading Marx as a student (Landau 1987, 4).) Few people who welcomed Castro to Havana expected his arrival to bring profound social and economic changes. In fact, the Cuban Communist party leaders in Havana reported to Khrushchev that Castro, who came from a landholding family, was a "bourgeois putschist" who could not be trusted (Walker 1995, 536).

Castro thus surprised many when he began to nationalize foreign investments, 95% of which were held by US citizens (García Molina 2005, 23). Pérez Jr. (2002) writes: “Fidel Castro proceeded with the nationalization of US property, beginning with the sugar corporations and cattle ranches and expanding to oil refineries, utilities, mines, railroads, and banks. And when it was all over, everything - absolutely everything - previously owned by US citizens, all \$1.5 billion of it, had been nationalized” (231). Historians of the era have observed that Castro’s actions were, at least initially, motivated by a nationalist agenda—to finally free Cuba of the US political and economic domination that had followed Spanish rule—rather than a socialist one (Kapcia 2008b, 630, Pérez Jr. 2002). By August 1960, Castro’s revolutionary government had seized all foreign-owned businesses on the island. However, once it finished with the foreigners, the government began to dispossess wealthy Cuban nationals of large tracts of land and large businesses, launching the first wave of emigration to the north.

In doing all this, Castro and other leaders of the Cuban state did not operate in a vacuum—at the time there were 8 million people on the island evaluating their every move. As in many socialist societies, Cuban leaders cited rational redistribution—the idea that the state would do a better job of fairly distributing goods than the open market did— to legitimize the actions of the Cuban revolutionary state (Verdery 1996). Castro was creating “a benefactor and protective” state (Kapcia 2008a, 123), which, in 1959, did appeal to the majority of Cubans, who owned no capital of their own and who struggled to varying degrees to meet their needs in the previous market-based economy.

Following the principle of rational redistribution, the Cuban government not only assumed ownership and control of all business, it also assumed responsibility for satisfying the needs of all citizens (Álvarez and Mattar 2004, 107, Verdery 1996). That meant that the socialist state had to distribute goods and services more effectively than capitalism did to retain popular support. To that end, the Revolution took some dramatic steps. Castro established a nationwide food rationing system to equally distribute all basic goods, including -- and especially -- food. Each Cuban—regardless of age, sex, size, or social status—was presented with a *libreta* card that entitled him or her to the same portion of rice, black beans, cooking oil, starchy tubers, sugar, canned milk, and other staples that all Cubans received. The state also began to provide health care, education, child care, and transportation free or nearly free of charge. Housing was built, rent was abolished, and the mansions left behind by fleeing upper class families were carved up and redistributed to new tenants, oftentimes to the families of the servants who had once worked there. The state distributed many goods and services through the workplace, which assumed the role of a “total institution,” a place where individuals and the state came into closest contact (Goffman 1961). This, too, was typical of socialism, where the firm “was the vehicle through which the state carried out its moral obligation to care for its citizens” (Dunn 2004, 46). Whether Cuban socialism was succeeding in the task of distributing goods better than the capitalist system had depended on who was asked. While wealthy and middle-class Cubans saw a marked reduction in material goods and their standard of living, the much larger population of poor urban dwellers and peasants saw their quality of life improve. These were the people who gave

enthusiastic support to the new government at the start of the revolution, and for many years to come.

As mentioned earlier, many of those who did not support the changes simply “voted with their feet and left Cuba” (Brenner 2007, 11). According to Brenner, “The first wave of émigrés (1959-1962) consisted largely of landowners, wealthy business people, former Batista government officers, managers, small proprietors, and professionals such as doctors, engineers, and skilled technicians . . . By November 1965, when Castro opened the door to unrestricted emigration, 211,000 Cubans had departed. In the next six years, an additional 277,000 emigrated from Cuba” (12). Many have noted that emigration operated as a “safety valve” for the Revolution by removing those most critical of the Revolutionary project from the island (Kapcia 2008a, 124, Pérez Jr. 2002, 249). Castro would ultimately rely on unrestricted mass immigration as a safety valve two more times – the first in 1980 when 125,000 Cubans left from the port of Mariel and the second in 1994, when 38,000 *balseros*, or rafters, were allowed to leave the island on homemade boats (Eckstein and Barberia 2007, 268, Prieto 2004).

Cuba, the US and the USSR

In response to the nationalization of US companies, President Dwight Eisenhower placed an embargo on Cuban sugar in July 1960 (Brenner 2007, 14). The Soviet Union stepped forward to buy the sugar that the United States had refused, beginning a relationship that would have enormous consequences for the future.

Increasingly unnerved by the Cuban-Soviet connection, in 1961 John F. Kennedy authorized the CIA to assist a team of Cuban emigrants in attacking Cuba, launching what came to be known as the Bay of Pigs Invasion. After the failed attack, Cuba became formally socialist (Kapcia 2008b, 629) and aligned itself with the Soviet Union, setting the stage for the Cuban Missile Crisis the following year.

While never politically integrated into the USSR to the extent that European nations were, Cuba did come to rely heavily on the USSR in economic matters. In 1972, under a tightening US embargo, Cuba became part of Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON), which meant channeling nearly all of its imports and exports through its distant Soviet allies. COMECON operated according to the principle of competitive advantage, with each member nation concentrating on producing the goods best suited to it, and relying on trade to obtain the rest of what it needed (García Molina 2005, Pérez-López 2005). Within the COMECON, Cuba specialized in the production of sugar, citrus, and nickel (García Molina 2005, 27). This narrow range of production would have drastic consequences for Cubans when the collapse of the USSR and COMECON left them with few domestically produced goods and fewer trading partners.

From the 70s until the late 80s, however, Cuba benefitted from trade with the COMECON, which was heavily subsidized in Cuba’s favor. Soviet subsidies averaged \$4.3 billion a year for the period 1986- 1990 (Spadoni 2004a, 116), and constituted 21.2% of the Cuban GNP (Pérez-López 2005, 178). According to Pérez-López, “the Soviet Union sold oil to Cuba at below-

market prices in nonconvertible currency and allowed Cuba to re-export this commodity to the world market as a means for the island to obtain scarce convertible currency. In 1983-85, oil and oil product re-exports actually overtook sugar as the island's most significant convertible currency export, accounting for more than 40 percent of total convertible currency revenues in those years, twice the share generated by sugar exports” (178). Similarly, Pérez-López (ibid) reports that, “in 1987, the contract price of Cuban sugar exports to the Soviet Union was the equivalent of 41.90 U.S. cents/pound, while the average world market price was 6.76 U.S. cents/pound, a more than six-fold margin of preference.” It is not an exaggeration to state that Soviet subsidies, including subsidized trade within the COMECON, kept the Cuban economy afloat for more than twenty years.

After the Cuban Missile crisis, US policy towards Cuba only became more erratic and ineffective, which strengthened Castro’s authority within the country and his commitment to the Cuban-Soviet alliance. In his aptly named “Fear and Loathing of Fidel Castro: Sources of US Policy toward Cuba,” Louis A. Pérez Jr. (2002) details the events of the early 60s that, he argues, inspired five decades of continuously failing US policies, most famously the trade embargo. According to Pérez Jr., it is “within the realm of trauma that an understanding of US policy must begin,” the trauma being the way in which US leaders experienced the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, the Cuban Missile crisis, the violation of the Monroe Doctrine, and other humiliating losses to Cuba in the early 1960s (232). He concurs with *New York Times* foreign affairs editor Thomas Friedman “that the US position on Cuba is 'not really a policy. It's an attitude -- a blind hunger for revenge against Mr. Castro” (251). Driven by this blind hunger for revenge, “. . . the United States engaged in acts that today would be understood as state-sponsored terrorism, including scores of assassination attempts against Fidel Castro, the infiltration of sabotage teams, and the disruption of Cuban agricultural and industrial production capacities” (244). As a result, Pérez Jr. writes, Cuban leaders became preoccupied with security, developing an orientation that exists to this day: “It is the height of cynicism for the United States to condemn Cuba for the absence of civil liberties and political freedoms, on one hand, and, on the other, to have pursued policies variously employing assassination, subversion, sabotage and threatened invasions as means to topple the government of Fidel Castro. US policy does nothing to contribute to an environment in which civil liberties and political freedoms can flourish” (253).

The Structure of the State

As Pérez Jr. suggests, it was within the context of intense US aggression that the structure of the Cuban state developed. For the first ten years of the Revolution, the absence of true state institutions meant that Fidel Castro was able to rule the country as he did the 24th of July Movement -- directly and personally (Bengelsdorf 1994, 71). When state institutions finally began to be formed in the 1970s, power continued to be concentrated in the hands of Fidel Castro, which he and his allies justified by making reference to US aggression. Raul Castro, one of the architects of the Cuban state, reflected “that it was essential . . . to have a single structure in

which all power, legislative, executive and administrative, was concentrated in a structure that would have the flexibility to make decisions without any delay” (ibid). Castro assumed the top role in every state institution—and outlawed every institution that existed outside the state. By centralizing power within the state and disabling the structures of civil society that had existed outside the state prior to 1959, including labor unions and the Catholic Church, Castro made himself the absolute authority in Cuba (Córdova and García Moure 2003, 125).

Stepping back for a moment, it is important to consider what exactly it means when one attributes a policy or attitude to “the Revolution” or “the government” or “the state” in Cuba. Who or what nationalized businesses, started a ration system, cultivated socialist values, and so on? Many analysts conflate those state actions and structures with the person of Fidel Castro, asserting that the state, party, government, and Revolution, while obviously distinct from a living and breathing human being, are controlled to such an overwhelming degree by Fidel Castro that one can use “Castro,” “the Revolution,” or “the state” interchangeably as part of any analysis.

Recently, a handful of Cuba scholars have criticized this approach. Those who conflate Castro and the state and the Revolution, they assert, are treating Castro as a charismatic leader. Weber (1991) defines a charismatic leader as a leader with “a certain quality . . . by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities . . . and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader” (358). Kaptcia (2008b) dismisses this characterization of Castro as “the symbolic hegemony of the *lider maximo*,” and claims it leads to errors in analysis that exaggerate the role Castro actually plays (644). Valdes (2007) further asserts that characterizing Castro as a charismatic leader insults the Cuban people, as it implies “that Cubans have a predilection for personalistic politics, in contrast to the more ‘advanced’ Europeans and North Americans who support political institutions” (27). It also implies that the Revolution is the project of a single person, rather than a broad-based movement that generated many leaders with differing perspectives and aims.

In this work I do sometimes conflate the Cuban Revolution and state with the person of Fidel Castro, but I do not do so uncritically or with the intention of insulting the Cuban people. For one, I agree with Bengelsdorf (1994) that when the Revolution’s leaders began creating state and political institutions, a full ten years after assuming power, these institutions were structured so that up to his retirement Fidel Castro could, and did, exercise overwhelming control over each branch (91). Under this vertical, highly centralized state structure, one man was expected to hold all key leadership positions—for example, being leader of the Cuban Communist Party entitled Castro to leadership of the executive and legislative branches of governments as well. In the particular case of Cuba, I assert, it would not be a mistake for Fidel Castro to repeat the words of the Sun King, “L’État c’est *Moi*” (“The State is *Me*”). While a fairly stable group of associates, including Raul Castro and Che Guevara, supported his efforts, their role was clearly subordinate to that of Fidel Castro—they are not leaders in the traditional sense of the word.

Secondly, and most importantly for the purposes of this research, I speak of Castro as if he were in control of the state, sometimes as if he *were* the state, because that’s what most Cubans

do. Bengelsdorf (1994) noted a phrase used by the Cubans when discussing some particular failure of the Revolution --"If Fidel only knew"-- and observes that it "gives a good indication of the level of popular internalization of what can only be described as a deeply paternalistic structure" (83). It also describes a personalistic structure. She also observed in Cuba "an overwhelming perception that Fidel was setting the course and a basic acceptance of this course" (ibid, 118). My ethnographic research supports Bengelsdorf's argument that Cubans think of their state as being wholly controlled by Fidel Castro, a social fact that, for the purposes of this dissertation, is more relevant than assessing to what extent their impression of Castro's role is true.²

With so much power centralized under Castro, critics describe the revolutionary government as undemocratic. And under most definitions of democracy, it is. For example, beyond the municipal level, there are no open elections; in provincial and national races Cubans can vote only to accept or reject candidates that have been pre-selected by committees controlled by the Cuban Communist Party (PCC), which is led and directed by Castro. However, it is worth noting that the changes to the Cuban political structure after 1959 affected the bulk of Cubans far less than did the economic and ideological changes of the time. Prior to 1959, most Cubans had little electoral control over the direction of political institutions, and afterward, that trend continued.

In assessing the extent of democracy in Cuba, some consideration must also be given to the Revolution's notion of "direct democracy." Writes Bengelsdorf (1994):

This "direct democracy," or what Che called the "dialectical unity between the individual and the mass," took essentially two forms. The first was the huge rallies held in the Plaza of the Revolution during the first decade of the Revolution, at which Fidel spoke, sometimes for hours, sometimes to literally millions of people. The second form was Fidel's constant presence, his endless pilgrimages through the island, promoting the feeling that he was everywhere, dealing with sometimes the most trivial of individual or village problems. Both elements were facilitated by the small size of Cuba, the relative homogeneity of its people, and its extensive system of communication, ironically a by-product of U.S. domination. (79)

Contrary to how the Cuban government portrays it, direct democracy involves a highly constrained form of communication between ordinary Cuban people and their leader. The Communist Party of Cuba (PCC), Cuba's only legal political party, is an important link between the *lider maximo* and the institutions of the state. Membership in the Communist Party is by invitation only, and, until the massive Special Period transformations that are the subject of this work, widely coveted. More than 700,000 Cubans are now party members, 51 percent of whom joined in the 1990s (Perez-Stable 2007, 33). The PCC assumed its current form in 1965, through

²-Even US policy makers conceive Castro and the Cuban state in this way. According to Pérez Jr. (2002), "any act that Washington perceived as inimical to US interests and contrary to professed values came to be associated entirely with the person of the Cuban leader." (229)

a five-year integration of the communist political organizations that existed prior to 1959 and the rebel groups who had opposed Batista, including Castro's own 26th of July Movement (Bengelsdorf 1994, 105). Not coincidentally, in 1965 Castro assumed the title of First Secretary of the PCC. Over time the PCC developed procedures that ensured that party leadership assumed all key state posts and made party membership a prerequisite for filling the other desirable positions and institutions in society—the best jobs, the best schools-- as well. The Party's position is enshrined in Article 5 of the Cuban Constitution (1992), which describes the PCC as “the leading force of society and the state.” While none of my interlocutors was a Party member, their lives were directly affected by decisions made by those who were.

While there are a host of legislative bodies in Cuba, Bengelsdorf (1994) describes “a severe blurring of the boundaries between the Party and any other institution of authority,” including the municipal, provincial, and national legislative bodies, that renders the distinction between party and state moot (105). “The overlap between the Party and the state is clearly captured in simple statistics,” Bengelsdorf writes. “75% of Municipal Delegates were party members. National deputies are virtually 100% party members” (110). Elected leaders who were not themselves party members were also expected to follow the lead of the party in decision making. Bengelsdorf states that, “If on paper the highest governmental authority (*jefe maximo*) at each level -- municipal, provincial, and national -- was designated as the president of the assembly at those levels, it was crystal clear in practice that authority rested with the head of the Party at each level” (113). None of my informants participated in, or attended to, the actions of their municipal, provincial, or national assemblies. Tracing the evolution of their structure and the changing procedures for electing delegates is beyond the scope of this work. It is important to reiterate, however, the dominant role that the Cuban Communist Party plays in directing the actions of each level of government.

While the typical Cuban gives little thought to the actions of the provincial and municipal political structures, the mass organizations, and most importantly the neighborhood-based Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR), do play a significant role in daily life. The CDR in each *barrio* is a significant point of contact between the state and citizens. CDRs have provided a great deal of direct political leadership and social control in Cuba. CDR leaders in each neighborhood are charged with surveillance and are expected to report counter-Revolutionary activity up a chain of command. What activities the CDRs do and don't report vary depending on the motives of the CDR leader and his or her relationship with the rest of the neighborhood. While not officially part of its role, some of my informants admitted to taking part in CDR-organized beatings (*actos de repudio*) that are periodically directed towards those identified as opposing the Revolution. CDRs also organize attendance at political rallies and improvement projects and encourage their neighbors to vote. On the mornings of Castro's mass rallies, CDR leaders are the ones who knock on doors and direct their neighbors towards the bus. Mass organizations directed at women, children, and workers also play an important role in Cuban daily life.

Beyond the party, the legislative and executive branches, and the mass organizations, the Cuban state also includes a large bureaucracy. For instance, to coordinate disparate parts of the economy, Cuba, like other socialist states, relied on planning agencies to decide what and how much to produce, where and at what price to sell it, and so on. Castro, in his role as President, supervised the economic apparatus of the Cuban state for 48 years, before he passed the reins to his brother. There are bureaucratic structures dedicated to each aspect of Cuban life, including education, medical care, foreign policy, and research. Bengelsdorf (1994) calls Cuban administrative structures “a slapdash affair” and notes their tendency to grow large and inefficient, problems that Castro periodically addressed (87) She notes the “most potent answer to the problem of bureaucracy was, fittingly, Fidel himself,” who, some Cubans believed, “kept in constant touch with the people in his continuous outings across the nation and took it upon himself, once he returned to Havana, to personally confront administrative agencies and personnel responsible for meaningless red tape and delays” (88).

Making Cuban Socialism

Upon assuming control of Cuba in 1959, Castro shared with Che Guevara the goal of creating a new sort of citizen, what scholars on the island came to call the “New Man” (Silverman 1971). In this sense, Cuba was on the leading edge of a school of thought that posited that there is a necessary resemblance between a stable state and the people who live within it, and that it is the task of the state to fashion such people. Eckstein (1994) describes the New Man as “egalitarian, selfless, cooperative, non-materialistic, hardworking (at both manual and non manual tasks), and morally pure” (4). So important was this New Man, Guevara, in his position of Minister of the Economy, was willing to endure economic inefficiency to hasten his development. Guevara advocated for focusing state resources on the re-education of the masses, rather than a transformation of the means of production, which he thought would happen automatically once the New Man was made. In 1963, he explained:

I am not interested in dry economic socialism. We are fighting against misery, but we are also fighting against alienation. One of the fundamental objectives of Marxism is to remove interest, the factor of individual interest, and gain from men's psychological motivations. Marx was preoccupied both with economic factors and with their repercussions on the spirit. If communism isn't interested in this, too, it may be a method of distributing goods, but it will never be a revolutionary way of life.” (Silverman 1971, 5)

In the early years of the Revolution, Castro agreed with Guevara’s sentiment, once telling a crowd, “. . . the great task of the Revolution is basically the task of forming the new man of whom we spoke here ” (Dolgoff 1976, 153).

While the goal was clear, it was more difficult to see how the Cuban state could refashion the identities of its citizens—especially fully-formed adult identities that were forged in the context of neo-colonialism and capitalism—to match this ideal. In ‘The Great Debate’ of the early

sixties, Cuban party officials and influential Marxist economists from around the globe weighed in on the path that the Revolutionary state ought to take. ‘The Economists,’ perhaps better described as materialists or orthodox Marxists, included the French economist Charles Bettelheim and Cuban official Alberto Mora. They squared off against ‘The Idealists,’ a group with Che Guevara at its head that included British economist Ernest Mandel. Both groups addressed questions that were simultaneously pragmatic and philosophical in nature.

The Economists argued that only a transformation of the means of production could create the New Man. In their view, such a transformation of man, economy, and society would progress slowly and require an intermediate socialist stage. In 1959, Cuba lacked the sort of advanced capitalist economy that Marx considered an essential precursor to socialism, and the Economists agreed with Marx that those material conditions had to be first achieved, and then surpassed, for communism to take root. Until a full communist society could be achieved, the Economists insisted, the state must treat its workers essentially as capitalist subjects, motivated by self-interest and profit, lest the entire system collapse. This view hewed closely to the writings of Marx (Nove 1991, 55). The Idealists put their own spin on Marx to argue that the productive forces and social relations “may not . . . so precisely correspond to one another” (Silverman 1971, 99) in a given moment, and that a vanguard could draw on the historical experience of other nations to cultivate a communist society even under a less-advanced capitalist system of production. In their view, treating workers as self-interested capitalists in the short-term would only impede the development of their consciousness. In short, the Economists believed that over time an evolution in the mode of production would create the New Man, while the Idealists believed the new man, borne of revolutionary enthusiasm and education, could more quickly transform production.

This debate was more than intellectual—above all, the state was looking for guidance on very specific policy issues. Views on economic and social planning—whether to maintain or reduce salary differentials, whether to offer material or moral incentives, whether to rely on paid or volunteer labor, whether to invest in political education or basic industry—varied tremendously depending on which position, economist or idealist, one took. During this time, Castro admitted it was much easier to destroy the old social order than to make a new one.

Fidel Castro originally tried his best to find a middle ground between the two positions. Castro subscribed to the orthodox Marxist notion that “communist society must be based on a thorough mastery of technology, on the complete development of the productive forces, so that man may be able to create material goods in such quantities that everyone may be able to satisfy his needs” (Silverman 1971). Yet from this material transformation the development of socialist society did not inevitably follow; awareness must also be developed through education at the same time the material base was to be transformed. Said Castro, “an advance . . . in the conscientiousness of the people, must accompany every step forward in the development of the productive forces” (ibid, 363). And “abundance alone is not enough to achieve communism; it is achieved through education, through a truly communist, truly socialist consciousness” (Medin 1990, 18).

Despite Castro's desire for a middle course, in hindsight the decade of the '60s came to be seen—critically—as being essentially Idealist in nature. According to Bengelsdorf (1994), “In 1966 . . . Fidel took up Che's position and carried it to its extreme. For the next four years the Cuban people were to pass, at a hurtling speed and under conditions of scarcity (intensified by a 31 percent reinvestment rate), through an incarnation of the idea of simultaneous creation of socialism and communism with a radical emphasis on moral incentives” (91). The massive rate of reinvestment, while not precisely Idealist in itself, can be seen as Cuba's attempt to modernize its economy and reach socialism at a rate much faster than the Economist scholars thought possible. The aim was to create the conditions of production of advanced industrial capitalism in the space of one generation, in order to reach the next stages—socialism and communism—more quickly. In keeping with this idea that Marxist economic laws did not apply to Cuba—or at least that the rate of evolution could be speeded up dramatically by the actions of the state--the state moved directly into establishing certain socialist economic forms. For instance, the Revolutionary Offensive of 1968 achieved total state control of the economy, when Castro nationalized all small private businesses, down to the small cafes and street vendors selling snacks (Prieto 2004).

By most accounts, the Idealist experiment failed to produce acceptable economic results. Brenner (2007) describes the problem the Cuban government faced this way: “In practice, the use of moral incentives is usually accompanied by inefficiency . . . For a poor country like Cuba, reduced production affects the availability of basic necessities, and so it would tend to undermine popular support for the revolution itself” (12). Ultimately, the failure of the volunteer-based, “10 million ton harvest” of sugar in 1970 caused the Cuban state to start shifting towards the more gradual policies advocated by the Economist group, which included a greater reliance on material incentive and individual reward while travelling the path to socialism and communism. But while the path was somewhat circuitous, the end goal of creating socialism and the New Man did hold great sway with the Cuban people during the first half of the Revolution. In the 1970s, the individuals described by Oscar Lewis (1977) make regular references to Che Guevara and the New Man, often evaluating their own lives in terms of this ideal.

In its first decades not only did the Revolution offer a compelling ideology to the Cuban people, but the Cuban economy grew at a reasonably steady rate (Pérez-López 2005). From 1964-1970 the Cuban GDP grew 4.2% annually, and from 1971 to 1975 that growth increased to 7.5% per year (García Molina 2005, 26). This growth was achieved in the context of heavy state planning over the economy.

But in the 1980s, Castro pushed the economic pendulum quite far in the direction of an open market. Castro opened free farmers markets, referred to as *agros*, in 1980 (Brundenius 2002: 368). The intention was to stimulate an increase in the “volume of agricultural produce available to the urban population, so as to achieve higher levels consumption and stimulate economic activity in general” (Torres Vila and Pérez Rojas 1997, 31). The *agros* were also intended to circumvent the growing black market trade between farmers and urban people (Benjamin, Collins, and Scott 1989). In the *agros*, farmers were allowed to sell produce that was left over

after the state purchasing centers had obtained what they wanted and the producers had met their own needs (Torres Vila and Pérez Rojas 1997, 31). However, in practice, “middlemen appeared who filled the gap left by the farmers' lack of interest in bringing produce to a distant market, and prices remained high for consumers . . . there was a decline in some products, which was prejudicial to the population's obtaining rationed products” (ibid). Even worse for Castro, some consumers began to resent the profits earned by farmers and middlemen and to wonder why, “after more than twenty years, the government-run food system was still unable to fully satisfy people's food desires” (Benjamin, Collins and Scott 1989). The social consequences of the market reforms, particularly the creation of the free farmers markets, posed a threat to state authority and the construction of socialism.

Indeed, it was not long after the *agros* opened that Castro would begin to reverse course and reassert idealist values. Brundenius (2006) paraphrases the economist Mesa-Lago, explaining that “the pattern seems to be that a crisis pressures Castro for reforms he actually does not care for, and after a period of recovery with healthy growth, he vows to get the country back on the idealist socialist track” (863). In 1982, the police raided many Havana *agros* and arrested hundreds of vendors accused of breaking the laws that governed the market (Benjamin, Collins, and Scott 1989, 72). In 1986, Castro launched the "Campaign to Rectify Errors and Correct Negative Tendencies." In addition to closing down the farmers markets completely, the “Rectification” was intended to address “serious errors in economic and labor policy; excessive centralization; a marked tendency toward rigidity in administrative methods; bureaucracy and lack of control systems; formalism in political and ideological activities; triumphalism; lack of critical, objective analysis by the mass media; the closed nature of the Party's internal operations, and other undesirable practices” (Duharte Diaz 2010, 2). Launched just as policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost* were taking hold of the USSR, “Rectification was a pointed rejection of the Soviet model, and implicitly of Soviet leadership. Cuba's Communist Party leaders blamed the stagnation of Cuba's economy in the late 1970s and early 1980s on their own blind adherence to Soviet practices” (Brenner 2007, 13). Castro clearly indicated that Cuba’s future did not lie in the direction of democracy and market reform. Within a few years, however, most of the goals of the Rectification had to be set aside—the Special Period had begun, bringing with it a new set of priorities and pressures.

Special Period in Peacetime

Over time, Cuba had grown dependent on Soviet economic support. While it is difficult to reach a consensus about the exact figures, a clear pattern of dependency emerges from the numbers taken as a whole. For instance, by the 1990s, the USSR provided approximately 70% of Cuba’s imports and purchased 70% of Cuba’s exports--all at subsidized prices that greatly favored Cuba (Eckstein 1994, 93). Laura Enríquez (2000) puts the amount of Cuban imports and exports passing through COMECON closer to 80%, as does Mesa-Lago (2003, 104). Moreover, as described above, because Cuba and its partners subscribed to a version of development that

required each nation to specialize in producing just those goods best suited to it, Cuba produced sugar, citrus, and nickel, and little else, on its own (Spadoni 2004a, 116). This narrow productive focus, as much as the Soviet subsidies, left Cuba highly dependent on its trade partners for key goods, including food and fuel (ibid). Pérez-López (2003) provides import statistics from 1988, which further portray the extent of this dependency. In 1988, the COMECON provided 100 percent of condensed milk, butter, cheese, and wheat flour consumed in Cuba, as well as 89 percent of wheat; 87 percent of lard; 63 percent of canned meats; and 57 percent of corn (177). The COMECON provided Cuba with 100 percent of its lumber, 96 percent of fertilizers; 9 percent of oil and oil products, 100 percent of buses and sugarcane lifters; and more than 80 percent of automobiles and parts for agricultural equipment (ibid). And as discussed earlier, all of these exchanges were subsidized, with Cuba paying less for its imports and receiving more for its exports than it would have on the world market (Spadoni 2004a, Pérez-López 2003).

Because of this dependency, when the USSR collapsed, taking the COMECON along with it, Cuba was ill-prepared to fulfill even the basic needs of the population. Almost overnight, Cuba was forced to buy food, fuel, and manufactured goods on the world market using hard currency. Making things even worse was the fact that the price of sugar on the world market in those years was low, meaning hard currency was in even shorter supply. Not surprisingly, trade levels fell sharply. Between 1990 and 1993 exports fell by 80 percent and imports by 75 percent (Enríquez 2003, 203).

Because Cuba was heavily dependent on trade with the COMECON to meet its food needs (in the late 1980s, between 44 to 57 percent of Cuban caloric intake came from imported foods [Enríquez 2000]), starvation was a real threat. Almost immediately, food rations were reduced sharply; the per-person monthly allotment of rice fell from 5 to 2.5 pounds, sugar from 4 to 2.5 pounds, and coffee from 4 ounces to one ounce, all during a time period when physical demands were increased dramatically by the shortage of fossil fuels (Pérez-López 2003, 181). Eckstein (2007) estimates that official allotments covered only half of a person's caloric needs (180). As a result of malnutrition and overwork, more than 40,000 Cubans developed neurological diseases (Álvarez and Mattar 2004, 115, Eckstein 1994, 135, Pérez-López 2003, 181). Brenner (2007) describes a fairly typical Cuban experience of this period this way: “. . . you had to substitute sugar water for food every third day for a year, and as a result you lost your eyesight because of a vitamin deficiency (as happened to fifty thousand Cubans temporarily), and lost twenty to twenty-five pounds (the average for Cubans in 1993-1994)” (1).

In the absence of trade, Cuban planners had to quickly shift the economy towards producing a broad range of basic items, including food and medicine, on its own. To survive, Cubans had to learn how to grow their own food on the island once again, and with very limited inputs (Enríquez 2000). As the crisis deepened, the *Programa Alimentario* reintroduced animal labor to farms where the tractors sat idle (due to a lack of spare parts and a reduction in available fuel) and experimented with domestically produced pesticides (which were now too costly to import).

People's memories of the early 1990s are invariably colored by hunger and fear. Buses stopped running, and there were rotating blackouts that left people without power for up to 16 hours at a time (Pérez-López 2003, 181). This was the time during which more than a thousand people protested the sinking of a tug boat of would-be emigrants in Havana harbor, and 35,000 raft people (*balseros*) attempted the dangerous 90-mile journey to Miami on makeshift boats rather than endure conditions on the island (Eckstein and Barberia 2007, 268). This was also the time when the Cuban Coast Guard turned a blind eye to such escapes, rather than risk the violence that could have resulted had the flow of *balseros* been stopped.

While some nations offered aid to Cuba, the George H.W. Bush administration saw the crisis as an opportunity to “settle old scores” (Pérez Jr. 2002, 246): “At the precise moment that Cuba faced new and perhaps the most serious round of difficulties at home and reversals abroad, Washington acted to expand the scope and increase the severity of economic sanctions” (ibid).

Not surprisingly, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of Soviet economic support severely jeopardized Cuba's Revolutionary government and economy, as well as its social and cultural projects. With most of its people on the brink of starvation, the government simply could not continue the “Rectification” program it had laid out in 1986. Unlike their cohorts in the east, however, the Communist Party in Cuba did not adopt a *glasnost*-like, political opening to counter public unrest. At its 4th Congress in 1991, the PCC rejected most calls for political liberalization, including proposals to legalize competing political parties and hold open elections. The PCC did make minor changes to the process for choosing candidates to *Poder Popular*, but those reforms had little noticeable effect (Bengelsdorf 1994, 171).

Instead of making political changes, the PCC sought to end the crisis by legalizing a short list of economic activities (Pérez-López 2003, Prieto 2004, Spadoni 2004a, Torres Vila and Pérez Rojas 1997). Starting in 1992, Cubans could own and run certain small businesses, earn and save American dollars, and make purchases in dollar stores that had previously been restricted to foreign visitors. Large state farms were broken up into agricultural cooperatives, and in cities the *agros* were reopened, again in hopes of stimulating production, satisfying demand, and reigning in the black market trade between farmers and urban people (Torres Vila and Pérez Rojas 1997, 32) The PCC also opened the doors to foreign investment and the development of an international tourist industry. It was hoped that tourism would increase the flow of dollars to the island, and that legalizing the dollar and dollar stores would channel into government coffers more of the hard currency that was already circulating illegally. It was further hoped that the small private businesses could provide people with some of the goods and services that the state could no longer afford to provide.

These party-approved and state-enacted economic policies were intended as temporary measures to mitigate the effects of the Special Period, but each ended up reshaping Cuba's social and cultural terrain in unexpected ways (Álvarez and Mattar 2004, 9). From the economic collapse and the policy changes that took place in Cuba in the early 1990s emerged the resilient, highly flexible, creative, and opportunistic strategist who is the subject of the ethnographic chapters that follow.

