

VISIONI LATINOAMERICANE

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Visioni LatinoAmericane, Anno / Year XIV, Numero / Number 27, Luglio / July 2022, Issn 2035-6633
Autorizzazione del Tribunale di Trieste n.1236 del 13 maggio 2011 / Authorization by the Court of Trieste n.1236 of
13 May 2011

Direttore responsabile / Director in charge
Francesco Lazzari (Ordine dei giornalisti di Trieste)

Editore / Publisher - Eut Edizioni Università di Trieste (Italia), website: <https://www.eut.units.it>

Contatti e indirizzo / Contacts and address - Editorial Unit *Visioni LatinoAmericane*, Via Edoardo Weiss, 21 - I-34128 Trieste
(Italia), website: <https://www.visionilatinoamericane.com>; <https://www.openstarts.units.it/cris/journals/journals00010>; e-mail:
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Social transformation and binary socialism: an ethnographic account of labour market changes in contemporary Cuba

Concetta Russo*

Abstract

By exploring the metamorphosis of the Cuban labor market, and in particular the narratives of new workers in the private sector, the author participates in the ongoing debate on the social transformations detectable in post-socialist countries. She presents the data collected from an ethnographic research conducted in the city of Havana which lasted about eight months.

Keywords: narrative approach, societal changes, labour market, informal economy, Cuba

Al explorar la metamorfosis del mercado laboral cubano, y en particular, las narrativas de los nuevos trabajadores en el sector privado, la autora participa en el debate en curso sobre las transformaciones sociales detectables en los Países postsocialistas. Presenta los datos recogidos de una investigación etnográfica realizada en la ciudad de La Habana que duró cerca de ocho meses.

Palabras claves: enfoque narrativo, cambios sociales, mercado laboral, economía informal, Cuba

Esplorando la metamorfosi del mercato del lavoro cubano, e in particolare le narrazioni dei nuovi lavoratori del settore privato, l'autrice partecipa al dibattito in corso sulle trasformazioni sociali rilevabili nei Paesi post-socialisti. Presenta i dati raccolti di una ricerca etnografica nella città dell'Avana durata circa otto mesi.

Parole chiave: approccio narrativo, cambiamento sociale, mercato del lavoro, economia informale, Cuba

Introduction

Since the Cuban Revolution of 1959 and for more than sixty years, the Republic of Cuba has been ruled by the Cuban Communist Party (Pcc), which led the country into a largely egalitarian social system and a centrally planned economy. Nevertheless, in the last decades, even if the country has still a single-party political system, and the legitimacy of the government seems to be mostly immune to pressure from below, society has been partially detotalitarianized and the constraints on civil society have been eased. After Raul Castro became the first secretary of the party in 2008¹, a series of purposefully designed changes in the country's social and economic order has been implemented from above. Abandoned state land has been given to private farmers, internet access has become cheaper and wider, and, for the first time since the sovietisation of society has started, Cuban citizens are allowed to purchase and sell property. At the root of those

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¹ Raúl Castro officially became the first secretary of Pcc in 2008, and concurrently he assumed the role of president. The latter role was assumed by Miguel Díaz-Canel in 2019, nevertheless Castro remained first secretary of the party.



changes lies the plan approved by the sixth Cuban Congress of Communist Party in 2011. Under these new regulations small entrepreneurs (locally called *cuentapropistas*, lit. ‘who work on their own account’) were for the first time allowed to hire employees who did not fall within their immediate family members, thereby originating an entire new category of private employees. The 2016 Party Congress emphasised the idea that Cuban socialism has not fallen, but it needed an economic actualization in order to keep working². However, many changes are reshaping the Cuban economy and, most importantly, the basis of the citizen-State relationship (Gey, 2019).

By exploring the puzzled labour market in Cuba and the work metamorphoses, this article intends to offer an original contribution to the ongoing debate on post-socialist labour markets, moving then to a broader understanding of the citizenship complexity in contemporary Cuba, through the gathered ethnographic data from eight months fieldwork in the Cuban capital of Havana between 2012 and 2017.

In particular, this article aims to investigate the metamorphosis that the concept and practices of *work* are currently undergoing in Cuba, by taking into account two levels of subjectivity: the first level is represented by how the two interlocutors, I dialogue with, have shaped their identities of *cuentapropistas* by distancing themselves from their previous formal and informal jobs. I argue that the informal job (*lo informal*) contributed to a *shift* in the ideology about work, individual and collective needs.

