

# What should we work for? Notes toward an ethnographic theory of value in the contemporary Cuban labor market

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## Abstract

Through the means of ethnographic fieldwork, carried out during seven extended visits to the Cuban capital of La Havana and Cienfuegos between 2007 and 2017, this article aims to investigate how the concept and the ultimate purpose of ‘work’ have been changing in contemporary Cuba, due to the set of reforms recently enacted in the labor market. Stemming from Graeber considerations on the “politics of value”, I analyze how, in the Cuban traditional planned economy, ‘work’ was the core of the social project whose aim was not to produce profit but to ensure basic needs to the whole citizenry. Finally, I seek to argue how, in more recent times, work is the nest of a complex values’ transformation and a turning point in joining the Marxist-Leninist social project.

**Key words:** Cuba, labor studies, planned economy, politics of value, citizenship, social changes

## Introduction

‘What should we work for?’: this is fundamentally a question about value. Firstly, because labor is expressed in value (Marx 1867) when it is commoditized. Secondly, because even when it is not transformed into material goods, labor ‘becomes real’ when it receives a social recognition by being associated with a symbolic value, such as a token or a certificate, or even with a transcendent one, like love or honor (Turner 2008, Graeber 2013). The latter kind is what we usually call ‘values’, using the plural form, and pointing out that they are not directly ‘convertible’ into money or, better to say, they lack quantifiable price equivalence (Eiss and Pedersen 2002). Yet how do those different forms of value relate to one another and in which way are they defined by the present social order?

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In his book *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value*, David Graeber argued that a social order could be considered as “an arena in which certain types of value can be produced and realized, they can be defended on that basis [...] or alternatively, they can be challenged by those who think these are not the sorts of value they would most like to pursue” (Graeber 2001, 89). Ultimately, as maintained by Graeber, politics should not be considered as “the struggle to appropriate value, it is the struggle to establish what value is” (2001, 89). In other words, a social order establishes a system of value so that a determined rule-setting can be found and made socially acceptable.

This article presents an attempt at understanding a specific system of value in contemporary Cuba. By drawing on ethnographic evidence gathered during seven extended visits to the Cuban capital of La Havana and Cienfuegos between 2007 and 2017<sup>1</sup>, it analyzes a segment of the population: professional state salaried workers. This category of workers found themselves in the peculiar situation of dealing with two clashing and coexisting regimes of value, the socialist rule-setting and the market regime. This is the underlying context that causes them to wonder what they should work for.

Whereas ‘work’ in the traditional Cuban planned economy was the core of the social project of ensuring that basic needs were met, due to the latter economic reforms which reintroduced some forms of private labor (2011 and 2013),<sup>2</sup> it is quickly becoming less clear who works for whom and for what reason. My hypothesis is that in contemporary times, work is the main node wherein frustration emerges – “the frustration with the failure of the socialist principles to manifest themselves in daily life” (Gordy 2015, 159) -, thus work is the symbol of the citizens adapting to or refusing the social project. Stemming from Gordy’s considerations about how contemporary Cubans are negotiating and making sense of socialist ideology in light of the later economic reforms (Gordy 2015), in this article I shall focus on how the value of work has been changing, both symbolically and practically.

First, stemming from Che Guevara’s speeches from the Sixties, I will consider how the Cuban Marxist-Leninist rule-setting built a new system of value, where working was considered as a moral value in itself, and where graduated professionals who engaged in healthcare and education were considered ‘heroes of the Revolution’. Then, I investigate how the conception of work and value has changed under reforms implemented by Raul Castro,

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1 During my PhD, I was not merely investigating work *per se*. Nevertheless, while I was studying the everyday practices in a Mental Health Community Center and in several *consultorios* (small clinics), the theme was often brought up by my interviewees (Russo 2017a). After my Ph.D. dissertation, I spent another six months in Cuba in 2012 and then three more months between 2016 and 2017, right after Fidel Castro death. In this period, I observed both the economic and societal changes, and I opened a new research path about the changing labor market (Russo 2017b; Russo 2018).

2 The reforms will be further described in this work.

and how this shift has created new social and ideological contradictions in the Cuban society. Considering contemporary Cuba as a society constituted of a plurality of economic forms (Romero 2014), I shall follow Hart's suggestion to not conform completely to a specific theory of value, but to try to "find out what each of these theories is particularly good for" in analyzing the empirical data that I have collected (Hart 2011, 14).

