

Dollarization, Consumer Capitalism and Popular Responses

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Journalists and academics have brought us numerous accounts of the ways in which people in Cuba have struggled to make do, given the termination in 1991 of the Soviet trading block, and the consequent changes in the Cuban economy. These writers often emphasize the clash between Cuban socialist ideology, on the one hand, and government economic policy and daily life, on the other. They say that the Cuban government's use of the market, and the consequences of the market's use, reflect the hypocrisy and impracticality of Cuban socialist ideology, and that the existence of the black market/informal economy proves the government's utter failure to translate the ideology of Cuban socialism into daily life.¹

An examination of popular criticisms of and reactions to recent economic policy in Cuba, however, suggests that an economy that is de facto in crisis may leave intact a robust ideology. Popular expressions of discontent with the current state of affairs in Cuba often use such implicit principles of Cuban socialism as unity, equality and nationalism to complain about its failings. The discontent reflects a frustration with the failure of socialist principles to manifest themselves in daily life. Contradictions in Cuban society do not necessarily point to the failure of socialist ideology in Cuba or to the conclusion that socialist ideology can only survive as dogma imposed by the leadership. Popular reactions, particularly in the arts, provide evidence of a deep awareness of and concern with the ways that capitalism creates new forms of domination and material scarcity.

1. See, for instance, Horowitz, Irving Louis, ed., *Cuban Communism, 1959-1995*, Eighth ed. (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1995), McFayden, Deirdre, "The Social Repercussions of the Crisis," *NACLA Report on the Americas* XXIX, no. 2 (1995).

Images capturing socialist slogans alongside inequality and poverty do capture certain difficult realities and problems of the Cuban situation that demand attention. However, these images are often taken as a conclusion and proof of what was already assumed about the possibility of socialism and alternative projects in general, rather than as a provocation or point of departure for further examination of the issues the images raise.

All economic systems have justifying ideologies that do not match reality.² However, the Cuban government's practice of making clear its ideological commitments makes it particularly vulnerable to the use of images which juxtapose Revolutionary slogans to the Cuban reality. Anthropologist Paul Ryer has pointed to the dangerous uses to which these kinds of images can be put. In a 2000 piece in *Public Culture*, Ryer shows viewers a photo of a wall on which the slogan "Socialism or Death" appears in faded paint. Next to this photo, Ryer places a picture that appears on the book jacket of an account of Special Period Cuba by journalist Christopher Hunt called *Waiting for Fidel*.³ This picture features a woman, perhaps a prostitute, in high heels and a spandex suit with the design of the American flag on it. According to Ryer, both images "too easily map onto Western complacencies regarding the inevitability of capitalism and the futility of alternative ideologies or resistant practices."⁴ Such a complacent reading of the images means that history and politics drop out entirely. The images are used to illustrate a position already preserved.

For German social theorist Walter Benjamin these kinds of images had critical and revolutionary potential, as a challenge to the myth of progress, which both the Right and Left used to justify programs regardless of the effects on exactly those groups the programs claimed to be benefiting.⁵ Benjamin criticized the notion of history as progress because it served as a code word for the continuation of existing power relations despite technological change. Precisely because things "just keep on going," progress is in reality catastrophe.⁶ The chain of events known as history is in fact one enormous catastrophe which appears as wreckage piling higher and higher into the sky as time moves forward. Benjamin's angel of history sees the wreckage and

2. Capitalism, too, has failed to come through on all its promises, yet capitalist ideology, as Marx pointed out, presents the particular interests of capital in the guise of the universal and natural. It thus escapes the kind of scrutiny given to socialist economies, which make clear the subservience of purely market driven considerations to social welfare goals, at least at the level of political rhetoric and ideology.

3. The blurb on the book jacket of the book *Waiting for Fidel*, which I have read, captures the tone of the book. Hunt is also author of *Sparring with Charlie: Motoring down the Ho Chi Min Trail*. "This time he sets his sights on Cuba, where crumbling but elegant facades overlook shady street activities, where vintage Ford Fairlanes rumble past Soviet Ladas in the fast lanes of eerily deserted boulevards, and where an aging Fidel Castro is struggling to maintain his grip on a population yearning for *aire libre*, or at least Air Jordans." Hunt, Christopher, *Waiting for Fidel* (Mariner Books, 1998).

4. Ryer, Paul, "Millenium's Past Cuba's Future?" *Public Culture* 12, no. 2 (2000): 499.

“would like to stay, awaken the dead and make whole what has been smashed” yet the strong wind of progress pushes him forward into a future towards which his back is turned.⁷ The wind is difficult to resist for it tells us that what we have was the only possible outcome and paralyzes political agency by making all change seem futile in the face of history’s incontrovertible movement. Benjamin’s angel of history is useful for discussions of post-Soviet Cuba because his framework provides a way of navigating between the language of the cheap shot that Ryer critiques and blind apology for all that the Cuban government does.