Consequently, the second level of subjectivity copes with the efforts of Cuban citizens in conceiving new practices of citizenship. Indeed, Cubans have been traditionally treated by literature as mere “objects” of politics and, at the most, involved in a weak civil society (Brotherton, 2009; Leiva, 2007; Romero, Capote González, 1998). For these aforementioned considerations, I will analyse the impact of the *cuentapropistas* phenomenon on new forms of political and social awareness and participation.

My work hypothesis is that the new reforms are challenging the dualism between socialism and capitalism, or informal/unregulated and formal/regulated work, whereas, in the meanwhile, they are creating a paradox in the citizens-State relationship by separating two different groups of citizens. On one hand, private workers, who can live within the reform with a sense of agency, on the other hand, State-workers in those professional fields not eligible for self-employment, who cannot. I maintain that both groups are engaged in the preservation of the Socialist State, but in two different ways with also different consequences for them as social actors.

1. Background: an historical perspective on Cuban labour market de-regulation

The contemporary Cuban Nation-State, in the Weberian concept of «community of sentiment» (Weber 1978, 932), was born in 1976 after a popular referendum approved the Constitution defining Cuba as a ‘Socialist State of workers’ where the population owns the basic means of production. According to Fidel Castro, who led the Constituent

² Text from the seventh congress of Pcc was published on *El Gramma online* on April, 20, 2016.



Assembly, workers shall work because of moral commitment and conceive their occupation not as an income-generating activity, but rather as a contribution to the «State of the people» (Castro, 1969).

Being a Cuban citizen meant, therefore, to embrace the ambitious project of working for the collective wellbeing, well stated by the maxim «Soy Cubano, soy popular» (lit. I am Cuban, I am of the people). It meant, as well, that citizens would entrust the State as guarantor of such project, in charge of providing material basis for good living conditions in an equal society (symbolised, for instance, by the *libreta* system, a sort of monthly coupon providing some basic goods like eggs, chicken, rice, bread, beans, etc.), free health care and education and, no less important, a state employment for everyone (del Aguila, 1994).

When the communist Soviet Bloc collapsed in 1989, Cuba was deprived of the Urss economic support and therefore by the possibility to survive despite the United States embargo pressure, generating a period of extreme poverty for the island. The so-called *periodo especial en tiempo de paz* (1991-1994)³ forced the Government to abandon the centralised economic system where the State was entitled to control resources allocation (Santana, 2019). The increasing gap between needed products and guaranteed resources led the Government to introduce reforms in order to restore and stimulate the labour market (Russo, 2021).

The moral pact based on the egalitarian distribution of wellness between citizens and Government started changing. The decree law n.141 (1993) increased and legitimated the possibility to work independently from the State for the first time since the constitution went to effect in 1976⁴. In order to ‘save la *Revolución*’ education and medical care remained free of charge (Horowitz, 1995). The first wave of licences was officially released from 1993 to 1998: not any kind of job was eligible for self-employment, rather a limited number was listed by the reform, like food vendor, taxi driver, carpenter, bicycle and car repair-person, artisan, hairdresser, shoe repair-person, and manicurist (Phillips, 2007). It was also allowed to apply for a licence for turning ones’ home into a *casa particular* (lit. private house), in order to rent rooms to tourists.

The reforms realised in the 1990s were presented as mandatory for the sake of the national emergency. Indeed, self-employment was no longer promoted, until the Pcc Congress in 2011 when, after a significant wave of dismissals, new licences were officially released as a measure to face unemployment. The plan called *Guidelines of economic and social policies of the party and the revolution* was approved by the sixth congress of the Cuban Communist Party (Pcc) and published on April 17, 2011. Under those new regulations small entrepreneurs were for the first time allowed to hire

³ The concept of *Cuban special period in peacetime* refers to a severe economic crisis that hit the country after the fall of the Soviet-bloc, in 1989. The economic de-growth came in the years from 1991 to 1994, although Cuban scholars often disagree in framing the special period only in reference to those years. For a more detailed perspective on this issue, see Hernandez-Reguant, 2009.

⁴ In the late 1960, when the “sovietisation” of Cuban society began, private workers still existed. Most of them were peasants and drivers but there were also physicians, optometrists, dentists and veterinarians. The decree law n.14 (1978) stated the possibility of private practice to the people who graduated before 1959. The decree law n.141 allowed 55 job activities, 117 more were allowed in 1995 (Sánchez, Cumbreira and Báez, 2015).



employees not within their immediate family members, originating an entire new category of private employees. Moreover, Cuban citizens were also allowed to privately buy and sell houses and cars⁵.