The Chapters

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 of my dissertation describe some aspects of daily life during the Special Period. Some of what I saw was easy to admire, but much of what I describe in these chapters -- sarcasm, drunkenness, dishonesty, petty theft, and so on -- could be viewed in a negative light. There is a tendency to ignore this kind of data in works of this kind; “Anthropology has paid attention mostly to positive relations in society, especially those that are ongoing and self-reproducing. Negative, disavowed relations have received relatively little comment” (Humphrey and Hugh-Jones 1992, 134). It invites the question: How does an anthropologist deal with people who seem, by the standards of their own society as well as that of the anthropologist, to be behaving badly? First, to step away from the value judgment imbedded in the Althusserian term, “bad subject,” I think of many of the people I encountered in Havana instead as “disorderly subjects.” The disorderly subject is one who in some way fails to fit with the dominant order of his society – what you think of them depends in part on what you think of the order they operate in. It is worth noting that disorderly actors are not necessarily *opposing* the order in which they operate; many disorderly Cubans operate outside state norms while being careful not to challenge them overtly. Second, the job of the anthropologist is to provide context for all the actions they describe -- not to justify every action, but to render each one intelligible. Many of the less appealing actions of the individuals described here, when viewed within the framework in which they occurred, can be seen as thoughtful, appropriate, and effective. Understanding life in Havana during the Special Period requires an engagement with actions and attitudes that, on the surface, invite critique, and I have chosen not to redact that part of what I saw. My hope is that I have done a good enough job in writing that my individuals are seen as ordinary, honorable people living in extraordinary times.

Life in Havana, while never without complexity, was once comparatively straightforward. Before the Special Period, the Cuban state largely succeeded in making the norms of socialism hegemonic and keeping American cultural and capitalist influences largely at bay. Most Cubans followed the socialist life course laid out by the state, and this included their work life. Because all economic activity was concentrated in the hands of the state, all working adults were employed by state firms, and that employment was their only form of paid work. The state firm served as a total social institution, where, in addition to a small paycheck, each person collected their allotment of food, clothing, housing, and luxury items. Basic needs were met, and luxuries enjoyed; most workers achieved a comfortable lifestyle through the 1980s. The state experimented with offering moral and material incentives for excelling in the work place, though at the start of the Revolution, many Cubans worked hard on the job simply because it was the normal thing to do.

Today most Cubans still work for the state, but not for the same reasons they used to, as Chapter 2 will demonstrate. Since the start of the Special Period, the state has been unable to provide many basic goods, so Cubans are forced to buy more and more things from government-

run hard currency stores or on the black market. With the exception of top musicians and athletes, no state employee earns enough at his or her job to pay for the all the basic goods and services they need. Most families have members still working in a state enterprise, however, but it is not primarily to earn a salary. Instead, for many people such jobs serve as sources of goods or equipment that can be converted to cash that can be used to buy what one needs to live. State jobs are also a means of holding one's place in legitimate society, a means of collecting the education, food, and health care that is still distributed, in diminished amounts, through this institution. While there are reasons to hold a state job, there are few moral or material incentives for doing good work in that job, and, as a result, many workers don't try especially hard. The orientation towards work in state enterprises, and what results, are important subjects of the second chapter—for one, only by explaining why Cuban state workers approach state work as they do can the myth of the “lazy socialist worker” be dispelled.

Outside the state firms, on the other hand, many Cubans do work inordinately hard. Chapter 2 also examines the “real work” done in Cuba, much of it in the private businesses that were legalized to compensate for the state's inability to provide consumer goods and services during the Special Period. Another work practice that falls well outside the state sphere is called *trapicheo*. The word “trapicheo” comes from the word “trapiche,” the part of a sugar mill that squeezes the juice from the cane—trapicheo is the act of “putting the squeeze” on someone or something. Or, more precisely, trapicheo is cleverness, ingenuity, or trickiness put to the service of making money, usually by means that are illegal in Cuba. In English we might be tempted to call an act of trapicheo a “scam” or “con,” but those words carry too strong a negative connotation to match the Cuban context. Whereas in the United States a con artist is thought to be a relatively rare and marginal individual, in Cuba there are few families that can afford not to have some of its members regularly engaged in trapicheo—it is the quintessential productive activity in Havana, the endeavor toward which one's energy and intellect are focused. Making a living in Cuba during Special Period meant cobbling together several of the economic strategies discussed above, none of which fit well within the principals of socialism.

As the reader can already see, the productive life of Cubans is intimately tied to the system of commodity distribution and consumption. Prior to the special period, the state provided all citizens with basic goods through the ration system, and granted some citizens luxuries to reward their performance in the workplace. Also prior to the Special Period, the government-run peso stores that supplemented the ration system offered a limited range of goods. In keeping with the spirit of the New Man (and the limited productive capacity of the state), all Cubans were encouraged to consume in moderation and to not crave the material goods that were more abundant in capitalist societies. While some grumbled, most people felt relatively at peace with their possessions and the system for obtaining them.

During the Special Period, the state found it impossible to fulfill its commitment to provide even basic goods and services to Cubans. People struggled to earn pesos or dollars, in any way they could, so that they could spend it on black market goods and services the state could no longer provide. Because the state needed a way to absorb the American dollars that already

circulated on the island, and to encourage Cubans living abroad to send more, it legalized that currency and began selling Cubans desirable consumer goods in it. Eckstein (2007) calls this process the “dollarization” of the Cuban economy. As part of dollarization, in the mid-1990s the state opened hundreds of “shoppings” in every part of the country. The shoppings were modeled on the dollar stores that had previously existed only for diplomats, but these stores sold products directly to Cubans—or at least Cubans with enough dollars to afford the goods. The state also increasingly encouraged Cubans to reconnect with family members living abroad, as remittances were the main source of hard currency for Cubans on the island. These policies, while probably essential to the nation’s economic recovery, marked a dramatic break with socialist values and systems. The unintended effects of these policy changes are still being felt today.

For one, when the dollar stores opened, a dramatic change in the relationship between the Cuban state and the Cuban consumer began. The state had long discouraged commodity consumption, both through its educational apparatus and its system of production and distribution, which tightly capped the number of goods available to consume. During the Special Period the state began tempting Cubans with an array of new products in order to separate them from their American dollars. Many Cubans would eagerly consume the products that only dollar stores could provide, ranging from spaghetti noodles and mayonnaise (which came to be seen as basic subsistence items), to Chinese televisions and Sony stereos (true luxuries that are beyond the reach of most). Print and radio advertising quietly reemerged, as Cubans were encouraged to celebrate *Día de Enamorados* (Valentine’s Day) with gifts purchased at the dollar stores, and to replace their rationed soap with perfumed, brightly packaged Lux. People in Havana lined up for hours to buy plastic sunglasses or ceramic figurines; one woman who waited almost an hour to enter a “*Todo por \$1*” store admitted that she did not know what was inside to buy, only that she wanted to buy something for \$1. The rise of Cuban consumerism, and its profound impact on Cuban Revolutionary culture and society, are the subject of Chapter 3.

Cubans since the start of the Special Period have experienced other, less tangible, overall changes in attitude, but ones that are just as important in terms of understanding the consciousness of Cuban subjects during the Special Period. This is the subject of Chapter 4. The New Man was to have earnestness and a seriousness of purpose that matched Guevara’s own, at least where the aims of the nation were concerned. But many Cubans today have developed just the opposite, a humorous view of the Revolution’s failures and their own uncertain lives. Some of it is immediately recognizable as political joking--about the shortcomings of Castro or communism, for instance. But even commentary about the minutia of life (“How much would a *café con leche* cost these days?” “There’s *leche*?”) contains within it the low buzz of political critique—for, as everyone knows, whose job is it to provide the milk if not the state? A worldly cynicism about the state and its projects, coupled with a desire to make light of it all, is everywhere in Havana.

Given their disregard for the laws that govern production, distribution, and consumption, their cavalier attitude about state enterprise work, their growing desire to consume like capitalists, their willingness to mock the whole socialist project, and the other disorderly practices of

Havana Cubans, one might assume that the end of the Revolution is near. Scholarship on the state demonstrates time after time that a state must create a “good subject,” or use violence, to perpetuate its rule; too much disorder, it is believed, signals the state’s end. (Althusser 1970, Gramsci 1971) Cuban leaders, themselves, were initially convinced of this. But something different has happened in Cuba—there is much disorder, but the order itself is stable. And the state is not holding its ground through the use of force.

What I hope to demonstrate in Chapter 5 is that what the state, once established, must extract from its people in order to perpetuate itself is actually quite minimal. Since the Special Period, I will argue, the goal of the Cuban revolution has been the creation of the *appearance* of a good state subject, rather than the actual transformation of persons toward that end. State resources are directed towards persuading people to enact a socialist identity in certain key moments; the actual transformation of people along socialist lines has ceased to be of concern. This much more limited relationship between state and subject seems, in the end, enough to hold the Cuban state in its place. This enactment, it is important to note, happens with the Cuban people, not in spite of them. Cubans do what is asked of them in part to avoid punishment, but also, I argue here, to protect the state, which provides material and ideological support they hope will endure.

Finally, Chapter 5 will show the forces of order in Cuba, those that want to bring disorderly practices in line with one system or another. These rectifying forces present a challenge to many of the practices that one sees in Havana today. The concept of rectification first came from the state, in the campaign described above, to combat a slippage towards capitalism in the 1980s (Duharte Diaz 2010, 2). Since the beginning of the Special Period, the drive for rectification in Havana emerges only in small part from the Cuban state, which seems to draw strength from disorder, as described above. Instead, international dissident and human rights groups, foreign investors, environmentalists, religious missionaries, émigré groups, the US State Department, and other transnational players lead most of the current rectification campaigns. These organizations seek to root out many of the behaviors and attitudes described in previous chapters—*trapicheo*, tax evasion, foot dragging, facetiousness, insularity, consumption—and replace them with whatever norms they favor.

While many of the reformers may be driven by a desire to alleviate immediate social suffering on the island, their actions still must be questioned. Laura Nader refers to the drive to impose order on a disorderly situation as “harmonizing” (1991); it is one way that powerful people and institutions shape ordinary lives without being noticed or resisted by those whom they act upon. We must examine rectification drives critically to see who may gain from fitting Cubans into a particular set of norms. Some rectification campaigns can contribute to the formation of a harmonized, transparent society that can be more easily subsumed by transnational currents in the moment of disorder that will follow Castro’s death. Whether easy incorporation into the global system is ultimately good for the Cuban people remains a question none of these individual groups of reformers address.

CHAPTER 2 PRODUCTION

In 1999, real wages in Cuba were just 60% of their 1989 level (Mesa-Lago 2003, 112), and the country was still five years away from a full recovery; however, the worst of the Special Period was over (Núñez Sarmiento 2010). Nearly all the Havana residents I met in 2000 were decently clothed and sufficiently fed. Homes in Havana, though crumbling on the outside, were often clean and well maintained within. Some families managed to keep a car or motorbike running as well. A married man, the father of two young children, explained the situation to me at the time by saying, “There is hunger in Cuba, but not *hunger* hunger,” drawing a distinction between the precarious, but ultimately manageable, food situation in Cuba in 2000 with the chronic malnutrition found in other Latin American countries or the shortages Cubans suffered in 1993-94. Another man explained that while a person might not have the pork or beef he wants, he did eat; he might not own the latest fashions but he was clothed. Setting the cost of living in Havana next to average Havana wages at the time, however, makes the achievement of even this level of material security seem miraculous.

For example, in 1999, the average Cuban working full time at a state-owned business or government agency earned the peso equivalent of just under \$10 per month (Mesa Lago 2003, 112). While under the *libreta* system basic goods were still provided at extremely low cost, by the mid-1990s, reductions in the food ration left only enough beans, rice, sugar, and other basic foodstuffs to feed an adult for about two weeks out of the month (Eckstein 2007, 180). Buying the remainder of a family’s food in state-owned hard currency markets or on the black market would cost more than a typical salary. And that didn’t take into account the need to pay for shoes, clothing, books, home maintenance, transportation, and the other necessary goods and services. Yet people somehow managed to make ends meet.

The discrepancy between what Habaneros earned at their jobs and how well they lived was a source of fascination for visitors. Writing in the *Atlantic Monthly*, journalist Joy Gordon (1997) described Cuba’s contemporary economic situation with reference to a joke going around Havana at the time:

The CIA sends an agent down to live in Cuba and report back on the state of the economy. He returns six months later, babbling, and is carted off to an asylum. “I don't get it,” he mutters over and over. “There's no gasoline, but the cars are still running. There's no food in the stores, but everyone cooks dinner every night. They have no money, they have nothing at all—but they drink rum and go dancing. (18)

“It's an economy of loaves and fishes, where things somehow come out of thin air, ingenuity, and sheer will,” Gordon declared (ibid).

Cubans still invoke will and ingenuity to explain how they live as well as they do, but no miracles of the “loaves and fishes” type are required. What Gordon could not see, but what

fieldwork in Havana does reveal, is that almost every family has several strategies for adding to the income they earn from state employment. Most of these productive strategies violate some part of Cuban law, so pains are taken not to advertise their existence to outsiders. In this chapter I describe Cuban production—not the idealized form portrayed by state planners or the Cuban media, but the ways that most people really earn a living in Havana today. For the sake of clarity, I draw distinctions between different classes of productive activity: state jobs, including jobs in the emerging economy, remittances and “inheritances,” legal small businesses, and money-making scams that Cubans call *trapicheo*. It is important to note that in actual practice, some types of work cross categories, and most individuals employ several kinds of earning strategies during any one period. I found that most Cubans are resigned to their work in state enterprises, but pursue their more lucrative, illegal projects with more energy and skill.

There is a concept in the “native ethnography” of the island that I find useful when considering the productive life of Cubans. The words *luchar*, a verb meaning “to struggle,” and *la lucha*, the noun form of the word, are frequently invoked by Cubans in talking about their lives and work. Many Cubans speak of themselves as permanently engaged in *la lucha*—even sitting in a cafeteria drinking rum with his friends, one individual insisted he was at that very moment *luchando*, or struggling. Cubans more commonly invoke *luchar* to describe those moments when one is quietly suffering through the frequent, but not quite accepted, trials of living in Havana. Waiting several hours for a bus to travel to work is surely part of *la lucha*, as is paying a nightly visit to the bodega to see if a particular food item has finally arrived. Taking home a paycheck that is equivalent to \$4 (US) for a 40-hour work week, but going to work anyway, is part of *la lucha*. One individual noted a shift in the word’s meaning over the last few decades: “At the beginning of the revolution, the word ‘luchar’ denoted the struggle against imperialism, against the Americans, against the Cuban bourgeoisie, and this is the classic sense of the word. But now we don’t *luchar* against anything, or for anything, any ideas or objectives.” Indeed, most individuals, when asked to name something that they struggle *against* or struggle *for*, simply could not frame their lives in those terms. They struggle because they do; everyone does. Many Cubans invoke the concept of *la lucha* to portray their actions, especially the ones that violate the law, as justified or inevitable under the circumstances.

I have chosen to call this chapter “Production,” although it covers material that is not dealt with in most works about the Cuban economy. Such analyses typically focus on the legal, state-run economy and view it from a macroeconomic perspective—it’s a world of GDP, import and export figures, employment levels, and real wages. Economic studies that do acknowledge, for instance, the ubiquity of law-breaking productive strategies in Cuba—a key part of this chapter—typically delimit that discussion to one or two paragraphs somewhere towards the end of the work, portraying such practices as “survival strategies” (Henken 2007, 169) or challenges that the official Cuban economy faces (Benjamin, Collins, and Scott 1989, Espina Prieto and Rodríguez Ruiz 2010). Even Susan Eckstein, who has always attended carefully to the secondary or submerged economy in Cuba, characterizes practices like selling state-owned goods on the

black market as “illicit and immoral activity” that negatively impacts the growth of the real Cuban economy (2007, 187).

I would like to turn this on its head and argue that what this chapter covers – black marketeering, trapicheo, remittance-seeking, and so forth—deserves to be a central narrative of accounts of Cuban production, not just an addendum to the discussion. Statistics justify this reorientation. For instance, since the Special Period the highest-earning state “industry” is neither tourism (\$354 million in 2002) nor sugar (\$176 million in 2002), but remittances, which totaled \$723 million that same year (Spadoni 2004b, 104). According to Spadoni (ibid), “several scholars contend that money sent from abroad has been the single most important factor in reactivating the Cuban economy in the second half of the 1990s” (90). Therefore any discussion of the Cuban economy as a whole that focuses on endeavors in the agriculture and tourism industries but fails to describe ways in which the both the state and individuals try to maximize remittance earnings erases an important aspect of Cuba’s true system of production.

An analogous point can be made about analyzing not just production but most aspects of the Cuban economy— for instance, when it is estimated that most products circulated through the black or secondary market during the early years of the Special Period, it stands to reason that this market was no longer “secondary.” The black market was, and in many respects continues to be, *the* market in Cuba. It is the way many people obtain both basic and luxury goods. It thus deserves the same analytical priority as the state-sanctioned markets in Cuba in economic analyses. The work that goes into running that black market, including the appropriation of goods from state firms so that they can be sold to others, or the use of state equipment to provide services for a charge, can be characterized as a productive activity in Cuba, if not a legal one. For this reason, I cover both legal and illegal kinds of work in this chapter.

Productive Strategy Number 1: State Jobs

The following is a description of a fairly typical interaction with Cuban employees taken from my field notes [2001]:

I needed a halogen bulb for a lamp that I had bought in Havana five months before. The store where I had bought the lamp did not sell bulbs. I asked [two acquaintances] about where to buy the bulbs, and they said they’ve been looking for a halogen bulb for years. The next day I asked [a neighbor] and he suggested that Dita, the electronics store, might carry halogen bulbs. After 30 minutes of dialing, I finally got a call through to Dita and asked if they had any in the store. The clerk on the phone said yes. I rode my bike all the way to the Dita, asked for the halogen bulb, and the clerk at the counter said “We don’t have those.” I told him that I had called, yes this store, I talked to a person, not a machine, just a few minutes ago, and was told they were in stock. He clearly didn’t care, so I stopped trying to make him feel bad for me. I did ask him to call other Ditas and find me one with a bulb in stock, and he agreed. After one call he wrote down the address

for Dita across town and said there was a bulb waiting for me there. I biked to the next Dita, where the man took a little box out from under the counter, opened it up, and said, “This bulb is broken. We have no others.” He tells me that I can come back Monday or Tuesday and maybe they’ll have some then. I know this almost certainly is not true, and I lose my temper. You have no other bulbs? You sell all these halogen lamps (there were half a dozen lamps on the floor) but don’t sell the bulbs? Open the box for one of these lamps and sell me that bulb! No, he says. Ok, then call another Dita store and find me a bulb. I can’t, he says. I tell him to get me a manager. He busies himself behind the counter. I ask someone at the door to get me a manager, words are exchanged on walkie-talkies, and a guard starts to take me upstairs. As we are ascending the staircase, the man in the lamp department motions me back. Immediately, there are many clerks milling around me. I was staring forward in a blind rage, so I’m not sure of all the details here, but it seems to consist of many men taking halogen bulbs out of little boxes, an endless supply of halogen bulbs, and sticking them in lamps to see which work and which don’t. There was a cache of them somewhere, probably being held back for selling on the black market, and my tantrum had shaken them loose. I bought two.

Anyone who has spent time in Cuba can tell similar stories of frustration at the hands of clerks, secretaries, and other state workers, some of whom can seem lazy, incompetent, or hostile to the casual observer. Production workers have a reputation almost as bad as that of service workers. At a funeral at the Colon Cemetery, a friend advised me to watch carefully as the coffin was being lifted from the hearse; Cuban coffins are badly made, he said, so the bottom—and the body--will sometimes fall out. Then again, when the self-employed repairman saw the broken seat and shredded pedals on my brand-new bicycle, he said “It must be Cuban.” “No, it’s Chinese,” I corrected. To which he replied, “Same thing.” In fact, many Cubans avoid Cuban-made products when they can, and anything that is well-made is called “American,” regardless of where it’s from. While I never expected to become fully accustomed to the poor treatment I sometimes received in state firms, nor the shoddy products I sometimes bought, it was a surprise to watch Cubans who had never known anything else brought to the edge of reason by a run-in with a state employee or a particularly disappointing purchase. A good friend buried his head in his hands after a banker could not find the money in his account, and seemed disinclined to work on resolving the problem any further. Muttering, he described the work attitudes of his countrymen as “a plague.”

My point here is not to perpetuate the image of the lazy socialist worker. Socialism has not transformed worker behavior as dramatically as it may seem. Instead, the crisis of the Special Period and subsequent policy changes shifted the locus of productive activity out of the official state economy, where things are left to slow down or fall apart, into the secondary economy, where dynamic enterprises are being built. For instance, in the example from my field notes, the

Dita clerks seem to have diverted desirable products like halogen light bulbs from store shelves to the black market, where they can collect all the money from their sale, rather than let it flow into state coffers where, under the socialist system, it rightfully belongs. In the meantime, having fewer light bulbs to offer at the store where they work makes them less effective as store clerks, and likely to incur abuse from frustrated customers like me. But that is the cost of making a living. Work in the state sector is neither profitable nor meaningful for most workers, but such work is to a certain extent, obligatory as a source of goods to sell on the black market and for maintaining a connection to a state that does sometimes distribute goods and services through the firm. Also, because the state during this time pursued a policy of full-employment, under which all Cuban adults were expected to hold a state job, there was little chance of being disciplined or fired for doing low-quality work in the state sector. Under these circumstances, most Cubans consider it reasonable to invest as little as possible of oneself into the state job, while taking everything the job offers to make money on the side. This dynamic has profound consequences on Cuban work life.

What actually characterizes work life in a state firm? One of the first things one notices while conducting daily affairs in Havana is that almost no state worker feels a connection to the firm where they work or the work that they do. Nor do they put much of their selves into their official jobs. Arlie Hochschild (1985) has written much on the subject of “emotion work,” the way in which getting the job done under American capitalism increasingly entails not only acting but feeling, or at least appearing to feel, certain ways. She eloquently describes the high cost, both in terms of energy and psychological consequences, of this practice. By maintaining a division between self and firm, Cubans certainly protect themselves from the consequences of emotion work. But viewed another way, their complete dissociation from their own labor is the very alienation that Marx believed made workers less human in the long run. Alienation from labor was one trap the Cuban socialist state clearly did not succeed in avoiding.

One way this dissociation manifests is the quickness with which a Cuban worker shifts from their work-identity into another social role. A bank teller, after citing arcane bank policy to refuse to cash the travelers’ checks that I had been successfully cashing at that branch for months, finished our interaction by asking me on a date. I despised him for being so rigid about bank rules and could not understand why he thought I would want to see him socially. Yet, when I coincidentally met him again through mutual friends, he said he saw no reason why I would dislike him *personally* for something he as “the banker” had done. In other instance, a security guard who had tried to forcibly remove me from a computer center for breaking another rule, and seethed when her supervisor intervened on my behalf and insisted that I stay, later approached me with great warmth on the street. While she might have been expressing familiarity with a foreigner to impress her companions, it was still striking how easily she had left her role as guard, and my identity as her nemesis, at the computer center. The message in both cases was that I was silly to take incidents in the workplace personally, because clearly there was no connection between these two people and the work roles they sometimes performed.

The refusal to identify with one's role within the state firm also means that the goals and responsibilities of the enterprise are in no way accepted as those of the workers'. In my fieldwork diary [2000] I describe trying to get a hold of \$700 that had been subtracted from my US bank account but failed to appear in my bank account in Cuba.

I have talked to probably a dozen Cuban bankers now, in person and on the phone. I have to tell the entire story to a new employee every time, because no one will give me their name or commit to dealing with this on an ongoing basis. No one has given the slightest impression that he or she feels responsible for the missing money, or ought to help correct the situation, or will help for any other reason. The first reaction, in most cases, is no reaction at all. This is the end of last part of a conversation I've had many times now:

Me: I did what you told me to do to transfer the money, and now it has been 12 days and I want to know, where is my money?

Banker: What is your name again? Hold on. (Several minutes pass.) Your money is not here.

Me: It's still not there?

Them: No, it's not here. (Silence.)

Every time I am shocked that the banker doesn't offer something more, an explanation, an apology, a rationalization, a theory, a promise, a strategy—there is nothing but silence. The silence is broken only when I say something like “What are you going to do about it?”

Now, typically, the question surprises the banker, who responds by repeating a few more times, “Well, it's not here, it's not in the bank.” Then, invariably, if pushed to offer a solution, the strategy they offer is “you should wait.” Try again tomorrow. I explain that I've waited ten extra days, and nothing has happened, so I have no reason to believe that waiting another day will help. They have no other suggestion, typically, so at this point I usually try an appeal to expertise. “Isn't there someone who knows more about how international transfers work?” I ask. Usually the phone is passed to someone else, to whom I must repeat the story, but that person never provides any more information than the first person, and the cycle repeats. If I protest long enough, or if I tell them I am out of money and start to cry, the person takes my phone number and promises to call me the next day with more information. The call never comes.

It's like these people have nothing to do with their jobs. I feel like I'm telling the story of my missing money to a bus driver, baker, or corpse, to someone who has never been in a bank-- not someone who is working in one right this very second!

My battle with the Cuban bankers reveals as much about my own enculturation in a capitalist society as it does theirs in a socialist one. In hindsight, I notice with some embarrassment that I told each banker that I “did what *you* told me” to transfer money. I really meant that I did what *another* banker had told me, what “the bank” had told me—as a capitalist subject, I regard individual employees interchangeably, and conflate them all with the firm, which somehow speaks through their mouths. But to a Cuban this conflation of firm and person is insanity; the person talking to me each time is a unique individual to whom I have never spoken, who had offered me no advice about transferring money, and thus feels no responsibility for the problem I have had accessing it. Equally bizarre was my expectation that the banker would feel obliged to speak to or rectify what was not her own error. *This* banker's job is to answer the phone or come to the counter and report on the presence or absence of money in an account—something each person I spoke to did flawlessly. Therefore, my recriminations fell lightly on them. Finally, it seems to me, if I had told my story of missing money to a Cuban bus driver or baker (though not a corpse), I *would* have been warmly consoled and intelligently advised—Cubans often show genuine concern for strangers in a bind, they just don't do it as part of a state job, as Castro himself noted.

So deep is the cultural avoidance of “emotion work” that even in situations where that orientation could be lucrative, it is nowhere to be found. This suggests that Cubans, almost all of whom have an interest in increasing their income, do not know that such emotion work is, in some cases, expected of them by those coming from outside Cuba. A waitress in a luxury tourist hotel, for example, could increase her tips if she did the emotion work that tourists from most countries are accustomed to in a server – smiling, making eye contact, expressing interest and concern. Yet one almost never sees a server engage in such behavior in Cuba, regardless of where they work. In an online discussion group on a website called Trip Advisor in 2009, a British tourist who had travelled to Cuba in the summer of 2009 complained about the service at a landmark Havana restaurant: “As we had already chosen the set lunch, the maitre d' didn't have to take our order, and he and the waiter managed four courses of service without looking at us, speaking or smiling. OMG we have never had such arrogant, bad service. We were smiling and trying to get some kind of reaction, but to no avail.” What the British tourist interpreted as arrogance on the part of the maitre d' and waiters was probably intended by them to be a crisp, professional service, evidence of their training by Cuban tourism schools. Both the failure of these Cuban waiters to perform what these visitors see as normal emotion work in a customer service setting—smiling, making eye contact, chatting—and the visitor's angry reaction, are very typical of the nascent tourism industry.

Lest one conclude that all of these disinterested or taciturn workers I encountered are “*militantes*” who withhold good service from imperialist visitors, but lavish it on their fellow countrymen, I can say with confidence that it is not so. From many observations and conversations I learned that most Cuban workers treat their Cuban customers much worse than they treated me. Cuban customers, whether they are seeking service in a typical neighborhood business or entering one of the hard currency establishments that were, until recently, off limits to them, are regularly met with open shows of disrespect from service workers. The reasons for this, which involve the social dislocations created by the legalization of hard currency, will be discussed in the next chapter.

All of this is not to say that state workers are never nice or that interactions with them never go smoothly—an individual worker might take a liking to a customer, whether a local or foreigner, and treat him or her warmly. For example, when she saw how much I enjoyed buying the old movie posters being sold in the lobby, one movie theater employee ushered me to a back room where even more of the posters were kept. Cuban workers are rarely nice on account of it being part of their job, however.

In addition to the striking absence of emotion work, Cuban work differs from capitalist work in other ways as well. Speeding up, or, creating conditions for faster work habits, is a central facet of capitalism. Starting with the time and motion studies of Frederick Winslow Taylor (1911), capitalists have known that time is money, and profit is maximized when people work at maximum speed. Much has been written about the socialization of workers into the norms of capitalist time: how to get people who were once accustomed to measuring time by the change of seasons to accept the discipline of the alarm clock and the factory bell, how to accelerate human rhythms to match as closely as possible the relentless movement of machines. In recent years, the time-space compression of the post-Fordist, capitalist system has required an even stricter discipline regarding time.

Cuban socialism, on the other hand, is all about slowing down. In their work in state enterprises, many Cubans seem intent on making each of their actions take up the maximum amount of time. According to Bengelsdorf (1994), a 1968 time-loss study of over two hundred state firms “. . . revealed that fully a quarter to a half of each workday was wasted, the result of overstaffing and poor labor discipline” (98); perhaps because the data is so damning, it is difficult to find any time-loss studies published later than that date. While some workers may be consciously deciding to prolong each task, most are simply following workplace norms about how things are done -- that is, slowly.

Just like speeding up a work process, slowing down takes its own kind of discipline, as impatient customers and clients sometimes try to instigate an increase in speed that workers have to subtly resist. I once watched two clerks at a food stand spend 15 minutes selling two lollipops and a package of bouillon cubes to a single customer while the line reached ten people long. That slowness didn’t happen by accident. To maintain it in that instance, the clerks scrupulously avoided eye contact with the people waiting in line. They divided roles, one clerk handing over products and the other working the cash register, and kept strictly to that division of labor. If one

clerk was forced to leave the counter, or was monopolized by an indecisive customer, then the second clerk would stop work completely rather than try to do her companion's job as well as her own.

This rigidity of work roles, and the resultant slowing down of work flow, is common. At the institute where I studied, only one of the office secretaries would accept my monthly tuition payment. When she was at home taking care of a sick pet, I was instructed to come back with the money in a few days rather than to put the envelope in another person's hands. At an office supply counter, people trying to make copies were instructed to wait until the "compañero-who-makes-copies" returned from lunch. When I asked whether another clerk, many of whom appeared to be idle, could make the copies in his absence, I was told that only the "compañero-who-makes-copies" knew the code needed to start the machine. In yet another instance, probably anyone at the Ministry of Communications could have located the package that waited for me there, but it was their normal practice to say that only a certain co-worker – say, Marco -- can hand over packages—Marco, who was apparently always at lunch. In each of these examples, rigid work roles function to slow the pace of work, regardless of the intention of the workers who adhere to these roles.

Another technique for slowing down the pace of work in Cuba is what I will call single-tasking, which is the opposite of the multi-tasking that some post-Fordist workers, especially professional workers, are expected to achieve. In other words, workers in Havana are much more likely to approach work tasks one at a time, rather than do them simultaneously. They are also more likely to stay on a single task until it is completed, rather than interrupt one task to perform another. Single-tasking, I argue, is another technique workers use to slow the pace of state labor. At the food stand described above, the two clerks slowed their work by never doing two or more of their duties simultaneously. If a customer needed a few minutes to decide which of two items to buy, for example, the clerk who handed over the goods would stand motionless at that customer's side, waiting for the decision, rather than handing goods to a second customer while keeping an eye out for the first. Almost every small shop I visited would close down for 30 minutes to an hour whenever a new box of goods had to be placed on shelves. The clerks would *either* wait on customers *or* put all the products from the box into the display case, but never both at once. As I would wait for them to finish, my capitalist mind could not understand why the clerk would not stop restocking long enough to hand me the item I needed, and then return to stocking until the next customer approached. In an even more extreme separation of tasks, I once watched a waitress at a tourist restaurant spend almost 10 minutes to set a single four-top table, prolonging the job by bringing each piece of silverware to the table in a separate trip. The job of carrying a knife was not combined with the job of carrying a plate or fork. It was the opposite of what one sees in the United States, where wait staff are trained to be "full in – full out" – that is, to maximize efficiency by always keeping both hands full of the items that need to be delivered to or removed from customers. The sort of attention to surroundings, flexibility of roles, and multi-tasking that keeps employees of capitalist enterprises working at a nearly inhuman clip are noticeably absent in the Cuban state sector.

Another way to slow the pace of work is to turn away as many clients as possible, or at least to slow their entrance into a firm's realm of responsibility. This goes hand in hand with the strict division of tasks between employees described above – if the one person who hands over packages is not present, all people looking to pick up packages can be sent away, and so on. But state workers place barriers to entry in other ways, such as by imposing seemingly arbitrary time delays on people seeking service. The bankers who could not find my money often suggested that I wait a few days before bringing my complaint again. The receptionist at the medical clinic for foreigners always suggested I come in the following week, even though the clinic was empty of patients and full of medical staff on the day when I finally convinced her to make an immediate appointment. A grocery store by my house paid an employee to divert people away from a display of sausages, then to hide them beneath plastic bags for an entire day before putting prices on them so they could be sold. Some percentage of people, once turned away, will not return, lowering the overall workload of those at that state firm and possibly ensuring some items can be sold in the black market.

The descriptions above should not be understood as a condemnation of Cuban state workers. Work practices that are ineffective or irrational from the point of view of capitalist accumulation are revealed to be effective and rational when understood for what they are--strategies to slow the pace of state work. The desire to slow down state work is itself strategic, a rational adaptation to actual circumstances. A worker's energy is a limited resource, so it makes sense that most Cubans, who cannot support their families with earnings from state jobs, will conserve it where they can, then direct it to more lucrative ends. And the policy of full employment means that few people are at risk of losing a state job for going too slow. In some cases the worker makes a conscious decision to work slowly, but in most cases, workers are merely adapting to norms that have been set through countless actions of many workers over the years. Workplace culture tells each and every one to go slow.