My research ethnographic method is inspired by the 'obliquity' approach suggested by Ledeneva (2018), it means I relied upon "people willingness to share their experiences and I started framing the most interesting ones in case studies" (2018: 42). Indeed, as Ledeneva argued, doing ethnographic research in fields where the freedom of speech is not something which can be taken for granted means to be able to ask your interviewees to talk openly (and while being recorded) about something could be considered a secret, in the way it is excluded from formal and official discourse, so it requires a solid relationship of trust between the researcher and his/her interlocutors, for this reason, the data from the interviews are accompanied by several months of participant observation over the past ten years. Finally, I consider my interviewees 'interlocutors' rather than 'informants' (Malighetti 2004). This terminological choice aims to emphasize the fact that I discuss my research aims with them before setting a proper interview and I dialectically consider their forms of interpretation while elaborating on mine.

### **"Society of communist human beings": creating a new law of value**

During the Sixties, in the effort of creating a new work ethic, coherently with the purpose expressed by Fidel Castro of transforming Cuba into a Marxist-Leninist economy, a series of measures were designed to diminish class distinctions and promote equality. "To develop a new culture, work must acquire a new status", Che Guevara stated (1965) while presenting the accomplishments achieved by the Revolution. This new status represents, in Guevara's words, the ability to subvert the capitalists' law of value, which implies commodity relations between workers and owners. The challenge was to transform *surplus value*, the value added by the laborers to production, into a *surplus product* (Yaffe 2009, 132). If in capitalism the labor surplus is a product of exploitation and a means to enrich the owners, in Cuba it would be considered as a public wealth to be redistributed by the State.

We are doing everything possible to give work this new category of social duty and to join it to the development of technology, on the one hand, which will provide the conditions for greater freedom, and to voluntary work on the other, based on the Marxist concept that man truly achieves his full human condition when he produces without being compelled by the physical

necessity of selling himself as a commodity (Guevara 1965, quoted in Yaffe 2009, 65).

According to Marxist theory, “the place one occupies in the chain of production determines the way in which one sees oneself in relation to the world” (Perelman 2007, 10). The core point of Guevara’s quoted statement was to show how critical it is that the laborers see themselves committed to the effort of changing their own world by working in it. Working is not anymore a way to fulfill basic needs or to produce personal profit, it concerns a higher scope to contribute to achieving freedom and social justice. In this compelling logic, working and being a part of the society is, indeed, the same thing. Being a good worker means being a good citizen.

Eliminating class conflict by rooting out the bourgeoisie –a class who prioritizes personal interest above common benefit– constituted the next step of this process, so wage scales were partially neglected and moral rewards and recognition went to substitute higher pay or bonuses (del Aguila 1994, 88-89). Yet the fact that the educated middle-class was rapidly leaving the island was also a critical issue for the Government to face. As Guevara pointed out, since the worker must face two possible alternatives, embracing revolution (and then socialism) or leaving the country, many professionals (relatively privileged workers) decided to emigrate (Guevara 1962, quoted in Yaffe 2009, 134).

The Government activated a massive literacy campaign and abolished religious and private education. As a response to the scarcity of graduated professionals, it also gave a prominent emphasis to the value of professional career jobs. Since the Revolution itself was guided by a law student (Fidel Castro) and a physician (Che Guevara), designing a slogan such as “*ser culto es ser libre*” [lit. being cultured is being free] was not at all a theoretical stretch (Blum 2011). The aim was to forge a completely new educated class, raised in public schools following the values of the Revolution, wholeheartedly committed to the cause, and convinced that embracing the social project was more a sacred duty than an obligation (Castro 1969; del Aguila 1994, 77-78).

After the Revolution, choosing a career path that included university studies and being a graduated professional can therefore be considered not only as a personal aspiration, but also as the logical result of such social dynamics (Calviño 2000, 72). The crucial role of post-Revolution education had to face this responsibility in order to make the process successful: the masses must make the tasks their own; they should see that the effort is worthwhile. The concept of ‘voluntary work’ lines up with this assessment because it implies not simply an acceptance of the new set of rules, but the capacity to envision the common goal of the society as a part of one’s daily job tasks.