The moral pact, tidying citizens with the State in the common effort to provide a good life for *el pueblo*, considering employment both a right and sacred duty, started falling apart in the 1990s and took another blow with the 2011 reform. The average salary and those few products received through the *libreta* system, for instance, and the other gratuities have stopped supplying the population with basic necessities since the *periodo especial*.

Therefore, the need for an informal income-generating activity became generally recognized by the average Cuban, and in particular for those workers employed in non-productive sectors (Person, 1995), or in non-touristic facilities (where, for instance, it is possible to gain generous tips). Indeed, the medium level of salary for professionals (physicians, architects, lawyers, professors, engineers) ranges from 700 to 1000 pesos, (to the value of 30-40 Us dollar). In order to understand this salary purchasing power, it is possible to compare it with the prices of a basket of common products: 1 bottle of shampoo costs on average 3 dollar; 1 litre of tomato sauce has the same prize, four toilet rolls cost 2 dollar; fruits and vegetables have a held down prize, as well as rice, sugar and bread.

According to the Cuban Ministry of Labour and Social Security (Mtss), a total of 580,828 Cubans were self-employed at the end of 2018, representing 13% of the workforce, nevertheless the list of currently authorises occupations includes just 201 types of job, most of which are low skill and none of which are in health sector, manufacturing or industry.

Based on those considerations, it is possible to figure that the last partial labour market reform has also represented an institutional response to the informal job market. An enormous amount of Cuban people, in order to 'stay afloat', as one of my interlocutors stated, are engaged in the complex but essential task of *resolver* (lit. to resolve), which means to figure out how to earn some money *por la izquierda* (lit. with the left hand) and expresses the intention to elude State policies without infringing them. According to Morris and Polese definition, it is possible to consider 'informal economy' all the work-practices that resist formalisation or regulation from above (Morris and Polese, 2015), in other words all the work-practices that do not cope with State regulations, because the workers do not have any licences or/and do not pay any taxes. In contemporary Cuba it is possible to find many different kinds of informal work practices: a farmer who does not declare his whole harvest in order to sell a little part of it privately, a medical doctor who sews bags and sells them at home, a psychologist who runs an informal hairdressing salon in her garden, may represent some examples of that. Cuban people define this kind of job as *informal*, and many have learnt to devise their lifetime as divided in two parts: one dedicated to a formal job, and another dedicated to the informal job.

⁵ According to the plan guidelines, co-operative societies were allowed to exist as well, and the State enterprises would be more independent from the Government.



2. Research design and method

In the following paragraphs I will use an ethnographic perspective to analyse the possible reasons for this complex path of state workers, and especially professionals, towards the private sector, and the role played by the informal economy in shaping this path. I will focus in particular on three⁶ of the twenty-five narrative interviews, collected during my fieldwork, in which I also applied participant observation and audio-visual methods. My principal interlocutors were private workers (*cuentapropistas* and salaried private staff) and state workers with a second informal income generating activity, I selected thanks to the solid non-academic network I have built in Havana during my PhD fieldworks (2007-2011).

The interviews, audio-recorded then transcribed in their entirety, were carried out at the workplace of my interlocutors. For the purpose of this article, I chose to present three stories that exemplify three different paths among my interlocutors' work-life trajectories. The first account, the story of Eloisa, who transitioned from state-worker to self-employment after relying on informal work, represents largely the most common path (18 out of 25 interlocutors). The second one, Luis, who relied on benefits coming from business trips, represents the second path (5 out of 25 interlocutors). The third and last account, Harold, who lived abroad for a period of time and then moved back to Cuba to start his small business, represents the least common path (2 out of 25 interlocutors).

During the interviews, they mainly received two open questions: 'Would you like to tell me how you started your current job?' and (if they were State workers prior to their private jobs) 'Would you consider getting back working in the State sector in future?'

The nature of those questions aimed to encourage explanation by 'emplotment' (Ricoeur, 1979), a key feature of narrative inquiry that allows «an intuitive grasping together (*prendre ensemble*) of otherwise heterogeneous elements» (Dowling, 2011: 4). Where narrative interviews allow, during the analysis, this 'grasping together', a more detailed interpretation of the meanings that my interlocutors assign to their choices and deeds as they relate to their identities (Miller, 2005), other ethnographic data, such as participant observation among in city markets and street vendors and a comprehensive knowledge of regulations that govern the labor market, offer the means for a deeper understanding of narrations cultural and social contest.