Productive Strategy Number 2: Jobs in the Emerging Economy

There is one important exception to the orientation toward state work described in the section above; Cubans are enthusiastic about holding jobs within Cuba's "emerging economy." The emerging economy encompasses the firms that were created after the market reforms that began in 1993, most of which are either foreign-owned or grant regular access to foreigners (Brundenius 2002, 378). Cubans fortunate enough to work in this sector have several incentives to perform their jobs well.

The Cuban government had actually passed a Foreign Investment Law (Decree Law 50) in 1982, but that law was written in such a way that it did not attract much attention from investors, who were wary of the Revolution's history of asset appropriation. However, in 1995, "when Cuba's desperate need for foreign earnings made it open up on a great scale to international tourism . . . the Cuban National Assembly amended the Constitution in order to give assurances to potential foreign investors that it was safe to invest in the island . . . These changes were later

codified in the Foreign Investment Law (Law 77)” (Brundenius 2002, 373). Spadoni (2004a) writes that Law 77 “set out specific guarantees for foreign firms by establishing full protection and security against expropriation, and opened all sectors of the Cuban economy (except public health, education services, and armed forces) to foreign investment. It also abolished the limit of 49% of foreign shares for joint ventures and authorized for the first time the possibility of 100% wholly foreign owned investment” (118). As a result of these changes, by 2000, 400 agreements were signed with investors from Spain (23% of contracts), Canada (19%), Italy (9%), France, the UK, and Mexico. (Brundenius 2002, 374). Most of the new businesses were in mining, oil exploration, telecommunications and tourism (ibid). Buoyed by foreign investment, by 2004 the tourist industry was estimated to employ, directly or indirectly, 300,000 people in Cuba (Álvarez and Mattar 2004: 15) and to contribute significantly to the country’s balance of payments (Brundenius 2002, 383).

Tourist jobs, especially, are highly desirable in Havana, whether the work is in a foreign-owned firm or in state firm that offer services to the growing population of foreign visitors. While the Cuban government remains the sole legal employer in Cuba, and earns revenue by providing labor to the foreign-owned firms operating on the island, the foreign firms are permitted to add hard currency bonuses to the peso salaries earned by their Cuban employees (ibid 378). Emerging economy workers can also earn hard currency in the form of tips from foreigners or as payment for black market services they provide them (Espina Prieto and Rodríguez Ruiz 2010). Because they are more lucrative and thus more desirable, many emerging economy jobs are reserved for members of the Communist Party, one of the few remaining economic perquisites of party membership. The fact that even low-level service jobs (maid, cook) in the emerging economy pay far more than the most prestigious jobs (doctor, manager) of the traditional state sector has had a range of economic and social consequences, that will be discussed in the later sections on social division and “brain waste.”

Productive Strategy Number 3: Remittances, Inheritances

As described in the previous chapters, during the Special Period the state needed a way to absorb the US dollars that were already circulating illegally in the black market economy, and it wanted to encourage Cubans living abroad to send more hard currency to family on the island. So in June 1993, the government made it legal for Cuban citizens to possess and spend hard currency. To recoup some of that currency, the state also opened dollar stores across the country (García Molina 2005, 32). Eckstein (2007) calls this process the “dollarization” of the Cuban economy.

While there are no truly reliable statistics about Cuban remittances, those who research the subject have estimated that between 300 million and 1.2 billion dollars were sent to Cubans every year during the late 1990s and 2000s (Álvarez and Mattar 2004, 17, Brenner 2007, 180, García Molina 2005, 32, Mesa-Lago 2003, 104, Spadoni 2004b, 95). Remittances are not distributed to the entire population—economist Sarah Blue (2004, 71) calculates that 34% of

Cubans receive them, a figure which nearly matches the 37% Pérez-López and Diaz-Briquet discovered through surveys (2005, 403). It appears that two-thirds of remittances are sent from the United States, and that in general small amounts of money are sent; only 1% of respondents reported receiving more than \$200 per month (*ibid*). While most remittances are sent by family members, the increased number of foreigners who now travel to the island (Mesa-Lago 2003, 106, Brundenius 2002, 383) means that more Cubans, especially in Havana, can potentially build a relationship with someone who, upon returning home, will send them remittances. In all, more than 60 percent of the Cuban population is estimated to have some source of hard currency, whether in remittances, salary bonuses, tips and other payments from foreigners (Eckstein 2007, 185).

While it may seem odd to characterize collecting remittances as a productive activity, in many cases this money does not come without a good deal of work, most of it the sort of “emotion work” (Hochschild 1985) that Cubans don’t do in their state jobs. Remittances require the production of certain kinds of relationships between the giver and recipient, which can be quite different from the relationship that existed when both were present on the island. Elements of the patron-client relationship emerge between people who had previously been related as siblings, parent and child, spouses, or lovers. Receiving remittances requires fostering intimacy, or its appearance, and maintaining it over time. It is work to remain a presence, and a financial priority, in the lives of Cubans who have long since left the island, or of visitors who spent just a few short days there. Those who receive remittances work to maintain relationships across long distances, hindered by the unreliability of mail, the illegality of internet, and the high cost of international calls. The occasional in-person visit by benefactors requires an additional set of effort and accommodations. Like any sort of emotion work, it can take its toll on people.

For example, Roberto did not hold a state job and rarely labored in the secondary economy, but he lived well on a steady stream of money sent by his mother who had moved to Miami. In a very unusual situation, his mother lived off money that had been earned in Cuba; the illegal business machinations of Roberto’s high ranking father, now deceased, had generated enough money to support a comfortable lifestyle for his widow in the US. But Roberto’s relationship with his mother was full of tension, as she encouraged him and his brother to stay on the island, keeping hold of some of the family’s valuable properties, while he pushed her to help repatriate him, his wife, and his children to Miami, where he hoped eventually to live independently of her largess. It is not an exaggeration to say that Roberto’s “job” was maintaining a relationship with his mother, and that the job was a difficult one.

Many people who rely on remittances to survive share with Roberto a pervading sense of uneasiness, as their source of income feels far beyond their control. A moment of great tension is when money that is expected does not come. In another example, Julio was left wondering whether his half-sister had decided to stop making regular contributions from her new home in Germany, or whether the transfer had been misplaced. Equally tense is the division of money sent to a single person (to minimize transfer costs) but intended for “everyone” in the family,

however that group may be defined. Money sometimes comes with conditions attached, which recipients struggle to meet.

This preoccupation with wealth from abroad is apparently the result of a widespread belief in an urban legend involving an English inheritance. More than one Cuban of my acquaintance mentioned to me that they had family money coming to them in the form of a large inheritance from an English ancestor named Monso. As the story goes, Senor Monso long ago made an investment somewhere in Europe, the profits were earning interest in an English bank, and his wealth would soon be divided between his Cuban descendents. My Spanish tutor, one of the few relentlessly loyal Castro supporters whom I met, reported that his cousin and her twenty closest relatives were entitled to 4.7 million dollars *each* once the details of the will were settled. The store clerks on the corner knew Monso people, and one of the vice presidents at the culinary school I attended considered himself one. Supposedly, the existence of the money and the will had been reported in Cuban newspapers (which I was unable to find), and some of the descendents had begun buying items on credit using their future inheritance as collateral.

Productive Strategy Number 4: *Cuentapropista*

Before the Special Period reforms, 94% of Cubans worked for the state, the only exception being a small number of private farmers (Brundenius 2002, 376). And most of that 94% worked in large firms. This is because for many years, Cuban central planners concentrated on developing heavy industry at the expense of fulfilling domestic consumer needs (Humphrey 2002). As labor and other resources were first poured into the nickel and sugar industry, then into biotechnology and tourism, there has always been a shortage of state firms charged with smaller tasks like making clothes, cutting hair, or serving prepared food outside the home. To satisfy domestic needs, Cuba experimented with small private business in the 1980s, including the *agros*. When these *agros* proved much more successful than the state markets at providing varied and reasonably affordable fresh food, many of the farmers involved became rich. The vociferous objection of some urbanites to this sudden accumulation of wealth by rural people was enough to disrupt the smooth functioning of the state, and by the late 1980s, all *agros* were shut down as part of the Campaign to Rectify Errors and Correct Negative Tendencies, called the “Rectification” for short (Benjamin, Collins, and Scott 1989, Torres Vila and Pérez Rojas 1997).

But the state could not continue to build its monopoly over the economy once the Soviet Union fell. During the Special Period, the state found itself unable to provide even basic consumer goods and services at a level that would satisfy most Cubans (Eckstein 1994, Eckstein 2007, Enríquez 2003, Mesa Lago 2003, Pérez-López 2003). To help meet demand, in September 1993 the government issued a list of 117 small businesses (Brenner et al. 2007, 169), soon expanded to 157, which could be owned and run by individual Cubans (Álvarez and Mattar 2004: 177).

The new small business owners, called *cuentapropistas*, were saddled with high taxes and prohibited from hiring employees. Despite these and other restrictions, as of 2003, 153,000

people worked as licensed *cuentapropistas* (*ibid*). The most common licenses in Havana were for street food vending and porch-front cafeterias, messengers, artisans, hair stylists, and private taxi drivers (Brenner 2007, 171).³ While the wealthiest and most visible *cuentapropistas* today are those that cater to tourists, a larger number cater to their own countrymen, providing the closest thing to a vibrant domestic economy that Cuba has had since 1959.

In Havana, *cuentapropistas* continue to be the most reliable source of palatable, fresh and prepared food. Every neighborhood now has an agro market, where “farmers”—many are in fact middlemen illegally employed by the actual farmers -- sell side by side with state-employed clerks. The *cuentapropistas* employ various marketing techniques to attract buyers to their produce, rather than that sold by the state. For instance, while produce offered by the state-employed vendors are sold still caked with dirt, the *cuentapropistas* in the market wash and peel the produce they sell to make it more attractive to consumers (see also Torres Vila and Pérez Rojas 1997, 39). *Cuentapropistas* excel in the area of prepared food--street vendors sell fresh, roasted pork sandwiches to commuters at a fraction of the price of the processed, frozen pork cutlets fried up in drab state restaurants. The sandwich seller might have raised and slaughtered the pig himself, as the law requires, or illegally purchased it from another person dedicated to such a task. Even in hot, crowded bus stations it is not uncommon to see an independent baker with a giant, elaborately decorated cake on his shoulder, which he slices and serves to waiting travelers, who eat it straight from their hands. The baker is expected to buy all of his ingredients from the state-run dollar stores, and be prepared to show the receipts to police, but in nearly every instance a baker buys his sugar, flour, and eggs on the black market, from a person who diverted the product from the legal, state distribution stream. As fewer state firms can afford to provide lunch to employees, a market has emerged for affordable box lunches sold at worksites. The daughter of my Spanish tutor, an outstanding student and party loyalist who was trained in finance in Hungary before taking an important military job, used the excuse of a back injury to leave state work and dedicate herself to making sandwiches for workers in her neighborhood instead. Sandwich-making, combined with teaching English in her home, has given her a much higher income than she could earn working for the state.

Cuentapropistas also help alleviate the transportation situation in Havana, which has been in a state of crisis since the start of the Special Period (Pérez-López 1993, 181). Many Cubans rely on bicycles to get around, creating a large market for affordable bike repair, which only *cuentapropistas* provide. And the need to keep bikes safe has given rise to paid bicycle parking lots, or *parqueos*—on almost every block one can find a house where, in exchange for a few pesos, the owners will watch over your bike. *Cuentapropistas* also service all the privately owned cars, which are nearly always sources of income in themselves. Those who are lucky enough to own cars that still run use them to chauffeur Cubans who are fortunate enough to have enough cash to pay for that service.

³While beyond the scope of this dissertation, an analogous process of self-employment was taking place in the countryside, where to increase production and deal with input shortages, large state farms were split into smaller cooperatives and private farmers were allowed to sell directly to the market (Enríquez 2003).

Tourists have far more money to spend than Cubans do, so it is not surprising that some *cuentapropistas* focus on providing goods and services to them. While *paladares*, or private restaurants, are open to Cubans, many of them serve meals that few Cubans could afford—the owners find it more lucrative to ply the tourist trade rather than cook for their neighbors. Most tourists choose the well-marked state-owned taxis over hiring a private car, but the people who drive taxis for the state often earn money by acting as concierges, directing tourists to the restaurants and rental rooms of *cuentapropistas*, who reward the driver with tips. People visiting Cuba for more than a few weeks often rely on independent brokers to locate apartments that can be rented at a lower cost than rooms in hotels or licensed *casas particulares*. Even esoteric professional skills can be converted into a private business directed towards earning the tourist dollar. A professor at one institute sold instructional CD ROMs about Cuban culture; another professor sold seats in his courses to foreigners. Language courses are also in high demand; Cubans will pay a lot to study English with a qualified teacher, and foreigners will pay even more to learn Spanish. Doctors often let foreigners know that they will make house calls for a fee.

It is not incidental that a large number of *cuentapropistas*, including most of those described above, operate in part or completely outside the law in doing business (Brenner 2007, 169). Cubans have their own word for this. The verb *resolver*, meaning literally “to resolve,” refers to a situation in which some amount of personal ingenuity is used to overcome obstacles and accomplish a task. While *resolver* does not always entail acting illegally, it tends to, as the productive life of Cubans is governed by restrictive laws that are oftentimes discreetly evaded. The *cuentapropistas* are masters at “resolving” the problems created by the legal restrictions on their businesses. For example, owners of *paladares* are required by law to buy all the food they serve at state dollar stores, where costs are high. Because they cannot afford to do so, most choose to *resolver* this situation by buying ingredients on the black market and forging store receipts to show to inspectors (see also Álvarez and Mattar 2004, 177). A *casa particular* owner might diligently pay the taxes on one rental room but rent out a second room without reporting it to the state, in order to avoid doubling the tax owed. The prohibition on hiring employees can sometimes be circumvented by inventing genealogies which make almost anyone a distant cousin. Prohibited foods like lobster are not printed on *paladar* menus, but are offered verbally to tourists. Those selling their artwork in the marketplaces are rarely as creative as they claim to be. Almost all are middlemen who pay artists to supply them with the goods they sell under their own names. These subversions of the law often make the difference between success and failure for the small business owner in Cuba.

Even with such strategies in place, there are very real limits to the wealth one can make as a *cuentapropista*. Business owners spend much of what they earn on fees and taxes, not to mention bribes for inspectors whom they count on to overlook some violations. And while those costs are relatively fixed--fees and taxes are charged at a flat rate, not as a percentage of earnings-- income can range wildly, making staying in business difficult. But there are economic rewards for successful self-employment. One market vendor I knew was elated to earn the equivalent of

\$6.50 US profit for his 40 hours of work that week. I was appalled by his hourly wage, but he was not, since his frame of reference was people who worked 40 hours for a state firm and took home the equivalent of \$2.50 US. Eckstein (2007, 180) estimates that the typical *cuentapropista* earns two and half times the average state employee salary, making what my friend earned fairly typical. Even though most *cuentapropistas* I knew expressed satisfaction with their jobs, especially as they compare to working for a state firm, it was hard for them to avoid feeling resentment as they see increasing numbers of foreign businessmen open more profitable medium-sized firms with government support. “It’s okay if the Spanish or Argentine executives get rich, but no Cuban must enrich him or herself,” one Cuban photographer lamented. Another man, a father who earned a few dollars a month repairing electronic goods for his neighbors while his wife earned slightly more catering parties for Cubans and foreign residents, became agitated one day as he recounted the story of one Cuban, “an idiot,” who “married a Venezuelan, left the country, came back as a foreign business owner, and became rich. He had to become a foreigner so he could become rich—once he did that, it was easy.”

While both government and privately-collected statistics suggest that a relatively small fraction (3.4%) of Cuban people operate licensed small businesses (Álvarez and Mattar 2004, 177), many more *biznear*—do business outside of the law—today than ever before. This is because heavy taxes and tight restrictions provide a disincentive for working as a licensed *cuentapropista* (Brenner 2007, 171), while the presence of the licensed *cuentapropistas* provides a cover for unlicensed entrepreneurial activities. For example, one young man without a home of his own but with a strong entrepreneurial bent negotiated with several homeowners in his town to start a chain of *casa particulares*, in which he would fill the rooms with people from his small circle of foreign contacts in exchange for a 60% share of the room rental proceeds. Once he negotiated the deal with the homeowners, he successfully built relationships with small tour companies who provided a steady stream of clients. His business was highly profitable and completely outside of the law, but because it resembled the legal *casa particular* businesses, it survived. In the end, however, it makes little sense to draw a strong distinction between licensed and unlicensed small businesses, given that nearly all the licensed businesses regularly circumvent some aspect of the law.

Everybody Steals: The Culture of *Trapicheo*

I stop to buy a soda at one of the hard currency snack bars common in Nuevo Vedado, the most modern section of Havana and one center of tourist activity. The clerk, a man of about forty dressed in the striped shirt and tan slacks that are the uniform of this chain, sets a can of soda on the steel counter between us, and I hand him a US dollar. As I pop open the soda and take a drink, he turns to the cash register and rings up my purchase. He takes the change from the drawer, turns to me, and pours the coins into my hand. I make a fist around the money as I mumble my thanks and step aside quickly to let the next customer in the long line behind me reach the counter. But because of my growing interest in this sort of exchange, a few steps from

the counter I remember to open my fist and count the change that is there, rather than just stuff it in my pocket. I had given him one dollar for a 55 cent soda, so I hope to find 45 cents in change. But in my hand I have only 40 cents. I've been overcharged again.

I turn to face the clerk. The clerk, now smiling, pushes a nickel towards me that is sitting on the counter. I forgot my nickel, his gesture implies, and I should take it. I go back up to the counter, sheepishly take the nickel, thank him again, and leave. I am confused. The change was passed from his hand to mine, not placed on the counter, wasn't it? And if that nickel had dropped as the change passed between our hands, wouldn't I have heard it hit the counter? Eventually I realized that the nickel has most likely been sitting on the counter all afternoon, and it belongs to the rare tourist who counts her change, finds it a nickel short, and is shameless enough to ask about it. This is trapicheo.

As mentioned in the introduction, trapicheo comes from the word "trapiche," the part of a sugar mill that squeezes the juice from the cane—trapicheo is the act of "putting the squeeze" on someone or something. Trapicheo in the purest sense involves using cleverness, ingenuity, or trickiness to make money at the expense of the mark. That may be a tourist, a fellow Cuban, or an institution of the state. A trapicheo, once developed, tends to be repeated until it is shut down by a higher authority or no longer turns a profit. Perhaps the closest word in English would be "scam" or "con" although these carry too strong a negative connotation. Whereas in the US a con artist is a relatively rare and marginal individual, in Cuba there are few families that can afford not to have some of its members engaged in some regular form of trapicheo. When Medea Benjamin wrote about Cuba in the 1980s, she observed some butchers "short-weighting" meat to sell the excess on the black market (Benjamin, Collins, and Scott 1989, 45); what she saw as an isolated and objectional act had become very typical of the Cuba I lived in. Trapicheo is for most Cubans a necessary part of life, a method of *resolviendo* the problem of low wages, part of la lucha.

While certain forms of theft are ubiquitous in the United States (one thinks of underreporting income on tax forms, talking office supplies from work, charging private lunches to a business account), trapicheo differs in some important respects. For one, trapicheo is more common and has a far greater level of acceptance in Cuba than the American variants do. And unlike most workplace theft in the US, trapicheo is for most of its Cuban practitioners a fundamental productive activity. Its earnings are essential to meeting basic needs. Put even more simply, many Cuban families could not survive in the absence of trapicheo. Understanding trapicheo is, I argue, essential to understanding the culture, economy, and politics of contemporary Cuba. In this section, I will describe and classify some trapicheos of which I am aware, try to delineate the social rules that separate trapicheo from theft, examine how Cubans themselves think and feel about trapicheo, and then insert my own theory of the unexpected consequences, both good and bad, of an economy that revolves around taking a little bit more than one is entitled to.

The Facts of Trapicheo

Tourists are the preferred target for trapicheo for anyone lucky enough to have regular access to them. Even a simple trick can separate a tourist from a large amount of money by Cuban standards, and tourists lack the cultural capital to pick up on most schemes. And even if he or she does notice a trapicheo, a tourist may quietly overlook the loss of some money rather than raise a fuss. For instance, a taxi driver, by failing to turn on the meter in his state-owned cab, can put the fare into his own pocket. Some drivers will ask the passenger to agree to a price for the off-meter trip before it begins. Other less scrupulous drivers wait until the end of the ride then demand a much higher than normal price to see if the tourist has the knowledge and the courage to dispute it (they seldom have both). A waiter in a restaurant frequented by foreigners or dollar-holding Cubans might add a few cents or dollars to the total on the bill and divert the difference to his pocket. One Cuban friend observed that if a bill arrives at the table and the price of each dish is not listed on it, this is a sign that the total at the bottom is greater than the true cost of the meal. If one asks the waiter to note the price of each item separately, often the bill will be returned, without comment, with a new, lower total at the bottom. At snack bars in popular tourist locations, employees will hide the state-issued price lists, increase the price of beverages, and keep the difference for themselves. One of the most lucrative instances of trapicheo I observed was in the lobby of a Spanish-owned luxury hotel, in which the workers tending the international phone booths exaggerated by a minute or two the time spent on the line, allowing them to overcharge guests up to \$8 per minute for calls to Europe. Most tourist trapicheos, however, net no more than two dollars, and sometimes as little as five cents, for each iteration.

Because the percentage of Cubans working in the tourist industry is small, even in Havana, most acts of trapicheo focus on domestic targets instead. Probably the most common form of trapicheo squeezes the Cuban state itself, as a great many people take items from state workplaces and resell them on the black market. This type of trapicheo is analogous to workplace theft in the US – taking home office supplies, overcharging business accounts – but it seems to be done on a larger scale by more people in Cuba. Mona Rosendahl's (1998) impressions matched my own. In the late 1980s she observed the "rather innocent activity of pilfering light bulbs or paper," from state workplaces, "to the much more serious crime of organized theft of construction materials or other high-value goods" (40). Rosendahl did not, however, suggest that either practice was commonplace, as it had become during the Special Period. More than one Cuban named easy access to resalable goods as the primary criteria for their job choices in the 1990s. "I really liked the job (in a radio station), but I had to quit," remembered one young man with a laugh. "There was nothing there to steal. Nothing! And we looked!" He later trained as a cigar roller and began work in one of Havana's legendary cigar factories. This was an extremely appealing job from the standpoint of trapicheo, as cigars are value dense—a small package carries a high price—and are one of the only black market items that can be sold to tourists as well as Cubans. The young man regularly smuggled cigars out of the factory in his underclothes, and every few weeks he'd carry out the thin wood panels of an

unconstructed cigar box under his shirt. In keeping with the nature of *trapicheo*, this young man developed a moneymaking strategy and repeated it hundreds of times. Taking home cigars was not an impulsive or occasional act for him, but his primary source of income and the center of his productive life.

Most of what is taken from state workplaces is not nearly as iconic as the Cuban cigar, but can still be valuable on the black market. The valorization of kitchen work that has occurred in Cuba over the last decade has much to do with the ease with which kitchen workers can take home and resell scarce food items, especially meat. Given the unending need to repair crumbling housing in Havana, building materials also bring high prices on the black market. A Canadian executive I met once remarked that firms building structures in Cuba import twice the amount of building materials that one would normally need, as half of the supplies will be carried away from the site by workers. That “shrinkage” is considered a cost of doing business in Cuba

What cannot be stolen in its entirety from a state workplace can sometimes be stolen in part. In the dollar stores bottles of liquid detergent are seldom more than three-quarters full, as an inch or two of product is siphoned off and used or resold by employees. Some rum, too, is often poured from each bottle and replaced with water, so the absence is not apparent to the eye. In the peso economy, through which less desirable goods are distributed, the same practices occur. A worker at a ground beef factory explained how employees take home part of the meat intended for the mix and replace its weight by adding fat, cartilage, and bone from the waste pile. She added that at the state bodegas where the *picadillo* (a ground beef and soy product) is distributed, the workers take another part of it away and make up what’s missing by adding water. And things that cannot be stolen can sometimes be used and returned. I was told of clothing store employees wearing clothes from the store, washing them out, and placing them back on the shelves.

Another form of *trapicheo* that puts the squeeze on the state itself involves using the time, equipment, and raw materials of state businesses to do private work. This type of work, called *chivo*, which translates to “goat,” is extremely common. In many factories, workers openly use materials and equipment during their lunch hours, before and after work to do their own business (Espina Prieto and Rodríguez Ruiz 2010).

Like trading in the black market, *chivo* fosters the creation of broad social networks—what some jokingly refer to *sociolismo*, *socio* being the Spanish word for “buddy” (Fernández 2003, 231). This is because rarely does one workplace have all the equipment and skills needed to complete a job. For instance, when I poked a hole in the wall of my freezer and emptied it of freon, the repair was delayed for about a week while the man with access to freon tried to find an acquaintance who could weld the hole shut.

The Vertical Slice: Managers and the State

In her landmark piece “Up the Anthropologist: Perspectives Gained from Studying Up” (1972), Laura Nader called on anthropologists who customarily focused on people with little

power in a given society to turn their analytic gaze towards people in power (Nader 1972). In developing her theory, Nader argued that while power must be taken into account, it was not sufficient to study power holders exclusively. To understand life in any part of the world, including our own, one must examine a “vertical slice” that includes the powerful, the powerless, and those that mediate between them. To a discipline that was accustomed to looking downward or horizontally at cultural phenomena, this was a radical approach. One shortcoming of my research on trapicheo is that, due to problems of access, I learned much more about the trapicheo of ordinary workers than I did about the trapicheos of managers and bureaucrats. My limited access skews my results—the African sociologist Achille Mbembé (2001) noticed the same tendency in the studies of “corruption,” where analysts see only the behavior of those at lowest levels of society then devise a theory of corruption that excludes the more powerful from critique.

In my ethnographic work, however, I was able to discuss trapicheo with a few middle managers. From these conversations, and from workers’ observations of their own managers, a portrait emerges in which most managers know about and accept the trapicheo of employees, while developing more lucrative trapicheos for themselves. This resonates with Mbembé’s own work in Zaire, where he details the tendency of those in power to gain financially from their posts (Mbembé 2001). In Africa this is called “the politics of the belly,” and can be summed up in the colloquial phrase “the goat eats where it is tethered” (Bayart 1993). One Cuban boss described the concept of *cobertura*, which means “covering” or “frosting,” as central in the management of Cuban state businesses. When ordering supplies from the state distribution centers, managers typically exaggerate the amount of goods needed by the firm, or needed to compensate for the percentage that would be lost, broken, or wasted--what a capitalist manager might call shrinkage. Only, she says, “nothing is wasted” in the Cuban firm; all *cobertura* items that enter are actually appropriated by employees in a predictable fashion. An ironic side-effect of the trapicheo system is that employees’ intense attention to products makes actual wastage uncommon and theft by customers nearly impossible-- almost everything that is “lost” in Cuban stores goes to the employees in an orderly fashion. Security guards hired to prevent theft of goods by employees, such as those hired to pat down workers as they leave cigar factories, are in the same precarious economic position as the people they watch. As such they can often be paid off and thus incorporated into the networks of trapicheo they are ostensibly there to disrupt.

Managers not only overlook the trapicheo of their employees; they participate actively in trapicheo as well. Managers can adopt the same tactics as their employees, but take them to a higher level. One worker on a construction site mentioned that while he was limited to taking material that could be concealed on his body, his supervisor had enough authority to bring vehicles onto the site to carry away goods. Their authority also allows managers to engineer trapicheos that would be impossible for regular employees. “Notice that there aren’t any sale signs in the stores this year?” a friend asked me during my second holiday season in Havana. That’s because the managers stopped advertising the discounts to the public so they can charge full price and divert the difference to themselves. Managers of dollar stores are also known to

contract with private producers within Cuba, who illegally manufacture goods like coffee and rum on a small scale. These producers give managers bottles of rum and bags of coffee, packaged in wrappers that are culled from trash piles or stolen from state firms, to sell in the state stores. These privately-made goods share shelf space with what is legitimately produced or imported by state firms. All earnings from the sale of the private market goods, however, are diverted from the state revenue stream and shared by the managers and manufacturers. While the products are sometimes indistinguishable from state goods, Cuban shoppers know, for instance, that coffee produced by the state reaches the store in hard, vacuum-packed bricks, while the coffee produced independently arrives in the same bags, but loosely packed.

A Life History

Trapicheo is not an opportunity to be taken should one merely present itself; trapicheos are sought out and cultivated. Some Cubans give their career histories as a series of increasingly sophisticated and profitable trapicheos, rather than a series of legitimate state jobs. To demonstrate this we can look at the work history of Julio. He developed his first trapicheos in his late teens, while fulfilling his military requirement. He described the army as a training ground for trapicheo, where a variety of factors including extremely low pay, separation from family, access to goods that are scarce in the civilian world, and a culture that rewards acts of bravado and machismo combine to make trapicheo endemic. Julio recalled the army as “like a prison—it’s where all your senses are confused, and then you begin to think differently about things.” He never worried about the consequences of being caught in the act of trapicheo, because, in his words, “in military service, you’re not afraid of anything. You become a delinquent.” Julio worked in a brigade that repaired tanks, trucks, and other combat-related machinery. Soon, he said “I began—not to steal—but to *find* gasoline, and I would sell that.” Car owners living near the base would approach him and others in the brigade looking for gas, oil, and parts; soon regular buying and selling relationships were established, and the trapicheo intensified. With obvious anxiety he recalls:

What I’m saying is very, very delicate, do you understand me? These were cars used in combat that we were trapichando, and we were taking everything, so sometimes the cars weren’t good for anything afterwards. They were no longer combat-ready. They had no gas, they had no oil, they were missing pieces of the motor, you understand, things that we found in order to sell.

Every few months officers not involved in these particular trapicheos would inspect the vehicles, and there would be a tremendous outcry. But, as Julio said, “then, what are they going to do?” Given that most of the 5,000 people in the unit had access to the vehicles, it was very difficult to discover who had stolen what. Also, the incremental destruction of the vehicles was just one of many trapicheos taking place at the same time on the base. Julio explains, “We stole car parts because we worked in the repair brigade, but if you worked in the canteen, you were stealing food, if you worked in the warehouse site, you were stealing soap.” Curbing trapicheo

on the base would have required tremendous effort, were those in charge of the base truly interested in seeing it end. Julio suspects that they actually were not—at that time the Soviets seemed to be a limitless source of material goods, so there was little incentive to keep tabs on the goods that had already arrived. Presumably higher ranking officers were also benefiting from trapicheos of their own. Almost no one in military service was punished for theft. While Julio came close to serving time in a military prison, it was not for theft, but for falling asleep while on guard duty.

Soon Julio made a friend in the warehouse on the base and he began selling what the friend could pass to him—shoes, boots, and uniforms—to people outside the base. As a middleman, he took a small cut on every item he sold. So lucrative was this trade that Julio could not resist selling most of his own clothing and personal items as well, leaving him with almost nothing upon discharge from the army. “In the house of the silversmith, there are only wooden knives,” he explained. Upon discharge he had to plead to keep his army boots and uniform, because they were the only things he had left to wear home.

After leaving the army, Julio worked as a repairman at a social club for army officers, where he learned to diversify his trapicheos to increase his income. He sold wood taken from the carpentry shop where he worked, and bought, then resold, rum taken by waiters in the officers’ club. From a friend in the kitchen, he bought bread for resale, and he asked those who served lunch to the employees to sell him any leftover food, which he boxed up and resold to neighbors. Family contracts allowed him to obtain a small supply of tickets to musical performances, which he could scalp at the gate. Julio conducted all this business in addition to the regular duties of his job.

Julio left the officers’ club to take a job he considered excellent from the standpoint of trapicheo: working in a warehouse that held materials for the construction of a large building. The abundance of the warehouse inspired Julio to develop his distribution system, again in order to increase his income. A neighborhood friend who did black market construction work would request particular items from Julio, who would then remove exactly those items from the warehouse. With demand and supply fully coordinated, he no longer had to spend time searching for items that someone wanted, or finding buyers for the random items that he stole. At the warehouse Julio saw a hierarchy of trapicheo evolve that mapped onto the hierarchy of workers at the firm. As an entry-level worker Julio understood himself as limited to taking items that could be concealed on his body, such as shower heads and electrical switches, but his supervisor was able to take things large enough to require alternate transportation—the supervisor sometimes paid workers to load stolen items into car trunks after hours. A hurricane that hit the worksite while Julio was there served as a pretext for “the biggest theft I’ve ever seen in my life,” as workers carried off items they could report as being destroyed in the flood. Julio eventually lost the job, but for insubordination, not theft.

While the warehouse was the richest site, Julio’s most elaborate trapicheo took place at the metal working shop where he worked next. There he managed to steal one of the machines used in production. A person who fabricated metal items in his home shop asked Julio if a lathe could

be found in the shop where he worked. It could. Over the course of two weeks, Julio and an accomplice slowly dismantled the machine and carried out a small part each time they left the shop. When there was nothing left of the machine, they covered the empty base with a cardboard box. "I am a little proud, because of the planning, because of the patience we had to have. We spent two weeks doing this, two weeks disconnecting it, with a ton of people in the shop, a ton of people, and no one realized until two weeks after. This was screw by screw." Chivo work -- private work done on state work time with state equipment -- was the only other trapicheo Julio could find at the shop.

Julio eventually left the machine shop to sell paintings in one of the Havana markets catering to tourists. While his work in the market required a great deal of illegal *resolviendo*, including license-sharing, tax evasion, and concealing the origins of the items sold, it more closely resembled *cuentapropista* work than trapicheo. He worked in the market until finally leaving Cuba with a foreign wife.