At the peak of this transformation, Castro launched in March 1968 the *Revolutionary Offensive*, which stopped almost all types of private and individual activities, except for a small portion of the agricultural sector and a branch of the private transportation sector (Pérez Villanueva 2010, 5). It was with this new regulation that the State became the owner of all the means of production and the whole category of laborers became salaried employees on the State payroll. In the process of centralizing the economy, the Government also absorbed the critical task of distribution. The latter process started with the *libreta* (ration book) in 1962, a system for rationing basic goods, as well as allotting houses to the laborers, toys for children and clothes for everyone. This ‘period of idealism’, where designing a new social system was considered more relevant than considering the real economic situation of the island (Gordy 2015, 88), was soon challenged by the failure of ‘the 10-million-ton-sugar drive of 1970’, after which the budgetary finance system promoted by Che Guevara was substituted in 1975 with a more Soviet-style model, the System of Management and Planning of the Economy (SDPE). As such, various market measures were taken to assure the economic feasibility of the social project, such as the introduction of a “parallel market” and the partial autonomy of State enterprises (del Aguila 1994, 99). The SDPE introduced some material incentives in the completely moral-based labor market envisioned by Guevara. However, as Gordy argued, “idealism did not recede, or remain in a weakened version, but emerged in another form [...] the SDPE was presented as the best way to consciously control the economy” (2015, 89).

### **The “golden age” and the children of the revolution**

In the Eighties, when the children of the Revolution –the generation that does not have a personal knowledge of the country before the building of the socialist order- became young adults, Cuba experienced a stronger model for social mobility. For the first time, a peasant’s child could aspire to become a physician or an engineer without having to pay for his/her university education. The Cuban anthropologist Pablo Rodríguez commented upon this phenomenon in an interview for the national online journal *Temas*: “If something saved me, it was in 1959, when he [Fidel] set in motion this cataclysm of social transformations that took away from my path the fatalism to which the son of a coal worker was condemned” (Rodríguez 2015). Picturing the social transformation put in motion from the Revolution as a stepping stone for gaining access to higher education is a common *topos* in the narratives of this generation, as we will see in the main part of this section.

During the fieldwork I carried out between December 2016 and February 2017, I collected several long non-structured interviews with state workers having a second income-generating activity.<sup>3</sup> The interviewees were selected among the members of a solid network that I had built up during my previous fieldwork periods in La Havana and Cienfuegos. Discussing career paths with my interlocutors, the so-called children of the Revolution, who are now in their 50s or 60s, I noticed that their common way to refer to the Eighties was as a 'decade of abundance', often using the hyperbolic expression of the 'golden age'. When I asked them what those terms meant, they usually referred to the possibility to find goods without any difficulties, because of both the good purchasing power of their salary and the sufficient circulation of food and other basic commodities on the local market. Moreover, they described a common feeling of hope and optimism, a desire to commit coherently to their trust in the Governmental decisions.

Teresa and Reina are two Cuban intellectuals I met during my fieldwork. We discussed my research aims and I interviewed them after several meetings. Teresa, a sixty-year-old professor of sociology at University of La Havana, during our interview at her home in January 2017, described her generation with the following words:

My generation -you know- we were the children of the Revolution, we were born in the first years of the Revolution, I recall the enthusiasm... people deeply believed in the Revolution's promises, in the plan... we came from difficult times, we had a civil war, we were hungry for social justice, for equality... we wanted to eradicate poverty, to give access to health and education to everybody... this made our pact with the Government very tight, it was a strong bond [...] I come from a poor family, but I had the chance to study, to become a graduated professional, I guess this was the grounds of my personal enthusiasm, of my trust... (Recorded interview, January 6, 2017).

Describing the enthusiasm of her generation, Teresa underlined that public education, and the social mobility that followed it, had played an important role in tightening the bond between the State and the citizens. Similarly to Pablo Rodriguez, who referred to himself as being the son of a coal worker, Teresa pointed out that she could study sociology because of the Revolution's social plan. She also underlined the desire for social justice of a population who faced colonialism, slavery and a civil war. Teresa described a "hunger for social justice" by using as the subject a general "we".

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3 For the recorded interviews, I got my interviewees' permission to use their first name and professions, when I use the formula 'informal conversation' the names are omitted or fictional.