Indeed, since working is not only a matter of 'breadwinning' but is also one of the main features of placing an individual in the social structure and contributing to define their self-representation (Jahoda, 1982), scholars have maintained that the discourse that sustains employment choices during an individual life course should be investigated

⁶ I chose to present only three of the workers' narratives I collected in order to analyse my interlocutors' life trajectories and work choices without sacrificing the right length, clarity, and flow of an academic article. For a more comprehensive look at my research results, please also consult Russo (2018; 2021).



throughout a biographical dimension (Zinn, 2010). Furthermore, Mandel and Humphrey (2002) argued that analysing the encounter between the socialist state planned economy and free market activities implies the need to consider a broader and more complex negotiation of values, of culturally rooted practices and consolidated forms of interactions that are best captured in the individual's narrative accounts.

Thus, by investigating the actors involved (*cuentalpropistas*) personal narration and comparing systematically the different narrative patterns (Miller, 2005) and the semantics that describe biographical 'experiences, decision-making and expectations' (Zinn, 2010; Küsters, 2014), it is possible to foster a better understanding of those passages of 'becoming subjects' (Foucault, 2003) that elude the meshes of quantitative research and closed-ended questions and consequently enlighten how regulation of the arena of 'private work' emerges and why the resurgence of the private sector has not implied a contraction of the informal work market.

Finally, concerning the ethical aspects of my ethnography, all my interlocutors were well informed about my research aims and academic affiliation, and I guarantee their anonymity by using fictitious names and by concealing those demographic characteristics that are not essential to the analysis.

3. Between professional identity and life struggling: the story of Eloisa

«Hay que dejar la profesión por la vida», (lit: It is needed to give up with the profession to live), told me Eloisa in tears, at the end of a long interview beginning with the simple question: 'How did you start your current job?'.⁷

It was a humid July afternoon, when we sat together on her home doorstep, which was also her workplace⁷. Eloisa was 40 back then and she was the owner of a little handicraft shop, along with her husband Javier. She is one of the several new *cuentalpropistas*, Cuban citizens who got a licence to work on their own after the 2011 reform. Indeed, like many of them, she started as a State employee, right after her graduation, then she embraced an informal job to deal with the broken economy during the nineties, and finally she got a licence as a private worker.

I studied librarianship and enjoyed my university experience. I had outstanding professors who taught me the scientific approach of the discipline, and how to manage investigation, but also how to better interact with people... back then I was part of the Unión Jóvenes Comunistas (Ujc, lit. Young Communists Union) so, after my graduation, I went to work in the archive of the Comité Central of Pcc. I loved my work! I had to classify information, events and newspapers... When I got married and I had my first child, attending my job became more difficult. The public transportation was a disaster, life cost raised and my wage was about four hundred pesos per months (Eloisa)⁸.

⁷ I met Eloisa while shopping for souvenirs at her shop; we had several informal conversations before I asked her to do the presented interview.

⁸ Registered interview, Havana, July 2012.



Eloisa struggled to keep her job, but the drawback coming from the low salary, bad transportation connections and her motherhood, forced her to leave that position. She tried to find other state-jobs but, after a couple of failures, someone suggested she rent part of her house. In the early 2000, Cuba had opened the door to International Tourism and the measures taken by Unesco to restore the old town centre had made *calle Obispo*, the street where Eloisa lived, one of the most characteristic tourist attractions in the *La Habana Vieja*. She started renting, without a legal licence, the living room of her house as a studio for some painters who sell their artworks to tourists. She went from earning 400 pesos (about 16 Us dollars) to 150 US dollars per month. The money coming from renting and other informal jobs sustained Eloisa and her husband for some years:

In order to deal with hardship, we had at the time three little girls and my old father in law to take care of. I cooked croquettes to be sold by Javier on the street, and I prepared fruit salad to be sold in a pot on the street... It did not make me comfortable, but everybody had an informal job at that time, it was the only way to make a living without stealing. This was the only realistic choice we had, a State job does not pay enough to raise three children, to give them healthy food and some clothes, the Health System is free of charge, it is true, but you have to buy gifts for the physicians, and also to get yourself some drugs abroad.

