

‘*Cuentapropismo*’ in a *Socialist State*¹

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“Maybe tomorrow I’ll turn capitalist,” Alejandro jokingly tells me, “today I’m staying home!”² Alejandro is one of a small number of licensed self-employed workers in Cuba, or “*trabajadores por cuenta propia*” (workers for own account). Although legal in Cuba since 1993, *trabajo por cuenta propia* remains a controversial sector in the Cuban economy. As the first Cubans to shift from the centralized state sector to self-employment in the private sector, *cuentapropistas* challenge the state socialist monopoly on labor and production. For a country whose Constitution states that it is a nation “composed of workers, peasants, and other manual and intellectual laborers” (Constitución de la República de Cuba 1992), the legalization of independent workers motivated by private gain is particularly contentious. Of course, *trabajo por cuenta propia* is not a unique change in the Cuban labor market, and the creation of joint-venture and “market-oriented” state enterprises, as well as an active black market, pose equally strong challenges to the socialist labor regime. Yet *cuentapropistas* are one of the most potent symbols of Cuba’s changing economic, political and ideological character—in part because of the significance that outside observers have attached to their existence.

1. For an extended exploration of the material covered in this article, focusing on the relationship between legal regulation and the formation of identity, see my article “‘Maybe Tomorrow I’ll Turn Capitalist’: *Cuentapropismo* in a Workers’ State,” forthcoming in *Law and Society Review*. The germ of this paper originated in an undergraduate thesis in Anthropology entitled “Transforming Identities: An Ethnography of Change in a Cuban Market” (2000) at Harvard University, in which the ethnographic material is more fully presented. I wish to express my gratitude to the Anthropology Department and the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies for the funding to undertake this research, and to Brian Palmer and William Fisher for their comments and encouragement. The project evolved further with the financial assistance of the Centre for Criminology at the University of Toronto and under the intellectual guidance of Ron Levi and Mariana Valverde, to whom I would also like to express my thanks.

2. All of the names in this article have been changed.

Indeed, the group has frequently been portrayed as a kind of capitalist vanguard by North American commentators, the shepherds of Cuba's transition from socialism to a free-market democracy.

In examining the tension surrounding *cuentapropismo*, this article argues that an anthropological, "on-the-ground" approach can help to expose the overly-rigid assumptions which have frequently informed analyses of Cuba's limited opening of self-employment. Cuba-observers have tended to view Cuba's "transition" to a free-market economy as all but inevitable, with *cuentapropistas* as its personal agents. Viewed from the inside, however, the picture looks significantly different. As Alejandro's comment illustrates, *cuentapropistas* themselves are ambivalent about claiming a larger group identity, on the one hand taking pride in their unique position outside of the state-controlled centralized economy, and on the other hand disclaiming any kind of capitalist mentality or work culture. Rather than asking whether *cuentapropistas* are "capitalist" or "socialist"—rubrics which are closely bound up in Cold War ideology and hard-line rhetoric in Cuba and the United States—a more productive line of investigation might focus on the ways in which identity is constructed around particular kinds of economic and social activity, and the longer term impact this may have for models of citizenship and governance. Such an approach can therefore help to complicate ideological interpretations of transition by highlighting how changes in the regulation of labor put pressure on traditional socialist models of state and citizen, and the way in which this renegotiation of the citizen-state relationship may itself become constitutive of fundamental social change in a way that is not easily captured by the binary of communism/capitalism.

One of the complexities of employing the term "transition" is the difficulty of distinguishing a period of "transition" from the less sharply marked fluctuations of social evolution. While Cuba's direction remains unknown, it is almost certainly a country undergoing a period of profound transformation. The pace and scale of economic change since 1990, including the "dollarization" of the economy, the growth of foreign investment and the explosion of foreign tourism, have created a fundamental shift in Cuba's socialist framework which will be difficult to reverse, despite the government's recent announcement that Cuba is in a phase of "deepening socialism."³ Thus while this article specifically rejects a teleological, "evolutionist" conception of transition, it does suggest that the contemporary moment in Cuba is one of profound and radical change. As a close examination of *cuentapropismo* illustrates, the legalization of self-employment has important consequences for the renegotiation of individual-state relations and the construction of citi-

3. Announcement of National Assembly President Ricardo Alarcón, EFE News Service, December 1, 2005.

zenship. This renegotiation may itself help to contribute to the creation, shape and character of a transitional period.