Trapicheo: Is it Theft?

Susan Eckstein (2007) once referred to Cubans as engaging in "illicit and immoral activity" when they "illegally appropriated supplies from state jobs to sell on the black market" (187). Whether Cubans see such acts as illicit and immoral, however, is a more complicated question. Most Cubans draw a distinction between trapicheo and theft. On those occasions when a shopping bag or purse was pulled out of my hands on the streets of Havana, no one hesitated to label that act a theft. But if cash of equal value or an identical product was taken directly from a store by an employee, or added to an unwitting tourist's bill, most would deny that a "theft" had occurred. This section considers on what grounds Cubans distinguish between theft and trapicheo, and how they maintain that boundary through their use of language.

In considering his long list of trapicheos, Julio sometimes expressed worry over their possible consequences for himself or others, but he never expressed regret. In fact, some of these actions, such as the incremental dismantling of the lathe, are clearly a source of pride for him. For the most part, however, he speaks of his own acts of trapicheo matter-of-factly, as one would speak of a job that one neither loves nor hates. His one-time foray into what he, himself, describes as theft, however, was clearly a source of shame for Julio. After some prompting, he reluctantly described his part in taking electronic equipment from a state office. He and a neighbor broke the lock to an office where neither worked, then they carried a television and washing machine to a waiting vehicle. In his descriptions of trapicheo, Julio oftentimes identified himself as the instigator of the operation. But in this case, he emphasized that none of the planning was his. In telling the story he also tried to justify the robbery by describing the poverty he faced at the time. When talking about trapicheo, he felt no need to provide similar justifications. For Julio, the difference between theft and trapicheo was clearly meaningful.

What made taking the appliances theft, and what made it shameful? The value of the items taken was not particularly relevant--indeed, the lathe he removed from the factory where he

worked certainly cost more than both appliances stolen from the office. One thing that does distinguish the two cases is the use of force; trapicheo rests on stealth or cleverness, and never force, whereas theft, like other criminal acts, may include its use. In this case, force was used in breaking the office lock. And it might have been required, according to Julio, had a person been present in the office.

More important in distinguishing theft and trapicheo, and in granting legitimacy to the latter and not the former, is the social position of the person performing the act relative to the objects being acted upon. In explaining the distinction between trapicheo and theft, Julio and others speak of being inside or outside a particular social sphere where items circulate. In a discussion of his selling gas siphoned out of army vehicles, Julio begins by saying “all of this is outside the law,” but moments later seems to reverse himself by saying “this is inside the law we were working.” When asked to clarify, he says that selling the gas was “outside the law” in that it was illegal—it violated the written rules of the army and the country. But at the same time he acted “inside the law” because, as a serviceman, he was a part of the system from which he took the gas. That insider position is ultimately what made his outsider act a trapicheo and not a theft. Those who appropriate goods from an outsider position are simply thieves. “If you go to a shopping and you steal something, it’s not trapicheo, but if you are inside of the shopping, working, and you take something, yes, it’s trapicheo,” according to Julio. Therefore, when Julio and his companion took items from a place where neither of them worked, they committed theft.

Whether something is theft or trapicheo is not a rhetorical question. In addition to making a great deal of difference in how the actor is regarded by himself and others, as a practical matter theft is much more likely than trapicheo to result in legal consequences. An individual explained, “When the thefts committed by party members who work in the dollar stores are discovered, there is no punishment, no jail or anything. Oh, they let them go or they transfer them to another job, but they’ll never have any problem with the law or anything.” Thieves on the other hand—those who break locks or pull purses from peoples’ hands—spend years in jail for their crimes.

Cubans use language to mark and maintain this conceptual distinction between trapicheo and theft. Several of my individuals consistently objected to my use of verb *robar*, to steal, to describe the central act of trapicheo. *Robar* was too *duro*, too hard, for such a case, I was frequently told. Another individual used the verb *robar*, but then caught herself, explaining that “there’s something about the etymology—it’s not the right word for what Cubans do.” Julio said he might use *robar* to describe his trapicheos among friends, because they “understand, and they’re all doing the same.” But in speaking to others, he is more likely to use gentler terms.

It is interesting that while one quickly learns that *robar* is considered the wrong word to describe the appropriation of goods through trapicheo, there is little agreement among Cubans about what an appropriate word would be. This, I suppose, reflects the relative newness of this phenomenon in Cuban life. One individual insisted that I substitute a verb-form of trapicheo, *trapichar*, even though that verb was not of common use. Many substitute the word *conseguir*, to get, to describe the process of separating an object from its rightful place in an act of trapicheo. The word is most naturally used in the verbal exchanges that precede the actual taking

of a product. A person seeking, for instance, a faucet for a kitchen sink might mention needing or lacking it, and ask a person working in a warehouse if she could “find” such an item. “Someone in your neighborhood says to you, listen man, I’m lacking, I’m lacking pants. Or I’m lacking, I’m lacking a liter of gasoline. And then you would go to your unit and you would say to the people, can you find this?” Discussing another transaction, Julio said, “And we say, ‘Listen, a friend of ours lacks silicone,’ and it’s interesting, the form of the question isn’t ‘Can I buy silicone from you?’ It’s like, ‘I’m not saying that you have this, I’m only making conversation.” Clearly, such phrasing allows both parties to deny that the theft of an item was being discussed, should one of them turn out to be less than trustworthy, though any Cuban would understand what was actually being spoken about. From this usage, *conseguir* started to serve as a euphemistic substitute for *robar* in other contexts, even when the need to deny that a thing was taken was negligible.

Interestingly, people in Havana now use *luchar*, the culturally significant word meaning “to struggle,” as a slang term to replace of the already euphemistic *conseguir*. Julio reports: “You would say, ‘I found a job in this place’ and the first thing the people would ask you is, ‘Can you *luchar* something there?’ It’s not ‘Can you rob something,’ instead it is, ‘Can you *luchar* something? If you can, can you *luchar* me some rice, some oil, some meat?’ Notice the change, now I’m going to *luchar* it.” This slang use of the word *luchar* does double duty; like *conseguir* it conceals the illegal aspect of what occurred from listeners, and possibly from the actor himself, but *luchar* also serves as a rationalization for the act by invoking the original sense of *la lucha*, the struggle. It implies that the action being described is justified because it is done out of necessity; like everything else in *la lucha*, it is something one must do to survive. This usage of *la lucha* also demonstrates the darkly ironic humor prevalent in Havana, which is the subject of a later chapter. To paraphrase Julio, at the start of the Revolution, *luchar* characterized the glorious struggle against imperialism, but by the end of the century it meant stealing from the Cuban state.

A Small Space for Regret

Trapicheo is endlessly discussed by Cubans in conversation, and it was enshrined in a song by Carlos Varela called “*Todo se Roban*,” or “Everybody Steals.” In this remarkably candid depiction of life in Havana by an artist who was eventually imprisoned for his political views, Varela describes the chain of petty theft that encompasses nearly everyone:

*From your father they stole the car radio,
You steal his cigarettes when Saturday comes . . .*

*From the neighbor they stole the clothes from the backyard,
He was stealing money from the cash register where he worked . . .*

From your father they stole pieces of his car,

He buys them again from the same guy that stole them . . .

In Varela's view, the line between thieves and victims is not a fixed one, and a person can play either role depending on the circumstance. The consequence of the high prevalence of theft, in Varela's view, is the breakdown of relationships between Cubans. He ends each vignette with the laconic refrain that:

They steal from you the desire--they steal from you the desire to love.

At the end of the song, however, Varela seems to reconcile himself to the situation, or perhaps he only ironically offers the justification:

If everyone steals, everyone steals.

Most Cubans see little need to legitimate the morality of an act of *trapicheo* to one another. If pressed to do so by an outsider, most put forth a dual defense of the act—it was done out of dire necessity and it violated the laws of a system to which the person has not consented. Julio was particularly astute at justifying his *trapicheos* in the context of socialism when pressed to do so. He argued that the low wages paid by the state made *trapicheo* both necessary and just, and that the laws that made entrepreneurial activity illegal were unreasonable and undemocratic and, thus, justly ignored. Many Cubans would agree with this mode of defense.

In their more vulnerable moments, however, some Cubans wonder how different from theft *trapicheo* really is. Looking more closely at the Carlos Varela song quoted above, one sees that in each couplet, the first line describes what is by Cuban definition a theft, the second line, a *trapicheo*. By juxtaposing them, he seems to suggest that the line between the two is not clear, or that they are causally related. Inadvertently echoing the Varela song, a dissident economist told me that “*todo se roban*,” (“everybody steals”), and this was changing Cuban morality. He worried about children who are growing up in a society where their parents openly steal. He also worried that *trapicheo* would not go away quickly even if the economic context changed. More than one of my individuals admitted that it was sometimes difficult to distinguish between *trapicheo* and theft in their own lives, because “it's hard to know where the limits are.”

The line between *trapicheo* and theft, between socially acceptable and unacceptable appropriation of material goods, is not universally agreed upon. As one would expect in any complex society, there is considerable room for contention. The same individual who insisted that I substitute *trapichar* for *robar* when describing his own actions, spoke disdainfully of another person's attempt to benefit from that same distinction. On a bus trip, the individual said, his cousin had locked eyes with a man removing the wallet from the back pocket of another Cuban, only to be told “one has to *trapichar*.” In the mind of this individual and his cousin, to take a wallet was clearly theft, and morally wrong. The thief, however, invoked *trapicheo* to try to forge a connection with the cousin that would outweigh his sympathy for the man about to lose his wallet. Or perhaps the thief understood that invoking *trapicheo* could knock the cousin off the moral high ground, and that his shaken convictions would render him less likely to follow through on his inclination to stop the act. In other words, how can I be a hero, when I, too, am a

thief like this man? Damian Fernández (2003) worries that Cuba has developed a “culture of illegality” that influences more than activities in the economic sphere (232).

Inequalities of Wealth

More than at any other point during the Revolution, Cubans since the Special Period have alternatives to state-based employment, some of which pay considerably better than state jobs do. One consequence of the policy changes of the 1990s, which opened the door to all the productive strategies discussed above, is that Cubans now differ in terms of their wealth. Families whose members pursue activities that generate hard currency, legally or illegally, and especially families who receive remittances from abroad, have achieved higher levels of wealth overall (Álvarez and Mattar 2004, 62, Perez Villanueva 2009, 1, Espina Prieto and Rodríguez Ruiz 2010). Statistics show that the change over the last 15 years has been a dramatic one. Distribution of wealth within society is commonly measured by a figure called a Gini coefficient. The higher the number, the more unequal the distribution of wealth within a society. After 1959, Cuba’s Gini coefficient dropped steadily; by 1986 it was a remarkably low .22 (Zabala Argüelles 2010).⁴ According to Mesa Lago (2003), however, “The Gini coefficient has been estimated to have increased from 0.22 in 1986 to 0.55 in 1995, the latter being comparable to the pre-revolutionary level.” Most others have not calculated a number as high as Mesa Lago’s, however; Brundenius (2002, 378) puts the Gini coefficient for Cuba between 1996 and 1998 at .41, while The Global Peace Index draws on data from the United Nations Human Development Index and World Bank to arrive at a Gini coefficient of .30 for Cuba in the years from 2007 through 2010 (<http://www.visionofhumanity.org>). Regardless, all analysts agree that the Gini coefficient, and income disparity, have increased since the start of the Special Period.

Furthermore, the way in which wealth is distributed in Cuba since 1990 reinforces the sort of social inequalities that the Revolution tried, but never really succeeded at, erasing. For instance, men on average now earn more than women, in part because they applied for and received 78% of the cuentapropista licenses (Álvarez and Mattar 2004), which pay more than state jobs do (Eckstein 2007, 180). Men are also overrepresented in the more lucrative emerging and “submerged” economies, while women have been left behind in the lower paying state economy (Núñez Sarmiento 2010). As a result, women who lead households are more likely to fall into the “at risk” category, which among Cuban researchers expresses what others might call poverty (ibid). This happens despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that women “continue to attain higher educational levels than their male counterparts” (ibid); the later section on “brain waste” will discuss how the traditional path to success in Cuba, starting with earning a university degree, actually limits a person’s ability to earn a living in Cuba today.

Wealth is also distributed unequally along racial lines. Eckstein (2007) observes that “. . . access to remittances, as well as to other dollar sources, is heavily race based . . . Blacks, who in

⁴-By comparison, the US Census Department calculates the Gini coefficient for the US in 2009 to be 46.8. In Columbia, the number is 58.5, according to the UNDP Human Development Report.

prerevolutionary Cuba were the most disadvantaged group, benefited most under Castro-relative to their situation under Batista. For this reason they were disinclined to emigrate, a loyalty that put them at a decided disadvantage in the emergent cross-border-based informal dollarized economy” (185). Possibly due to historical patterns of racism, Afro-Cubans are also underrepresented in the emerging economy: “Whites were found to be 1.6 times more likely than blacks to receive tips and to hold 80 percent of the dollar economy employment while constituting 60 percent of the population” (ibid). A study by Cuban anthropologists generated some remarkable statements about income and race, including that “Whites receive 2.5 times the remittances of blacks and 2.2 times those of mestizos,” “Whites received 1.6 times more tips than blacks and 1.4 more than mestizos,” and “Whites resell products subsidized by the rationing system 3.7 times less than blacks, and the latter, 2.1 times more than the mestizos” (Espina Prieto and Rodríguez Ruiz 2010).

It hardly seems unexpected that white men, rather than women and people of color, have tended to accumulate the most wealth in Cuba since the start of the Special Period. Perhaps more surprising is the fact that wealth now tends to be concentrated among those who were *least* politically powerful prior to market reforms. According to Eckstein (2007), “The emergent informal transnationalized status schema turned the former socialist stratification hierarchy on its head” (187). To a significant extent, those who receive regular remittances, and, thus, have the highest standard of living in Cuba today, are the same people who were at the *bottom* of the party-based social hierarchy that existed before the Special Period. Cubans who fled the Revolution, either in its early years, during the Mariel boat lift, or more recently as *balseros*, had long been known among party loyalists as *gusanos* (worms). To remain in good standing with the PCC and maintain high status in Cuban society prior to 1993, a person was expected to cut ties with any *gusanos* in one’s own family. Those who refused to do so could expect to remain near the bottom of Cuba’s party-based, social hierarchy. But, when remittances were legalized, those who defied PCC orders and maintained a good relationship with “familia en la extranjera” over the years were the ones who profited most. Many of those who followed party orders and cut ties with *gusanos* had a hard time repairing those relationships in the 1990s. An addition, it may be true that those with the weakest commitment to the PCC and the socialist state are more likely to engage in the most audacious and lucrative forms of *trapicheo*, tax-evasion, and so on, and thus increase their wealth in that way.

That the strongest supporters of the Revolutionary government were not well-positioned to benefit from the state’s policy changes regarding remittances did not bode well for the state’s popular support. The state seems to have compensated for this by reserving many jobs in the tourist industry--where a worker can earn hard currency in tips, bonuses, and *trapicheo*--for party members. The fact remains, though, that “those who stayed in Cuba and worked their way up the socialist bureaucracy, the socialist system of stratification, experienced downward mobility under the circumstances” of the Special Period (Eckstein 2007, 187). What the current distribution of wealth means for a Revolutionary state that pledged to eradicate racism, sexism,

inequality, and to enshrine the communist party as the leading force of the nation, will be discussed more in the concluding chapter.

“Brain Waste”

“Currently jobs related to the emergent sector of the economy -- tourism and foreign firms -- are perceived as being the most prestigious and profitable types of employment. Such views mark a turning point in how upward social mobility has come to be understood (Espina Prieto and Rodríguez Ruiz 2010). Since the literacy campaigns of the early 1960s, the Revolutionary state had promoted education and professional development—especially within medicine and science--as engines of economic and social advancement, and a large body of skilled, professional workers did in fact emerge. But as Espina Prieto and Rodríguez Ruiz note, the Special Period economic conditions put the breaks on that trend, creating by 2000 a situation I characterize as “brain waste.” The literature on “brain waste” is a small section of the better known body of work in economics on “brain drain.” “Brain waste” refers to the situation where educated professionals emigrate to a new country but are unable to secure work within their field of expertise, and instead find lower paying, unskilled jobs unrelated to their original profession (Mattoo, Neagu, and Ozden 2005). In Cuba since the Special Period, one can observe a pattern of domestic “brain waste,” in which promising students and workers are lured away from traditionally valued sectors like medicine and science and in favor of work in the mostly unskilled positions that grant access to dollars.

When I first arrived in Cuba, I took as evidence of the country’s superior educational system the fact that people holding the most menial jobs, things like parking bicycles or cutting lawns, might be much better versed in the works of Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz than I could claim to be. I later realized that it was the country’s problem with brain waste that made it necessary for these people, who were university educated and equipped to do much more sophisticated work, to abandon their professions for unskilled cuentapropista or black market labor. The fact that 50% of those holding cuentapropista licenses are university educated (Álvarez and Mattar 2004, 177), and that most of the licenses were for street food vending, messengers, artisans, hair stylists, and private taxi drivers (Brenner 2007, 171), further supports my observation that brain waste is occurring. The process by which “one of Latin America's most educated populations became deschooled as well as deskilled” (Eckstein 2007, 188) is being covered by many economists (Mesa-Lago 2003, Mesa-Lago 2008, Pérez Villanueva 2009).

Cuban Productive Realities

Since the start of the Special Period, Cubans have had to draw on a range of strategies to make a living, only some of them permissible under Cuban law. While some of my interlocutors had completely abandoned work in the state sector, willing to sacrifice the shrinking package of goods and service that the state was still able to deliver through the firm, most continued to hold a state job. Far more of their productive energy, however, was put towards activities that could

supplement their meager state earnings, including remittance seeking, chivo, black marketeering, and trapicheo. A small but significant number of Cubans have tried to navigate the tricky terrain of running their own cuentapropista business, and a similarly sized contingent have found relatively lucrative work in the emerging sector, including the growing tourism industry. The explosion of legal and illegal options for earning a living in Cuba has had a number of social effects, including the re-entrenchment of certain kinds of inequality, especially in terms of race, gender, and wealth. Another interesting social effect is “brain waste,” the tendency of Cuba’s best and brightest citizens to seek the kind of unskilled work that is now oftentimes more lucrative than skilled or professional jobs. The long-term consequences of these social transformations, especially the impact they have on state power, will be addressed in the conclusion.

CHAPTER 3: CONSUMPTION

In one of the most dilapidated neighborhoods of Central Havana stands Carlos III, a modern, three-tiered shopping center that opened in 1998. Every day thousands of Cubans stream through its glass and chrome doors, trading hard currency sent from abroad for groceries, hardware, clothes, toys, sporting equipment, and other goods not sold for pesos anywhere in the city. While Carlos III is striking in its abundance, every part of Havana now has shops that cater to eager consumers, despite the fact that the socialist state initially aimed to satisfy basic needs while freeing people from the desire to accumulate wealth and material goods (Guevara 1967; Silverman 1971). In this chapter, I explain how consumer culture—a system in which people seek to accumulate goods in ever greater amounts—eventually prevailed in a socialist society whose leaders were committed to fostering people who thought and acted another way.

If one accepts the anthropological and historical evidence that human beings are not always and everywhere desirous of commodities (Douglas and Isherwood 1998, Friedman 1990), one has to explain the development of consumer culture in Cuba by reference to the social and historical forces that caused it. In the United States, contemporary consumer culture is thought to be rooted in both the Industrial Revolution and the early 20th century development of marketing (McKendrick 1982). More recent anthropological work has looked beyond the United States and Western Europe to examine the processes by which modern commodity culture has taken root in other parts of the world (Trentmann 2004, Stearns 2004). In Cuba, the lingering influence of American culture, which dominated the island in the years before the Revolution (Pérez Jr. 2001), and the trickle of consumer goods that continued to reach Cuba after 1959 both played a role in fostering today's consumer culture. However, it was primarily state policies intended to mitigate the economic crisis of the Special Period that created the consumer culture that one finds on the island today. Ironically, interventions aimed at shoring up the socialist system have significantly threatened it, as these policies have led to many Cubans developing a taste for commodities that cannot be easily satisfied under the conditions of socialism. Studies of commodity consumption from around the world are useful in understanding why Cubans responded as they did to new opportunities for mass consumption, and what the new consumer culture might mean for the future of the socialist state.

Theories of Consumption

A commodity can be understood as any good or service produced by human labor and offered for sale within a market, a definition first found in Marx, but still widely used within social science today (Marx 1987). As defined by Marx, the commodity presupposes several complex cultural features; a market for the buying and selling of goods, currency to act as a medium of exchange, and a method of production to make the goods that circulate. While goods need not be industrially produced or produced within a capitalist system in order to be considered

commodities, empirically speaking, most of the world's commodities have been produced under the capitalist mode of production and through industrial methods. Commodities are, by definition, modern. Of course, not all goods and services people now use, or used in the past, are commodities. For instance, goods and services obtained as gifts, through barter, or via self-production are not commodities. The narrower definition of commodity is intended to mark, but not exaggerate, the differences between commodities and other kinds of goods that people use (Miller 2000). As Marx understood, commodities impacted individuals and societies in ways that other kinds of material goods did not.

It is useful to clarify the meaning of some of the terms most commonly used in discussions of commodities. Throughout this dissertation, the word "consumption" should be understood to mean the specific act of "commodity consumption," and not the act of obtaining or using up non-commodity material goods, such as the products of one's own hand. "Commoditization" is the process through which more goods, and more different kinds of goods, circulate as commodities (Kopytoff 1986). For instance, when individuals or families stop producing their own food and begin purchasing it at a store, one can say that food is being commoditized. As used in this dissertation, "consumer culture" entails the drive to consume commodities in ever increasing amounts. Underlying this drive to increase consumption is the power attached to commodities themselves—under commodity culture, consumers deeply believe that selecting particular goods or services will have significant transformative effects on their lives. Consumer culture also entails commoditization—the drive to consume expands as more items and experiences circulate only in the commodity form.

In the social science literature, commodity consumption has not been as well-examined as other economic processes (Miller 2000). Despite coming up with the enduring definition of the term, in his work Marx focused on the production of commodities, rather than their consumption, an orientation that has influenced social science to this day. Marx's most detailed treatment of consumption was his discussion of commodity fetishism, the near-magical ability of commodities to assume lifelike social relationships under the capitalist mode of production (Marx 1987). According to Marx, the "dance of fetishized commodities" (*ibid*) obscures the real story—the exploitative, alienating relations of production under which workers produce them. While some anthropologists have taken up commodity fetishism (Taussig 1980), most seem to follow Timothy Burke's thinking (1996) that the concept is conceptually thin: "Marx's definition of commodity fetishism does not leave sufficient room for the complexity of the relations between things and people, room for the imaginative possibilities and unexpected consequences of commodification, room for the intricate emotional and intellectual investments made by individuals within commodity culture"(6).

Marx's analytic focus seems appropriate given the radical changes taking place in the methods of production during the time he was alive, during the latter part of the Industrial Revolution. But the Industrial Revolution transformed consumption radically as well. Because of the improvements in production, many more products were available, and they could be sold for lower prices, especially in industrialized societies like that of the United States (McKendrick,

Plumb, and Brewer 1982). Per capita consumption of manufactured goods started to rise in 1760, the start of the Industrial Revolution, and it began to increase dramatically starting around 1820 (ibid).

The economist Thorsten Veblen was one of the first people to examine the patterns of consumption that emerged out of the Industrial Revolution. He published “The Theory of the Leisure Class” in 1889, six years after Marx’s death. He observed that, “In order to stand well in the eyes of the community, it is necessary to come up with a certain, somewhat indefinite, conventional standard of wealth” that can be observed by others ([1889] 2007, 20). Obtaining and displaying commodities, he believed, was the primary means of conveying power and wealth in a society. He coined the phrase “conspicuous consumption” to describe how commodities became the main mechanism of status display. Veblen ([1889] 2007, 95) cited the example of rich people eating with silver utensils, which cost more but have no greater utility than utensils made of cheaper metals, as an act of conspicuous consumption. The silver utensils are preferred by those who can afford them, according to Veblen, solely because they convey the user’s wealth and high status. While neoclassical economics started with the assumption that consumers were rational actors who choose commodities based on the strict functional utility of each item (i.e. people would be expected to favor the lowest priced utensil that serves its purpose of picking up food), Veblen recast them as more complicated actors who might also want to solidify their social status through commodity consumption. Economists of his time and later largely ignored Veblen, perhaps put off by the challenge his work posed to the “rational consumer” theory that continues to dominate that discipline (Miller 2000). Among sociologists, on the other hand, Veblen was widely used.

By the turn of the twentieth century, another economic shift was underway. Practices of consumption around the world were transformed by the emergence of marketing and advertising as a distinct and powerful social field. The Frankfurt School focused its attention on the resulting “mass” culture and consumption, using Marx as a starting point for nuanced critiques of the consumer culture that arose after the Second World War (Bottomore 1989). Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1972) argued that mass consumption distracts and depoliticizes working people to the point that they are no longer capable of revolutionary action. That people seem to enjoy consuming the products of the culture industry was to thinkers like Adorno a simple case of false consciousness. Walter Benjamin (1968), on the other hand, did not believe that mass culture necessarily depoliticizes the consumer, and offered one of the first depictions of commodity consumption as an act of agency on the part of individuals. In his oft-quoted “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” he argued that the ability to reproduce images in mass quantities would intensify rather than dilute their effects, allowing the transformative power of art to escape the confines of tradition and elitism.

Although other disciplines had begun studying it, anthropologists did not examine commodity consumption until relatively recently. For much of its history, anthropology defined itself as the discipline that studied people *without* commodities. Arnould and Wilk (1984) and Miller (2000) each noted that early ethnographers were careful to emphasize gift economy, separate spheres of

exchange, unique notions of value, and other "traditional" economic practices in order to de-emphasize the buying and selling of manufactured, and often imported, goods that occurred alongside such practices even at that time. The belief in the incommensurability of culture and commodity consumption, and the problems that would eventually create for an anthropology of modern life, can be seen in cartoons that portray "...stereotypical natives in a panic, accompanied by captions such as 'Put away the radio—the anthropologists are coming'" (Arnould and Wilk 1984, 142). Here, even the "natives" know that having commodities like radios will render them unsuitable for anthropological scrutiny.

These imagined natives are not the only ones within the discipline who concealed commodities to justify anthropological attention. Visual anthropology is full of examples of the selective cropping of photos to omit consumer goods and other signs of modernity. Anthropologists concealed commodity consumption in texts as well, omitting it entirely in traditional monographs or making only a brief mention of it in the final chapter. When commodity consumption did appear in the final chapter of a monograph, it often served as a trope to signal the exit of the anthropologist—and the discipline—from a now modern, de-cultured place (Miller 1987, 264) The "coke bottle in the Kalahari" figured as "a harbinger of homogeneity or irrevocable social transformation rather than as one cultural resource among others" (Coombe 1996, 204).

By the time Coombe and others made these observations, there were few parts of the world not being reached by a steady flow of manufactured goods. To endure as a discipline, anthropology could no longer limit its attention to people without commodities. Some say that a "shift in the structuring principle of society from production to consumption" also took place at approximately the same time (Falk and Campbell 1997), making necessary the shift in scholarly attention. Miller (1995), for one, thinks that people everywhere are now more likely to define themselves through commodities than through kinship or ethnicity, making the study of consumption more than a single area of research, but a paradigm shift that has the potential to transform the whole field of anthropology (141) and social science more generally (ibid, 2). Whether or not one believes in such a shift, global production and marketing undoubtedly intensified in the latter half of the 20th century, creating new consumers and inspiring more frequent acts of consumption. Anthropology and most other social science disciplines became fully engaged in this field of study.

At about this time, historians and archeologists made an important contribution to the literature of consumption by reminding us that, despite the Eurocentric bias of most writings on consumption, "there were vital signs of consumerism in Asia and Africa before Western forms emerged" (Stearns 2001, ix). Instead of starting in Europe with the Industrial Revolution, a more complete story of consumption must start with the Silk Road, Islamic traders, and Native American civilizations (Chauduri 1992, Curtin 1984, Waines 2003). Emphasizing the fact that, historically speaking, not all commodity consumption radiated from the "West" to "the Rest," makes students of contemporary consumption more sensitive to the fact that current commodity flows might also break that familiar pattern.

The theory of consumption that has emerged from historically- and anthropologically-oriented writings engages broad social and historical questions like those referenced above, but it also focuses on small, everyday actions of ordinary people. Understanding consumption at the level of individuals requires an understanding of desire. Desire describes the force that drives consumption of a whole set of seemingly unnecessary objects—things people know they can live without, but want deeply nonetheless. Desire has been the object of scholarly attention, much of which asks why people want what they do. As Burke (1996) wonders, "How do people acquire deeply felt and expressed desires for things they never had or wanted before? . . . And once the longing for a particular thing is satisfied, why does desire so quickly assume new forms?" (3). Alan Warde (1997) ponders "the capacity for people sincerely to desire something that they don't have, or have never experienced, only to feel disappointment when they actually consummate that desire." (57). Hirschman (1982) adds, "The world I am trying to understand . . . is one in which men think they want one thing and then upon getting it, find out to their dismay that they don't want it nearly as much as they thought or don't want it at all and that something else, of which they were hardly aware, is what they really want" (21).

While those oriented towards psychology might focus on individuals to explain their desires, anthropologists and sociologists believe that the desires of most people are best understood by reference to social and cultural context. The social approach is supported by the simple fact that in any one place at one time, many people desire the same commodities. To understand *why* requires engaging social and cultural forces as well as psychological ones.

There are many variants of the theory that desire is socially or culturally shaped. Many theorists rely on a simple epidemiological model, in which contact with a new commodity is enough to "infect" new consumers with a desire for it (Douglas and Isherwood 1996, 80). In a more sophisticated take on desire, Marshall Sahlins (1976) incorporates culture, arguing that "it is symbolic logic that organizes demand" for certain items and not others (176). For instance, the desire for some cuts of animal meat and avoidance of others makes little sense in terms of nutritional or economic needs, but resonates with cultural ideas, including Western privileging of inner over outer and the taboo on cannibalism. Similarly, Burke (1996) notes that understanding new desires in Zimbabwe requires "a detailed map of 'prior meanings'—the cultural and social raw material" (3) that organizes demand. For Burke, prior meanings do not come exclusively from local culture—in the case he studies, the introduction of soap to one area of Zimbabwe, prior meanings include the colonial construction of black bodies as dirty.

A central concern in the literature about consumption is how to distinguish between desire and need. That distinction is especially important in Cuba, where, I will argue, an expanding sense of what constitutes a "need" now poses a significant challenge to the state. The fact that Cuban people since the Special Period have more desires, many of them destined to be unfulfilled, is difficult but manageable for the state. However, the fact that Cubans have unmet need is potentially devastating, as the legitimacy of a socialist state rests largely on its ability to satisfy basic needs better capitalism can (Verdery 1996). If basic needs are not being met under

the socialist system, Cubans may find less reason to tolerate the very real material privations the system creates.

While defining need is difficult, social scientists for the most part agree on what constitutes an *unsatisfactory* definition. For one, contra classical economics, most agree that need is not natural. The economist's idea that needs can be easily distinguished from desires, and that needs are determined entirely by biology while desires are socially and culturally shaped, was first dismantled by Marx. In *Das Kapital*, he discussed need in terms of subsistence, the bare minimum that capital provides to labor in order to keep labor alive and productive (Marx 1987, 289). Marx argued that even the most basic requirements of subsistence, things like food, water, and shelter, were socially—not biologically—determined (Fischer et al. 1996, 26). He goes on to argue that, "because they are of a social nature, [needs] are of a relative nature." In other words there is no objective standard of human need—what it means to have enough depends on what it means to have plenty within a particular frame of reference. In Marx's time, comparisons were made between classes within one society, but today the frame of reference can be international.

The theory that need is natural has thus been largely replaced by the social construction of needs in consumption theory. Capitalism, through its marketing techniques, is commonly considered a powerful instigator of new needs, one that individual people can do little to escape: "The identification and pursuit of needs by consumers in a capitalist mode of production necessarily takes place under a condition of domination" (Burke 1996, 7). Yet capitalism does not have power to create needs consistently; both Burke and Nicholas Thomas (1991) argue that for every European item taken up by Africans and Pacific Islanders, for example, many others are rejected.

Much of the literature on consumption also engages with a familiar debate in the social sciences with regard to the roles of structure and agency in human action. Even though most agree that social and cultural context plays some role in shaping consumption, social scientists have differed in the degree to which they believe consumers actively choose the things that they consume, and to what degree are those choices already determined by external social forces. While most theorists would agree that consumption choices involve both agency and structure, most lean toward one pole or the other in characterizing it.

Thus, what I term here as "agentitive theories" of consumption are those that depict consumers as able to construct particular identities for themselves through their selective consumption of certain goods. While acknowledging the existence of a social or cultural framework, in this model, individuals can use consumption to place themselves within those structures at points of their choosing. Along these lines, Orlove (1997) argues that ". . . consumption does not merely reflect social relations, in that it marks certain social statuses and ties . . ." Instead, ". . . consumption can establish, maintain, and change social relations . . ." among actors (5).