Fernández defined informal economy as one of the most formidable adversaries of the Socialist State (Fernández, 2000: 101), arguing even so that if it is true that it betrays socialism, it also provides citizens with enough creativity to flee from it and to deal with the socialist regime. Indeed, by looking after their family through an informal job, Eloisa and Javier resisted and accommodated their lives to the form of Socialism provided by the State at the time. Moreover, their acceptance of informal economy extended way beyond their personal way to ‘make a living’, including as well their acceptance of the ‘economy of favour’ (Ledeneva 1998), such as the fact that it was needed to give gifts to physicians in order to informally pay their work (Betancourt, 2019), or like looking for ‘informal importation’ of drugs (Russo, 2017).

The concept of ‘economy of favour’ was coined by Alena Ledeneva in 1998, while she was analysing *blat* (informal exchange network) in Russia, and it refers to the fact that informality has shaped the everyday practices of socialist and post-socialist for so long that a functional manner of dealing with needs has become a complex system of social habits which shapes, as Bourdieu argued, a range of options and limits for social actors (Bourdieu, 1997). But how do those social habits and, more in general, the condition of work affect «the ensemble of modes of perception, affect, thought, desire, fear» and so on that we can call, following Ortner definition (Ortner, 2005), subjectivity? Eloisa described her informal job as something that makes her feel uncomfortable and insecure. She felt uncomfortable because, in her words, she had to manage many strangers in her home. She felt insecure because she perceived her informal job as “unstable”: «It was the only real alternative I had, it kept me afloat, but it was not good: I rented my doorstep to strangers and it was not legal at all, we did not have licence, and it was not stable earning».



So, when the 2011 reform made available new licences to work privately, Eloisa and Javier decided to get a licence and opened a little handicrafts shop on their doorstep. Commenting on this choice, that she felt it was the only way to escape economic uncertainty at the time, Eloisa told me: «I am not happy, I would be happy in a library, improving myself, I know that my life is not complete without my professional identity... but it is what it is, as you know, you must choose» she concluded among tears.

4. From ruling class to taxi-driver: the story of Luis

Luis was 55 years old when we met. After his bachelor degree in mathematics he attended a master of Business Administration and, from 1994, he was the director of the public Cuban enterprise Unión Geólogo Minera⁹, which is part of Minbas, the Cuban Ministry of Basic Industry. Since he was a high official, he earned a salary equivalent to about 70 US dollars, which was quite good for the Cuban average at the time. Furthermore, he received from the Ministry some job benefits, such as a mobile phone, a modern car and, last but not least, his job granted him with the possibility to work-travel abroad¹⁰.

Nevertheless, Luis decided to leave his position and, after twenty years serving the Government, he undertook a private job, getting a licence to manage a *casa particular* and renounced all the benefits he had. Commenting on his choice he told me:

A man who is getting closer to the old age and who is not able to meet the needs of his family is something very serious, my decision lies on economic motivations, I liked what I did and I was quite skilled, but it is not right to stand idly and wait until you reach the retirement and your children face the consequences for you (Luis)¹¹.

Luis had what could seem as a really favourable employment position. His salary was above average and he had many benefits, but after the Reform of 2011 and the consequent raise of prizes, even Luis' wage became inadequate for making a living. His older daughter was studying Medicine at University and the younger was attending secondary school, his wife had a really low wage, so he felt he needed to provide for his family by finding a more remunerative employment. Because of the partial privatisation of the Cuban labour market, Luis could not choose to maintain his profession in the

⁹ Unión Geólogo Minera is the Cuban state agency responsible for prospecting, exploration and exploitation of metallic and non-metallic minerals, except the nickel.

¹⁰ The opportunity to travel abroad was, until 2013 (when the law preventing Cuban citizens to travel freely without a formal governmental authorization was repealed), and to a certain extent it still is, the desired object both symbolically and at material level. In the latter case, it represented the possibility to gain goods not on the local market or at lower prices than on the local market (Alejandro, 2020). Symbolically it represented a privileged status and a higher feeling of freedom.

¹¹ Registered interview, Havana, July 2012. I met Luis because he was one of my neighbours in Havana, after some informal conversations I asked him to carry on a formal interview.



private sector¹², so he decided to take advantage of the emigration of a friend, who rented him his house, and to open a *casa particular* with his wife¹³.

As a matter of fact, the legal but partial liberalisation of the labour market and the admission of foreign capital which started with the opening to the international tourism (Brotherton, 2009) and the consequence opening of market niche in dollars have improved the economical differences between those who can work independently, having easily access to foreign currencies, and the professionals, who cannot (Russo, 2021).