Methodology

This paper builds on fieldwork conducted in Havana, Cuba, over a period of seven years, from 1998 to 2005, with *cuentapropista* craftsmen. Interview questions focussed on the individual's education and work prior to becoming a *cuentapropista*, reasons for entering into self-employment, perceived advantages and disadvantages of the shift in work practices and income, attempts to balance family and work time, plans for the future, and aspirations for their children. The ability to return to Havana over a period of seven years added an important dimension to the research, allowing me to compare points of variance or constancy over time, to recognize that a phenomenon first seen in a moment of apparent stability was in fact in a state of flux, or that something which seemed short-lived was able to endure. As such, my return visits did not so much constitute ethnographic "updates" as opportunities for a re-theorization of self-employment and the relationship between work, identity and the state. (Burrawoy, 2003)

The focus on artisans inevitably gives this paper a particular perspective on *trabajo por cuenta propia*. In some ways craftsmanship is one of the least controversial activities authorized for self-employment. Where private taxis, restaurants, or *casas particulares* (room rentals in private homes) are perceived as competing with their state counterparts for tourist revenue, the government is less likely to attempt to nationalize craftsmanship since the very fact that an object is hand-made by an individual artisan is what gives it value. Moreover, tourists flock to craft markets precisely for the sensation of buying "authentic" local goods. Craftsmen are also able to draw on the image of the "artist"—a significant advantage for craftsmen given the government's changing attitude towards artistic activity. (Hernández-Reguant, 2004)

The focus on artisans, however, does not limit the relevancy of the analysis to other types of *cuentapropismo*. While the less precarious position of artisans may allow them to speak more freely with a foreign researcher, the fundamental changes they have experienced in the regulation of their daily work—the freedom to set their own schedule and negotiate their own prices, the difficulty of dealing with government licenses and inspectors, the exclusion from state welfare programs—is shared by all *cuentapropistas*. Furthermore, I was able to put my observations and interviews into context through discussions with Cuban scholars at the *Centre Psicológico y Sociológico*, who have conducted extensive sociological studies of the Cuban labor market, as well as through daily interactions with a variety of *cuentapropistas*.

Of course, this study cannot claim to represent all *cuentapropistas* and remains limited by its geographical focus and small empirical base. The challenges and advantages of *cuentapropismo* may vary significantly in smaller communities or in regions less affected by tourism. *Cuentapropistas* whose work focuses on providing services to Cubans rather than to tourists may also experience the regulation of their daily work differently, and a more comprehensive study would benefit from a comparison of self-employment in the tourist industry with self-employment in the “domestic” sector. Nor can a few craftsmen be said to speak for a single “*cuentapropista* work culture.” Indeed, a key finding of the study is that *cuentapropistas* themselves reject adopting a cohesive group identity, and therefore any attempt at generalization must be treated with caution. While these limitations are significant, they do not, however, undermine the broader conclusion of this study—that *cuentapropistas* are neither capitalist nor socialist, but are helping to redefine what it means to be a productive worker, and therefore a citizen, in Cuba.

“Mal necesario” or Harbinger of Capitalism?

The deep ambivalence surrounding self-employment can only be understood in relation to the powerful symbolic role of the worker in the Cuban Revolution, typified most clearly in Che Guevara’s conceptualization of the “New Socialist Man” (*el hombre nuevo*)—a figure which denoted more than a productive worker or an individual dedicated to revolutionary ideals, but the forging of a new morality and consciousness. (Pérez, 1998: 340) It is hardly surprising, then, that a figure as antithetical to the social ideal of worker as the *trabajador por cuenta propia* has been received as a “*mal necesario*” (necessary evil) by the Cuban government. Yet perhaps an even more significant factor shaping the government’s reception of *cuentapropismo* has been the keen interest that American commentators have shown in the growth of self-employment. As Arnaldo Pérez Garcia, a Cuban psychologist who has written about recent changes in the Cuban labor market, explains, “You have to remember that the disagreement between Cuba and the United States penetrates every single decision made in Cuba. You cannot understand *cuentapropismo* outside of this context.” (Personal communication, Havana, February 2005) Drawing a circle on a piece of paper, he explained that the circle represents “the system,” and that, from the Cuban government’s point of view, anything that falls outside of the system is vulnerable to manipulation by American interests and is therefore a threat. A 1997 statement by Raúl Valdés Vivo, the Communist Party’s Academy Director, supports Pérez Garcia’s comments. Writing in the state newspaper, *Granma Internacional*, Valdés Vivó effectively announced the government’s intention to limit *cuentaprop-*