In the place of universal history, Benjamin places a brand of historical materialism which sees the present in transition and not as some final culmination of the past. Before one can even construct an alternative to the status quo, one must arrest the flow of events by showing the world through dialectical images that juxtapose what progress claims to provide and what it in reality produces. “Thinking,” argues Benjamin, “involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well.”⁸ Benjamin’s dialectical images should cause the viewer to pause and rethink rather than to affirm what one already believed. During these pauses, one can reexamine not just the present but also the past and what could have been.

Take for instance two apparently contradictory signs that I saw during a visit to the eastern province of Holguin in 2000. On the front of the bus station there is picture of Cuban Revolutionary hero and martyr Frank País accompanied by the words “Morir por la patria es vivir,” [“To die for the fatherland is to live”]. The slogan, often cited as an example of Cuban Communist fanaticism, is in fact a line from the Cuban national anthem written in 1868.⁹ There is also a sign in the center of town telling the people that “What is most important is to continue searching for efficiency.” This slogan, which would seem to represent Cuba’s newfound concern with economic viability,

5. Benjamin’s points of reference were Stalinism and the ideologies that supposedly opposed it, but one can see the operation of this myth today. International lending institutions insist that economic development be defined in terms of a macroeconomic growth that comes at great cost to poorer populations of these countries and rarely benefits those who sacrificed the most to allow it to happen. One sees the myth in Cuba, where the government continues to insist that labor unions and other independent organizations representing the interests of workers, Afro-Cubans, women and farmers, to name a few, are superfluous to the socialist revolution made in their name. In both cases, one measure of progress occludes another measure of equal importance and the voices of those actually affected by these policies drop out. Apparently opposing ideologies produce similar results.

6. Benjamin, Walter, “Convulst N [Re The Theory of Knowledge, Theory of Progress,” in *Benjamin: Philosophy, Aesthetics, History*, ed. Gary Smith (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 64.

7. Benjamin, Walter, “Theses on History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 267.

8. *Ibid.*, 264.

9. “To the Battle, Bayameses!/Let the Fatherland proudly observe you!/Do not fear a glorious death,/To die for the fatherland is to live!”

in fact harks back to the 1970s when Cuba adopted an economic strategy of industrialization based on the Soviet model of central planning. Thus neither of these signs is as new as they might appear and each contains a story that complicates both the official narrative of revolution and socialism in Cuba and that of the opposition (defined broadly as anyone who does not accept the official account).

Frank País was the head of the revolutionary July 26th Movement's operations in Santiago de Cuba where he was assassinated by police in July 1957. País has come to be an important symbol of the sacrifices made by Cuban Revolutionary youth during the Batista dictatorship. He did, indeed, die for the fatherland. The actual story of País' life and involvement in the struggle to overthrow Batista, however, does not place him clearly on the side of the triumphant Revolution and the ideology that represents it today. País was a devout Baptist and an advocate of liberal, rather than socialist, reforms in Cuba. His death prior to the radicalization of the Revolution made it possible for him to remain a popular figure in official Cuban revolutionary history. However, his differences with the ideology that Castro adopted after the Revolution's triumph mean that he is also admired by those wishing the Revolution had taken another course.

The two signs also represent two elements of Cuban socialism that have at times conflicted but at others have supported one another. Both signs exhort sacrifice in the name of the country — to defend it militarily or to build it up economically. From the moment that Cuba declared itself a socialist republic, Cuba has struggled with the issue of just what the right balance of moral and material incentives should be. This issue was dealt with during the "Great Debate" of 1962-1965 when "the advocates of 'revolutionary ethics' confronted the supporters of economic rationality."¹⁰ These debates would emerge again and again; in the early 70s with the failure of the 10 million ton sugar drive; in the late 70s when the Soviet economic model had taken hold; and again in the late 80s with the Rectification Campaign of Ideological Errors and Negative Tendencies. Thus, many of the tensions brought about by the economic crisis of the 1990s have always existed. The severity of the 1990 crisis, however, brought many of the tensions into high relief.

10. Silverman, Bertram, ed., *Man and Socialism in Cuba: The Great Debate* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), 3. The former, and primarily Che Guevara, believed that creating institutions to foster a socialist consciousness was more important than economic efficiency. The latter group, represented by Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, believed that elements of capitalism such as market, mercantile and financial relationships, profit criteria and material incentives were necessary, especially in an underdeveloped country, in order to establish a strong material foundation for socialism.

The Economic Crisis of the 1990s: Special Period Cuba

While there is hardly consensus as to what the fundamental flaws of the Cuban economy are and when they began to manifest themselves, there are few who do not identify the disappearance of the Soviet block as the most immediate source of Cuba's economic crisis. The statistics documenting the effects of the decline and ultimate disappearance of the Soviet trading block (The Council for Mutual Economic Assistance or CMEA) in 1991 are dramatic.