When I asked Luis if he would consider getting back working in the State sector in future, he told me: «I would only if the inverted pyramid (*pirámide invertida*) normalises». By *pirámide invertida* Luis means that

a taxi driver in Cuba earns much more than a surgeon, a waiter earns much more than a State manager, I earn much more now, renting rooms to tourists and driving them around, than before when I bore the full brunt of responsibilities running a ministerial enterprise. (...) I have just started, it is too soon to say I will achieve it, but if I tell you, the change in my house, on my diet, in my life is significant, it is not about working and I have always worked like a dog, for the time I spent and my commitment for it, no time, no rest, no weekends, now either, but the difference is that now the gains are for me, I see them, I touch them, they depend on what I am able or not to do, so what I am doing is valuable... of course, it hurts to know I am skilled and graduated, and I was really good at my job (...) but now let me say I am stepping slowly but surely giving the best of what I am and I learned, by playing a new game, to the chest, and I am looking for winning this game, without spearing myself which I always did, but this time I gotta do it in my own terms.

As Luis words pointed out, the partial privatisation of the labour market has produced (or enhanced) a paradox: many professionals have left their jobs in order to find a more remunerative occupation, and they have started working as waiters, or as taxi drivers, to try to get a better salary and improve their living standards. By paradoxical situation, or by using Luis words an ‘inverted pyramid’, I mean that, after the Second Industrial Revolution, the educated middle class usually had access to more remunerative positions than low skilled workers (Kocka, 2003). In the contemporary Cuban labour market the concept of middle class seems to have made an appearance for the first time after the Triumph of Revolution banned it. Nevertheless, it seems to represent a class of workers completely different from the Western definition. As a matter of fact, one of the most frequent questions I was asked by my Cuban interlocutors who worked as professionals was: how much money could you earn with

¹² As stated in the introduction of this article, not all the professions are eligible for self-employment, as well as private enterprise are not allowed in all sectors, so it was not possible for Luis to look for a private job as a geologist, as well as Eloisa could not find a private employment as librarian. For the complete list of authorised categories within which Cubans can now seek licences (in most cases from municipal authorities) for self-employment, as of September 26, 2013, please see Gaceta Oficial, n.27, Special Edition, Resolution 42/2013, September 26, 2013, Annex.

¹³ According to the Center for Insights in Survey Research (Cirs) 2018 data, the renting of private residences represents 14% of the total private licensed work activities in the country. Indeed, a recently published ethnographic study of Ana Lubiński (2019) illustrated how this formerly peripheral economic sector became central in the Cuban labor market transformation.



my profession in your country? Referring to the change he would like to see in Cuban economy, Luis told me:

It has been a while and a lot of things happened, unnecessary wastes. I do not know if they [the government] got aware too late of the need to unload the State, especially in the field of public services, this step makes easier the improvement of quality in any field, becomes real stimulus to get better and progress, competition drives you to move, whatever the agriculture, food, income level, only if initiatives to generate more satisfaction will develop it would be possible to build trust, credibility, it's like to expose what existed and was not used, it is very curious one person prepares and works conscientiously for the common good, but not for yourself, for your gain... then, when you do it really is when you pass, as I do, to the private sector, you have to throw yourself fully out there, unleash the energy that you have hibernated because otherwise you lose everything, the investment and even your shirt, Of course, like I said, it hurts: I was really good at my job, I loved it.

The 2011 *lineamentos* have legitimated a juxtaposition of two competing value systems: one duty-driven system based on the extreme egalitarianism lived by professionals (state workers), and the other based on individual choice and personal achievement lived by *cuentalpropistas* (Russo, 2018). My interlocutors' words seem to suggest that the discontent and the feeling of disaffection to the socialist Cuban project are generated by this state of imbalance, rather than the socialist organisation itself.

Moreover, Luis' words pointed out how his choice to undertake private work changed not only his possibility to consume goods, that he described as changes of the quality of his family diet, but also his personal approach to work. On one hand he felt a renovated sense of agency that he highlighted in the words «the gains are for me (...) they depend on what I am able or not to do», on the other hand he felt his agency limited by the impossibility to work privately as a professional. As well as Eloisa, who described her shift from 'career' to 'job' as «an unhappy choice», Luis expressed his feelings about it with the expression *duele* (lit. it hurts), but he also stressed, at the end of the interview, his willingness to «win the game» and to do it on his own terms.

5. I always dreamed to be an attorney: the story of Harold

Harold was 54 years old and lived with his mother and his aunt in Vedado, a neighbourhood in the Municipality of Plaza, the City of Havana. When I asked him how he started his current job, Harold decided to begin his account by telling me about his father, who was a law student when, in 1958, he enrolled in the 26th of July Movement¹⁴. During the *guerrilla* war, he was imprisoned and tortured, then he climbed the Sierra Maestra and joined the fight of the Third Eastern Front in Santiago de Cuba¹⁵.