ismo, stating: "The creation of the seeds of a local bourgeoisie would bring in a social force which sooner or later would serve the counterrevolution."

American media and academics have added to this perception. For example, one analysis of self-employed workers in Cuba, presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of the Cuban Economy in Miami in 1998, suggested that the "highly visible success" achieved by *cuentapropistas*,

...is what makes the self-employed phenomenon so interesting and important for the near term future of the country; when a transition toward a true free market economy occurs in Cuba, the self-employed will be an important minority of Cubans who have small enterprise experience, who are familiar with risk taking, investment and profits, taxes and regulation. They will be uniquely equipped to thrive in a capitalist setting. They will continue to sell goods and services to the domestic population and cater to tourists, but they will be able to expand their businesses, hire other people, and generate real wealth. (Smith, 1998:58)

Secure in the assumption that Cuba will transform itself into a free-market economy, the author concludes: "To the extent that the self-employed can create employment and demonstrate the tangible benefits of hard work for average Cubans, they will do much to smooth the transition to a market economy in Cuba." (Smith 1998: 59) *Cuentapropistas*, in this account, serve a symbolic function in promoting popular support for reform by demonstrating that widely-held fears about capitalism are unfounded, and that hard work will result in material gain.

The specific position that *cuentapropistas* occupy within Cuba's economic and political infrastructure is therefore as significant as the kind of economic, "capitalist" activity they engage in. While representing only a very small percentage of the Cuban labor force—minuscule in comparison with the number of Cubans who participate in the black market—*cuentapropistas* pose a powerful symbolic challenge to the socialist regime. In particular, *cuentapropistas* embody an increasing tension between Cuba's socialist past and uncertain future. In this period of "late socialism," many Cubans express both a deep attachment and pride in the successes of the Revolution, and an increasing certainty that socialism is no longer economically or politically viable. Yet, many Cubans are equally reluctant to embrace a "capitalist" future, which they worry will breed avarice, income inequality and a lack of compassion. This ambivalence is further heightened by deep strains of nationalism, which lead some Cubans to rejoice at being one of the only countries to withstand the political interference of the United States, even as they decry the socialist Revolution that helped to protect Cuban sovereignty. The figure of the *cuentapropista*, in its ambiguous position between social-

ism and capitalism, captures this tension in a particularly explicit way, making the *cuentapropista* both a powerful and a vulnerable actor in the Cuban landscape.

The Legalization of an Anomaly

As noted, *cuentapropismo* has been an uncomfortable development for the Cuban government since its inception. In the midst of the “special period”—a series of austerity measures and radical economic reforms adopted in the face of Cuba’s dramatic economic decline—National Assembly members vigorously debated the wisdom of expanding the private sector.⁴ Those who argued in favor of *cuenta propia* maintained that it would create jobs for the unemployed, provide goods and services which the state could not satisfy, increase control of illegal activities, boost tax revenues, and satisfy a popular demand. Among the opposing arguments were concerns that self-employment encourages profiteering, that it would compete with state enterprises for labor, or that it is too small-scale to be efficient—possibly creating deformities in the system (Jatar-Hausmann, 1999: 93-94). Even those in favour of the economic reforms were constrained to maintain that the economic pragmatism motivating the limited opening of self-employment was not indicative of changed ideological orientation.