Reina, a fifty-six-year-old philosophy professor at University of Cienfuegos, during an interview, set in a park near the University in February 2017, commented upon those years in this way:

We were so proud, so full of hope. In the 1980s my husband and I had a cookbook and every Saturday we experimented with cooking something new, just opening the book randomly. We could do grocery shopping following the recipes; it wasn't about 'what can I find in the market', but about what I plan to cook. Can you imagine that today? [She laughs] That was a golden age... but it wasn't just about the economy. It was the whole attitude, showing we can achieve our goal, that social justice was possible... When I started my career, I was thrilled, I love philosophy and I love teaching, passing knowledge. I became a professor at 25, right after graduating, I was given the possibility to do what I love, what I am. Besides I was doing good, forging new generations... I felt I was on the right side (Recorded interview, February 2, 2017).

In the open letter, which I referred to in the previous paragraph, Guevara stated that the individuals have a dual existence: as a unique being and as a member of society. As a unique being, they should be considered as an unfinished product, which becomes fulfilled in their belonging to society. In Reina's words, this duality is deeply linked with the concept of work. Labor is considered as a matter of self-expression but also as a way to contribute to the social project as a whole, an expression of both the inner being and the social one<sup>4</sup>.

Ideology, for Gramsci, concerns the ability to make sense of the conditions we live in. However, as Gordy argued, the possibility of "giving meaning" to the present and to the future includes the building of a coherent narration of the past (2015, 11). In Cuba, the effort of changing the entire society, although ambitious, came from the 'inside' of the country, differently from Eastern European nations that 'received' communism by being militarily invaded (Wolfe 1970). Therefore, for those who were (and still are) committed to the Revolution's social project and especially for the ones who are part of the above mentioned generation, the 'golden age of the 1980s' acts as a "chronotope": a socially meaningful construct that shapes the historical consciousness (Wirtz 2016). As Wirtz points out, speaking of the "historical consciousness" does not imply that those memories are artificial or untrue, more so it means that those shared memories acquired

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<sup>4</sup> In the Eighties, the Cuban government had already started to face the problem of the relationship between work and value, at first strongly sustaining the SDPE (Gordy 2015, 119). Then in 1986 an attempt was made to return to the Guevara plan through the implementation of the Rectification Campaign of Ideological Errors and Negative Tendencies (del Aguila 1994, 101). Despite that, my interviewees from this generation all concord in narrating the Eighties as a decade where the moral value and the market value of labor were not disconnected.

a significance and a capacity to giving meaning to the present, beyond their accuracy (2016, 344). In other words, the fact that there was a moment – a golden decade – in which all the effort paid off, giving meaning to the lived conditions, contributes to maintaining their present commitment.

In the latter scenario, the value could be considered strictly linked to the “relative potency entailed in given types of acts and practices”, which should be “viable in terms of the culturally defined moral-political prerequisites of the society” (Munn 1992, 19-20). Such as, in the Cuban case, all forms of work that contribute to the maintenance of the socialist order envisioned by the leaders of the Revolution. Value, then, as Nancy Munn argued, was the way in which people transformed their capacity to act in concrete and socially recognized forms of work.

The change in the law of value that Guevara considered crucial for enacting a Marxist-Leninist social order, which consisted of the transition from ‘working for being paid’ to ‘working to be a part of the society’, or even for being the best laborer you could be, seems embedded in this decade and especially in this generation. They are the generation who actualized through their work the building of both the public health and education systems, the generation who embraced the social project making Guevara’s dream to create a society of communist human beings come true.

### **Dollarization, shadow marketplace, and labor reforms**

The collapse of the Soviet bloc forced a more abrupt change of direction in Cuba. After three years of deep economic crisis, which was called Special period in time of peace, the government legalized the US dollar as means of payment in 1993, allowing foreign investment and laying the foundation for the development of international tourism, which became an important economic resource for the country. By legalizing US dollar and creating CADECAs (state currency exchange shops), the government allowed emigrant remittances, which shortly became a shadow yet a strong player in the Cuban economic system.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, private work was re-introduced for a circumscribed group of jobs and a limited number of licenses for taxi-drivers, hairdressers, cobblers and other craftsmen were released. Those two reforms also produced an important shift in the macroeconomic policy: from the goal

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5 According to the ONEI (the official Cuban government statistics agency) cash remittances in 2012 reached a record \$2.61 billion USD, outweighing government salaries by 3 to 1 (ONEI, 2012). For a historical perspective on foreign remittances see Mesa-Lago 2016.

of achieving full employment to an emphasis on maintaining price stability (Pérez Villanueva 2010, 17-18).