¹⁴ The 26th of July Movement was a Cuban vanguard revolutionary organisation and later a political party led by Fidel Castro.

¹⁵ The Third Eastern Front Santiago de Cuba was a guerrilla front of the Rebel Army, a revolutionary armed organisation created to carry out the National Liberation War (1956-1958) against the dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista (Horowitz, 1995).



With the Triumph of the Revolution, he finished his law degree and moved to Havana occupying different positions of national relevance. Raised in a revolutionary environment, with a father who, as he himself told me, had dedicated his entire life to his institutional responsibilities and his legal profession, Harold decided to follow in his father's footsteps by studying law:

Since I can remember I wanted to be a lawyer, I graduated very well in 1984, a time of prosperity, I think the best decade the country had. When I graduated, even though my father worked at the Office of the Attorney General, I spent my social service time in a small town in the Sierra, and I remember that I was happy to do so. Then, I got married and I came back to Havana to work as a prosecutor and... It was a challenging job, with poor work conditions, but I was optimistic it was going to improve. When my daughter was born in 1989, we lived together with my parents and my sister's family... in the nineties the situation became even more difficult, socially, at home and at work: it was terrible working all the time and still being very poor. My sister moved to Chile looking for a better future, we stayed with my parents and my aunt. I loved my work, but life was still very complicated¹⁶.

With the arrival of the Special Period, Harold changes several employments, always working as prosecutor or legal consultant, in an attempt to increase his earnings, but unable to do so, after separating from his wife, he decides to emigrate to Chile, where his sister lived. After a few years, unable to redeem his degree to practice law in Chile, Harold decided to return to Cuba and start working privately.

In addition, I never thought that I would live abroad forever and I am not interested in it either. I want to live and work with dignity here, but when I came back to Cuba it was more evident than never that I could not make a decent living as a lawyer, as a professional, with state employment it is impossible. It would be only possible with a real economic change, for instance why professional cooperatives are not allowed? Why can I own a photocopies shop but I cannot open a private law firm? I want to live in my country, but living, not vegetating, putting everything I know and what I have into being better... I dream of a private law firm, with diverse specialties...

Considering it impossible to have a dignified life by working as a professional in his country, Harold decides to import some copies machines from Chile, for printing and digitising documents. After applying for a self-employment licence, Harold proposes to the University of Havana to host his business with the idea of offering his services to students and professors. When the University denied him permission, Harold decided to set up his small printing establishment in his garage. It's interesting that in Harold's narration it is possible to find two tropes of loyalty to the socialist regime – the choices to start his story with the account of his father commitment to the Revolution, and then the fact he pointed out his return in the country and his willingness to stay in Cuba –, coexisting with his almost open criticism to the latter economic reforms.

The latter is expressed in his frustration about the impossibility of flourishing within his own profession in the nascent private market («Why can I own a photocopies shop

¹⁶ Registered interview, Havana, during August 2015. I met Harold at his photocopies shop, after some informal conversations I asked him to carry on a formal interview.



but I cannot open a private law firm? I want to live in my country, but living, not vegetating»). Indeed, the story of his father, lawyer and revolutionary, allows Harold to express his ideas against a historical counterpoint: if the revolution has been in its nature a revolution of highly educated people (Fidel Castro himself was a Law Student), why is this category denied the possibility of benefiting from the changes while maintaining your own professional identity?

6. Conclusions

Yurchak (2013), in his analysis of the metamorphosis of Russian society in the 1990s, criticises both scientific and mass media discourses that defined Soviet citizens as subjects deprived of agency: in this representation it is assumed that the adherence to «communist values» was purely due to the obligation and the lack of possibility of critical reflections (Yurchak, 2013: 5). Instead, Yurkak uses the concept of «binary socialism» (Yurchak, 2013: 5) to encompass the dichotomies between the willingness of the population to follow the socialism ideals and at the same time to evade them through informal practices:

What tends to get lost in the binary accounts is the crucial and seemingly paradoxical fact that, for a great number of Soviet citizens, many of the fundamental values, ideals and realities of Soviet life [...] were of genuine importance, despite the fact that many of their everyday practices routinely transgressed, reinterpreted, or refused certain norms and rules represented in the official ideology of the socialist state (Yurkak, 2013: 8).