While self-employment was ultimately authorized, political and ideological ambivalence informs its very existence, and the attempt to harmonize economic pragmatism with ideological purity has been imperfect and contradictory. This ambivalence is evident in the strict legal regime which governs self-employment. Under law decree no. 141, 162 occupations⁵ are eligible for self-employment, including food vendor, taxi driver, carpenter, bicycle and car repairperson, artisan, hairdresser, shoe repairperson, and manicurist. University graduates are not allowed to carry out self-employed activity in their own profession (for example, doctors cannot establish private clinics), nor can state or foreign enterprises contract the services of self-employed workers. (Evenson, 2003: 265)

Even more importantly, government regulations are carefully designed to prevent the exploitation of labor and the development of significant income inequalities within the population. (Núñez Moreno, 1998: 44) Self-employed

4. While self-employment was never completely banned after the triumph of the Revolution in 1959, it all but disappeared and was mostly limited to peasant-farmers who did not join the agricultural cooperatives.

5. This number has fluctuated somewhat since the inception of self-employment. In 1993, 110 activities were authorized for self-employment. Five activities were struck off the list in 1994, apparently in reaction to the growing popularity of *cuentrapropismo*. In 1995, 19 new occupations were added to the list and in 1996 the government authorized another 40 activities. However, in 2004, 40 occupations were again removed from the list.

workers cannot employ others, prices may be standardized by the government if there is any evidence of abuse, and the government can adopt measures to “forestall the excessive proliferation of vendors and to prohibit the emergence of middlemen.”⁶ Heavy licensing fees and an annual progressive income tax make it difficult for many *cuentapropistas* to continue their trade, or at least to accumulate a net profit. Artisans in Havana, for example, pay around US\$150 a month, while those who rent rooms to tourists commonly pay US\$250 per room, regardless of whether the rooms are occupied. The combined effect of such strict, sometimes irrational, regulations has been a marked decrease in the number of licensed *cuentapropistas*. At its peak in 1997, about 200,000 *cuentapropistas* were licensed; this number is now closer to 140,000. (Ritter, 2006)

Cuentapropismo is, therefore, a strictly regulated work sector. Yet what makes *cuentapropistas* distinct is their position outside of the normal legal regulation of labor. In choosing to leave state employment, *cuentapropistas* not only relinquish the social benefits distributed through state employment—everything from pensions to the use of a beach house in the summer—but they also remove themselves from a system of state incorporation and control. Under socialist ideology, according to Cuban sociologists José Luis Martín Romero and Armando Capote González (1998: 80), “The individual existed more as a member of a group—of the neighborhood, of the work centre...the ‘we’ was privileged over the ‘I,’ the interests of the collective over the interests of individuals.” *Cuentapropismo*, by contrast, depends on the decentralization of the organization of work, allowing for increased autonomy not simply in the distribution of labor and resources, but also in the realm of decision-making.

A “New Breed” of Workers

The partial abstraction of *cuentapropistas* from the centralized state labor system represents a fundamental challenge to the collectivist social pact underlying Cuban socialism. Arguably, it is this relational shift that, more than economic status or capitalist mentality, distinguishes *trabajadores por cuenta propia* from the rest of the populace and provides some sense of group identity. This restructuring of worker-state relations may also be at the heart of the Cuban government’s anxiety about *trabajo por cuenta propia*. As Mari-bel, a 37-year old *cuentapropista* who sells leather goods in a market in Havana, commented to me:

Before, the state provided you with the necessities of life. Now, the *trabajador por cuenta propia* can acquire things, and we control ourselves. The state

6. Resolution No. 10/95.

doesn't interest us, because it doesn't do anything for us. We even have to pay to do our work. What it does do is sell us things at a high price, and at the same time imposes more taxes and sends more inspectors. [The government] realizes that they are losing control of *trabajo por cuenta propia*....And so it seems to me that that's what the government fears, not that we have a capitalist mentality, but that we don't depend on the state for anything, nothing more than to pay our \$163 each month. (Personal communication, Malecón Market, August 1999)

Similarly, economist Ana Julia Jatar-Hausmann (1999:107) writes in describing a *cuentapropista* shoemaker she interviewed, "Jorge likes to work at odd hours, he likes to raise the prices of his shoes, to lower them, to give them away...to speak out about and defend the need to develop the miniscule private sector open to Cubans. He is part of a new social breed who does not rely on the government to earn a decent living; and he is enjoying it with a vengeance."