Many studies of consumption have demonstrated this line of thinking.⁵ The agentitive theory of consumption finds a particularly clear expression in Friedman's work on clothing in Central Africa, "The Political Economy of Elegance: An African Cult of Beauty." His work demonstrates most clearly the difference between consumption as a passive reflection of an already-determined identity and "change of identity via consumption" (Friedman 1990, 105). He focuses on the *sape*, a modern "ritual program for the transformation of ordinary unranked youth into great men" (1990, 116). In *sape*, "clothing is more than...the expression of one's already existing self...it is the constitution of a self, a self that is entirely social" (Friedman 1990, 120). For Friedman, consumption is one of a number of "broader strategies of self-definition and self maintenance" in African society (Friedman 1990, 103).

The agentitive theory of consumption contrasts with works that consider consumption to be largely determined by social forces beyond the individual's control. In this view, consumption is overwhelmingly determined by political-economic structures, state policies, or static systems of meaning which leave little room for individual innovation or transformation. Agency in this model is located outside the consumer, within transnational corporations, the means of production, marketing and advertising campaigns, or systems of meaning that operate below the level of consciousness. Consumption is just another means through which people are dominated by these familiar forces. It is not necessary to claim that consumers are completely without agency, but merely that the scattered agentitive acts of individuals are neither powerful nor frequent enough to counter "the 'grand narrative' of capitalism," and thus should not divert attention from "the powerful political issues associated with Western global hegemony" (Ferguson and Gupta, in Burke 1996).

The most influential writer in the determinist vein was certainly Marx. For Marx, consumption is wholly determined by production. As Marshall Sahlins (1976) writes, "In providing consumption with its object, production not only in turn completes consumption, but determines its actual form--that is, a definite good which defines the manner and content of consumption" (154). While consumption in Marxist thought is determined directly by material factors of production, another strand of theory posits that consumption is shaped by systems of

⁵-In a paper that compares the consumption of indigenous and imported beer in the Andes, Orlove and Schmidt (1995) ask whether beverage choice simply reflects pre-existing social identities, or plays a more active role in forming and expressing these identities. Recent analyses of consumption have a similar take. Miller (1998) describes how men in Trinidad decorate their cars to distinguish themselves from their families and peers. Wilk (1990) details how Belizians construct modern, cosmopolitan identities through the strategic and selective consumption of western goods. Most important is satellite television--real time broadcasts erase the sense of temporal lag between first and third world that has long crippled Belizian self-image. In addition, Heath (1992) describes the Senegalese social practice of *sanse*, dressing up or dressing well. Agents use clothing to construct identities that are traditional or modern, western or African, religious or heterodox, autonomous or dependent. In Great Britain, Iranian women reject western identity through strategic food purchases and traditional preparation (Harbottle 1996). In the US, academics wear bland clothing to convey a seriousness of intellect so great that it precludes their attending to bodily matters at all (Brydon and Niessen 1998). According to Hebdige (1983), English skinheads dress as "a kind of caricature of the model worker" (11) to call attention to, and thus undermine at least temporarily, the typically submerged structures of class. According to Shields (1992), the ambiguity of the bow tie (masculine and feminine, aristocratic and servile) is able to assert the 'je ne sais quoi' of its wearer.

meaning which themselves have strong connections to relations of production. This work has its best expression in the writings of Pierre Bourdieu (1984), who gave empirical weight to ideas first developed by the theorist, Jean Baudrillard (1981), who described consumption as "a restrictive social institution that determines behavior before even being considered in the consciousness of the social actors" (31). Bourdieu was preoccupied with explaining the irregular distribution of consumer goods, particularly high culture items like art and music, along class lines. He argues that the differences in consumption between classes are driven by their differing aesthetic dispositions, which he glosses as "taste." Education plays a crucial role in forming taste, and education level in France is largely determined by income. Thus, in the end consumption is determined by income, and looking at consumption reveals little more than "the past and present material conditions of existence" of the consumer (53). He adopts Marx's concept of class, but takes systems of meaning—here taste—seriously. Though they focus on different social features, Marxist theory and the work of Bourdieu end with a similar assertion—that people do not choose the things they consume, rather, those things are delivered to them by external social forces.

Many anthropologists believe that a fair characterization of consumption takes both agency and structure into account. Wilk (1990) writes, "The challenge for a theory of consumption in the third world"—and the first, I might add—"is not to choose one bias or another. The true task is instead to map out the areas where greater autonomy exists, and those where coercion takes place, and to seek explanations for the variation in these areas." (83). Reaching this goal requires detailed ethnographic studies of particular consumption practices in particular places, like those by Miller (1995), Orlove (1997), Friedman (1990), and Bourdieu (1984), among others.

In doing an ethnography of consumption in Cuba, I found Laura Nader's concept of vertically-integrated anthropology to be useful. Vertically-integrated research seeks to make ethnographic connections between those who have the power to shape the lives of many people and people who are impacted by the decisions of those in power. The vertical slice allows a single consumption practice to be simultaneously understood as the deliberate act of an individual while also being shaped or highly determined by state or global forces. Neither perspective is the only "correct" meaning of consumption. The vertical slice approach means acknowledging that one practice can have multiple, even contradictory, explanations, and that something is gained by considering all levels of analysis rather than staying rooted in just one. Other scholars have noticed something similar about consumption: As Lee (1993) has stated, "Consumer goods lead a double life" as both instruments of social control and tools for making culture (49). Burke (1996) also notes that commodities in Zimbabwe are simultaneously " . . . concrete material expressions of colonial capitalism's resources for domination and testimony to less visible and more uncertain changes in identity" (10). A satisfactory study of consumption must be open to this sort of complexity.

Whether one believes that commodities are chosen by or for the consumer, it is clear that those material possessions serve as a visible signal of a person's place in a society. In other words, consumption has a lot to say about identity and hierarchy. This is true whether one

believes the consumer has chosen particular goods in order to assume a desired social role, or that those same goods have been thrust upon the consumer in order to reflect his or her already established place within the social structure. For example, one cannot see “wealth” or “class” in itself—what one sees are the commodities associated with a certain position within these hierarchical systems. Differences in wealth are not socially significant until they are made visible via consumer goods. In Douglas and Isherwood’s view (1996), for instance, consumer goods always serve as mnemonic devices to remind the consumer of his place in social structures and to express that identity to others: “Abstract concepts are always hard to remember, unless they take on some physical appearance . . . Goods “make physical, visible statements about the hierarchy of values to which their chooser subscribes” (5). Baudrillard (1981) outlined a similar notion of commodities, as the smallest units in a social system of meaning that can be read through semiotic analysis. He writes “It is certain that objects are the carriers of indexed social significations, of a social and cultural hierarchy—and this in the very least of their details.” (36) This is true at every level; for example in Cuba the poorest people “display” their poverty through the age and condition of their state-issued clothing, for one, while other Cubans use the idiom of clothing to communicate wealth by wearing items recently bought at dollar stores or on the black market.

The next section describes consumption in Cuba prior to the Special Period—both the ideal promulgated by the state and the actual practices of ordinary people. Then the focus shifts to the radically different consumption practices that emerged as a result of policy changes made during the Special Period. The work of these previous theorists is useful to understanding both periods of Cuban consumption.

Cuban Consumption, 1959- 1990

Revolutionary leaders hoped that, under socialism, the Cuban subject would become a different sort of consumer than he had been under capitalism. The project, however, was not as radical as one might think. Contrary to the stories that circulated in the US during the Cold War, actually-existing socialism permitted the consumption of many of the same commodities that circulated elsewhere in the world. Socialism prohibited the individual possession of *private property*, material goods that are used as a means to generate wealth; however, it did not prohibit *personal property*, material goods meant for personal use. In fact, most socialist governments hoped to raise their citizens’ standard of living above that found in capitalist countries by providing more and better personal property to *all* of its citizens (Verdery 2004, 51). And starting immediately, the state pledged to fulfill what it defined as the basic needs of every citizen, a commitment that capitalist societies were not willing to make.

To satisfy needs, in 1963 the Cuban government set up a rationing system that covered most basic items. Every Cuban citizen was given a *libreta*, a card that listed the precise amount of rice, beans, meat, milk, eggs, bread, sugar, flour, cooking oil, soap, vegetables, and other staples to which he or she was entitled, all of which could be purchased at the bodega for nearly nothing.

While basic goods were distributed through the libreta, other products were sold by the state in peso stores or granted as incentives in the workplace (Benjamin, Collins, and Scott 1989).

Cuba's Revolutionary government took pride in its ability to satisfy the needs of all of its citizens. Indeed, "rational redistribution," the ability to distribute goods better than any alternative system, was the legitimating principle of most 20th century socialist states, including Cuba (Verdery 1996). To wit, one billboard in Havana in 2000 boasted that of the 7 million hungry children in the world, none of them were Cuban. The satisfaction of basic needs was Cuba's object lesson for other poor nations and a rebuke to the US, a wealthy country that did not satisfactorily provide food, medical care, and education to all its citizens.

Though it did not prohibit personal property, socialism did differ from capitalism in the relationship that was to exist between individuals and commodities. Put simply, while a good socialist could consume goods to satisfy needs and satiate some desires, he was not to engage in "consumer culture," a system in which individuals define identity and seek satisfaction primarily through the on-going acquisition of commodities. Cubans, it was hoped, could become fully human in ways other than acquiring more and better goods, such as by relating more completely to other people, the nation, the arts, and ideas. State leaders understood that after a long capitalist history, dismantling consumer culture and replacing it with a new relationship between people and things would take a great deal of work. But the goal was clear: buying and using material goods was to be of little import for the true socialist citizen.

To a certain extent, the Cuban state relied on its educational apparatus to promote the idea that Cuban people ought not to focus on obtaining material goods. The Cuban Institute of Research and Direction of Internal Demand (ICIODI) was one state institution charged with this task. The goal of the ICIODI was to promulgate ideas that would *minimize* consumption, making it quite unlike anything in the capitalist world, where marketers aim to maximize consumption in the interest of profit. Through various strategies the ICIODI steered consumers towards inexpensive, nutritious, abundantly available food products, for example. As Veblen demonstrated in the nineteenth century, people are not necessarily drawn to commodities that function well and cost little. ICIODI understood this, and drew on popular Revolutionary sentiments to make those choices more appealing. If consumers balked at the lack of beef or the abundance of split peas in the recommended "rational" diet, for instance, the ICIODI portrayed using low-cost, domestically-produced goods as an important act of defiance to Cuba's capitalist enemies. One billboard during the 1960s proudly proclaimed, "Chicle, no; taro, si" ("Gum, no, *taro*, yes") -- good Cuban subjects were encouraged to chew on locally grown taro instead of chewing gum, an imported product and symbol of US penetration (Benjamin, Collins, and Scott 1989).

Another ideational technique intended to reduce consumption was the replacement of material incentives, like wage increases, with moral ones in the workplace (Azicri 1988). In a sense, the state sought to replace the "conspicuous consumption" of commodities with the "conspicuous consumption" of symbols as the mode of displaying status within Cuba (Veblen [1889] 2007). These moral incentives took many forms, including public praise by leaders, the presentation of symbolic materials like medals, buttons, diplomas, certificates, and banners, the assignment of

prestigious job titles, and membership in the Communist Party. A more subtle form of moral incentive came into play whenever salaries were equalized across a workplace or volunteers enlisted to undertake a project—in either case, the state hoped workers would expend effort in order to gain esteem in the eyes of their peers, rather than for monetary reward.

More effective in keeping consumer culture at bay, however, was the simple fact that before the Special Period almost all Cubans had equal access to the same, limited range of commodities. While theoretically consistent with socialism, increasing the amount and variety of consumer goods available to all Cuban citizens was not practical in the early days of the Revolution. As in other socialist countries, Castro and other leaders made a strategic decision to focus the nation's economic resources on developing heavy industry and producing for export--both at the expense of making products for Cuba's own domestic market (Eckstein 1997, Humphrey 2002). Over time, managers of heavy industry became better at bargaining for state resources, while managers of agriculture and light industry grew worse. As the gap between the two sorts of production grew larger, the number of consumer goods produced for the domestic market shrank to almost nothing (Humphrey 2002). Therefore, most items that were consumed on the island were imported, mostly from Soviet-bloc allies, whose economies also tended to deemphasize finished goods in favor of developing heavy industry (Humphrey 2002). What the Cubans consumed, therefore, depended on which goods their allies chose to produce, and how much those allies were willing to subsidize the terms of trade.

As a result, after 1959 there were fewer goods available for purchase within Cuba, and a much smaller range of options within each product category. The state distributed the consumer goods it did have more or less equally to all people. The central idea of consumer culture--that one can consume more and more, and distinguish oneself from one's neighbors by selecting particular goods from a range of options-- necessarily recedes when everyone has access to the same short list of things. In this context, the idea that one could communicate something about one's self by one's choice of goods simply could not take root. To use Baudrillard's (1981) framework, as the number of signifiers shrank, consumption became a less useful language with which to communicate. As a result, the average Cubans' interest in commodities decreased after 1959, at the same time as consumer culture was taking root in most other parts of the world.

Consumer culture decreased under Cuban socialism, but the urge to consume never totally disappeared. Despite the ideational and material conditions of socialism, most Cubans remained somewhat entrenched in consumer culture—they wanted more and different products, and they considered commodities personally meaningful. For instance, while moral incentives were still much preferred by the Cuban state from an ideological and fiscal point of view, they were of questionable effectiveness in motivating workers as time went on (Brenner 2007, 12). People simply preferred to be rewarded with things, or the pesos with which to buy them. In the 1970s, declining production forced the state to reintroduce material incentives on a large scale, in which hard work was rewarded with money, trips, or consumer goods (ibid).

Further evidence of the perseverance of consumer culture was the black market, where, in violation of Cuban law, consumers with enough money could obtain commodities not available

from the state. Taking root in the early days of the Revolution, the black market has endured continuously to this day, though its scope and character has changed several times. In its early days, the Cuban black market was mainly a mechanism for obtaining luxury goods like new televisions and refrigerators (Benjamin, Collins, and Scott 1989, Eckstein 1997, Eckstein 2007, Torres Vila and Pérez Rojas 1997). Typically, foreign residents imported the items, initially or sometimes just ostensibly for their own use, and then sold them to Cubans. Foreigners could also purchase items on the island from special stores, called *diplotiendas*, in which Cubans were forbidden to shop. Over time, some visitors developed black market specialties—the wives of Russian engineers, for instance, distributed canned fruit and meat they brought from Eastern Europe, while African students loitered near the *diplotiendas*, where they bought requested items for Cubans in exchange for a fee.

The early 1980s were considered the pinnacle (or the abyss, depending on perspective) of consumer culture in Revolutionary-era Cuba. After the failed harvest of 1970, material incentives had replaced moral incentives as workplace motivators. Private farmers' markets were legalized in 1980, and many Cubans jumped at the chance to buy more varied and higher quality food from the *agros* than they could buy from the state (Benjamin, Collins, and Scott 1989, Brundenius 2002, Torres Vila and Pérez Rojas 1997). The early 1980s were a time of "increased consumption" and a "steady rise in expectations," especially among young Cubans (Domínguez García 1997, 4). Over time, as the growth of the Cuban economy slowed, it became clear to Castro that those growing expectations could not be satisfied, so some kind of adjustment had to be made (*ibid*). In a pointed rejection of the policies of political and economic liberalization promoted by Gorbachav in the east (Brenner 2007, 13), Castro in 1986 announced the "Campaign to Rectify Errors and Correct Negative Tendencies," more commonly referred to as "Rectification" (Torres Vila and Pérez Rojas 1997, Duharte Diaz 2010). Rectification entailed an immediate reversal of all market-oriented reforms and a renewed emphasis on economic centralization and Guevara-style, socialist ideology. Farmers markets were closed, and workplace bonus programs ended. The State promoted voluntary labor, in the form of "micro-brigades" and "contingents," especially in the construction sector, and tried to reduce the black market. After nearly a decade of what could be termed discreet-conspicuous consumption of commodities, people were suddenly imprisoned for possession of hard currency or the sort of products (color televisions, cameras, VCRs) that only hard currency could buy.

Despite the ups and downs, between 1959 and 1990 consumer culture was not an important social force in Cuba. One indication was the fact that though Cubans lagged behind their U.S. neighbors in their rate of commodity consumption, most looked on that fact with equanimity rather than dissatisfaction. Oscar and Ruth Lewis (1977) documented the fact that those Cubans who did crave more and better consumer goods were looked up disapprovingly by their neighbors. My own Cuban neighbors' memories reinforced Lewis's point. For example, Jorge described how the Revolution "liberated us from clothing protocol"—one no longer needed new or fashionable clothing to go to a party or professional attire for work. Clothing became simple

and utilitarian. And Jorge believed that Cubans tried not to dress “in a sumptuous way,” especially when they knew they would be in the company of people with less wealth.

The absence of a consumer culture meant that, up until the time of the Special Period, a Cuban’s social standing was overwhelmingly determined not by wealth or possessions, but by his or her relationship to the Communist Party. To enjoy social esteem and a comfortable standard of living in Cuba prior to the 1990s, it was much more important to be a loyal party member or ally than to have access to individual wealth or commodities to display. It was party status, and not pre-Revolutionary economic power, current wealth, or access to commodities in the present moment, which served as the fundamental organizing principle of Cuban society between 1959 and 1990.

Cuba in the Special Period—Policy Changes

Previous chapters have described the crisis that began with the Soviet Union’s end, a period of time that Castro termed “the Special Period in Peacetime.” To review, since the 1960s, Cuba had imported almost all domestically consumed commodities from its Soviet allies, and depended on subsidies from those allies to keep the balance of trade in check. When those allies disappeared, Cuba was suddenly forced to use hard currency to buy its own food, fuel, and manufactured goods on the open market, something it simply could not afford to do. Given the state’s lack of hard currency, meeting basic needs was a tremendous challenge. Whereas in the past Castro’s speeches focused on ambitious projects like third-world solidarity and global anti-imperialism, by 1991 he was reduced to telling crowds that the nation’s new goal was keeping itself fed.

The libreta rationing system continued throughout the Special Period, but the amount of food available began to fall short of what was printed on the card, and short of what most adults require for survival. Eckstein (1994, 135) estimated that rations were reduced by 30% at the same time that physical demands, like biking and manual farm labor, were increased dramatically. Some additional goods could be purchased at peso markets, but these markets also suffered from insufficient supply. One indicator of the depth of the crises was the fact that a large swath of the population developed neurological disorders in 1992 as a result of malnutrition (Álvarez and Mattar 2004, 115). The spread of *neuropatia* left Cubans deeply worried and severely damaged the credibility of a state that had previously succeeded in eradicating hunger on the island (Benjamin, Collins, and Scott 1989, 87).

Conditions like these put a quick end to the State’s rectification, as necessity forced the Cuban state to adopt whatever policies it believed could keep the people fed and the government intact during the first and most difficult years of the crisis. Cuban leaders opted to address the crisis by making economic, but not political, policy changes. At its 4th Congress in 1991, the PCC rejected proposals to legalize political parties and open elections (Bengelsdorf 1994). Instead, the National Assembly sought to end the crisis by legalizing a short list of economic activities.

Eventually, it was hoped, the economy would be stabilized and the State could return to implementing the “Rectification” that it had begun in 1986.

In Chapter 2, I discussed the Special Period policies that impacted the systems of production within Cuba, such as the legalization of small, individually-owned businesses and the cultivation of foreign investment. This chapter focuses on the policy changes that had the strongest impact on the practices of consumption on the island. They are:

1. **Dollarization:** In June 1993, the government made it legal for Cuban citizens to possess and spend hard currency. Cubans could legally accept transfers of dollars or other currency from abroad, and pesos earned from state employment could be exchanged for dollars to spend in the newly-opened dollar stores (Eckstein 2007, Spadoni 2004b).
2. **Dollar Stores:** Also in 1993, the State began opening sleek, modern *Tiendas de Recuperacion de Divisas* (TRDs), or “dollar stores,” to sell a wide range of imported commodities for hard currency (Eckstein 2007). By 2004 there were 5000 TRDs on the island (Álvarez and Mattar 2004, 17). Nearly every town has at least one dollar store, and large cities like Havana had one in every neighborhood. Spadoni (2004b) explains that high prices charged at the dollar stores acted “as a hidden sales tax on remittances, effectively allowing the Cuban authorities to obtain access to that money” (90).
3. **The reinstatement of farmers' markets:** In late September 1994, Cuba reopened free farmers' markets, similar to those that operated between 1980 and 1986.
4. **The establishment of artisan markets:** A network of artisan markets was established in October 1994, permitting the sale of a wide range of domestically manufactured products.

Each of these policies was intended to increase the flow of hard currency to the state. The first two changes worked together to do the job directly. Legalizing dollars meant those living abroad could easily send money to their Cuban family and friends, and spending in the new state-owned dollar stores funneled nearly all of that money to the state. In 2004, for example, the Cuban government released numbers that showed that the dollar stores were able to absorb slightly more than the total value of remittances sent to the island that year (\$1.3 billion in sales on \$1.2 billion in remittances) (Spadoni 2004b, 97). The farmer and artisan markets had the same function, albeit indirectly. While the goods sold by Cubans in artisan markets and farmer’s markets competed with goods sold by the State, the high rate of taxation on market earnings were a source of state income (Brenner 2007). Also, because the state continued to have a monopoly on importing and selling manufactured goods, most of the dollars that arrived on the island, even those spent first in the artisan and farmers’ markets, would eventually end up being

used in state stores. From a fiscal standpoint, these so-called market reforms were a double victory, because the state earned increasing amounts of hard currency (dollar store sales rose from \$537 million in 1995 to \$1.32 billion in 2003 (Spadoni 2004b, 97), and it could spend less on its ration system because a segment of Cuban society no longer relied completely on the libreta for needed goods. But these reforms also ended up reshaping Cuba's social and cultural terrain in unexpected ways.

Cuba in the Special Period -- Commodity Consumption

Dollarization has had remarkable social effects. While large, multi-store malls like Carlos III are still rare, every neighborhood in Havana, and every city and town in Cuba, now has at least one dollar store at which any Cuban can shop. Two chains, TRD and Caribe, operate the stores on the island; both chains are partnerships between the Cuban government and foreign investors. Most of the dollar stores are newly built and share a nearly identical design—each is brightly lit, clean, modern, and air-conditioned, in dramatic contrast with the hot, dark, dusty markets where rationed goods are distributed. Dollar stores offer a relatively wide range of products at many price points, ranging from bouillon cubes to refrigerators. Most dollar stores offer a similar selection of items, though a product not sold by one store can sometimes be found in a store in another part of town, and not all stores carry large items like televisions and refrigerators. Most of the purchases made at dollar stores are small ones--Cubans with dollars frequently buy spaghetti noodles, tomato sauce, penny candy, and condiments like mustard and mayonnaise at dollar stores. Those who can afford to also purchase frozen meat and dried spices with some regularity. The stores also sell a lot of cosmetics, perfume, and toiletries to Cubans. Less frequently does one observe the purchase of small electronics, like a lamp, radio, or blender, in a dollar store. While some stores sell large appliances and home electronics, few people are able to spend upwards of \$300 for a television or \$500 for a refrigerator, so sales of those items are very rare. A certain percentage of the goods in the stores—imported cookies and soda, canned vegetables, peanut butter, canned meats, liquors other than rum—seem to be of interest only to foreigners. All of the products are expensive. The Cuban state charges, on average, 240% of their wholesale cost for every item sold in the dollar stores (Spadoni 2004b, 101), making the prices astronomical when compared to Cuban wages. Those Cubans who earn only pesos occasionally convert them to dollars make small purchases in the dollar stores, typically of a food item like noodles, or laundry detergent, or bath soap. Shopping in the dollar store more widely or more regularly, however, requires a source of income other than state employment.

Those with enough dollars to shop regularly could engage in the exact sort of “conspicuous consumption” that Veblen once described. While fashions change, during the years I spent in Cuba the conspicuous consumers bought red meat and beer, CD players and VCRs, and sneakers and T-shirts with recognizable American brand names. But even the poorest Cubans seemed to make some dollar store purchases. A chance encounter with a tourist, or the occasional remittance from a distant relative living abroad, could result in dollars to spend. The poorest

Cubans also converted the pesos they earned from state employment into dollars to buy a few low cost items each month—bouillon cubes, or flavored soft-drink crystals to mix with sugar and water at home. The dollar stores were crowded and the clientele diverse, so it was tempting to conclude that “everyone” shopped there, but as one clerk reminded me, in each neighborhood it’s mostly the same small set of people who shop there every day.

While the dollar stores changed consumption practices most dramatically for those Cubans with a steady access to hard currency, a newly expanded black market significantly changed consumption practices for all Cubans, regardless of wealth. Since the start of the Special Period, a typical Cuban family bought much of its food, clothing, toiletries, and housewares on the black market, rather than from the state. Originally a means of distributing luxury items brought to Cuba by foreigners, especially clothes (Rosendahl 1998, 40), with the Special Period, the black market became a way of distributing commonly used goods at lower prices than found in dollar stores and farmer’s markets. Because the black market vendor’s “wholesale cost” is often close to zero—most goods are stolen from state firms in the most rudimentary sort of *trapicheo*—many products can be sold at artificially low prices. A similar shift happened in Eastern European black markets during the last days of the Soviet Union, when the sale of luxury items not found in the Soviet economy, like designer jeans and foreign liqueurs, outpaced the sale of cheap Russian produce (Humphrey 2002).

The Cuban black market today is much larger than that of old. According to Eckstein (1994): “The value of black-market trade is estimated to have risen from \$2 billion in 1989 to \$14.5 billion in mid-1993--exceeding the value of official retail trade” (124) Most products are diverted from state stores, but some items are, on a small scale, grown, manufactured, or imported specifically for the black market. Regular visitors to the island, for example, know to bring large bags of used clothing from their home countries, which can be sold on the black market by their families.

Since the start of the Special Period, Cubans use the black market in combination with other distribution channels to develop the best strategy for obtaining goods. Judith, who runs a small, unlicensed catering business out of her kitchen, was especially skilled at “*resolviendo*” her need for ingredients by drawing on different sources. She grew her own herbs, got her soap and toothpaste from the *libreta*, and bought flour, white sugar and spices for dollars at the dollar store. She bought cheese, potatoes, eggs, and oranges from a black market vendor who came to her door regularly, and special items like strawberries and fish from other black market vendors who came from time to time. What was available on the black market depended on time (some foods are seasonal, some imports are sporadic), location (urban black markets have more imported goods, but less domestic meat and produce, to offer than rural black markets), and on a shopper’s ability to pay. A relatively wealthy friend in my neighborhood boasted of being able to buy eggs, cream cheese, coffee, powdered milk, strawberries, and chicken with great ease on the black market, while a friend without money described the selection of goods available in that same neighborhood as much more limited. Clearly, the best items were being offered to the families with the greatest ability to pay.

Judith had a strategy for procuring every item she needed, and criteria for determining the best place to buy the goods that were available in multiple sites. Interestingly, she decided whether to buy an item from a state dollar store or buy it on the black market by comparing only the quality and price of the items offered, not taking into account the risk involved. Buying from the black market, though illegal, is not especially worrisome for the Cuban shopper. It is an accepted fact of life that a savvy shopper buys her flour at the dollar store and her eggs at the front door—she spends no more time worrying about the events that brought her eggs (which were most likely stolen from a state warehouse) than the one that brought her flour. Benjamin (Benjamin, Collins, and Scott 1989, 46) noted that her informants also preferred not to ask about the source of the black market food they bought. Judith knows that the front door transactions must be handled with discretion. But other than that, the “black market” is not an especially salient category for her.

Cuba in the Special Period – Consumer Culture Begins Anew

Cuban society has been transformed as radically as the individual consumption practices described above. In an earlier section I argued that the absence of consumer culture in Cuba could be attributed in part to ideological state campaigns, such as the work done by the ICIODI, but more directly to the basic economic conditions of Cuban socialism. Because only a small number of consumer goods were imported to the island, and most of those goods were distributed equally by the state, Cubans could not expect to consume “more and more” goods, or to select particular commodities with which to distinguish themselves from others. Over time, the ability of commodities to communicate any kind of meaning waned. In the thin soil of the socialist economy, consumer culture simply could not take root.

The legalization of dollars and the opening of the dollar stores changed the landscape of the Cuban economy almost overnight. Suddenly there were many more commodities, and more types of commodities, circulating on the island. There were new venues for obtaining those commodities, and a new motivation on the part of the state to stoke, rather than suppress, consumer desire. Perhaps most importantly, for the first time since 1959, commodities in Cuba were not equally available to everyone. Like everywhere else in the world, consumption depended on access to money. What a person bought and displayed now said something about that person’s social standing; most obviously, it communicated their level of wealth. Conspicuous consumption could, and did, reemerge as a means of displaying ones status as a wealthy person.

And, if the new state policies that allowed for commodity consumption weren’t enough to foster commodity culture, the state’s ideational approach towards consumption shifted in a way that also encouraged Cubans to consume more and more. In the past, the state had attempted to slow consumption through ideational techniques like moral incentives and ICIODI campaigns. After opening the dollar stores, however, the state began to actively foment consumer desire as a way of increasing sales and revenue. For instance, for the first time since 1959, advertising

sprang up in and around the dollar stores. Outside the TRD-Caribe stores, for instance, posters encouraged people to show their love on Valentine's Day with an item purchased inside. At one Havana mall, a giant inflatable soda can beckoned to shoppers. Advertising also reached beyond the stores themselves—a Cuban radio station nominally geared towards tourists but available to anyone with a radio broadcast ads for various dollar stores. While some were critical of the changes, the state's messages found a receptive audience among most Cubans.

Only a small percentage of Cubans can afford the majority of goods offered at dollar stores. Yet, the state found it nearly impossible to target just those potential consumers when promoting consumption. For instance, the state cannot limit its promotions to certain neighborhoods, because Revolution unmoored wealth from geography in Havana. Because Cuban law essentially prohibits the transfer of real estate, many newly-wealthy Cubans remain in the decaying neighborhoods where they were born, while some destitute people still live in what were once considered privileged areas. If the state hopes to find new consumers, and separate them from their dollars, it must blanket all areas of the city with dollar stores, which indeed it has. In doing so, of course, its spend-more message has fallen largely on the ears of Cubans without regular access to dollars, with increasingly negative repercussions for the state.

Social Divisions

Commodity consumption created an entirely new social hierarchy along which Cubans could be arranged. Before 1959, Cuba was a class-based society, but that hierarchy for the most part vanished when the means of production were collectivized and placed under state control. Between 1959 and 1990 social status was overwhelmingly determined by one's relationship to the Communist Party. Party leaders were at the top of the social hierarchy, followed by party members. Dissidents and other party opponents were at the bottom of society. During the Special Period, however, social esteem became tied to wealth and the types of items one could afford to consume, which were for the most part unrelated to one's party status. In fact, as described in the previous chapter, some people who were at the bottom of the party-based social hierarchy were near the top of the new, wealth- and consumption-based order once remittances were legalized. And some party loyalists found themselves without money, commodities, and the new sort of social power that came with them.

Starting with Marx, most theorists have thought of social hierarchy in modern society largely in terms of class--where people are positioned in relation to production. Are you an owner of the means of production (the top), one who sells his or her labor for a wage (the middle), or someone left outside that system entirely (the bottom)? The concept of class was never able to describe social hierarchy very well in post-Revolutionary Cuba, where the means of production were concentrated in the hands of the state and nearly everyone held the position of wage laborer. In a strictly Marxist sense, it is true that class differences have returned to Cuba, now that people can relate to the mode of production as owners once again. Most Cubans still work as laborers in state-owned factories or firms, but some do operate small businesses and thus own a part of the

means of production. However, class still has little social salience in Havana, and I saw no evidence of emerging class identity or class hierarchy among the people I met. The class situation in Cuba is made complex, and less likely to manifest itself socially, by the fact that many people hold multiple jobs that place them in different classes. It is difficult to assign a class position to a state engineer who leaves work at midday to make boxed lunches to sell to factory workers, and even more difficult to assign a class position to a black market vendor who keeps his job in a dollar store but steals from it much of what he sells. It is unlikely that either person would identify themselves in class terms.

More relevant than class differences in establishing the new social hierarchy are the increasing differences in wealth and commodity consumption among Cubans. Cuba is unlike capitalist societies in that wealth is still not strongly correlated with one's relationship to the means of production, most of which continues to be owned by the state. While it is true that people in the emerging *cuentapropista* class tend to be wealthier than those who labor exclusively in state factories or firms, those who remain state employees but have a propensity for *trapicheo* seem to earn even more. Above that, money sent by family living abroad is the most significant source of wealth in Havana. As discussed in the previous chapter, these remittances cut across class and party lines in interesting ways.

Tellingly, people in Havana don't speak of the rich and the poor, the "haves" and "have-nots." Instead they evaluate people in terms of "*poder adquisitivo*"—the power to acquire goods. The concept of *poder adquisitivo* acknowledges that Cubans today can be differentiated in terms of their ability to consume, but also suggests the absence of social hierarchy and stable, wealth-based identities. Someone whom I might describe as *being* wealthy is, instead, described as *having* high power to acquire commodities. His being, or identity, the term implies, has not been affected by this power. All is changeable—*poder adquisitivo* might be with someone one day and gone the next. While this terminology in part reflects a reality in which no source of income is particularly stable, and people really can have vast changes of fortune in short periods of time, it seems also to be a euphemism, meant to disguise the fact that increasingly, *los ricos* (the rich) and *los pobres* (the poor) are forming fairly stable social groups based on their increasingly different styles of life, and that whites and men (or male-led households) are overrepresented in the dominant group.