Between 1989 and 1993, Cuba's import bill decreased by 70 percent, the Soviet Union decided to stop automatically covering Cuba's trade deficits, and Cuban national output fell by more than 50 percent.¹¹ During the same period, the GDP fell by 35 percent,¹² private consumption dropped by 30 percent and gross investment decreased by 80 percent. By the end of 1993, the fiscal deficit was almost a third of GDP.¹³ Between 1989 and 1992, total trade with the member countries of CMEA fell 93 percent.¹⁴

The living conditions of Cubans during this period present the crisis more vividly. Schools and factories shut down. Electricity was scarce and black outs a daily occurrence. Hospitals operated under wartime conditions. While laid off workers continued to receive 60 percent of their salaries, the money in their pockets was of little use as there was nothing to buy with it. While the government attempted to move people to the countryside to support the drive for food self-sufficiency, those in the countryside flocked to Havana in the hopes of acquiring hard currency and scarce goods. Fuel deliveries to state and private sectors were reduced by 80 percent. Bicycles and ox drawn carts replaced fuel consuming cars and tractors. The nickel-processing plant and oil refinery were both shut down to save energy. Food and clothing rationing was reinstated.¹⁵

After Cuba's initial sectoral response to the macroeconomic crisis failed to pull the country out of the crisis, the Cuban government began introducing market mechanisms into the internal logic of the economy and creating insti-

11. Pastor, Manuel, Jr. and Andrew Zimbalist, "Cuba's Economic Conundrum," *NACLA Report on the Americas*, Sept/Oct 1995, 8.

12. 35 percent is the official figure but unofficial sources have suggested figures as high as 50 percent Leogrande, William M. and Julie M. Thomas, "Cuba's Quest for Economic Independence," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 34, no. 2 (2002): 343.

13. Brundenius, Claes, "Whither the Cuban economy after recovery? The reform process, upgrading strategies and the question of transition." *Journal of Latin American Studies* 34, no. 2 (2002): 366.

14. Fitzgerald, Frank T., *The Cuban Revolution in Crisis: From Managing Socialism to Managing Survival* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1994), 2.

15. Jatar-Hausmann, Ana Julia, *The Cuban Way: Capitalism, Communism and Confrontation* (West Hartford: Kumarian Press, 1999), 49.

tutions resembling private property starting in 1993. That year, the government legalized the US dollar (Law-Decree 140) in August and set up dollar stores where Cubans with access to dollars, mostly those with family in the United States, would be able to buy imported goods.¹⁶ The text of the law stated bluntly that legalizing the possession of dollars would reduce the number of acts deemed punishable by the law and thus alleviate the work load of the police and courts.¹⁷ In general, the tone of the law's text was pragmatic. It stated clearly that "the conditions of the special period" and the economic difficulties of the country "made it necessary to introduce new regulations and methods in relation to the possession of convertible currency" (US dollars).¹⁸

In September of 1993, the government also passed Law-Decree 141 that authorized self-employment in 117 occupations.¹⁹ The text of the self-employment law, like the text of the law legalizing dollars, argued that only the necessities of the moment justified legalizing self-employment and that it should be heavily monitored by the state in order to avoid the values of entrepreneurship from contaminating those values and practices fostered by socialism.²⁰

The same year, the government also transformed most state farms into worker-run cooperatives called Unidades Basicas de Producción Cooperativas (UBPC) or Basic Units of Cooperative Production and reopened the free agricultural markets. In 1995, the government replaced the 1982 foreign investment law, Law-Decree 50, which had closed most sectors of the Cuban economy off to foreign investment, with Law-Decree 77 which permitted foreign investment in almost all sectors of the Cuban economy except education, health and the armed forces. The text of the foreign investment law, like the texts of the law legalizing dollars and the self-employment law, argued that foreign investment was only desirable in light of current changes to the global economy. Foreign investment was the only way that Cuba could maintain its revolutionary achievements, argued the law, since a redistributive economy must also be a growing economy.²¹

16. The stores were aptly named *Tiendas Para la Recuperación de Divisas* (TRDs) or Stores for the Recuperation of hard currency (*divisas*).

17. The increased police work load was, of course, the consequence of a shortage of goods and people's consequent attempts to acquire them illegally.

18. *La economía cubana: reformas estructurales y desempeño en los noventa*, (Mexico, D.F.: Fondo de cultura económica/CEPAL, 1997), 520.

19. The number of permitted activities increased to 157 by 1997 Henken, Ted, "Condemned to Informality: Cuba's Experiments with Self-Employment during the Special Period (The Case of the Bed and Breakfasts)," *Cuban Studies* 33 (2002): 4.

20. The law stated: "It is necessary to provide the organization and establish the required order to ensure that self-employment responds to particular principles that favor its development in all areas that are useful to the people, while keeping the practice of it from taking harmful forms." *La economía cubana*.

21. *Ibid.*, 417.