This "new breed" of workers is characterized by an unprecedented autonomy within the Cuban labor market. Vendors at a tourist market on the Malecón frequently cite their newfound independence as one of the greatest advantages of the shift to self-employment from the state sector. The ability to set their own schedule and to see the fruits of their labor are frequently recurring themes. "We're our own masters," Maribel comments:

Despite the regulations we have, we're our own masters because you can get up at the hour that you want...I come if I want, take vacation when I want...I don't have to wait for my colleagues to take vacation—when I want to take them, I take them, I go where I want. You understand? And we really obtain the fruits of our own effort. If we push ourselves more, we gain more. If we push ourselves less, we gain less. The difference is that the rest of the workers [in the state sector] don't have this [incentive]. Push yourself more or less, you almost always get the same. You have to establish goals in life, depending on what you want to obtain. (Personal communication, Malecón Market, February 2005)

It is important to note, however, that not all *cuentapropistas* express the same sense of freedom as the Malecón craftsmen. Barbara, for example, was an economist in the sugar industry before obtaining a *cuentapropista* license, first to sell pizzas, and then to rent out an apartment in her home to tourists. Commenting that she feels tied down because she must constantly take care of clients, watch out for inspectors, and obtain food—frequently from black market vendors selling door to door—Barbara sometimes longs for her old profession. "If you could live from [state] work," she comments, "it would be better because you have your work for eight hours a day, or your studies or whatever. But all this with the house is difficult. You have to be paying attention 24 hours a day." (Personal communication, Barbara's home, Havana, February 2005) *Cuentapropistas* are therefore able to step outside of the state controlled economy and to challenge

existing social and legal norms. It is for this reason that Lilia Núñez Moreno, a Cuban sociologist (1998:41) refers to the creation of *cuentapropistas* as the "change with the greatest capacity to dissolve Cuban socialism." Under the mantle of legal legitimacy, *cuentapropistas* are not only breaking down traditional institutions and avenues of power, but they are also helping to create new social norms characterized by increased individualism and autonomy. (Ewick and Silbey, 2003: 1332-33) The result is the development of a "culturally demarcated" group whose authorized experimentation with new forms of property and market relations is leading to the formation of "a new work culture" and "a new kind of worker." (Martin Romero and Capote González, 1998:79)

Rachel, Alejandro's wife, similarly expresses a sense of being trapped inside her home as a result of self-employment. Rachel is not a licensed *cuentapropista*, but helps Alejandro to produce, in contravention of the regulations, the papier maché objects that he sells. In recent years Rachel has begun to long for her old job as a teacher. As she puts it, "It's not easy. Here you're like a slave. If you work for the state you have a fixed schedule. You have your weekends free, or you spend them doing something else like reading. But I'm always here working, working, working. I know that I have to do it, but really, I'm exhausted with this." (Personal communication, Rachel's home, Havana, February 2005) Significantly, however, it is likely that even if Rachel were working in the state sector in the current economy, she would spend all her available free time engaging in some kind of illegal or informal work in order to gain extra income, and would have even less leisure time than she currently has.

Rachel and Barbara's comments indicate not only that the degree of independence enjoyed by self-employed workers may vary by activity, but also that there is an important gender dimension to the benefits of *cuentapropismo*. While certain self-employed activities may enjoy greater autonomy and mobility, such as vending to tourists or driving a taxi, these activities tend to be dominated by men. By contrast, anecdotal evidence suggests that *cuentapropista* businesses that occur within the home, such as renting a room to tourists, selling snacks from a 'cafeteria,' or running a hairdressing salon, are overwhelmingly run by women. Women *cuentapropistas* may therefore be much less likely to enjoy the freedom and flexibility their male counterparts do.⁷

These differences in daily schedule, however, do not obviate the fact that *cuentapropistas*, both men and women, enjoy an independence of decision-making that is rarely seen in the state sector. Once removed from the centralized state system, furthermore, *cuentapropistas* are rapidly developing their own networks of social and economic relations outside of state-controlled