This point can be illustrated in several ways. Near the house where I lived for my first few months in Havana, a new chicken stand opened right next door to two other stands that were already selling chicken. That made three state-owned chicken stands within a stone's throw of one another—I wondered if it was evidence of the irrational socialist planning that I had been warned about. I soon learned, however, that a wide gulf separated the three stands, and kept them from taking business from one another; the gulf was social rather than geographic. Huge status differences separated the target customers of each stand—for a person who bought chicken at stand number 1, stands number 2 and 3 might as well not exist, and so on down the line. The middle stand, the oldest of the three businesses, sold chicken in pesos. It had by far the lowest prices. However, the service was very slow and the supply was limited; the chicken ran out early

in the day, every day. This is where those who earned predominantly in pesos ate, and then only on special occasions. The “Burgi” stand to its left, the second stand to open, sold hamburgers and hot dogs as well as chicken, which appeared to be identical to that sold at the peso stand. The Burgi chicken, however, was sold in dollars and at considerably higher prices. The atmosphere was, by Havana standards, better at Burgi than at the peso stand. At Burgi, displays of expensive packaged cookies, candies, beer, and sodas augmented the surroundings. The people who could afford to seemed to strongly prefer buying their chicken at Burgi, sitting for hours at the sticky plastic tables surrounded by glossy beer ads. The supply was more reliable at Burgi, but even if chicken was still being sold for pesos at the stand next door, people paid twice as much to eat it at the Burgi, an act of conspicuous consumption that demonstrated their high status. The third chicken stand, the newly opened El Pollo, was almost always empty. It, too, sold chicken for dollars, but the food was pre-cooked, held in a warming tray, then packaged in boxes for carryout. This differentiated it from the other two stands, where eating the cooked-to-order food necessitated a substantial investment of time. At least at the time of its arrival, no one in the neighborhood seemed inclined to pay higher prices for the convenience of pre-cooked food.

While the Revolution never completely equalized wealth, those who had money (especially hard currency, which was illegal before 1994) had few places to spend it. Before the Special Period the wealthy had no easy way of displaying their wealth, of recognizing each other, of building alliances, or of excluding the poor. Everyone consumed the same commodities in roughly the same amounts, so no clues about wealth were provided by clothing or other possessions. Not even geography reliably separated rich and poor—early in the Revolution, the finest houses in exclusive neighborhoods were subdivided into apartments where the home’s former servants and their families could live, making almost every part of every city racially and economically mixed. But today, the wealthy in each barrio can find each other at the Burgi, or its equivalent, and socialize separately from the people eating the peso chicken at the stand next door. A quick look at the commodities attached to each person’s body or home—or a brief survey of his hobbies, his dog, or his lunch—can provide a fairly accurate picture of each person’s degree of wealth and how it relates to one’s own. As people start to gravitate towards others able to display a lifestyle similar to their own, differences in wealth are starting to make themselves socially salient in Havana.

Another example of increasing social differentiation: just as the poor not shop at dollar stores, increasingly the rich are choosing not to stand in line at the bodega to pick up their rations. An unlicensed construction worker with high earnings admitted that his family left a good deal of their libreta products behind at the bodega. They considered the black beans from the bodega to be too hard, and the sugar too dark. They had little interest in eating lentils, and, and since they did not smoke, no need for cigarettes. The family no longer bothered to pick up their libreta products to trade or resell because, they felt, their time was better spent on other, more lucrative pursuits. At the same time, this man’s family enjoyed shopping at the farmers’ markets and dollar stores, where “the food is more expensive but fresher, healthier, more beautiful.” At the dollar store they bought oil, tomato sauce, pasta, soda, chicken, and a variety of condiments. On

the black market, they bought eggs, cream cheese, coffee and powdered milk. Just as this construction worker saw little need for the bodega food, he also doubted the need for a state that provided basic items to its people; he was ready to take their chances on the open market. The state may soon give him the chance. Writing in 2010, Cuban academic Perez Villanueva suggested that the state save money by limiting the rations to those Cubans who need it. They write, “It is widely felt that the ration-card food distribution system stopped fulfilling its original purpose, which was to ensure equity, some time ago. At present it subsidizes equally those who need it and those who do not. This method of distribution does not favor or encourage growth in productivity, as some people simply adapt to it” (7). Such a sentiment could not have been expressed ten years ago, when the idea that all Cubans eat the same because all Cubans *are* the same were firmly entrenched, all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding. Now, if the writings of these Cuban academics are characteristic, social inequalities among Cubans are being admitted to—and to a certain degree accepted—by those working within the state.

But the social divisions described above all pose a challenge for the Cuban state. Hierarchy is not inconsistent with state power in general; for instance, one finds a great deal of social stratification in liberal-democratic, capitalist nations like the United States, and it does not seem to pose a threat to state authority. Even in the most economically polarized societies of Latin America, state institutions are often strong. Citizens of socialist states like Cuba, however, seem less tolerant of social hierarchy, perhaps because their state and society were designed with more egalitarian goals. “Equality” in Cuba has meant not just equal rights, but equal outcomes, and criticism of the state has increased as social differentiation has. That the emerging hierarchy in Cuba clearly resulted from state policy changes makes the fallout for the socialist state worse still, as does that fact that the state’s most loyal supporters—members of the Communist Party—are now some of the worst off under the new order. And those who are at the top of the wealth- and consumption-based social hierarchy often see their interests as being at odds with the socialist state. In her discussion of dollarization, Susan Eckstein (2007) notes, “. . . in implementing the consumer strategy, the former antimaterialist regime . . . became a chief agent as well as a beneficiary of materialism (182). But in the long term the Cuban state may become a casualty of that strategy as well.

Cuba in the Special Period -- Needs, Desires, and State Power

During the Special Period, poverty reemerged as a social problem in Cuba. Between 1988 and 1996, the portion of the urban population who were too poor to purchase the “canasta” of basic goods more than doubled, according to a study cited by Álvarez and Mattar (2004, 64). As late as 2005, the Ministry of Economics and Planning estimated that 5 percent of the population was still “at risk of not covering some essential need,” meaning that their income was insufficient to buy basic food items (Mesa-Lago 2007, 200). Since the Special Period, the thesis that poverty had been eradicated in Cuba began to be questioned, although Zabala Argüelles (2010) tempers

that observation by saying “one does not find critical or extreme poverty of the sort that would produce malnutrition, poor health, illiteracy, insecurity, and social exclusion” (3).

The state’s inability to satisfy basic needs for even a small portion of the population is a problem. Rational redistribution—the ability to distribute goods better than a market system can—has been called the legitimating principle of any socialist society, including Cuba. The Cuban state’s ability to satisfy the basic needs of all citizens is crucial for maintaining popular support. Certainly those who depend on the libreta place great stock in the state’s ability to provide basic goods. Even those who have regular access to hard currency will still sometimes express satisfaction with the fact that the state takes care of the people not blessed with their connections or ability to earn money. Being unable to fulfill the role of provider casts the socialist state’s usefulness in doubt. Even in the absence of popular elections, the Cuban state relies on a certain level of popular support to endure; if support falls below that level, the state, too, may fall.

Satisfying need has, in fact, been a significant challenge for the state since the early 1990s. Immediately after the Soviet subsidies ended, the Cuban state came up short as a provider; as mentioned above, Cubans were estimated to have consumed 30% fewer calories during the first years of the Special Period. Though things have improved since then, the state is still not able to supply as many commodities on the libreta as it had in the 1980s. Moreover, with thousands of new items now entering the country through the dollar stores, the sense of what constitutes a basic need is changing for many people. The average Cuban’s sense of what is needed is beginning to diverge radically from the state’s view—the state has offered essentially the same list of items on the libreta for fifty years. The state has little ability to afford many of the items Cubans now claim to need; and that unmet need constitutes a significant threat to state power.

In fact, one of the most significant, unexpected consequences of the Special Period economic policies was that the unleashing of consumer *desire* (among those that could afford it) brought with it the expansion of *need* for almost everyone. As Marx explained, need is defined in relation to what others within one’s frame of reference have. It stands to reason then, that as some people get more and better goods, the common understanding of what goods are, by comparison, and the basic requirements of life, will expand correspondingly. One can clearly see the definition of needs changing among Habaneros today—now that many people own VCRs, for example, decency demands that even the poorest person should have a color TV. Indeed, the decades-old, black and white TVs in many homes are seen as no longer fulfilling the need for entertainment and information. This change comes not because needs inevitably expand, or that once introduced into a society color televisions inevitably become a need, but because need is determined socially, expanding when others within the frame of reference are seen obtaining more and more desirable goods. To give another example, when one of my neighbors saw a vendor emerge from a storeroom with large, unblemished tomatoes and present them to me to purchase, she insisted on trading the small, bruised tomatoes she had been given for the same kind I had been offered. It wasn’t merely that she desired larger and more beautiful tomatoes—she now *needed* them—common decency required that she have them—precisely because she

had seen them procured for me. This example also shows that in assessing their needs, people look not only at what objects are and do, but what they mean. The woman's small, bruised tomatoes failed to fill her needs not because of their objective qualities—in fact, they were equally nutritious as the large ones and just as well-suited for the puree she probably planned to make—but because of the meaning that she had suddenly attached to them. The small tomatoes meant that she, a Cuban woman, was less important than I, a foreigner, and this was something she could not abide. This sort of relational construction of need takes place thousands of times each day in Cuba, and everywhere else.

On the other hand, my neighbor Jorge believed that Cubans still needed no more than what the state had always provided. He ticked off a list of needs: a small TV and a radio, a little clean kitchen, fruit, vegetables, soap, a bed, shoes, a refrigerator, a bicycle, a weekly movie, and a twice-yearly trip to the beach. People, he argued, don't need to own "twenty pairs of shoes," "seven bottles of cologne," "diamonds and pearls," or "Nike shoes," though he acknowledged that Cubans were "spenders" and susceptible to such folly.

In Cuba, the debate over what people need and don't need is probably the most active site of politics on the island. The "needs debate" also serves as a trope for the larger, more dangerous debate on whether one supports or opposes the Revolutionary government. While the most loyal state supporters like Jorge argue that need is met, and that the state is fulfilling its primary role, opponents of the socialist state often cite cases of unmet need as a way of challenging the authority of a state whose legitimacy rests on the supposed fact that no Cuban goes without. This is why so much of the writing of Cuban dissidents takes the form of *accounting*—revealing that in a particular town, people got five eggs instead of the eight listed on the libreta last month is not just the complaint of an unsatisfied consumer. It is a political attack against state socialism.

The following is taken from an interview and field notes with a worker in a state bodega,

S: Sometimes, do you say, I should eat more of *this kind* of food?

J: Yes.

S: Ok, which food?

J: (Looks puzzled) All kinds of food. I should eat more. Of whatever. For example, I should eat more fish. But there isn't any.

S: Do you sometimes think I should eat less of *this kind* of food?

J: (Laughs). No. Never! Look, (takes a small object, weighing about two ounces), I have this amount of food, and I'm going to eat less? (Laughs).

S: What foods would you eat more of, if you could?

J: All of them. Whatever. Yellow rice, conch, sausage, but it doesn't come here.

S: Do you eat many vegetables?

J: Not a lot. They are very expensive.

I ask, "Are you still worried about the food situation?" He looks me dead in the eye, stops laughing, and says "yes." At the start of the interview I had told him that I would not record his name, at this point he reminded me of the seriousness of this, I told him that I would not use his name anywhere and that I understood the seriousness of this, and he told me to stop taking notes. I say, it's better than it was at the start of the Special Period, right? And he says, again looking me directly in the eye. "*No. No es.*" "Look," he says, and starts writing numbers on a paper. He seems to tell me that three people used to be able to live on 300 pesos, but now they need 900 to live the same way, and they don't have 900. I ask if most Cubans have ways to "resolverlo," by getting cheap or free food or something. He doesn't think so.

Here the market worker stressed the importance of not connecting his name with his clear statement that his needs were not met. He understood that to be a dangerous political act that could bring recriminations from the state.

To give another example, one interesting variant of this "needs debate" focuses on meat. Cubans had never received much meat on the *libreta*, but starting in the early 1990s a large part of the meat ration was replaced with a substance called *picadillo de soya*, textured soy protein mixed with a small amount of ground beef. Though not strictly vegetarian, *picadillo de soya* does not constitute meat to any Cuban. Do people need more meat in their diets, or just desire it? I observed this debate on several occasions. Once the relatively wealthy wife of a Cuban doctor explained that if a Cuban does not eat animal protein during a meal, regardless of whatever else she might consume, she feels that she has not eaten at all. Hearing this, a female friend exclaimed, "It's just psychological!" That insight was met with jeers of the others present, including the doctor and his wife, all of whom claimed that the typical Cuban's need for animal protein had a physical basis as well as a psychological one. Most Cubans remain convinced of the unique nutritional profile of meat and the biological necessity to consume it.

From a biological standpoint, it is difficult to argue that meat is a need. But when need is understood as social, a "need for meat" in Cuba becomes much more plausible. Armenia, a food scientist who helped develop the *picadillo de soya* product, still insists that her children eat "all the meat at a meal, and I don't care about the rest. I still have the idea that that's where all the nutrients are." It is not the objective biological profile of meat that determines whether Cubans

consider it a need, but rather the beliefs commonly held about it. Even a recent treatise about vegetable protein in Cuba's journal of nutrition science, *Temas Alimentarios (Pres)*, begins with the sweeping affirmation that "Psychologically and sociologically meat is the most appreciated food of mankind." Armena personally believed that "A good meal has meat. Cubans would eat nothing but meat if they could." Her hyperbole underlines the fact that for Cubans, while meat alone may not be sufficient to make a meal, it is a necessary component in every satisfactory eating experience.

Aside from its purported nutritional benefits, meat carries with it a host of meanings. "If there's no meat, we are eating badly," is how Armena sums up this fact. She explained that a meal without meat means "we are poor," so "it is depressing to eat." The meatless meal brings particular shame to a man, she claims. He is expected to provide material goods for the family, and a lack of meat at mealtime suggests he cannot. Introduced at a difficult time, picadillo de soya in Cuba came to embody the characteristics associated with the Special Period circumstances under which it was introduced: poverty, hunger, food insecurity, and sacrifice. Like all peoples, Cubans find "good to eat" only what they find "good to think." For them picadillo de soya is neither. Here, the meanings attached to a product, not its objective characteristics, help make it a need. Understanding meat as a need requires knowing that products are not consumed or rejected solely as a material object but as symbols as well.

Meat is just one case where people struggle with the definition of need, and where increasingly the state and the people define needs differently. Habaneros pride themselves on cleanliness, and even go as far as to contrast themselves with other socialist people, such as the Russian engineers who once flooded the city, by smell. The single bar of soap provided every two months on the libreta is not nearly enough to meet their bathing needs. Almost all Cubans rely on the dollar stores to provide them with extra bars of soap. Is soap an unmet need? What about spices? Many Cubans complained bitterly about having no onions, garlic, pepper, or cumin to mask the flavor of picadillo de soya. One individual spoke poetically about salt as a basic human need—without it, he felt, almost no food was palatable.

Although debates rage about particular products, debates about need are more abstract. Do people need variety in the products they consume, especially in food? Do they need choice? Although traditional societies had variety and choice only with the changing seasons, capitalist modernity has inculcated most people with the profit-increasing idea that constant change and choice are good. Increasingly the idea that variety, and the ability to choose between options, has spread to Cuba as well. Many people complained of being bored with the regularity of the libreta, and some older ones were disappointed that items they consumed in their youth—from American name-brand oatmeal to certain locally-grown tropical fruits—were no longer options. Do people need treats—a way to reward themselves with items not commonly available to them? Daniel Miller (1998) studies the unlikely shopping practices of British housewives to make a convincing argument that people need splurges to enable their normal, more restrained consumption practices. The near inability for a peso-earner to "treat" him self to anything is also perhaps a form of unmet need in Cuba today.

For its part, the state has tried to remove itself from the needs debate. The libreta has not expanded in response to public outcries. The flow of commodities through the dollar stores has not contracted. In the interest of keeping peace, however, the state allows the black market to run unchecked, making it easier for people to meet their needs on their own. Curbing the black market without a good replacement, like a more generous libreta, which the state cannot afford, would cause unrest. It is interesting to note that in his thousands of hours of public speaking and millions of written words, Fidel Castro is not known to have ever mentioned the existence of the dollar stores, let alone their effects on individuals and Cuban society. He continues to write and speak as if the laws and ideals of the 1980s had never changed.

Thrift and *Resolviendo*

Thrift is by no means unique to Cuba. Several scholars have looked at frugality in the capitalist world (Miller 1998, Lastovicka and Bettencourt 1999). But while only a minority of first-world consumers can be described as frugal—Lastovicka and Bettencourt (1999) sets the number at about 15% -- in Cuba frugal behavior is the norm for all but the wealthiest people. For that reason, no account of consumption in Cuba would be complete without careful attention to their practices of thrift. Understanding Cuba requires one to look not only at what Cubans buy and use, but on what they *don't* buy, and what they use time and again.

Two cases from my fieldnotes should easily demonstrate the importance of thrift in Cuba:

Chef Damason stands at the stove and, never looking up from the hot pans in front of him, yells out the name of the ingredient he needs. Then shirtless, sweaty cooks stop what they are doing and find him the ingredient, or in most cases, the best substitute for an ingredient which no Cuban restaurant kitchen would ever have on hand. “Aji picante!” Damason yells, and there is some shuffling, then Armena goes and finds the closest thing, a red pepper, will a red pepper do? Yes, but badly. “How should I cut it? Jardinare, jardinare?” “Don’t you mean julienned?” “Yes, ok, julienned. The red pepper is julienned.” “Mantequilla!” Damason cries out. There’s no mantequilla. There’s vegetable oil. White pepper! Try black. During the 45 minutes we had waited for the kitchen to open, Damason had grown so distraught over the lack of a pineapple for making the pineapple glaze that he actually tried to arrange a car for me so I could go home and retrieve a pineapple I had there. No car could be found, so no pineapple for the dish. “Is there any fresh fruit in the kitchen? Any fruit at all?” There is no fruit at all. Chef Damason is clearly disappointed with how the lobster mariposa demonstration is turning out, since the dish lacks every single ingredient except the lobster—it should have been lobster in butter with almonds and pineapple, instead it is lobster in sunflower seed oil with half-rancid, half-burnt peanuts bought from a street vendor, and boiled squash (2001).

Two afternoons each week I cooked at Judith's house. On her son's birthday, I helped her make a cake—actually a panatela, a sponge cake—frosted with chocolate pudding. As she pulled out the ingredients for the frosting, she told me that you can make pudding with flour, but it is better—smoother and lighter—when made with corn starch. However, she explained, corn starch in Cuba costs about twice as much as flour; she then paused for several seconds trying to decide which to use to make the pudding that will frost the cake. On this day, she chose the corn starch, even though it's more expensive. Judith's day is full of little calculations like this—striking a balance between saving for and splurging on the ones she loves. While she is mostly proud of her thrifty ways, she worries that she suffers from a *mania de ahorrar*—a mania for savings-- and that might not be a good thing. Maybe she tries to save too much, cut too many corners, “and you have to be careful, because there are dishes . . .” she trailed off, but presumably she was faulting herself for cutting corners in places where the substitution diminished the final product. (2001)

While Damason is an acclaimed professional chef and Judith is a home cook, both operate under similar constraints in their kitchens—they seldom have access to all the ingredients they need to execute a dish. But while Chef Damason experienced his unmet needs as a source of frustration, only partially offset by the skill of the other cooks at “resolviendo” the situation, Judith generally approached the need to find substitutions as an opportunity to apply her own ingenuity to a task. Judith, unlike the chef, viewed cooking through the lens of thrift—success for her meant not just creating a delicious dish, but doing so within the constraints presented to her. The thrift that Judith practiced isn't just about doing without—it also is about deciding to use the expensive corn starch at the right times. It's a balancing act, a complicated calculation involving nutrition, taste, cost, and love, one that Judith runs dozens of times each day in her head, each day worrying whether she spent too much, or loved too little, through her choices. Viewing scarcity through a lens of thrift, as Judith does, offsets the feeling of lack and need described in the previous section.

In the first decades of the revolution, the state engaged in various economic and ideological projects to deemphasize the role of commodity consumption in Cuban life. Over time, it was hoped, Cubans would dedicate less of their energy, resources, and thought to the acquisition of commodities. One irony of Cuban socialism is that, even before the Special Period, the shortage of consumer goods actually increased the energy and attention that had to be focused on obtaining and using them. The shortage economy that has existed for the length of the revolution favored the development of thrift; it was necessary to use all consumer goods in one's possession to the fullest extent, since there would likely be little else coming. During the Special Period, when access to key commodities dropped precipitously, the importance of thrift only intensified.

In the Special Period, thrift became a requirement of survival. The mania por ahorrar that Judith saw in herself and others has its roots in the earliest, harshest days of the Special Period.

On many occasions, I told Judith how good she was at using things in the kitchen—making substitutions, never wasting—and she pointed out that scarcity during the Special Period was her teacher. While both Judith and her husband Esteban lost a significant amount of their body weight in those years, neither of them fell ill, which Judith attributed to their resourcefulness and mental strength. For instance, she and Esteban used a booklet printed by the Armed Forces to gather wild plants growing around Havana, which they scrubbed and ate. Looking back on those years, they both believed that their willingness to learn and adapt to new food ways, as well as the emotional stability they gained from yoga, saved them from the intense suffering that others experienced during that time.

While their approaches were unusual, many other Cubans intensified their use of existing food recourses, and invented new ones, to fight off starvation during the Special Period. Several people described how they used to prepare and eat even the peels of citrus fruits during the Special Period—usually by candying the skin in sugar, which was generally available, or in some cases by marinating the white pith and frying it as a meat substitute. People found ways of consuming every part of the meat they did get, including grinding the bones and incorporating the powder into meals. In the most extreme cases, even inedible things were consumed. Although no one admitted to doing so themselves, people were rumored to have eaten cats. Armena, for example, related stories, which she admitted may have been apocryphal, of food stands that sold fried rags in the place of meat, and chopped condoms in the place of cheese.

Hunger was truly egalitarian in Cuba—nearly everyone faced the same challenges, and responded to them with similar strategies. This is part of the reason why thriftiness has become so widespread in the entire population—they all share the recent memory of hunger. Like survivors of the Great Depression, the experience of hunger has marked the generations who passed through the Special Period. For the majority of Cubans, who now have some income with which to supplement their rations, and possibly even a source of dollars, thrift is still valued.

Today, thrift in consumption is in some ways analogous to trapicheo in production. Both operate just below the surface of society, little analyzed by Cubans and largely unnoticed by outsiders. Both go a long way towards explaining the “miracle” of Cuban survival under late socialism. Both are incremental—by earning just a little bit more, or using just a little bit less, over time and without fail, Cubans are able to make ends meet. And both are, ultimately, logics that organize a range of behavior. Over time, one tends to see the world through the lenses of trapicheo and thrift. How can I earn just a little bit more? How can I use just a little bit less? Trapicheo and thrift also differ in key ways. Both genders take part in both practices, but trapicheo tends to be performed by men and thrift tends to be performed by women. This is because in Cuba it is still men who mostly work outside the home, where trapicheo takes place, and women who do most of the shopping and household tasks, where thrift comes into play. Also, the acts differ in terms of connotation, as thrift is more widely accepted as a positive practice, and one that can be openly admitted to, than trapicheo is.

How is thriftiness expressed? For one, thrifty Cubans reuse things that Americans might not consider reusable. In Cuba, there is no such thing as a disposable good—cigarette lighters are

refilled hundreds of times at tiny stands set up outside markets. Plastic bags are reused until they tear, and then strips of the torn bags might be woven into sturdier bags for more use. I saw tin cans converted into oil lamps and linked together into chains that served as window coverings. The daily paper has a second, some say more important, use, in the bathroom. They repair things that the US middle class would consider beyond repair. Shoes, hats, watches, and umbrellas are repaired and re-repaired, and electronic goods like radios, fans, and televisions are made to last thirty years with skillful repairs and replacements. When I partially severed the electrical cord to my computer, there was someone on my block who knew how to fix it.

Part of thrift is learning to substitute what you already have for unavailable items. Cubans take justifiable pride in their ability to resolve almost any situation and invent solutions for others. Beloved Cuban food writer Nitza Villapol always gave substitutions with her recipes—how to make flan without eggs, flan without milk, and so on. Another feature of their frugality—Cuban cooks use all the parts of things, including parts that Americans would throw out. One cook I worked with deemed “true creole food” any dish that made a good meal out of ingredients that wealthy people would discard. Ajiaco, the classic Cuban pork stew, is one such dish, which begins by making a broth out of a part of the pig that American consumers would rather not see in the kitchen—the head. Clearly, the tendency to cook with the less desirable, less costly food items has been part of the culture since well before the Revolution, probably because scarcity was an issue for most people under capitalism as well. But it became an art form after the Revolution.

Perhaps most noticeably, frugal Cubans try not to throw things out. Many houses are crowded with items accumulated over decades, and each item is of value to its owner. I once had the misfortune of being present when an elderly man toured an apartment he owned but did not reside in, which had been “cleaned” to prepare it for rental. The apartment had served, essentially, as a storage facility for the family, and converting it back to a home required that a good deal of what I might call garbage be thrown out. However, for reasons that should be becoming clearer, in Cuba, there is very little garbage. Almost every item has value to someone at sometime. Having had so many of his items—basically, his bank of stored wealth—removed in his absence sent the owner into obvious state of anxiety. He paced through the house and tried to remember what objects were now missing. To everyone’s relief, almost everything the owner remembered well enough to ask about—ancient surveying equipment, a broken fan--had been saved. But the man was still disturbed, worried that there were other, valuable goods that were now lost to him. After the owner left, I asked why he had not been included in their cleaning process. The response was: “If he had been here, we wouldn’t have been able to throw anything out.” The cabinets, now empty except for three usable pots and two pans, had been filled with plastic soda bottles covered in cooking grease, they said. They shook their head at the owner’s concept of wealth—they were earning dollars, and not as frugal as he.

Frugality: The Social Life of Cuban Things

While the younger people scoffed, the old man was not wrong to think of his possessions as a bank, and the clean-up job as a bank robbery. This is because the “social life of things” under socialism is very different from that under capitalism. Under capitalism, a typical commodity, upon being purchased, begins losing its value. A car, for instance, loses a certain percentage of its value the moment it leaves the lot. The item continues depreciating until its value hits zero; it has become trash, and is thrown out in some proscribed fashion. In a shortage economy like Cuba’s, however, scarcity stabilizes the value of goods over a longer period time. The value of commodities can actually increase over time, if demand remains stable and the supply dwindles or disappears.

That commodities hold their value and even appreciate over time has some interesting consequences, one of which is that a person who needs cash can sell almost any of their personal items; the fact that something is “used” does not render it of low value. That their “stuff” has value is not news to Cubans; they are often in the process of selling their possessions, or buying something another person has to offer. The fact that pretty much everything is always in circulation occurred to me when I started to keep track of the number of times a person on the street, while admiring some item that I owned, said, “Sell it to me.” At first it struck me as strange that so many people believed that I would consider selling my bicycle, my shoes, or my dog to them, but soon I realized that for an ordinary Cuban, everything anyone owns is always for sale. It has become sort of a habit, a way of complementing a person, and perhaps indicating one’s own *poder adquisitivo*, to say “sell it to me” when one sees something one likes. Julio, for instance, was flattered when a friend begged to buy from him a soccer jersey I had brought him from California.⁶

The stability of value over time causes Cubans to look at commodities differently than citizens under capitalism, both as something to consume, and as an asset or form of storing wealth, which can be converted to cash if a need arises. And because no commodity is fully, permanently taken out of circulation, the relationship between a person and what he owns is different than in other places. In Cuba a commodity is not “mine forever,” to use up and discard, but rather “something I am using for now,” which might be sold in the future. As a result, Cubans exhibit a sense of stewardship for even the smallest items. To the extent a person can keep a commodity functioning and intact, he will be able to recoup its value.

Things can get very complicated. For example, soon after Julio began earning dollars at the craft market, he traveled to the eastern part of the country to visit his poorest relatives and bring them gifts from Havana, including some new towels and slippers. The next time he visited, he noticed that his grandmother “still insisted on using the same rag she had been using” and that his uncle still walked around in slippers held together by tape. Julio reasoned that because his family was “accustomed to living in such misery,” they could not get used to new things. He saw their behavior as irrational, governed by unreasonable emotions, but when pressed to do so, he

also acknowledged that in an emergency the family could resell the towels and slippers to buy food, and keeping these items in good condition would mean getting a higher price. They really had to care for those things, which in their case meant not using them. This, of course, upset him, too, since it questioned his ability as a provider. He had hoped that his new source of income would reassure his family that there would be no more economic emergencies, because he could provide for them in the future. Their unwillingness to even use the goods he bought indicated that they believed otherwise.

Cuban Consumer Culture

Policy changes aimed at increasing the state's supply of hard currency led to the reemergence of consumer culture in Cuba during the Special Period. While successful from a revenue-generating point of view, the decision to legalize dollars and open retail sites where those dollars could be exchanged for products otherwise unavailable in Cuba had profound social effects, some of which could work against the state's long term survival. Those with regular access to dollars have enjoyed having access to more and better consumer goods, but some of them have come to believe that they would be better served by an open-market system rather than this truncated version of one. Those who cannot afford to fully participate in the consumer culture pose an even greater problem for state power, as many of them resent being on the bottom of a society that promised, and for many years achieved, social equality, at least in terms of wealth. The fact that there is an inverse relationship between party loyalty and dollar earnings compounds the problem further. The final chapter will more closely consider the implications of consumer culture on state power.

CHAPTER 4: POLITICAL HUMOR

Jokes are not evenly distributed around the globe; some places tend to have more jokes than others as part of their native folklore. Cuba is a rich site for the collection of jokes, especially politically themed ones. Even before the Revolution, Cubans were known for their sense of humor, and for reasons that will be discussed shortly, people living in socialist societies tend to know and share a larger than average number of political jokes (Beckmann 1969, Brunvand 1973, Dundes 1971, Yurchak 2005). This chapter examines over 300 politically-themed jokes collected in Cuba after 1959. Most of the jokes covered in this chapter were recorded by myself or others during the Special Period. While many of the jokes in the collection seem to have been crafted in Cuba during that time, others jokes being told during the Special Period could be reliably traced as far back as the 1960s, and even to other socialist countries. This collection of jokes, when viewed through the lens of my ethnographic fieldwork and other anthropological accounts of Cuba, sheds light on several aspects of contemporary Cuban culture. For one, the jokes provide strong evidence that some part of the Cuban people—those who create, refine, tell, and appreciate these jokes—feel dissatisfied with some parts of the Revolution, and use humor to articulate those feelings and share them with others.

Jokes are valuable because they pinpoint the aspects of the Revolutionary project that genuinely provoke ire among ordinary Cubans, and not what critics and dissidents living abroad consider to be the Revolution's principal drawbacks. The actual concerns of Cubans, as revealed through their humor, might surprise some. For instance, while I've found no jokes about the absence of contested elections, and very few jokes about the lack of an independent press—both things that bother outside commentators tremendously—I've collected more than 60 distinct jokes about the quality and quantity of food on the island, like this one, dating back to the 1980s:

One day, ham and eggs go as tourists to Cuba. When they get off the airplane a crowd gathers around them with the intention of eating them. Luckily, they slip through the crowd of people and begin to run and run and run. When they reach the corner they meet up with a steak. The ham and eggs tell the steak, "RUN, BECAUSE SURELY THESE PEOPLE WILL TRY TO EAT YOU TOO!" The steak smiles confidently and says, "Don't worry, I've lived here for 30 years and no one has recognized me yet.

In this joke the Cuban people have gone so long without seeing steak that they fail to recognize it on the street corner. They are also so desperately hungry they attack and eat "tourists." The same fears and frustrations turn up again and again in the jokes—hunger is one of them, the inability to leave the island is another, the improbably long life of Fidel Castro is a third. These same themes commonly emerged in my own interviews as well, supporting my sense that jokes can reflect real life concerns as well as serious conversations can.

Because Cuban political jokes can be read as a document of Cubans' own sense of what they're suffering, they go a long way towards legitimating certain critiques of the Revolutionary project. Captured on the island, frozen in writing, and strategically re-deployed, these anonymous but seemingly real native voices can be used to criticize the socialist project. Not surprisingly, some of the largest joke collections have been sponsored by opponents of Castro, like the Miami-based Cuban American National Foundation, which has published books of dissident humor and features political jokes on its web site. For their part, Cuban leaders have done their best to foster state-sanctioned humor and to employ state intellectuals to write works that "explain away" the more treacherous jokes that circulate in the streets. But as any student of folklore knows, official attempts to control the content of folk speech is almost always destined to fail. As Alan Dundes has written: "The mouth of the folk cannot be closed, as it were, and in the various manifestations of oral literature, the folk invariably have their say" (1971, 50).

Despite how they are used by critics, political jokes provide more than straight-forward proof of Cuban oppression. In some ways, I will argue, they demonstrate the freedom of thought that Cubans still enjoy. After looking more closely at the structure that most political jokes share, in this chapter I will argue that people who tell and "get" a large number of political jokes are actually more open and dynamic in their thinking than people living in societies where few political jokes circulate, such as our own. This chapter will examine the relationship between hegemony and political humor, and argue that only those people living under relatively weak hegemonic forces are free to create, perform, and understand political jokes. Generations of scholars have worked on unifying and refining the definition of hegemony that first emerged in piecemeal form in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* (1971), with one of the clearest treatments being given by Raymond Williams in his book *Marxism and Literature* (1977). For Williams and others, hegemony has come to mean one type of power that a dominant group can exert over subordinates—it entails members of the subordinate group accepting the values, goals, and worldview of the dominant group as their own. The subordinate group comes to accept their subordination, rather than have it imposed on them by force. I will argue that the volume, variety, and richness of Cuban political jokes testify to a certain sort of freedom from hegemonic control that Cubans have, even relative to people in the so-called free society of the United States. This does not mean one should dismiss the very real suffering that the content of some the jokes detail. The key is to take into account both what they jokes mean--the message they communicate--and what their very existence says about Cuban society.