With the important economic changes, the government has been able to weather the 1990's with the majority of the revolution's achievements intact. Even according to the World Bank's 2001 edition of World Development Indicators (WDI), Cuba has not only maintained the revolutions achievements in low infant mortality rates, primary education and health care, but improved them despite the presence of the US trade embargo and the collapse of the Soviet trading block. Cuba ranks among the western industrialized nations in many of these indicators. Much of this has to do with high levels of public spending.²²

In spite of critics' contention that these kinds of services are not sustainable,²³ statistics like these have been the government's constant defense in light of increasing economic,²⁴ social, racial and gender inequality, material scarcity, overt and subtle discrimination against Cubans in their own country, often harsh crackdowns on those trying to make their way in Cuba's illicit economy or seeking political change in Cuba, and continuing attempts by Cubans to leave their country.

The legalization of the dollar has created a severe division in a society that was previously highly egalitarian.²⁵ Those with family abroad who can send remittances and those with links to tourism and the dollars that tourists bring with them have much higher incomes than those living on state salaries.

Very few people in Cuba actually live on a state salary. If they work a government job, they supplement their income in a variety of ways.²⁶ A lot of people don't even bother with a government job. Then there are the full time *jineteros*, which literally means jockeys because they ride on the backs of tourists, as guides, middlemen or prostitutes. Almost no one can say that they do not participate in illegal activities or at least benefit from that participation and yet there is a great deal of finger pointing especially at those who have fewer outside resources.

The finger pointing has contributed to the reemergence of many racial and gendered stereotypes. With the increased reliance on dollars and fewer relatives abroad from whom they can receive them, Afro-Cubans have found

22. Lobe, Jim, "Learn From Cuba, Says World Bank," *Inter Press News Service Agency*, April 30 2001.

23. Solaún, Mauricio, "On Political Change in Cuba: A Comparative Introduction," in *Cuba in Transition* (1999).

24. The Gini coefficient increased from .22 in 1986 to .41 in 1999. Whereas the upper fifth of the population received 33.8 percent of the income in 1986, they received 58.1 percent in 1999. The bottom fifth of the population received 11.3 percent in 1986 and received 4 percent in 1999. According to Claes Brundenius, "if this trend continues, income distribution in Cuba will increasingly resemble that of the rest of Latin America" Brundenius, "Whither the Cuban economy after recovery?" 378.

25. While wage differentials in Cuba have always existed as a way of stimulating productivity, what is distinct now is that pay is based on one's involvement in the dollar economy.

26. The story of the doctor who drives a cab is a familiar one.

themselves forced to participate in the more illegal aspects of black market, prostitution and petty theft. Such participation facilitates the reemergence of stereotypes of Afro-Cubans as lazy, shiftless and thieving. Afro-Cubans also have a harder time getting jobs in the tourist industry, which is vulnerable to racist assumptions about what constitutes a “pleasant aspect” (buena presencia).²⁷ Gender inequality has also been exacerbated. During the initial cut-backs, women were fired first and many were absorbed into the growing Cuban prostitution business. While women’s staying home is also more compatible with the culture of machismo, what is newer is that female prostitution has become increasingly acceptable in Cuba. Many families rely on the money their daughters, wives and sisters bring in from prostitution.²⁸

The leadership has generally argued that, in spite of these social shifts, the crisis is economic and measures to tackle the crisis unavoidable. In a 1993 interview, Secretary of the Cuban Council of Ministers Carlos Lage Davila was asked whether the economic problem was worse than the political. He answered that Cuba’s problems were “economic, not political” and that only those who were not familiar with Cuban “reality,” would ask Cuba to make political changes.²⁹ In a 1994 piece entitled “Las estrategias antes la situación económica actual,” Lage argued that Cuba had two choices given the new situation in which it found itself after the collapse of CMEA. The first option was to impose a program of structural adjustment by raising prices, closing factories, cutting social welfare programs and decreasing social security, thus imposing great hardship on the Cuban people. The second option was to “apply a policy that corresponded with the ideology, the ideas, the aspirations and the objectives of the Revolution: to share amongst everyone the weight of [the] grave economic consequences” of Cuba’s economic isolation.³⁰ While far superior to the first option, argued Lage, the second option had negative consequences which were well known before they manifested themselves.

Lage’s comments and the texts of economic reform are indicative of the leadership’s tendency to characterize current economic policy as the lesser of two evils and to isolate the crisis to the economic realm. By isolating the crisis to the economic realm, officials hope to link the longer term survival of the Cuban revolution to the maintenance of basic social services such as

27. de la Fuente, Alejandro, “The Resurgence of Racism in Cuba,” *NACLA Report on the Americas* 2001, 32-33.

28. The existence of prostitution, however, is not just rationalized by dependence. One hears it increasingly used even as a compliment.

29. Author’s Translation. Lage Davila, Carlos, *Enfrentamos el desafío: Entrevista concedida por el Secretario del Consejo de Ministros a Mario Vázquez Raña* (La Habana: Editora Política, 1993).