In the analysis of the Cuban case, one can also read a binary logic in the adherence of citizens to the regulations established by the government: on the one hand, the recognition of the fundamental values of the revolution that continue to be considered in a positive way by the population, on the other, the need to seek an escape, a transgression, a way of reinterpreting those rules that limit their agency as subjects. Contrary to what Fernández (2000) affirmed, however, the informal economy is not in itself a way of betraying socialist values, but rather a desire not to abandon the social project, in its own binary perspective, as Yurchak suggests, referring to post-soviet scholars, Fernández has underestimated the deep adherence of the subjects to revolutionary values, considering the reaffirmation of the social project more as an unconscious consequence than as a form of genuine willingness to strive for an egalitarian social system.

In this article, I analysed the path from State workers to *cuentapropistas* of three Cuban citizens as an attempt, made by my interlocutors, to gain not just more money but a sense of stability and personal agency. In my interlocutors' account, becoming a private worker represented both a challenge to the socialist system and an umpteenth personal sacrifice to keep the system running. Indeed, quitting a state professional employment to become a low skill *cuentapropista* could be interpreted in the binary logic suggested by Yurchak: it allows citizens to continue subscribing to the socialist project and contextually to seek ways to rescue their own agency.



During the last thirty years, the informal economy has offered a functional manner to deal with needs, acting as an escape valve for social pressure. It has also contributed to legitimate an idea of non-state-work like a subversion of the State power. It means that working has been conceived as a way to earn money ‘in spite of’ the State formally adopting regulations and laws. Instead, the contemporary partial privatisation of the labour market has laid the ground to the creation of a different concept of non-state-work inasmuch as it is a practice ‘beyond’ the State, which indicates the ability to envision a different kind of participation to the labour market, with different but still legal rules (Morris and Polese, 2015).

Eloisa, Luis and Harold described their life as State-workers associating it with the feeling of frustration generated from the gap between their professional efforts and the purchasing power of their salaries. Then Eloisa devoted herself to informal practices, by renting a part of her house and selling home cooked meals without a licence, Harold moved to Chile, Luis relied on his international travel, different choices but common attempts to improve their earnings without any significant change in their sense of uncertainty. After 2011 reform, Eloisa, Luis and Harold became *cuentapropistas*, referring to their entrance in the private market as an attempt to recover some control on their lives. If we consider, with Giddens, social actors as «partially knowing subjects» (Giddens, 1979: 53), we could analyse the words of my interlocutors as a description of their personal effort to become subjects by re-negotiating their participation to the labour market and, at a broader level, to the Cuban society. Indeed, by leaving their State jobs and defying themselves as private workers, Eloisa, Luis and Harold embody the «increasing tension between Cuba’s socialist past and uncertain future» (Phillips, 2007: 312).

During the last Pcc congress, Raúl Castro stated that cooperatives members, *cuentapropistas*, and medium and little enterprises should not be considered against socialism and that the majority of non-state-workers are indeed *revolucionarios y patriotas* (lit. revolutionaries and patriots)¹⁷. Nevertheless, the new National Plan referred to the workers exodus to less qualified activities as a negative phenomenon, because it has eroded the inner values of Cuban society¹⁸.

Judith Butler argued that «social transformation occurs not merely by rallying mass numbers in favour of a cause, but precisely through the ways in which daily social relations are rearticulated, and new conceptual horizons opened up by anomalous or subversive practices» (Butler, 2000: 14). *Cuentapropismo* could be considered paradigmatic in this sense, because it offers a unique occasion to challenge the system without subverting it. Indeed, *cuentapropistas*, by engaging new forms of property and market relations, have changed not simply the distribution of resources and incomes,

¹⁷ The complete text of the speech is published on R. Castro Ruz, *Informe central al VII congreso del Partido comunista Cuba*, «CubaDebate. Contra el Terrorismo Mediático», 17 Abril 2016, <http://www.cubadebate.cu/noticias/2016/04/17/informe-central-al-vii-congreso-del-partido-comunista-cuba/#.V2fc8lfp7s0>, accessed on 21 May 2016.

¹⁸ *Plan nacional de desarrollo económico y social hasta 2030. Propuesta de visión de la nación, ejes y sectores estratégicos* (art.29, p.5).



but have also wreaked havoc in the realm of decision-making and pointed out the growing gap between State and society. Thus, my interlocutors' account seems to represent in a new way the ability of citizens to envision social alternatives and implement transformations beyond State regulations.

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