What is a Joke? A *Political* Joke?

The first modern analysts of jokes sought to discover how joking functioned on an individual, psychological level. Freud (1960), for example, wanted to know what caused a particular person to tell a joke, and even more importantly, what mental processes moved the listener to laugh at it. He eventually decided that laughter arises because the listener is able to make a mental jump between the two worlds that are contained within every joke, while expending little psychical

energy in the process. In his view, the surplus energy is emitted as laughter. Freud was also the first to make the point that telling a joke has nothing to do with expressing happiness or satisfaction. More likely, a joke expresses the opposite. In his work, Freud set aside what he called “innocent jokes”—nonsense, for instance, knock-knock jokes in the United States—and attends more closely to the larger category of “tendentious jokes,” those that convey an idea as they generate laughter. Of the tendentious joke, Freud (1960) writes: “. . . there are only two purposes that it may serve . . . it is either a hostile joke (serving the purpose of aggressiveness, satire, of defense) or an obscene joke (serving the purpose of exposure)” (97). Or, as Raskin (1985) says, “Laughter was born out of hostility. If there had been no hostility in man, there had been no laughter (and, incidentally, no need for laughter). All the current types of wit and humor retain evidence of this hostile origin” (11). And finally this, from Wilson (1979): “You will recognize a Utopia by the complete absence of humor, you will spot Superman by his unmitigated, infuriating seriousness.” (231).

Freud considered structure and psychology the key elements in joke analysis, and in his work he attended only briefly to the particular ideas that the jokes conveyed. Soon enough, however, analysts realized that the content of a joke can convey valuable information about the culture and society of its origin, and began looking at jokes anthropologically as well. For example, in his book, *Jokes and Their Relation to Society* (1998), Christie Davies quotes Louis Kronenberger’s observation that “frequently a joke can catch, better than a dozen treatises, the essence of a people, a period, an entire civilization (2). He then explains why this might be the case. To construct a joke, he suggests, humorists must look for the “essence of things,” and the “anti-essence of things,” then combine the two in a specific but unexpected way. To construct a joke, therefore, the humorist must have a deep and nuanced understanding of the thing he is joking about, and that understanding must be shared by his listeners in order for them to “get” the joke. If any aspect of the analysis is off, then the joke will fail to be funny. More than one humor researcher has compared the jokester to the sociologist, as both are students of society who go beneath the surface of things to reveal uncomfortable truths. Larsen (1980) writes “. . . both comedy . . . and sociology can be particularly provocative by revealing ‘dirt’ behind reputable institutions, roles, groups, and individuals: the government, the bureaucracy, the professions, the rich, the powerful, the celebrated” (157). One good reason to examine jokes, therefore, is to glean the insights of these skilled native analysts.

Before going further in my analysis of the political joke, it is worthwhile to define what I mean by the term. Deciding what counts as a joke of any sort is a thorny problem, one that Freud himself struggled with. Halfway through his *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud admitted that he had little way to prove that those items he had chosen to analyze in the book should be counted as “jokes” while other sorts of speech acts should not. Like most of us, he was guided only by a gut feeling about what constitutes a joke in making the identifications he did.

While Cubans say a lot of funny things about the state, most of their humorous speech acts do not have the form of jokes. One of my Cuban co-worker’s tendencies to follow any mention of even the most common food items with a surprised inquiry about the availability of that food

(“How much do black beans cost at the agro these days?” “There are black beans?!”) was humorous, and in an indirect way political, but it can’t be considered a joke for the purposes of this chapter. The rationale for excluding humorous quips like hers is that they tend to be idiosyncratic—one-off, unique speech acts that tell us more about a particular speaker’s ingenuity than shared Cuban values. Jokes that circulate widely in a fixed form are better indicators of shared attitudes.

In fact, in this chapter I analyze only jokes of unknown authorship that circulate orally -- that is, I’m looking at a form of Cuban folklore. In addition to excluding the quips of my individuals, I exclude jokes known to come from a single author and transmitted through some form of mass media. Jokes that are not folkloric are weaker indicators of shared values, though they are not worthless as anthropological instruments—if people laugh at a joke printed in a newspaper, told in a club, or shown on TV, some evidence of shared ideas is there. But jokes that circulate long enough to be documented by one or more collectors have, in some sense, a “fitness” that has allowed them to survive. That fitness is what makes them a good record of shared culture, rather than the genius of particular individuals.

In this chapter, I also limit myself to jokes that I consider “political.” One could take a narrow view of political jokes, and include only those jokes that directly name government officials and institutions. Setting the parameters this way would capture a fairly large number of jokes in Cuba and other former-Soviet states. But I believe finding a more natural boundary requires expanding the definition somewhat. I find it useful to deem political any joke that directly or *indirectly* implicates a state leader or institution in Cuba. For example, while on the surface the ham and eggs joke is about food, it becomes a joke about politics when one realizes that in the absence of a market economy it is the responsibility of the Cuban state to provide food to the people. A native listener would immediately know that state institutions are implicated in the joke, that some government person or agency is the unspoken cause of the absence of steak and the shortage of ham and eggs on the island. Indeed, there is very little space outside of the state where food can be *legitimately* procured; only the state has the right to feed the hungry in Cuba. That the state has *never* satisfied the craving for luxury goods like beef, and often fails in its responsibility to provide enough basic animal protein like ham and eggs, is a political critique, as was discussed in the previous chapter. Because it seeks to transform almost all aspects of life the Revolutionary state is implicated in areas—like food, work life, health care, art and culture—that might seem outside the purview of other states. That is why it makes sense to expand the category of political jokes to include these topics. Other analysts might choose to expand or narrow what they would consider a “Cuban political joke,” but hopefully I have made clear where for me the boundaries lie.

Why So Many Jokes?

Many humor analysts have tried to explain why certain places or certain times generate so much political humor. Most of these theories identify a social condition that *causes* political

joking; unfortunately, in almost every case it's easy to disprove the causal argument with counter-examples, where the social condition existed in the absence of political humor, or vice versa. I am reluctant to see these counter-examples as reason to dismiss the humor theories entirely, since almost all of them identify what seems to be a real context for the emergence of political humor, at least one that resonates with the Cuban case. I find it more helpful to begin with the suggestion that social theories, including theories of humor, are more likely to capture what Weber called "affinities" rather than strict causes (in Swedberg and Agevall 2005, 83). While the previous theories might not have captured a cause, in the strict sense, of political humor, many have identified affinities between political humor and particular social conditions. The section closes with my own hypothesis that there is an affinity between political joking and weak state hegemony. I finish with an analysis of particular Cuban jokes to support that view.

Looking for affinities between social conditions and political jokes rather than causes, we first turn to the well-known theory of the repressiveness hypothesis. The repressiveness hypothesis was first put forth by Alan Dundes in 1971, and who later predicted that "the more repressive the regime, the more jokes there will be about that regime" (1987, 160). Moving from correlation to cause, he wrote, "Political jokes in Iron Curtain countries frequently express what many individuals feel but dare not utter. Jokes are, by definition, impersonal. They provide a socially sanctioned frame that normally absolves individuals from any guilt that might otherwise result from conversational articulation of the same content. Thus jokes provide a much-needed vent for emotion" (ibid). In addition to absolving the speaker from guilt, the impersonal and socially-sanctioned character of jokes could also reduce the risk of punishment at the hands of the repressive state. Stanley Brandes (1977) has drawn on Dundes' repressive hypothesis to explain the abundance of political jokes circulating in Spain during the tightly controlled, politically uncertain years around the time of Franco's death. Egon Larsen (1980) agrees with Dundes as well, writing that ". . . jokes assume the role of the *vox populi* in countries and periods lacking free elections, a properly functioning parliament, satirical magazines, and in our time, uncensored radio and television" (2). To paraphrase Dundes, Brandes, and Larsen, political jokes bubble up when other modes of political discourse—free speech, newspapers, uncensored television, and so on—are absent. In such a context, jokes become the best way for people to make their ideas known.

The repressiveness theory could also be used to explain the *absence* of jokes. For example, Dundes (1971) claimed that the United States had relatively few orally-transmitted political jokes because it had a relatively free press and freedom of speech. Because Americans don't need to conceal their beliefs, the argument went, they did not need the more complex joke form to convey their political ideas. Alexei Yurchak, not himself a proponent of the repressive hypothesis, did observe that the number of Soviet political jokes, or *anekdoty*, disappeared in the late 1980s with the appearance of *glasnost* (2005, 275).

When critics of the repressive theory pointed out that some obviously repressive regimes, including those in Argentina and Guatemala during the 1980s, generated no political humor, proponents modified the theory. They now said that only under a moderately repressive regime

do political jokes arise; a highly repressive regime might stamp jokes out completely by making them too great a risk. This would explain why Stalin's Russia and the Third Reich also produced relatively few jokes, or why fascist Spain inspired political joking only in its later years as Franco's power declined (Brandes 1977).

To summarize, the repressive hypothesis suggests that people tell more political jokes when it is the only safe medium for expressing their ideas. In the so-called free societies of the West, political jokes are not needed because people have other avenues of expression available to them. Even in its modified form, two problems remain with the theory. First, it seems to me that people in "free" countries like the United States have no more ability to express political thought through the media that those living under "repressive regimes" do. The modes of expression listed by Dundes and others are, for most people, a mode of *receiving* ideas about politics, not expressing them. Outside of a small group of people, most people do not "speak" through the newspapers, television, and so on. If elections are an act of expression for the segment of society that votes, it is expression of a very constrained sort, as voters are generally asked to choose from a fixed list of candidates that has already been honed down sharply by other political forces. Secondly, the repressiveness theory assumes that people everywhere need to express political ideas, and at an identical rate, when it seems more accurate to say that people in different places and different times vary in their desire to engage in political discourse. In a later section of this chapter, I will suggest that Americans, for example, differ from Cubans not in that they have so many outlets in which to express their political views, but in that they have fewer political views to express. We have fewer political jokes, I will argue, because a strong state hegemony has rendered many of us unable to formulate the political ideas behind them.

Other humor theories are more able to explain the abundance of political jokes in Cuba. Looking cross-culturally, there seems to be an affinity between jokes and tragedy. Humor theorists have written about how cycles of "sick" jokes regularly arise in the wake of tragic events. In a later consideration of jokes, Dundes (1987) suggested that disaster joke cycles, like the one that followed the crash of the Space Shuttle Columbia, enable people to distance themselves from painful events. One might expect to hear sick jokes in the wake of politically generated tragedies as well, and in Cuba this is in fact the case. For instance, the darkest days of the Special Period were enshrined in a cycle of sick jokes about hunger and hunger-related diseases. In conversation, some Cuban individuals shamefacedly admitted that Cubans were reduced to eating cats; in jokes, they distance themselves enough to laugh at the idea of eating pets:

Who are the rat's best friends? The Cubans. Why? Because they are eating all the cats.

An Afro-Cuban in New York, who doesn't want to give money to help his friend emigrate, calls Havana on the telephone and says, "Listen, compadre, I have told you not to come here. Right now out the window I see a dog eating a black man."

“Well look, I’m going to come anyway, because right now I see out the window a black man eating a dog.”

Cubans during the Special Period also made sick jokes about the effects of hunger—the average Cuban lost about a third of his normal caloric intake during these years:

A scientific achievement of the Cuban Revolution is that before the Revolution, people died and after they became a skeleton. Now it’s the reverse.

Two skeletons meet, one American and the other Cuban. The Cuban says to the American with admiration, “Man, what a skeleton you are! Big and strong, with fat white bones! You are a tremendous skeleton!” The American skeleton responds. “I ate a lot of steak, drank a lot of milk, took a lot of vitamins. But hey, for a Cuban skeleton, you’re not so bad yourself. Did you have a special ration when you were alive?” The Cuban skeleton responds “No, no, I’m alive right now.”

Some portion of the population also suffered from hunger-related illnesses during the Special Period, like optical neuropathy, which left a startling number of Cubans temporarily (and in some cases permanently) blind (Álvarez and Mattar 2004, 115, Eckstein 1994, 135, Pérez-López 2003, 181). People lived in fear of contracting neuropathy and were deeply troubled by the government’s attempts to treat the condition medically, with surgeries and drugs, without first addressing its root cause—the widespread lack of food. That unease was captured in sick jokes like this one:

The people walk by here sounding like maracas. Why? Imagine an empty stomach filled with pills against neuritis.

All of these are dangerous jokes that run the risk of offending listeners, and yet “sick” jokes are favorites in Havana. One suspects they play a functional role in distancing people from the effects of widely-shared tragedies. Wilson (1979) points out that “amusement at misfortune enables the individual to avoid suffering and salvage reward from adversity” (144). While it would be too simple to say that tragedy causes jokes, and ridiculous to expect all tragedies to generate sick joke cycles, there seems to be an affinity between tragedy and the creation and telling of jokes. It also seems that societies that suffer more than their fair share of tragic events turn to black humor as one way of carrying on.

Another affinity exists between political joking and defending oneself from the criticism of an outside group. Freud suggested that the development of Jewish humor could be attributed to the fact that so many outsiders criticized the Jews. The Jews themselves told Jewish jokes to preempt such criticism and diminish its force. Wilson (1979) agreed that in Jewish jokes, “The message to the gentile audience is ‘I know my faults, and can ridicule them better than you can’ ... The joker forestalls, pre-empts other people’s criticism” (147). Brandes (1983) also considered Jewish-Americans jokes to be a way for members of that group to contrast themselves with

others, but gently so; the same joke told by a non-Jewish person would carry a different, harsher meaning. This argument resonates with the Cuban case as well, as many people living on the island feel the need to defend themselves against criticisms made by Cubans living abroad, who believe more direct action should be taken against Castro. One way to preempt such criticism is to make a joke about oneself. A well-known joke, one that was also present in Russia, makes fun of Cubans who, perhaps because they are overly susceptible to government propaganda, don't understand how badly off they truly are:

Don't you know that Adam and Eve were Cuban? Well, look, they didn't have clothes, they were without shoes, they only had fruit to eat, and still they said they lived in paradise.

Members of a group that faces criticism can also use jokes to separate themselves from those in their group who actually may deserve that criticism. Wilson (1979) says a joker "may be criticizing those members of his group which 'give the whole group a bad name'" (218). Looking through the lens of class, Wilson predicted that jokes would be used mainly by the upwardly-mobile part of a society. While there are fewer examples of this in Cuba, some jokes do take aim at a segment of the population who sincerely support the Castro regime. These jokes are told, presumably, by people who consider themselves above holding such beliefs.

A man asks a Cuban dentist how much he charges to extract a tooth. "100 pesos," the dentist replies. "Why so much money?" the man asks. The dentist explains it is hard work because Cubans don't like to open their mouths.

This is a swipe at those Cubans, who, unlike the joke teller, refuse to speak out against their government. Another joke suggests that in addition to neuropathy, the fearsome nutrition-related disease, many Cubans suffer from a neuro-apathy, an apathy of the mind that lets the regime endure. Again, those who are telling and appreciating the joke may be differentiating themselves from the apathetic group, and saying that only the apathetic Cubans, not they themselves, are worthy of derision through joking.

A related type of joke are those in which a native protagonist tells a foreign visitor how it "really is" in Cuba, thus destroying the foreigner's fantasy that Cuba is a socialist paradise. Foreigners are not the intended audience for these jokes; Cubans tell them to each other as way of distinguishing themselves from Castro sympathizers, who, like the foreigners in the jokes, just don't understand Cuba and are worthy of laughter. Here is one example:

A foreign visitor says to a disbelieving citizen, "But in Cuba there aren't any destitute people (*pordioseros*) in the street." The citizen responds, "That's true, they're inside all of the houses."

And another:

A Cuban immigrant in Madrid is talking to a local.
Listen, how was it living in Cuba?

Man, I couldn't complain.
How was the economy?
Well, look, we couldn't complain.
And you drink a lot?
Again, I can't complain.
Fuck, then, why did you leave Cuba?
Shit, I told you! Because I couldn't complain!

In the first joke, the savvy native explains that destitution is the common fate of all Cubans, rather than a problem faced by a small minority who would be visible in the streets. It suggests that the Revolution's eradication of homelessness—all Cubans do indeed have some place to live—is not enough to merit praise, because the conditions in which people live are still often very bad. In the second joke, the foreigner cannot understand that the lack of free speech makes life intolerable, even if other aspects of life were tolerable. In both cases, clueless outsiders are put in their place.

Dualistic Theory and Hegemony

Of all the theory on humor there is to review, the so-called “dualistic theory” contributes the most towards an understanding of the abundance of jokes in places like Cuba. Dualistic theory proposes that all jokes express the union of two opposite entities, such as meanings, perceptions, concepts, or systems. While dualistic theory is concerned with the structure of jokes in the abstract, and pays little attention to the content of jokes, it has lots to say about political humor and societies where such humor occurs. One can expand on the dualistic theory to explain why some people, like Cubans, will be able to generate both parts of the political joke's dual structure, while others cannot.

While Freud first noticed the dual-structure of the joke, Davies perhaps explained the theory best when he claimed a joke brings together the “essence” and “anti-essence” of a thing, or two opposite views of the same subject. For instance, in the joke that Adam and Eve were really Cuban, the pairs brought together are clearly opposites—scarce and abundant resources, sacred and mundane history, the distant past and contemporary time. In the joke about ham and eggs, however, the two worlds brought together—one populated by anthropomorphic food and the other by ordinary Cubans—are so radically different that it may seem strange to call them opposite. One can preserve the notion of oppositeness in that joke by characterizing one world as authentic and the other as fake, one fact and the other fantasy.

A joke is a dynamic instrument—not only are two opposing entities brought together in the text, but the listener is catapulted from one meaning, perception, concept, or system to the other merely by following the narrative line of the joke. In his careful examination of joke structure, Freud (1960) first observed that “. . . we derive unmistakable enjoyment in jokes from being transported by the use of the same or a similar word from one circle of ideas to another, remote one” (147). Or as Mindess (in Raskin, 1985) more plainly put it: “in jokes, we are led along one

line of thought and then booted out of it” (31). Freud (1960) observed that, “The pleasure in a joke . . . seems to be the greater the more alien the two circles of ideas they are, and thus the greater the economy which the joke’s technical method provides in train of thought” (120).

According to the dualistic theory, there are various means by which a joke can “boot” a person from one perception, concept, meaning, or system to a radically different one, eliciting laughter. As Freud suggests, the use of a “same or similar word” is a generally accepted mechanism. More broadly, Davies (1998) explains that “humor shifts its audience’s attention from one system into another system via an ambiguity, an element congruous with both systems—their ‘overlap point’” (17). This ambiguity or overlap point is something that exists in both of the systems, concepts, perceptions, or meanings being brought together in a joke. For example, in the ham and eggs joke, the “unrecognizable steak” serves as the overlap point between the fantasy world of anthropomorphic food items and the real world of food shortages. “Unrecognizable steak” makes sense in both of the systems that the joke combines—it characterizes both the cocky fantasy character who speaks to the ham and eggs and the actual absence of beef in contemporary Cuba.

Rather than an overlap point, I call this part of the joke its “pivot,” to capture what for me is its more interesting feature: it is at this point that the joke rotates out of one world and into another. When the listener reaches the joke’s pivot point, the joke teller shifts from the frame of reference in which the joke began into a new one that, hopefully, the listener does not expect. Freud (1960) describes it this way: “From an expected continuation within one system, the comic mind pivots around an ambiguity to branch off into another system.” To continue with the ham and eggs example, the joke shifts from the fantasy system of talking food into Cuban reality—or at least to the joker’s version of reality, one he cajoles the listener into sharing. When the steak reveals that “no one has recognized me yet,” the listener is transported from a fantasy world of talking eggs to a world in which there is no beef to eat. That is, he is returned his own world, and reminded that it is marked by privation.

Almost anything can serve as a pivot point, but some things lend themselves to such a role. Only one joke I know of—the ham and eggs joke—pivots around a steak, but this shows that even an idiosyncratic pivot point can do the job. The more common Cuban “pivots” – naïve children, drunks, orphans, peasants – share the quality of being ungoverned by normal social forces, due to their age, intoxication, lack of familial guidance, or lack of sophistication. Therefore, unlike the Cubans telling or listening to the joke, who are governed by social forces, these joke-protagonists are free to say things that are not permitted in Cuban society. In many Cuban jokes, the naïve outspokenness of the “pivot” is what propels the listener from the official, state sanctioned view of the world, into the “true world” (or at least to the joker’s version of “true world,” one he cajoles the listener into sharing). Presumably, the person who tells a joke, or laughs at it, to some extent shares the view expressed by the child, the drunk, and so on, but is constrained by social forces from saying such a thing seriously, or in his or her own (rather than pivot’s) voice.

The most popular “pivot” in my collection of Cuban political jokes is a character named Pepito. “Pepito jokes” are a category of humor recognized by all Cubans. Pepito, a school-aged boy, acts as jester in the court of socialism; in many jokes the humor comes from Pepito expressing an outrageous “truth” in the face of the state actor. Like a jester, within the joke, Pepito is both naïve and clever, and, his point of view is always right. Some examples of jokes in which the pivot is Pepito:

Castro arrives in Pepito’s classroom and asks him, “Tell me boy, who is your mother?” Pepito tells him, “The motherland, sir.” “Very good, and who is your father, my son?” “The *comendante en jefe*, sir.” “Perfect boy, you are very smart, tell me then what do you want to be when you grow up?” Pepito thinks and answers: “An orphan, sir!”

After the fall of the Soviet Block, Castro calls for a mass meeting in the Plaza de la Revolution. Speaking from a podium to the crowd, he explains the difficult times to come, and gives them the following instructions: Everyone that prefers socialism, go to the left. And everyone that prefers capitalism, go to the right. The crowd divides in two halves more or less the same, with the exception that Pepito (or other) remains alone in the middle. Fidel looks at him and asks:

“And you, why haven’t you moved?” “Well, what happened is that I want the social progress of Socialism but I also want the material benefits of Capitalism,” responds Pepito.

“Well then,” Fidel says from the podium, “you belong up here with us.”

Fidel, very angry, sends for Pepito and asks him. “I hear that you’re walking around saying that when I die you’re going to shit on my grave. Is this true?”

Perplexed, Pepito answers, “No, *comendante*, this is a lie. You know that I don’t like to stand in line.”

There are even Pepito “meta-jokes” – jokes about jokes, in which Pepito knows that he is speaking as a well-known joke protagonist.

“So you are the one with the *historias* (stories, excuses)?” Fidel asks Pepito the day that he met him. “No, *comendante*,” replied Pepito. “I’m the one with the *jokes*, you’re the one with the *historias*.”

Fidel meets with Pepito and spends an enjoyable night listening to his jokes. He is so content that he says to Pepito, “Tomorrow I’m going to provide ham and cheese sandwiches in all the schools.” Pepito says to him, “*Comendante*, are you going to begin your jokes now?”

In the first two of the Pepito jokes above, one can see the two worlds that are juxtaposed—the normal, official, everyday world of school examinations (which were sometimes actually conducted by Castro) and political speeches—and the alternative universe in which people are willing to give responses that indicate a dissatisfaction with socialism and Castro’s leadership of it. Pepito is the pivot in the sense that his answers to Castro’s questions “boot” the listener out of the normal realm—in which school children and audiences are asked, often by Castro, to profess support for the revolution, and invariably do—into another world, in which a person can and does give a different sort of answer. Even the more fanciful scenarios of Castro calling little Pepito to his side for personal conversations convey the same idea—in the real world Castro as the head of the Cuban state does pose questions to the populace about their commitment to the socialist project (Castro has described the sort of call-and-response that goes on at his speeches Cuba’s own form of “direct democracy”). But only in the “possible world” created by the joke does one hear a response like Pepito’s.

Similar to Pepito jokes are those where a drunk person acts as a pivot point between two worlds. Whereas Pepito’s candor comes from his youth and naïvete, the drunk speaks freely because his intoxicated state has liberated him from social norms. Like Pepito, the drunk is a jester who is understood to be expressing the painful “truths” (again, “truth” as it is understood by the joke-teller) about Cuban society that normal people are unable or unwilling to express. The drunk jokes differ from Pepito jokes in that they are often darker and more violent. Also, unlike Pepito, who is often being examined by adults in the jokes in which he appears, the drunk in his jokes has not been invited to speak—he simply yells things out, or makes a snide addition to a conversation occurring alongside him. Three examples of drunk jokes:

A Party member says: Fidel took the chains off the Cubans. A drunk passing by adds: yes, and also the bracelets, the rings, and the rest of our gold jewelry.

A drunk man is on the corner screaming “Fidel is a degenerate! Fidel is a killer! Fidel, you are killing me with hunger!” The police arrive and give him a fine for insulting the Comendante en Jefe. The drunk protests, “Why do you hit me, if there are a lot of Fidels?” Says the policeman, “Yes, but with those characteristics there’s only one.”

A drunk on the corner screams “I know very well who is responsible for the misery we are suffering.” The police give him several blows so that he’ll say who is responsible, until the drunk says, “The responsible one is Yankee Imperialism.” Very good, says the policeman, and lets him go. The drunk begins to walk and suddenly he turns, “Yes, but I know who you were thinking of.”

An interesting feature shared by the last two drunk jokes is that within the joke, the drunk can plausibly claim to not be speaking ill of Castro or socialism, while those who punish him clearly do think of the system negatively, as evidenced by the fact that they interpret the drunk’s

comments as they do. These jokes have pivoted between the official world – in which degenerates criticize the revolution, but police officers think highly of it—to the another world in which everyone, include state agents, blames the state for the privations of the Special Period.

Dualistic theory posits that any joke, including any political joke, brings together the “essence” and “anti-essence” of a thing. The chart below describes what tends to be juxtaposed in Cuban political jokes.

Essence	Anti-Essence
Official View of World: As held by Castro, State Leaders, Party Members, Loyalists within joke and outside of it	“True” View of World: As held by Pepito, the Drunk, and other protagonists in joke, and by extension, joke-teller and any appreciate audience
Sacred World	Profane World
Current World: Either the “official” or the “true” version	Possible World: How world <i>ought to be</i> , according to the joke-teller
Current World: Either the “official” or the “true” version	Possible World: How world <i>will actually be</i> in the future, can be good or bad

The second column gets at the power of political jokes in a society. In Cuba and elsewhere one can see “the creation of new reality in jokes, which a modern semanticist would be willing, perhaps, to term ‘possible world’” (Raskin 1985, 34). Joking lets people see beyond their current circumstances to contemplate other alternative ways of being, other “possible worlds.” This capacity to see two worlds, I argue, occurs only where the state fails to maintain a hegemonic grip over its citizens. Only under weak hegemony are citizens free of the illusion that the state’s way of doing things is the only way, and thus able to make jokes. In Cuba, because state hegemony has crumbled, people have many alternative systems clearly in mind, and thus many sources for humor.

Given its reputation for wide reaching and heavy handed rule, this depiction of a “weak Cuban state” may seem paradoxical. But it’s not—Nader (1991), Althusser (1970), and Gramsci (1971) agree there is an inverse relationship between a state’s reliance on overt repression and its achievement of effective ideological control. Cuba resorts to repressive tactics—jailing and beating (but not so much) dissidents for example— *because* its hegemonic power is not strong enough to maintain subject control. In this context of weak hegemony, one side effect is

repression, and another is jokes. The wealth and sophistication of political jokes also serves to disprove the notion that Cuba is an island populated by unthinking zombies (as depicted by Oppenheimer 1993).

Jokes that engage fundamental state institutions like the one above that are not told in the United States. Raskin (1985) notes, “I have failed to discover a single American anti-institution joke in spite of the abundance of willing and knowledgeable native information.” (237). Davies (1998) adds that “Western humor rarely implies the ineffectual functioning of an entire society” (248). The absence of this type of political joke can be understood as evidence that state hegemonic control is quite high. Americans, for instance, do not tell and wouldn’t “get” many political jokes because we are buried so deeply in a hegemony that asserts our way as the only way that we’re left with no alternatives—imaginary, historical, cross-cultural—in our minds. Telling a joke about the two-party system, for instance, would require both the teller and the listener to know that some alternative to the two-party system exists— but how many Americans really know that?

Common Joke Themes

By identifying the topics most commonly covered by jokes, and paying attention to what Cubans have to say about each, one can learn a great deal about life in Cuba today. Interestingly, there appear to be no pro-Castro or pro-Revolution jokes in circulation. That is not to say that there is no pro-socialist *humor*—for example, sympathetic cartoons are published in all the island’s newspapers, which are exclusively state-run. But there are no pro-socialist jokes. The collection I’ve assembled maps out the fears, frustrations, and sources of anger most common among Cubans, which turn up again and again as themes in the jokes. The portrait that emerges is an exaggerated, perhaps, but telling view of life on the island.

1. Socialism/Communism/Capitalism: Jokes reveal that some Cubans believe they would find greater happiness under a capitalist system, rather than their current socialist one:

A teacher explains in class: In capitalism man exploits man. Yes, a student says, and in socialism it’s the reverse.

Socialism is the long and tortuous path that starts at capitalism and ends at capitalism.

An American guarding Guantanamo base loses his hat in the air, and it falls on the other side of the fence. The Cuban guard shits in the hat and returns it to the American, who says nothing. A little while later the wind changes and the Cuban loses his hat, which gently falls in front of the American. The American fills the hat with candy, chocolate bars, and gum, and returns it. The Cuban says

ashamedly, “Listen, man, I feel so bad for having done that, forgive me.” “It’s ok,” says the American, “from each according to what he has.”

2. The Bad Economy: Cuban jokes reveal concerns about the nation’s economic situation.

What is the monetary relation between the dollar, the pound, and the Cuban peso? One pound of pesos is worth a dollar.

Fidel addresses a great crowd in one of his speeches:

I have good news and bad news.

Tell us the good news comendante, please!

We have just paid off our foreign debt. We don’t owe anyone anything.

And the bad news?

We have to evacuate the island in 24 hours.

The Revolutionary government is going to take measures to make sure no Cuban goes to bed without eating. They’re going to pick up all the beds.

3. Hunger and Illness: A lack of quality food, and the nutrition-related illnesses of the Special Period, are popular joke topics.

Question: What are the three successes of the Cuban Revolution?

Answer: Education, public health, and sports.

Question: What are the three failures of the Cuban Revolution?

Answer: Breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

Signs in the Havana Zoo:

Before 1960...Please don’t feed the animals.

Between 1960 and 1989...Please don’t take food from the animals.

After 1990...Please don’t eat the animals.

What did the stomach say to the spinal column? Now is the time to come together!

The teacher asks Pepito, “Which systems are incompatible with socialism?”
Pepito responds, “The digestive system and the central nervous system.”

The government is right, neuritis optica does have a viral origin. A dangerous virus that has been incubating for 34 years, that entered from the Oriente and is called Beard-cocus.

An eminent Cuban surgeon, director of one of the main hospitals in Havana, is admitted to Mazorra [hospital] for insanity. After a routine exam, the psychiatrist gives his diagnosis: he has delusions of grandeur --he thinks that he's a butcher.

4. Commodity Shortage: A shortage of all sorts of commodities is a common source of humor in socialist societies, including Cuba.

Mikhail Gorbachev sends a telegram to Fidel, "Tighten your belts!"
Fidel answers with another telegram, "Send belts!"

Why do they call the egg ration "the countdown"? Because it's 5, then 4, 3, 2 .
..

Fidel says in a speech: Next year there will be shoes for absolutely everyone. An old lady who is near the stage approaches and holds up a leg to show her shoes, which are old, broken, and dirty. And Fidel continues: And also there will be panties for everyone.

5. Castro's Character: In the political jokes of the former-Soviet states, the different Soviet leaders were portrayed in a fairly static way, generally as clowns or buffoons. Cuba differs in that both Fidel and Raul Castro are given specific personalities in many Cuban jokes. Fidel is alternately portrayed as verbose, powerful, tricky, long-lived, and overconfident in his abilities; Raul is always portrayed as weak or dumb.

If Fidel Castro gets you by the neck, how would you save yourself?
By throwing him a microphone.

Reagan, Gorbachev, and Fidel arrive at un pantano where the people are buried according to how dishonest they are. Reagan enters and is buried up to his belt. Gorbachev enters and is buried up to his neck. Finally Fidel enters and is buried only up to his tobillos. When they are alone, Raul asks him, "How did you do it?" "It was nothing, boy, I knew where Lenin was and I stood on his head."

A foreign delegation gives Fidel a very strange little animal, and he asks, "How long does this little turtle live?" "About 200 years." "Then take it away, I don't want to see it die after I grow fond of it."

A charcoal maker in Cienaga de Zapata receives a visit from Fidel, who talks to him for hours. Afterward a journalist approaches the ceneguero and interviews him:

What impression did you have of Fidel?

Very good, he's a man that knows everything, about politics, science, ganaderia, agriculture, about the kitchen, sports, everything.

And did you talk also about making charcoal?

Yes, he gave me a lot of advice about making charcoal.

And did he also know a lot about this?

Well, to tell you the truth, this is the only thing he knows nothing about.

A car arrives at a gas station in Havana, and a woman gets out saying:

Attendant, I need gas, but I don't have my coupons. Look, I'm an important person, I'm Alicia Alonso [a famous ballerina], give me the gas and afterwards I'll bring you the coupons.