30. Lage Davila, Carlos, *Las estrategias antes la situación económica actual* (La Habana: Editora Política, 1994).

healthcare, education, housing, regulated prices and low inflation and to the maintenance of Communist Party control.

There is much support among the Cuban population to maintain these social services. A 1995 poll showed that 75 percent wished to keep education free and 77.9 percent wished to keep public health care free. 22.1 percent wished to keep education partially free and 19.6 percent wished to keep health care partially free. The remaining percentages either opposed free or partially free education and health care or were not sure.³¹ Those who have done research in Cuba and spoken with Cuban people generally recognize that in spite of the Cuban people's dissatisfaction with such things as state salaries upon which they cannot subsist, the poor purchasing power of the Cuban peso, and a new class system based on access to dollars, the majority of Cubans continue to value and depend upon the Cuban social welfare state and do not wish to see it disappear under the weight of a hyper individualistic consumer society.³² My own conversations with people in Cuba support these general conclusions.³³

While one may be suspicious of an opinion poll carried out by the government of a one-party system or question the objectivity of the type of foreign researcher who would even be given permission to enter Cuba,³⁴ a complete dismissal of this data would fail to take into account several important considerations. First, the fact that not all Cubans supported absolutely free education and health care demonstrates that people were sufficiently honest to express at least a mild opposition. Second, it is significant that many of the dissident organizations on and off the island also support some sort of welfare state. While the Cuban American National Foundation has come to represent the Cuban exile community in the minds of many Americans, their platform is hardly representative of the views of most Cuban Americans and of dissidents on the island. Many insist upon the maintenance of basic social

31. Machado Rodríguez, Darío L., "Democracia Política e Ideología: Una Opinión Después del V Congreso del Partido," *Cuba Socialista* 9 (1998).

32. Azicri, Max, *Cuba Today and Tomorrow: Reinventing Socialism*, ed. John M. Kirk, *Contemporary Cuba* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), Rosenthal, Mona, *Inside the Revolution: Everyday Life in Socialist Cuba*, ed. Roger Sanjek, *Anthropology of Contemporary Issues* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), Sznajder, Mario and Luis Roniger, "Politics, Social Ethos and Identity in Contemporary Cuba," (Jerusalem: The Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2001), Vasquez, Miguel, "Cultural Integrity in Non-Traditional Societies: Cuba Encounters the Global Market System," *Cultural Dynamics* 2002.

33. I have been visiting Cuba since 1996 and lived in Havana from 2000 to 2002. While I have had informal conversations with Cubans from all walks of life and regions of the country, most of my formal conversations have been with academics, artists and students in Havana.

34. Economist Carmelo Mesa-Lago has written extensively on the difficulties of doing social science research in Cuba, pointing to the ideological bias within Cuba that places obstacles in the way of the "search for the truth" Mesa-Lago, Carmelo, *Availability and Reliability of Statistics in Socialist Cuba* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1970), 54.

services and are critical of non-Cuban solutions that would impose savage capitalism or deprive Cubans of property or other advantages acquired from the Revolution.³⁵

It is difficult to contextualize politics in Cuba. There has long been debate over the existence of democracy in Cuba.³⁶ However, one need not enter into discussions about the defects and merits of Cuba's formal democracy in order to deal with politics in Cuba. Realms deemed outside the political provide examples of political views that do not fit neatly into the framework of the Cuban leadership nor of those wishing to juxtapose socialist dogma against the image of a Cuban people embracing wholeheartedly the elements of capitalism that have seeped into Cuban daily life.

It is the case that after 40 years, government ideology has become the hegemonic ideology. According to anthropologist Mona Rosenthal in one of the few post-1960s and post-Special Period anthropological studies of Cuban everyday life: "the hegemonic political ideology, the centralist planned structure and the planned economy pervade everyday life" and "[n]o one in Cuba can avoid being affected by socialist ideology in one way or another, whether one accepts its premises or not."³⁷ Thus, to use Gramscian terms, the state does not rule from above by imposing certain rules and norms on pre-constituted subjects. Rather, it sets the standards of appropriate behavior and provides the structures through which individuals interpret their situations thereby producing and maintaining subjects who come to view law and other forms of coercion, not as something externally imposed, but as freedom, since they have been taught to believe that these laws contain moral or social value.³⁸

The discursive framework in Cuba is limited by these considerations and one should not underestimate the various forms of oppression that the state uses.³⁹ However, two important qualifications should be made, one at the theoretical level and one at the level of Cuban society. First, there is a normative/philosophical issue at stake in distrusting Cuban public opinion for there is only so far that you can take these objections before they become downright undemocratic. At what point does awareness of the ways that hegemonic ide-

35. The Miami based *Cuban Change*, for instance, supports a Social-Democrat platform.

36. For an intelligent discussion of Cuban democracy by a variety of Cuban and foreign academics, see Dilla Alfonso, Haroldo, ed., *la democracia en Cuba y el diferendo con los Estados Unidos* (Havana: Editorial de Ciencias Sociales, 1996).