7. One exception to this might be family-run restaurants, or *paladares*, which usually involve the whole family working from the home.

venues. Alejandro and his family, for example, sometimes rent a beach house in the summer since they no longer have access to state-subsidized holidays. The woman they rent the house from is also a licensed *cuentapropista* and the transportation they use are licensed taxi drivers. What is therefore becoming increasingly evident is that *cuentapropistas* are developing “a whole range of flexible options permitting each individual to structure his or her own [life-]strategies.” (Martin Romero and Capote González, 1998:80) As a result, *cuentapropistas* are consciously experimenting with new models not only of private economic activity, but of private social activity as well.

Of course, *cuentapropistas* are not the only Cubans to engage in private work, and a far greater number of Cubans are involved in informal or black market activities. Yet ironically, the state’s authorization of self-employment may create a situation of even greater ambivalence for *cuentapropistas* than for those who engage in illegal work. While black marketeers can claim that their illegal wheeling and dealing is more a matter of survival than of ideology, *cuentapropistas* have greater difficulty reconciling their official, “legitimate” activity with membership in a socialist state. Recognizing the liminality of *cuentapropistas*’ structural position—one which is ideologically threatening in part because it is legally authorized—helps to illuminate why they are regarded with suspicion by the Cuban government. As legally authorized private, for-profit workers, *cuentapropistas* throw into confusion the ideologically clear-cut categories of “socialism” and “capitalism.”

The legalization of self-employment thus creates the paradoxical question of whether *cuentapropistas* can claim to be “socialist citizens.” Alejandro suggests that the answer lies in *cuentapropistas*’ contributions to the everyday functioning of their country:

We’re bringing in a lot of money to the country, to the government. Plus services that the government can’t provide. If the *agropecuario* closes, where will people find things to eat? And if they stop the taxi drivers, how will people move around Havana? Or if they stop the shoe repairmen, who will repair the shoes? The *trabajador por cuenta propia* resolves many problems for the population that the government just can’t provide for the moment. (Personal communication, Alejandro’s home, Havana, August, 1999)

Alejandro thus emphasizes not only the financial benefit that *cuentapropistas* bring, but also their key role in facilitating the day-to-day functioning of the country. This is an imperfect answer, however, since it is through private, profit-making activity antithetical to the socialist paradigm that *cuentapropistas* are able to make this contribution. Yet it illustrates both the strength and the vulnerability of *cuentapropistas* as they straddle the socialist past and an uncertain future.

Safety in Numbers? The Shift to State Unionism

Given the value that *cuentapropistas* attach to their independence, it is perhaps surprising that the vendors in the Malecón tourist market voted to join a national union in 2004.⁸ State workers in Cuba are organized into sector-wide national unions. Although Cuban unions have, historically, played a role in protecting individual workers at disciplinary hearings or in conflicts with management, critics have argued that they are, fundamentally, adjuncts of the state and function to subjugate workers' rights to the interests of the state (Leiva, 2000:481). Yet it is, arguably, precisely the unions' close relationship to the state that makes them attractive to *cuentapropistas*. While self-employed workers are proud of their position outside of the state, they are also keenly aware of the threat this independence poses to the government, and thus of the vulnerability of their work sector. As Maribel explains,

It's completely uncertain... We imagine... that we're a stable sector, because we don't cost anything [to the state] and we bring a lot—in dollars and in national pesos. But at the same time, we're a privileged sector because we've obtained independence with our work... and that brings advantages and disadvantages. Because when we've become too privileged relative to the rest of the population, we could disappear any minute. (Personal communication, Malecón market, Havana, February 2005)

Similarly, Majela, who taught technical drawing in a faculty of engineering before obtaining a license to sell leather goods in the Malecón market in 1996, is keenly aware that in the eyes of the government, self-employment is a "necessary evil:"

This is like anything else—today we're here and tomorrow self-employment is over, and we have to find a place for ourselves [in the state sector.] This work isn't secure, we're not secure. [Self-employment] arose because of the special period, the lack of employment... We've brought benefits—we contribute a lot to the state. But just as quickly as this appeared, it could disappear. It appeared at a specific moment and because of a specific set of conditions in the country. If this situation ends, well, I assume we could also disappear. (Personal communication, Malecón market, Havana, February 2005)

Because *cuentapropismo* originated in the economic crisis, Majela worries that the government may decide to close the sector down as soon as the economy recuperates. Majela and Maribel's comments illustrate not only the deep uncertainty that underlies self-employment, but also their profound

8. Specifically, they joined the *Sindicato de Industria Ligera*, or Union of Light Industry.

awareness that they are living through a particular historical phase that has demanded radical—and quite possibly temporary—measures.