And how do I know you're Alicia Alonso?

The woman goes toward the street and dances a portion of "Giselle."

No doubt you are Alicia Alonso, I'm going to give you the gasoline, says the employee.

A little while later, another car arrives and the person inside says:

Boy, I need gas, but I don't have my coupons. Look, I'm an important person, I'm Raul Castro, give me gas and afterward I'll bring you the coupons.

And how do I know that you're Raul Castro?

The man looks pensive for a moment, scratches his head and says,

Boy, I can't think of anything.

No doubt you are Raul Castro, I'm going to give you the gasoline.

6. Emigration: The desire to leave Cuba, and the difficulty of doing so, is a subject of jokes.

Listen, you're Cuban, how did you leave Cuba, boy?

Easy, I used the passport of a friend.

Hey, it makes me so happy to know that there still exist people like that in this dirty world. What a good friend! I would like to know such a person, where is he now?

In Cuba, looking for his passport.

The teacher says, well, today we are going to work on mathematical reasoning. A man walks at 5 km/hour. If we suppose that, um, the distance between Havana and Florida is 180 km, and there's a walking bridge that connects the two, how much time would it take to walk there?

Pepito raises his hand immediately.

Let's see, Pepito, you are good and quick today, how much time will it be?

Two weeks at least, teacher.

How come two weeks? Where did you get such a long time?

Imagine it, teacher, how much time are you going to have to spend if you have to go the whole way dando codazos and saying, "Excuse me, excuse me . . ."

A father asks his six-year-old son, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" The son responds, "A foreigner."

7. The Future: Jokes about the future take on many different forms. Some jokes anticipate dramatic change for Cuba, while others predict continuity with the present situation.

A Cuban that had died in 1993 is resuscitated in the year 2100 and begins to ask questions.

How did the problem of Bosnia-Herzegovina end? Well, this resolved itself peacefully. Now the ancient peoples of Yugoslavia live together in peace.

The man keeps asking questions. And hunger in the third world? They answer him: this problem is solved. There is technology to synthesize food very cheaply, and the whole world is full.

Finally he asks, And the problem of Cuba, how did it end? Well, this year we're sure that Fidel will fall.

Children, how will you know when the Special Period has ended, asked the teacher. Because when I get up my mom will give me *café con leche* and bread and butter for breakfast. Because when I get up my mom will give me orange juice and cheese and crackers for breakfast. Because when I get up my mom will say to me (in English) "Good morning, Pepito!"

Question: Do you know what the Cubans used for light in their homes before candles?

Answer: Electric bulbs.

Fidel goes to a spiritualist, and during the session his dead mother appears. Fidel asks her, "Mother, in the next year am I still going to be in power?" "Yes, my son," his mother responds. Fidel continues asking, "And the people are going to be with me?" "No, my son, they're going to be with me!"

A Political Action or Inaction?

There is much disagreement about the consequences of political jokes. People disagree as to whether political jokes are a type of political action in themselves or diminish the possibility for true political action by channeling popular resentment into a harmless social form (Brandes 1977, Zijderveld 1968). When Cubans create or tell jokes about commodity shortages, hunger,

the desire to emigrate, and so on, do those jokes have an actual consequence on their world? Bayart (1993), for one, held political jokes and other forms of political humor in low regard:

There is no official policy which is not immediately deciphered in the back streets, no slogan which is not straightaway parodied, no speech which is not subjected to an acid bath of derision...the political impact of this...is limited...it has little potential for opposition or revolution. It can only add nuance to domination and seems essentially to be an indication of an amusing, but fatalist, culture of impotence. (252)

In Moscow, Alexei Yurchak (2005) described a form of humor that, although it took the socialist state as its subject, was self-consciously apolitical in its intent. According to Yurchak, “This type of humor . . . refuses to be charged with the moral pathos of exposing ‘lies’ and stating ‘truths.’” (277) Yurchak invokes Peter Sloterdijk’s (1983 terminology to label this kind of joking, “humor that has ceased to struggle” (305). This differs greatly from the jokes that circulated in Havana, which were very much focused on exposing lies and truths.

On the other hand, Mel Brooks observed that “you can bring down totalitarian governments faster by using ridicule than you can with invective.” (Fleishman 1977, 8). While it may be a stretch to say that jokes can bring down governments, in my view they are evidence of, and a stimulus towards, a way of thinking that can lead to significant political change. Larsen (1980) used the concept of “implicit politics” to make this point, which he defined as the “internal map of the political world that impinges on people, and a notion of what that political world ought to be like . . . even if it appears impossible right now” (85). If one borrows Michel de Certeau’s (1984) terminology, jokes are more like mobile and changing “tactics” than they are counter-hegemonic “strategies” capable of acting in a historically significant fashion upon the whole system. Jokes may not be sufficient to bring about social transformation, but they can serve as one force within a larger process of change.

The Meaning of Cuban Jokes

A large number of political jokes circulate in Cuba. Examining the content of those jokes provides a great deal of insight into how Cubans regard the socialist Revolution and its strengths, but mostly its limitations. However, Cuban jokes can be understood not just in terms of their denotative meaning – what they say – but also their connotative meaning – how they function within society. In this chapter I have focused on the abundance of political jokes as evidence of a *lack* of hegemonic control over citizens in Cuba. Telling and understanding a political joke requires being able to imagine an alternative to the way things are currently, which under true hegemony is difficult if not impossible to do. That so many Cubans can tell and understand political jokes is evidence that the forces acting upon them should probably not be considered hegemonic ones. In this way, I argue, Cubans are freer than people in the United States, where a robust hegemony makes it impossible for many of us to imagine alternatives to the way things are.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 detailed many of the “disorderly practices” that Cubans have engaged in during the Special Period. With the advent of the Revolution, the Cuban state had hoped to create a “New Man” in Cuba, and certainly the state expected its citizens to obey its law. Whatever success the state had in making the “New Man” during the first decades of the Revolution, however, was undone by the Special Period. The economic crisis, followed by the policy changes implemented by the state to address it, created circumstances in which the majority of Cubans no longer felt willing or able to behave as “good subjects” of the socialist state. Given their disregard for the laws that governed production, distribution, and consumption; their cavalier attitude about state employment; their growing desire to consume like a capitalist; their willingness to joke about the whole socialist project; and all of the other disorderly practices described here, one might assume that the Cuban people are eager to challenge the socialist state. And one might also assume that a state that has, in many ways, so loose a grasp on its citizens would be liable to fall.

In fact, there is a large body of literature that predicts that a state will fall if it fails to foster in its citizens an identity that corresponds well to state norms. In *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes toward an Investigation)* (1970), Althusser argued that successful states create subjects through a process he calls “interpolation” or “hailing.” Once subjects are formed, the project of shaping those subjects in accordance with state values commences. Althusser pays close attention to the instruments used by the state to create certain sorts of subjects, focusing on the three “state strategies for gaining compliance of subjects: remunerative (material incentives), coercive (force) and normative (moral, societal norms, ideology).” If the project of state subject formation fails, according to Althusser, so too will the state.

Anthropologists who apply Althusser’s theory to contemporary cases support his hypothesis that states must foster a certain sort of subject so as to endure. In her essay, “the Politicized Body” (1997), Ann Anagnost (1997) notes that the Chinese socialist state continues to expend tremendous energy towards the production of political subjects. She gives a deep reading of a newspaper story, written in the socialist-realist style, about a villager who eventually wins an award given to the most law-abiding household. She demonstrates how the news story first critiques, but then subtly validates the ideological instruments of the state, while serving as an ideological instrument in itself. Through such writings and other techniques, she argues, the Chinese state creates the “docile political subjects” that it requires.

Likewise, in his essay, “State, Territory, and Identity Formation in the Postwar Berlins, 1945-1989,” John Borneman (1992) argues that the collapse of East Germany was due in part to the inability of the East German state to cultivate in its citizens a unique East German identity. West Germany, on the other hand, endured because it succeeded in formulating a West German identity that many of its citizens adopted. However, the same pattern has not held in Cuba. For

nearly two decades, the Cuban state has been largely unable to cultivate in its citizens an identity that corresponds to the socialist state, and yet that system endures.

The endurance of the socialist state in Cuba, and Castro's continued leadership (both manifested and/or symbolic), puzzles observers outside of academia. In the early 1990s most Cuba-watchers believed that the collapse of the Soviet Union would bring Cuban socialism to an immediate end. When that did not occur, many expected that the political, social, and economic changes I describe in this dissertation would more slowly, but just as surely, finish both socialism and Castro. For this reason, the journalist Andres Oppenheimer gave his book, published in 1993, the provocative title of *Castro's Final Hour*. Oppenheimer and many others never imagined that, despite dramatic changes on the island, both socialism and the Castro family's leadership would continue for decades after the Soviet Union's end.

What explains the endurance of the Cuban socialist state? Critics of the state, on the island and abroad, assert that the state relies on violence to keep a fearful population from pushing it aside. Certainly many theorists have demonstrated that when other methods fail, violence can be a successful method of maintaining state power, especially in a crisis. Williams (1977) writes that Gramsci “. . . explicitly states that hegemony is the ‘normal’ form of control, force and coercion becoming dominant only at times of crisis” (591). Althusser (1970), too, predicted that a state relies mostly on ideological control, but could also unleash the power of its Repressive State Apparatuses on “bad subjects,” those that reject the life course the state has sanctioned. To a certain extent, Castro has relied on repressive power to keep Cubans under his sway during the 1990s and 2000s. Certainly the jailing of hundreds of dissidents in 2003 could be understood in this light. However, most Cubans agree that the repressive apparatus of the state has been *less* active during the Special Period than it was in the period immediately before; most descriptions of state-sanctioned jailings, beatings, and verbal abuse that I collected occurred in the 1980s, during the era that started with the Mariel crisis and culminated in the Rectification Campaign. For instance, none of the “bad subjects” described in this dissertation have ever met with significant punishment from the state, despite their near-constant violations of state laws and norms.

The Cuban example, I believe, thus suggests another possibility for the relationship between a state and its citizenry. In my view, a state need not successfully create state subjects to endure. Instead, it needs only to create people who are willing to behave *as if* they are state subjects in certain key contexts. The Cuban state apparatus was not strong enough to generate, at least in this latest generation of subjects, an identity well-matched to the socialist state, but it was indeed strong enough to make subjects who will enact aspects of that identity when the state deems it necessary. For their part, Cuban people take on this complicated role because they want to perpetuate the good qualities of the socialist system—its commitment to fulfilling basic needs, its aspiration to treat all people equally--while maintaining enough space to evade some of its less appealing features.

Alexei Yurchak (2005) observes this same dynamic in Moscow during the latter part of the Soviet era. He noted that in Moscow a space opened up between what people said and did in

relation to the state, and what those things actually meant to them. Yurchak explains that any utterance, including those related to the state, is both “constative,” in that it conveys meaning, and “performative,” in that it has practical effects and accomplishes something in the world (14). Performative shift is defined as “a general shift of the discursive regime, in which the performative dimension’s importance grows, while the constative dimension’s importance diminishes . . .” (ibid). In Moscow during the 1980s, the forms of expression related to the state remained rigid, but the meanings attached to the forms changed constantly, until what an event or speech seemed to mean to unaccustomed observers, and what it actually meant to those making the expression, grew very far apart. Most Russian people continued to reproduce the forms expected of them—in the way they spoke, wrote, voted, behaved—not because of fear or ignorance, but because they believed that sticking to the expected forms would keep the socialist system alive, and that was something they desired. His interlocutors knew “the pure form of these rituals had to be performed in order for the creative and good aspects of socialist life to also be possible” (ibid 62). But at the same time, people were freed by performative shift to attach their own preferred meanings to each situation. For example, everyone in a Party meeting might vote in favor of the policy alternative favored by the state, but the raising of hands came to mean to everyone in the room something other than universal agreement with that policy. Instead, the unanimous vote more likely meant only that everyone generally supports the overall system and remains willing to play by its basic rules, which includes voting as a block. And as a performative act, what raising one’s hand *did* was keep the system in place. Similarly, paying dues to a union or the Party were no longer about “ideological statements of allegiance, but being normal” (ibid 71).

Cubans, too, do many things that can be viewed through the lens of performative shift. Some of the specific examples from Moscow given by Yurchak could just as easily describe Havana. Nearly every Cuban will turn out to vote unanimously for the single, party-chosen candidate on a ballot, not because of what that act seems to *mean* (expressing genuine support for that candidate), but because of what that act *does*, which is perpetuate the power of the socialist state by maintaining the appearance of unanimity and a broad base of support. At the institute where I spent time with workers, everyone filed in for the union meeting, and yelled “*Socialismo o Muerte!*” (“Socialism or Death!”) at the end, but if the moments in between were spent daydreaming or quietly gossiping, that was acceptable too. I quickly learned that “*Socialismo o Muerte!*” had shifted away from its original meaning and now seemed to express relief that a long meeting had come to an end. A Cuban need not listen to or agree with what is said in the Plaza de la Revolucion, but he must be physically present during every speech, and, unlike the plain-spoken Pepito, respond appropriately to invocations from the speakers. Cubans know that much of what they say and do is not to be taken literally—no one is expected to die for socialism anymore—but that sticking to the forms is a key part of perpetuating a state system that, fundamentally, most of them hope will continue.

Yurchak’s (2005) concept of performative shift can be expanded beyond obviously political acts like voting or attending rallies and union meetings to characterize other aspects of Cuban

life. For instance, one can view the productive life of many Cubans, in which they get up in the morning, put on their uniforms, and go to work in a state enterprise as a version of maintaining the state's economic form, while much of what they do once they get to work—everything from slowing down to stealing, as described in Chapter 2-- could be seen as them making their own personal meaning out of the situation. They maintain the form of regular state employment, but what state employment now means for most of them has veered wildly off the course set out by the state. Why do they bother going to work, if they are not going to do much that benefits the state or themselves once they get there? As Yurchak points out, it is the willingness of most people to maintain the outer forms of socialism, rather than challenge them or abandon them completely, that is keeping socialism alive, and that seems something that, on some level, is desired by most. A *cuentapropista* who buys all his commodities on the black market, but forges receipts to show the occasional inspector is maintaining the state's form but playing with the meaning of receipts in a way that makes the law manageable for him. A vendor in the artisan market who claims to spend all night painting the pictures he spends all day selling is accepting the form that the state has laid out – no middlemen in the market – while discreetly attaching his own meaning – middlemen must be discreet.

Critics of the socialist state might argue that in the examples above, Cubans maintain the forms of the state out of fear, and this may be partially the case. A committed non-voter, a *cuentapropista* without receipts, or an unabashed middleman in the artisan market could all potentially face fines, harassment, or jail time from the state. To be relatively safe and effective, the abandonment of state forms would have to happen simultaneously—there is simply not a large enough repressive state apparatus to punish everyone--and, for reasons beyond the scope of this chapter, collective action in Cuba is difficult. However, I tend to agree with Yurchak that there is more than fear behind Cubans' almost universal willingness to maintain state forms. On some level, Cubans recognize that maintaining the forms (while doing what they need to do quietly behind the scenes) keeps the socialist project alive, and most people are reluctant to give up the protections, however imperfect, that the state provides.

In Yurchak's view, the eventual collapse of performative shift contributed to the fall of the Soviet state. Over time, the distance between the constative and performative meaning of many words and actions grew very large, while the ability of party leadership to present state forms as springing from its single, authoritative voice was diminished by the new policy of openness (*glasnost*). This showed the Party to be a collection of ordinary, imperfect men. In the end, people stopped bothering to enact the state forms, which no longer seemed to carry any authority or make any sense at all. In Cuba, performative shift may be more resilient because it is actively cultivated by the state. The state still generates forms from a position of absolute authority—there has been no *glasnost*-type questioning of state power in Cuba. Through a variety of mechanisms, the state convinces people to enact its forms in certain key contexts, while making clear—mostly by its inattention--that there is room to “do one's own thing” outside of those contexts. Most effective is the state's use of media—while the exact mechanism is worthy of more attention, here it is enough to say that the state has used media to make Cubans acutely

aware of the positive perception of them held by some people outside of Cuba. Many Cubans do try to live up to that idealized image, at least in certain contexts, which means upholding state forms, at least in those contexts most likely to be viewed by outsiders.

For the reasons discussed above, the Cuban state has little inclination to bring most of the actions of Cuban people in line with socialist values, or even state law. The state has been able to survive, and even thrive, despite the “disorderly practices” that take place on the island. There are actors other than the state, however, who do hope to inspire Cubans to think and behave differently than they now do, and to make order out of the current disorder. The list of those seeking change in Cuba is long and diverse. International dissident and human rights groups, foreign investors, environmentalists, religious missionaries, émigré groups, the U.S. State Department, and other transnational players all seek to root out many of the behaviors and attitudes described in previous chapters—trapicheo, tax evasion, foot dragging, facetiousness, insularity, conspicuous consumption—and replace them with sincere acceptance of some set of norms other than that of the socialist state. And, as opposed to a state that tolerates, and perhaps cultivates, performative shift, most of these “forces of rectification” believe that there ought to be a closer correspondence between what Cubans say, mean, and do, and the forms of the state that governs them.

In characterizing these forces, I borrow the term “rectification” from the 1980s “Campaign to Rectify Errors and Correct Negative Tendencies.” As mentioned earlier, in 1986 the Cuban state announced that over the previous decade it had allowed society to swing too far in the direction of capitalism, with undesirable results. The Rectification Campaign was a state-centered attempt to correct the market-oriented ‘errors’ of the previous decade and reestablish socialism in a purer form. It encompassed a number of policies: the farmers’ markets were closed in 1985, and wage differentials decreased. The profit motive, black market, and middlemen were all condemned by the state, and enforcement of the laws prohibiting them suddenly increased. The original Rectification was put on indefinite hold at the start of the Special Period, but here I will argue that its orientation was taken up by a variety of actors originating outside of Cuba, who were given greater access to the island thanks to Special Period policy changes, especially those that legalized tourism and foreign investment. But whereas the original Rectification was intended as a return to the values of Che Guevara and the New Man, the new forces of rectification push Cubans in the opposite direction. Each of these new “forces of rectification” views the complex relationship between citizens and the socialist state negatively, and works to bring the beliefs and behaviors of Cubans in line with a system other than socialism. While one might assume that the drive to bring order to the island is a good thing, and some Cubans certainly believe that it is, it is important to step back and view each campaign critically, asking “rectification in line with what?,” “how?,” and “for whom?” A careful consideration of all the various actors would be beyond the scope of this conclusion, but I will end this dissertation by considering some of the forces that are now dedicated to ordering the “disorderly” attitudes and practices that have been the subject of this work.

While most of the forces of rectification seem to originate outside of the island, some of the most persuasive rectifiers are the dissidents who reside in Cuba. A dissident is a person who actively challenges an established doctrine, policy, or institution. In Cuba, those who openly challenge state authority and socialist values are considered dissidents. Such people are rare, and they are an object of both fear and fascination for other Cubans, most of whom instead choose to discreetly evade state law or quietly ignore socialist values, as I have described in the body of this work. Dissidents entreat their neighbors to abandon what they call the *doble moral* – double morality – that enables most people to speak and act in accordance with state forms in some situations, and keep their frequent divergences from that path quiet in the socially-sanctioned way. Dissidents frequently break Cuban law, such as the law that prohibits a Cuban from speaking critically about the system to a foreigner, or the law that makes meetings of political parties other than the PCC illegal. But unlike the laws governing production or consumption, the laws that the dissidents break are enforced. In 2003, for instance, the Cuban government imprisoned 75 dissidents for terms up to 20 years. Most were accused of being traitors who received money from the United States government. It is widely believed, both on and off the island, that the majority of those jailed had not been financially supported by the U.S. government, but nearly all had publically criticized aspects of the socialist state.

So, in what sense are dissidents trying to “rectify” Cuban society? In their speech and writings, most are trying to create a world in which state forms and people’s lives line up more directly. But whereas the state Rectification campaign of the ‘80s tried to bring people in line with the forms of the state, dissidents want to bring the state in line with the thoughts and behaviors that they attribute to most people. Most Cuban dissidents hope to replace socialism with an economic system that corresponds to the market-oriented activity that is already taking place, much of it illegally, on the island. Politically speaking, they advocate for participatory democracy like that found in the United States, believing that to be the best mechanism for bringing law, policy, and leaders in line with the will of the people. While it is both dangerous and dismissive to characterize Cuban dissidents as agents of the U.S. government, there is a strong resemblance between their preferred vision for the future and what the United States government has in the past and now currently advocates. The United States clearly serves as a model for most.

Dissidents differ from other Cubans in that they refuse to engage in performative shift—they interpret the forms of the state literally and react to them with clarity and directness. Dissidents often try to express what one individual in my research called “clear truth,” or what Boym (2001) calls “counter-memory,” an “alternative vision of the past, present and future” that “resides in finding blemishes in the official narrative of history or even in one’s own life” (61). Much of their work challenges the state’s authoritative discourse on matters both large and small. One article written by a dissident and circulated online reported that while the ration report said that residents of the Escambray region, in the eastern part of Cuba, received eight eggs in a given month, in actual fact they received only five. As discussed in chapter 3, reporting the shortage of eggs on the ration conveys the larger point that the socialist state is unable to fulfill basic needs,

and has thus lost its legitimacy and should cease to exist. This form of argument is a large part of the dissident project.

Because of their literal-mindedness, dissidents are perceived as odd by most. According to Yurchak (2005), in Moscow most people were not dissidents and distanced themselves from actual ones in their midst, in part because these abnormal people insisted on “reading (authoritative discourse) as a constative description of reality and evaluating that description for truth conditions” (67)—in other words, when the *libreta* says eight eggs are delivered by the state but only five arrive, it is only the dissident who would say out loud that the *libreta* is not correct. The same unease around dissidents can be found in Cuba today. Even the most passionate opponents of Castro and socialism I knew felt profoundly uncomfortable on the few occasions we were in the presence of true dissidents—people who had the same critique of the state, but spoke publically and frankly about it. Interestingly, according to Yurchak (*ibid*), only after *glasnost* did ordinary Russians embrace dissidents and their point of view.

The Varela Project of the early 2000s also says a great deal about how dissidents operate on the island, and how they are regarded. In an incredible act of will and organization, Varela Project supporters managed to collect more than 11,000 signatures on a petition calling for broad political reforms in Cuba, including freedom of association, speech, press, religion, and elections. The petition organizers took seriously Article #88(g) of the Cuban Constitution, which allows citizens to propose laws if 10,000 people sign a petition supporting the proposal. State leaders who received the petition, however, had no inclination to accept the literal interpretation of the Constitution. They discarded the petition, and responded with their own petition to make permanent the socialist nature of the Cuban state—which, reportedly, met with 99% voter approval. While the state’s figures were surely inflated, and possibly the result of harassment, the “normal” Cuban would be much more likely to sign the state’s petition—though not accept its meaning—than they would risk signing the petition circulated by the Varela Project, even if that petition truly expressed their views. It is that orientation that Cuban dissidents are trying to rectify.

As mentioned above, Cuban dissidents are trying to bring their state and their countrymen in line with the system that operates in the United States. For its part, the United States government, specifically the U.S. State Department, is a significant force of rectification in Cuba; it seeks to transform individuals and society through the direct actions of the Cuban Interest Section in Havana and more broadly through various foreign policy interventions. It should come as little surprise that the United States government is trying to bring Cubans in line with our country’s own political and economic systems, and has been doing so for more than 50 years.

In 2003 George W. Bush created a Cabinet-level committee to address the continued existence of Cuban state socialism and Fidel Castro (and to satisfy his supporters among the right-wing Cuban American National Foundation [CANF] in the swing state Florida). The committee made the following list of goals for Cuba:

1. Bring about a peaceful, near-term end to the dictatorship;

2. Establish democratic institutions, respect for human rights, and the rule of law;
3. Create the core institutions of a free market economy;
4. Modernize infrastructure; and
5. Meet basic needs in the areas of health, education, housing, and human services.

While the Bush administration may have been unusual in the extremity of the tactics it used to achieve (or not to achieve, as it turned out) its goals, it is important to note that the goals themselves have been shared by every President from 1960 up to this day. While President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton have not made a clear and comprehensive statement of what they hope will transpire in Cuba, the list laid out by Bush lines up well with the scattered policy statements they have made. Put simply, every administration since Kennedy has had as a goal bringing Cuba in line with our own system, or at least, with the most optimistic view of that system.

Administrations have differed, however, in the tactics they use to try to achieve this rectification in Cuba. Other authors, including Eckstein (1994), have completed thorough reviews of U.S. legislation and policy initiatives regarding Cuba. For the purposes of this conclusion, I will note the two major trends in this history -- isolation and engagement.

John F. Kennedy began the policy of isolation in response to the Cuban Missile Crisis, after which he tightened the trade embargo and restrictions on travel to the island. The policy of isolation peaked during the George W. Bush administration with the passage of the Torricelli Act, which significantly tightened those restrictions. On the other side of the spectrum, both President Clinton and President Obama tended more towards a policy of engagement (though Clinton signed the restrictive Helms Burton Act, and Obama has yet to lift travel restrictions). But compared to earlier leaders, both Clinton and Obama seem to believe that loosening trade and travel restrictions, and increasing contact between Cubans and Americans, will bring about the changes they desire. In either case, however, the desired outcome is the same; every US leader, including Obama, wants to remake Cuba in the United States' own image

The Cuban state is well aware that the US government hopes the visitors from the United States will inspire Cubans to reshape their system, but they claim not to be worried. When Bush put Clinton's "people-to-people" strategy on hold (it was later resumed by President Obama), Radio Progreso, one of the state news radio stations, reflected on that policy:

Among the general licenses there was the category of 'people-to-people educational exchange,' created to facilitate meetings between Americans and Cubans on issues of culture and life on the island. This was the license the majority of Americans interested in traveling to Cuba applied for . . . The origin of the license is interesting if one is to understand the fluctuations of Washington's policies regarding Cuba. It was born in the aftermath of the

Torricelli Act, based on the concept that the contact with the people of the United States would weaken the political bases of the Cuban regime. It was called 'Track 2,' since 'Track 1' consisted on strengthening the blockade and the aggressive measures. According to its advocates, every American that visited Cuba would be a natural agent for the government's destabilizing plans. The Cuban side accepted the challenge and thousands of Americans went to Cuba. Nothing happened, that is, now it seems the Bush administration would rather keep "pure Americans" away from the evil temptation of contact with Cuba."

I disagree with this assessment. During the 18 months I spent in Havana, I was keenly aware that I served as a rectifying force, even without wanting to be one. No matter how I attempted to minimize my own "conspicuous consumption" and speak honestly of the faults in my own society, I was often seen as proof of American wealth, freedom, and gender equality--a healthy, educated woman who could live by herself in another country of her choosing, without pressing financial concerns. Any attempt I made to dispute the belief that I encompassed all of the American experience, or that life would be perfect for any Cuban who could stow-away in my suitcase, was waved off immediately. I might convince some people that life in the United States wasn't perfect, but most remained convinced it would be great. Moreover, my arrival on any scene always set off a wave of introspection and examination among my new acquaintances and friends. Even when I wasn't asking questions, people often felt the need to "explain things" to me as an American, and then often became entangled in invidious comparisons between the "Cuban way" of doing things and the "American way." As Clinton and Obama understood, but Bush did not, the presence of people like me does contribute to political instability on the island, and opens greater possibility that the Cuban system will be brought in line with our own.

Another significant force of rectification on the island is international investors. Early in the Special Period the Cuban state adjusted its laws to make possible joint partnerships between the state and foreign investors, as a means of quickly developing those areas of the economy that were hoped would generate significant revenue. Because of US trade restrictions, very few of the individuals and corporations doing business in Cuba are American; most originate in Canada, Mexico, or Spain. International investors try to "rectify" Cubans on two levels—they try to shape Cubans as producers "into flexible, agile, self-regulating workers who help their firms respond to ever more rapidly changing market conditions" (Dunn 2004,7). The international business community also hopes to cultivate new consumers in Cuba in order to increase markets for their products.

While the supposedly well-educated and highly disciplined workforce is one of the state's principal selling points, foreign businessmen on the island are often negatively impressed by the work culture that they find, which I described here in Chapter 2. One Canadian CEO poised to spend millions on the island stated, "We do have to teach [Cubans] that it takes one person to make a salad, not six." This particular executive had delayed the building of the resort until the Cuban government would concede to let him bring in his own construction workers and

materials from abroad. He cited the case of one new luxury hotel in Havana that “fell down three times” as it was being built, and now appeared much older than its age because of inferior materials. While this executive was somewhat aware of the economic and social forces that caused Cuban workers to behave as they did, they were of little importance to him; in order to make money, he needed to convince Cuban workers to act like Canadian workers.

A similar process of creating good capitalist workers happened in Poland and elsewhere after the Soviet Union’s fall. At the time, according to Dunn (2004), “Some argued that ‘the socialist mentality is basically at odds with the spirit of capitalism’” (5). Dunn describes the techniques of “standardization, accountability, audit, quality control, participatory management, and ideas about private property” that managers used to turn their employees into “self-directed, self-activating, self-monitoring workers” (ibid, 20). Similar efforts are being made by foreign managers in Cuba. The investors also express concern over a trend that they term “‘brain waste’.” In Cuba people are no longer required to work for the state, and many find it far more profitable to sell vegetables in a farmer’s market or carry bags for tourists than it is to become a doctor, teacher, scientist, or other professional. As a result, Cuba’s “best and brightest” tend to gravitate towards unskilled, service sector labor. As a result, the advances Cuba had made over the past two generations in developing the intellectual capital on the island have started to dissipate, and the potential to make money by investing in scientific, medical, or technical enterprises is diminishing. Thus, part of rectification is trying to find ways to entice Cubans into the roles that best suit the interests of international capitalism; financial incentives are often the technique used.

There are other, less powerful forces of rectification as well. The anti-Castro political organizations, based mostly in Miami, have grown less vociferous and politically influential in recent years, largely because the generation of Miami Cubans now coming into power have no memory of life in Cuba, and less to gain personally or financially by pursuing a strictly isolationist policy. Even the famously-hard line CANF now has largely Democrat leadership and supports the policy of gradual engagement being followed by President Obama. But the groups do exist, and via the internet or during in-person visits, they do exhort Cubans to take active steps to push aside the socialist government and establish a U.S.-style political and economic system. Religious groups from various denominations have made inroads in Cuba, where they try to bring people in line with their spiritual values. Environmental groups encourage Cubans to remain consistent in the ecologically sound practices that emerged during the Special Period. While the declining use of things like fossil fuels and pesticides was primarily driven by cost considerations, environmentalists are working to keep that thread constant even as the financial situation of the nation improves.

Beside the obvious potential for personal and institutional gain that underlies most of these campaigns, there may be another reason why the project of “rectification” is so appealing for many outsiders. The desire to change the situation in Cuba stems from a basic discomfort that many Westerners have with the concept of “doubleness,” which is so evidently on display in Cuba. Our culture values straightforward, direct, single-minded people who demonstrate thought,

speech, and behavior that are consistent with one another and over time. It is important to note that this is not a value shared by all. In a study of sexuality, for example, Frank Browning (1998) made a point that says volumes about how Americans relate to the case of Cuba,

To be two is an exasperating conundrum for most Americans. Descendants of Calvin, Condorcet, and Descartes, fabricators of the New World, we like to believe definitively in the labels we give ourselves and the claims we make for ourselves. We are Christians or we are pagans. We are “law abiding citizens” or we are “criminals.” (Never mind the tax laws we break.) We are men or we are women. We are straight or we are gay. In the theology of ordinary living, this is the litany most Americans embrace. It is at the foundations of our system of laws, at the core of our faith in scientific progress, at the font of our positivistic, binary, cyberspatial dream (43).

Whether you characterize it as “performative shift” or “doble moral” or any other way, there is no escaping the fact that most Cubans live a dual existence. That duality is part of their authentic selves. As an example, it is worth noting that while most urban people in Cuba today express dislike of ardent defenders of the socialist system, called “*comunistas*” in Havana, most urbanites also dislike dissidents--for basically the same reason. By unfailingly choosing only one path, both “*comunistas*” and dissidents operate using rationalities that seem destined to fail. Worse yet, they inconvenience or endanger the people around them by adhering to lofty values, regardless of the value of the values themselves. This duality is written out of almost every account of Cuba, most of which generally seek to celebrate or condemn Castro’s rule by portraying ordinary Cubans as consistently supporting or opposing it.

Laura Nader (1990) calls the drive to impose order on a disorderly situation “*harmonizing*.” It is one way powerful people and institutions shape ordinary lives without being noticed or resisted by those whom they act upon. Her ethnographic portrayal of the complexities of justice and control in a Zapotec mountain village demonstrates that the most harmonious outcome is not necessarily the best or most just one. In her introduction, Nader writes, “Apparently, the basic components of harmony ideology are the same everywhere: an emphasis on conciliation, recognition that resolution of conflict is inherently good and that its reverse—continued conflict or controversy—is bad or dysfunctional” (2). The remainder of her work uses detailed ethnographic and historical evidence to challenge that ideology. Whatever the motivations, the agents of rectification in Cuba are contributing to the formation of a harmonized, transparent society that can be more easily plugged into the lowest rung of the transnational system. Whether easy incorporation into the global system ultimately benefits the Cuban people is a question that none of these individual reformers address. In the absence of such *harmonizing*, Cubans might go on indefinitely as they are now, not wholly satisfied, but strategic, independent, and critical actors. We should be wary of the forces of order because it takes them out of their position of possibility.

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