37. Rosenthal, *Inside the Revolution: Everyday Life in Socialist Cuba*, 156.

38. Gramsci, Antonio, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International, 1971), 34.

39. Whether the government in Cuba actually knows all does not matter for it has succeeded in making most Cuban citizens believe that it does. Foreigners wishing to see the best of Cuba often have a difficult time understanding this fear by virtue of their limited time in Cuba, the special treatment they receive and their ability to leave.

ologies produce their subjects become disrespect for the opinions of those supposedly dominated by that hegemonic ideology? The issue becomes even more complicated in a case like Cuba where the national hegemonic ideology is not hegemonic globally. The existence of strong criticism in Cuba and of counter-hegemonic movements means that we can also take seriously strong opinions in support of certain government policies. In Cuba one can find anarchists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Quakers and followers of a whole range of ideologies that do not match either Cuban socialism in a broad sense or official definitions of it. Can it be assumed that somehow they have escaped the hegemonic ideology? Can it be concluded then that they are the only Cubans whose opinions are truly expressed or acquired consciously? On what basis could such a claim possibly be made? These are important philosophical questions but they are not questions that apply only to Cuba.

If we move to Cuba specifically, we must ask if belittling Cuban popular opinions does not make us complicit in the same logic used by the Cuban government to dismiss genuine outbursts of dissatisfaction with daily living conditions. For instance, this is how the Museum of the Revolution characterized photos of a mass uprising that took place in Old Havana and Central Havana during the height of the Special Period in 1994:

Groups of antisocial elements and tramps performed counter-revolutionary riots in two neighborhoods Old Havana and Central Havana on August 5, 1994. The workers responded immediately and, without weapons, put an end to the revolts, supported by the presence of Fidel, who had rushed to join the revolutionary people. Huge popular demonstrations followed, frustrating all attempts to create instability.

The characterization, which I read during a visit to the museum in 2000, transforms a genuine expression of discontent over unacceptable conditions into the work of a few misfits eager to upset an otherwise stable situation. The police, who had come to quell the situation, are transformed into the representatives of the workers. In spite of the fact that the neighborhoods in which these riots took place are predominantly Afro-Cuban and Afro-Cubans are generally more in favor of maintaining the "achievements of the revolution," the Museum quote can brand the participants counter-revolutionaries.

The complexity and variety of the responses of Cubans themselves to Cuba's current situation call into question the simplistic categories of criminal anti-revolutionary elements, active/thinking opponents to the system, fearful citizens of a totalitarian state, or fanatical hard-line Communists/party elites. Being part of the system often means that one continues to engage and to criticize rather than disengage from politics altogether. There are cynical explanations for this. Those marginal to the system and deeply imbedded in informal economic activities may wish to keep as low a profile as possible

and thus go through the minimal motions expected of Cubans within the system: voting, signing referendums, allowing the fumigators in and, depending on the neighborhood, attending a local meeting or two. Those who participate in the system must be given some leeway in order to convince them that their involvement means something. The stories are always complicated.

For instance, while many Cuban youths see little reason to continue their studies in light of the low state salaries, being a student does provide certain material benefits from the state. Subsidized food (the University of Havana cafeteria has the cheapest lunch around), access to the Internet and computers and an environment where status can depend on standards other than the dollar are all appealing aspects of continuing one's education. These students are not necessarily apologists for the system and indeed their educations may make it harder for them to accept inconsistencies within it. A friend of mine, who is studying sociology at the University of Havana, is a member of the Union of Communist Youth (Unión de la Juventud Comunista) and regularly does voluntary labor (a thing associated with either the idealism or tyranny of the 1960s). On the other hand, she refused to sign a national referendum in support of the Cuban Constitution and against the Varela Project,⁴⁰ even when the local representative from the neighborhood CDR (Committee of the Defense of the Revolution) came to her door and made her write a letter explaining why and even though her refusal might make future advancement difficult. For her, supporting the Revolution, as she does, is not compatible with signing a document that argues that the Constitution is "untouchable." For her, giving such power to the Constitution was anti-Revolutionary. At the same time, she herself has helped with neighborhood voluntary programs and is writing a thesis on the manipulation of information about Cuba in one U.S. newspaper. She is equally critical of the Cuban press, however, and finds the Cuban magazine *Temas*, which publishes a variety of academic articles including those of foreigners, too compromised.

A 32-year old independent artist I spoke with at a party emphasized the necessity of an economic base for socialism and the tendency of the people to rationalize the situation in Cuba by referring to the provision of social services. At the same time, she saw socialism as providing good things.

Cuban socialism for me are ideas favorable to man but in reality they would more viable if there was a more solid economic base. Sometimes socialism loses its meaning in reality because it does not have structural support. Yes

40. The referendum was called in response to the Varela Project, a petition with roughly 11,000 signatures requesting "a referendum to guarantee Cuban civil liberties: freedom of expression and association, the right to own a private business (foreigners can own businesses in Cuba but nationals cannot), the release of nonviolent political prisoners and the right to directly elect representatives in multi-party elections" Payá, Osvaldo, "Cloud of Terror Hangs Over Cubans Seeking Rights," *Los Angeles Times*, July 14 2003.

there are benefits to socialism but they are precarious because they want everybody to have them without having an economic base.