While *cuentapropistas* may value the independence they enjoy in determining their work conditions they are also clearly aware that this independence is self-defeating if it means that the government will continue to view them with hostility. Unionization may help to mitigate the threat posed by *cuentapropismo* by reincorporating self-employed workers back into the state through labor regulation. As Maribel explains,

At a minimum [unionization] incorporates us into the rest of society. Now we're no longer an isolated society... We're incorporated, regardless of whether we work in the private sector and we have private earnings... We want to be independent workers, but not independent in spirit. (Personal communication, Malecón Market, Havana, February 2005)

In addition to helping vendors make small but concrete improvements to their workplace conditions, unionization may also, therefore, provide *cuentapropistas* with an important mantle of legitimacy, and thus with an added degree of security. As members of a union, *cuentapropistas* demonstrate their social citizenship through the frequent collections that the union takes up for charitable and Revolutionary causes, such as the children's ward at a local cancer hospital or for uniforms for the *Movimiento de Tropas Teritoriales*.⁹ It also provides *cuentapropistas* with valuable symbolic capital. As members of the union, *cuentapropistas* are no longer outliers in the system, but can instead claim full membership in the Cuban state—without giving up their autonomy and material benefits. In this sense, the distinction that Maribel makes between being independent workers and being independent “in spirit” is a significant one because it indicates a desire to be viewed as part of the same “spirit,” or social fabric, as the rest of Cuban society, even if their work habits differ from those of state workers.

The Cuban government appears to have come to a similar conclusion; through unionization the government can retain the economic benefits of self-employment,¹⁰ while reasserting some control over self-employed workers. At a recent conference, the *Congreso de Trabajadores Cubano* (National Congress of Workers, or CTC), which coordinates the national unions and represents workers' interests to the national government, recognized that *cuentapropistas* are now a “substantial entity,”¹¹ and announced a campaign

9. A local peoples' militia which played an important role in the Revolution.

10. Smith (1998: 58) notes that in 1997 *cuentapropistas* brought in an estimated US\$130 million in tax revenue. The government does not release data on tax revenues from self-employed workers.

11. Interview with the *secretaría general* of the Malecón market to the Union of Light Industry. This is an interested comment, given the steep decrease in the number of self-employed workers over the last five years.

to invite self-employed workers to join the national unions. Magalys, an older *cuentapropista* in the Malecón market and the main representative of the Malecón vendors to the union¹² suggests that the government may be waiting until the private sector is organized—ie. unionized—before it permits new licenses:

What happened was that to allow us to organize ourselves they stopped allowing new licenses. Right now they aren't giving out new licenses in order to say to people: "Stop. Let's get organized." And after everything's organized, it will open up again... So that when new people enter [the sector], they enter into something organized. (Personal communication, Malecón market, Havana, February 2005)

While it is unclear whether *cuentapropismo* will be allowed to grow again after unionization is complete, Magalys' comments affirm the idea that the government is seeking to integrate *cuentapropistas* into the state sector. *Cuentapropistas* are being invited to join either the union most related to their work activity or physically closest to their home. Noticeably, no suggestion has been made of creating a "*cuentapropista* union," which would allow self-employed workers to pool economic power and to develop—or solidify—a sense of common identity and purpose. Indeed, *cuentapropistas* are strictly prohibited from forming cooperatives or associations. It is unclear how many *cuentapropistas* have decided to take-up the invitation to join a union, although Barbara reports that the idea was discussed and rejected at a recent meeting of *cuentapropistas* who are licensed to rent rooms.