Thus she pointed to what she saw to be a trade-off between social welfare and individual wealth accumulation. When I asked her whether she would sacrifice free health care for a higher salary, she told me no. At the same time, she was critical of the ways in which the provision of social services in Cuba served to justify severe inadequacies to the system. When I asked if socialism for her amounted only to free education and medicine, she told me “that is the banner that people raise here. People protect themselves with this.” But again, she did not see these rationalizations of the government’s failure in Cuba as a sign that socialism, in the sense of de commodification, did not have its virtues. Thus, when I asked if she would want to leave Cuba, she told me no because “money corrupts” and causes problems.

These examples are anecdotal but they represent many conversations I have had. More importantly, they are reactions which are not knee-jerk repetitions of party slogans. Their complexity raises a troubling question for the leadership for, while their concern with the maintenance of social services is one that the government can feel secure about, not all Cubans trust in the state’s ability to maintain them (as evidenced in the woman’s concern with a solid economic base). This distrust, however, is not only based on the issue of viability but also on what socialism means beyond the provision of social services, and on whether the attempts to salvage a narrow definition of socialism may well work to undermine the possibility of a true political consensus around socialism. As Cuban social scientist Haroldo Dilla Alfonso argued in 1999:

[T]he slow commercial colonization of socialized areas of the economy has posed challenges at many levels to the most central of all political questions—the distribution of power. If we take as axiomatic the fact that a combination of militant anti-imperialism and the provision of free social services does not amount to socialism, we are left with the question as to the real depth of these systemic changes: first, at the social (and more specifically the class) level and second, at the level of the rearticulation of the whole of political life.⁴¹

If Cuba is heading towards marketization with the state increasingly aligning its interests with capital, it becomes increasingly important for discussions of Cuban socialism to center on what elements of Cuban socialism are most important for its long term survival. Marketization may help to maintain the social welfare state, but what happens when the social welfare state comes to identify with capital?

41. Dilla Alfonso, Haroldo, “Comrades and Investors: The Uncertain Transition in Cuba,” in *Global Capitalist Versus Democracy: Socialist Register 1999*, ed. Leo Panitch and Colin Leys (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1999), 229.

Take, for instance, the propaganda displayed in a Central Havana shopping mall. In the entranceway of Tienda Carlos Tercera, a sign announces that “Sales plus economy plus efficiency equals revolution.” Another sign hanging from the ramp that slopes up to the top of the shopping complex says “Together to defend what is ours” and is credited to CIMEX (Consortio de Importaciones y Exportaciones), Cuba’s largest trading company and the firm that runs the shopping complex. The shopping complex Carlos Tercera and others like it in Havana testify to the expanding role that consumption plays in public life in Cuba even as the number of people who can consume diminishes. The stores and prices demonstrate the vast differences between the peso and dollar economy. The identity of its shoppers represents class shifts and a new system of remuneration. One must possess dollars to buy anything at Carlos Tercera.

Opened in October of 1998, Carlos Tercera is a self-contained. It is a space full of the new with few reminders of the scarcity and dilapidation of Havana outside. The mall offers everything: home appliances, cosmetics and perfume, clothing, pet supplies, shoes and a food court. There is a Benetton where t-shirts for children cost \$25. The grocery store sells sugar cereals, peanut butter, imported apples that cost up to a dollar each, olive oil and other tinned products that most Cubans could never afford. There is even an “everything for a dollar” store in the tradition of the United States where one can buy plastic toys and flowers, buckets, and pencils, much of it made in China. There are often long lines outside these stores. Everything is “only a dollar” even when a dollar can buy you 60 bus rides (120 if you ride the infamous *camello* instituted during the Special Period), ten cinema tickets, ten pounds of oranges or five packs of unfiltered cigarettes. However, a dollar in the world of dollars in Cuba gets you very little. In the grocery store like the one in Carlos Tercera, a can of Tropicola, the Cuban cola, costs 45 cents and a beer costs 60 cents. A stick of butter can cost up to a dollar, more than what it costs in the United States. Toilet paper costs \$1.40 for four rolls. Eggs cost from ten to 15 cents each. When the highest salary in Cuba is 40 dollars a month, these prices are very high indeed.

Carlos Tercera, however, does not simply provide Cubans with a window onto the goods they may not have access to in the peso economy. It is not simply a store; it is a shopping experience. Just like the malls in the United States, it’s a place where people congregate by virtue of their commonality as consumers. Just as in the United States, it is a place where one has agency as a buyer and where one can take control of one’s life by adding new objects to it. And, just as in the United States, this agency as a buyer does not translate into political power.

Thus those who go shopping at Carlos Tercera are “defend[ing] what is [theirs]” by helping to keep the economy functioning. Sales plus economy plus efficiency does equal revolution if the revolution has come to mean nothing but the influx of hard currency to keep the economy going, the government afloat and basic social services intact. Other activities such as domestic production, popular political and direct participation, and the search for Cuban solutions are absent from this equation. If “sales plus economy plus efficiency equals revolution,” then revolution in Cuba is reduced to economic calculation and conspicuous consumption which are not only activities that few Cubans can actually participate in, but are also principles fundamentally at odds with such important principles of Cuban socialism as unity, equality, and nationalism.

It is in the various realms of Cuban popular culture that one finds the strongest criticisms of this consumer culture. One such realm is that of music, and particularly nueva trova, rap, and rock and roll, which because of its location outside the political has greater space to speak.

The songs of Cuban trovador Carlos Varela deal with Cubans’ self censorship and fear (“Like Fish,” “Walls and Door”), the irony of a system that says that all is for you but forbids you to change it (“Like They Did to Me”), and the failure of the Cuban news media to report on the ugly realities of Cuban life (“Politics Doesn’t fit in the Sugar Bowl”).⁴² Yet Varela’s concern with greater freedom of expression in Cuba and his criticisms are not unproblematic embraces of consumer society. His 1989 song “Tropicollage” addresses both the ways in which Cuba’s desire for dollars has damaged Cubans’ respect for one another and the ways in which Cuba has been commodified by its reliance on the tourist industry. “I know that the dollar makes the economy like flour makes bread” sings Varela, “but what I don’t understand is why money confuses people so much that if you go to a hotel they treat you badly because you are not a foreigner.”⁴³ In the same song, Varela reminds the typical tourist who never goes to the places where Cubans actually live and work that Cuba can’t be bought nor captured in a photograph.

Trovador Frank Delgado’s song “Trovatur” (1995) is a song about Cuban musicians who pander to tourists’ romantic vision of Cuban revolutionaries. “I was a tropical virus, communist Latin lover, trafficking in the revolution and its points of views.” In “Johnny, the Babalao,” Delgado sings of Afro-Cuban religious figures whose spiritual concerns have been clouded by their entrepreneurial aspirations and who accept only dollars and name brand rum.⁴⁴

42. All songs are from Varela’s albums *Como los peces* (TRAK 1995), *Monedas al aire* (Anides-Sonido 1992) and *Jalisco Park* (EGREM 1989). Lyrics in Spanish from www.carlosvarela.com.

43. All song lyrics are translated from Spanish to English by the author.

Cuban rap has provided an increasingly important outlet for criticism especially in relation to Afro-Cuban identity, police brutality, and racial profiling. Yet these issues are not necessarily treated independently from economic ones. Thus the rap group EPG&B tell their listeners in one song not to be a Mickey Mouse, which means to be a copycat and a blind consumer of American culture, but rather to be Carabali, in reference to Cuba's African cultural origins and influences.⁴⁵

The group Buena Fe's song "psicologia al día"⁴⁶ portrays capitalism as literally something that "grab[s] you by the neck" and demands that you resign yourself to it. The song's verses go on to describe the ways in which capitalism appears to provide freedom but in fact creates forms of obligation for which capital does not compensate in the end. Thus one stanza of the song refers to the situation of the underdeveloped country that must squander its natural resources and its environment in order to acquire loans which they will be paying off indefinitely. Each chorus ends with a different "point of view" whether it be ecological or humanist and yet their characterizations of these views show the extent to which they have been perverted by capitalism. Humanism is about resignation to the world being an unequal one where each exists to enjoy her own individual life. If one looks on the bright side, goes the song, at least poverty and suffering can be profitable.

The final chorus tells the listener that the desired result of this ideological and economic onslaught is that people themselves ask to be grabbed by the neck and promise that they won't complain since "at the end of the story, being hanged isn't so bad." The final lines conclude that "you will see it this way, in a conformist way, from the slavish point of view." The song represents precisely the kind of Gramscian dynamic that Rosenthal uses to describe Cuba. Yet, in this case, it is explicitly a critique of neo-liberalism and its attempt, not simply to impose a certain world order, but to make it appear as if this is what people really wish.

There is much to criticize about Cuban economic policy and daily life and those criticisms can be found not just among the dissident community but also in the streets and in popular culture. People's dissatisfaction with the status quo does not represent a straightforward embrace of the free market. Indeed popular criticisms can be far more socialist than the official propaganda of the Cuban state and this may be something that neither the Cuban state, who believes itself to be the last socialist holdout, nor critics of socialist projects, who appear often to share the same belief, wish to recognize.

44. Both songs from the album *Trova-Tur* (1995). Lyrics in Spanish from www.trovadores.net.

45. "Rap con Churre" from the album *Con los Puños Arriba: Compilación de Hip Hop Cubano* (EGREM 2002).

46. From the album *Dejame Entrar* (EGREM 2001).

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