Conclusion: Cuentapropistas in the Cuban Transition

As the comments of Alejandro, Maribel, Barbara and others make clear, *cuentapropistas* cannot easily be cast in an ideological mold. While *cuentapropistas* themselves argue that their existence provides crucial support to the continuation of the socialist state, it is clear that their activities also amount to an expansion of spheres of individual autonomy and alternate social and economic networks that circumvent official state avenues. In so doing, *cuentapropistas* are developing new conceptions of what it means to be a productive worker in Cuban society and what kind of relationship workers will have with the state. The rise of market relations, in particular, requires workers in the new labor paradigm to assess a variety of state, informal, illegal and private work options, to develop strategies for economic survival, deal with new forms of property, and make independent decisions unnecessary under the

12. There are 12 *cuentapropistas* in the market who serve as union representatives and Magalys is the *secretaría general*, or general secretary. She is also a member of the National Committee of the Union of Light Industry to the Cuban Labor Congress.

socialist system. Such new levels of individual autonomy, risk-taking, and decision-making have consequences far beyond the workplace, extending to other realms of social and family life.

As the focus on *cuentapropismo* illustrates, workplaces are a particularly significant site of governance and identity formation. The bond between individual and workplace, Martin Romero and Capote González (1998:81), observe,

generates a set of relations which are incorporated, as part of the individual's experiences, into the existence of the person and, as such, into his or her subjective internal world....Through this bond, people construct a form of existence which converts employment into a social condition necessary for self-realization....

By structuring workers' time, activities, aspirations, economic remuneration, and social interactions, worksites play a formative role in conditioning the interests and desires of workers to align with those of the employer and the state (Rose, 1999:157). In socialist societies, the link between work, governmental power and the construction of citizenship is particularly clear because of the state's monopoly over employment and its ideological position as the voice of the workers. The legitimacy of the state depends, at least rhetorically, on its identification with workers' interests, and in a "workers' state" workers are presumed to share in state policies encouraging productivity and efficiency. The state, moreover, has direct control over worksites to ensure the implementation of these policies. The authoritarianism of socialist states, as well as their ideological formation, thus reinforces the importance of worksites as a "governable space" (Rose, 1999:31) for the dissemination of state power and the construction of citizenship. As Martin Romero and Capote González (1998:82) observe, "In the Cuban case, more than any other, inclusion in the program of employment...is a form of incorporating [individuals] into the sociopolitical project and of fostering proactive participation in the creation of the base and the socio-political system."

The central role of work in the construction of citizenship makes work a particularly important factor in periods of transition. In post-socialist transitions in particular, new forms of property and modes of economic activity frequently come into existence which are completely antithetical to the outgoing regime. With the diversification of employment and forms of property typical of post-socialist economies, the individual no longer exists purely as a member of the collective and must begin to explore new spheres of individual decision-making and self-reliance.

In transitional societies, work—both in official discourse and in day-to-day practice—thus becomes a battleground for the development of new gov-

ernmental powers. Significantly, the contest to define what will constitute "work" and who will be a legitimate "worker" within the new socio-economic model is itself constitutive of the transitional period. As Cuban psychologist Arnaldo Pérez García (2004:148) observes, "Work, as the backbone of society, is not only impacted [by external factors], it also produces them, converting itself, together with the crisis and the reforms, into a cause of the transformations occurring in the social structure." As worker subjectivities are reconstructed to encompass a growing range of individual choices and opportunities, new ideas evolve about who is a productive member of society and how citizen-state relationships should be mediated. This, in turn, has an impact on how new models of governance are envisioned and within what parameters.

The renegotiation of work thus has implications far beyond the day-to-day lives of *cuentapropistas* themselves, and poses a significant challenge to socialist orthodoxy. This insight into the relationship between work and identity during transitional periods helps to complicate the conventional "transition paradigm," in which transition is framed in unidirectional and unidimensional terms, rather than as a product of contestation and negotiation among individuals, officials, and state institutions. Taking a "close-up" look at *cuentapropismo* can therefore help us to create not only a more nuanced understanding of the significance of self-employment in Cuba, but also a more complex and multi-faceted picture of Cuba's current transformations.

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