In 2004 the Government managed to substitute the US dollar by introducing a second local currency: the *convertible pesos*, shortly called CUC. The CUC introduction into the local market dramatically decreased the purchasing value of the Cuban state wages. Since then, state workers are living in a peculiar economic paradox: their salaries are paid in *pesos* (CUP), which is changed to CUC 25:1, but they mostly buy goods in CUC, which became the main currency in the local markets.

The double currency that was held to distinguish foreigners from residents, or to protect state socialism from the political and economic *shock* of foreign direct investment, currently points out the gap between those who can afford dollar prices and those who cannot. By developing upon Keith Hart's two-sides-of-a-coin definition, where the head symbolizes the State authority and the tail symbolizes the market, one could maintain that the Cuban government disconnected and transposed the coin's sides into two different currencies: national pesos and convertible pesos. For this reason, as Holbraad argued, "the most prized commodity among this large and dispossessed segment of Cuban society is the dollar itself" (Holbraad 2004, 648)<sup>6</sup>.

Although the Government remained the owner of most means of production and the main employer in the country, the 'dollarization of the economy', by causing price inflation and inadequate wages, enhanced the black market and the informal job market supporting a series of non-regulated income-generating activities (Pertierra 2011). Food vendors without any licenses, not regularly employed household servants, people acting as a tourist guide and asking for a donation... countless income-generating activities practiced without any licenses became central to the expenditure flows of the urban economy (Fernandez 2000; Brotherton 2008).

Informal activities were considered a buffer against underpaid employment. Since the early Nineties, a job alone was not sufficient to provide for the welfare of a family, nor were the goods distributed by the *libreta* system enough to guarantee basic daily meals. As the Government was well aware of such dynamics, unlicensed jobs not involving illegal activities (such as prostitution or theft) were largely tolerated by local authorities. "*Resolver* [to get by] was the new normal" (Mujal-León 2011).

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6 After the writing of this paper, the CUC currency ceased to be on circulation on the January, 1, 2021. Albeit the Cuban Government claimed to having realized the much-needed currency standardization (Pérez Villanueva 2010), the massive circulation of foreign currencies (US Dollars and Euros) and the fact that goods that were only accessible by paying in CUC are now only accessible by paying with a foreign currency (De Miranda Parrondo, 2021) suggests that the double currency/double value discourse is still a legit theoretical framework to this analysis.

In the labor market, the reform with the greatest impact was enacted in 2011. I am referring to the Guidelines of Economic and Social Policies of the Party and the Revolution. This plan allowed for the opening of small and medium private enterprises in explicitly determined work sectors. A Cuban resident could now open a restaurant or a hair salon, or be a part of a cooperative for construction.<sup>7</sup> The aim of this crucial labor market reform was to balance the wave of dismissals that laid off more than one million workers, ending what Mujal-León defined as the “cornerstone of paternalistic State Fidel Castro had founded”: a country that guarantees as many jobs as an active working population needs (Mujal-León 2011, 155).

On the other hand, several categories of jobs remained unauthorized to enter the private labor market, mainly graduated professional profiles, such as medical doctors, professors, engineers, or architects. The choice of leaving those with educated professional careers out of the private labor market developed due to the ideal purpose of “saving the socialism” (Castro R. 2014). For instance, the Government attempted to protect both the public health and public education systems by preventing medical doctors or professors from building private practices. Moreover, by not allowing either engineers or other scientists to enter into the emerging private sector, the state was preventing the collapse of Cuban companies, such as the petrochemical installation, or the nickel companies (Sánchez, García 2014).

In 2013 a second legislative initiative was introduced to attenuate this difference and to discourage the informal work market. Following this law, public workers were allowed for the first time since 1968 to having a second private job. Since this new reform was enacted, university professors could, for instance, obtain a license to rent a place for tourists or to sell food (Romanò, León 2015).<sup>8</sup> At the twentieth National Congress of Laborers, the chief of State Raul Castro declared:

It is also true that the salary does not satisfy all the needs of the workers and their family, which generates demotivation and apathy towards work, influencing negatively the discipline and encouraging the exodus of qualified personnel to better-remunerated activities regardless of the required professional level. Likewise, it discourages the promotion of the most capable and selfless superiors, because of the harmful phenomenon of the ‘inverted pyra-

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7 For the complete list of authorized categories for self-employment, see *Gaceta Oficial*, No. 027, Special Edition, Resolution 42/2013, September 26, 2013, Annex.

8 It is maintained that professionals in active employment cannot practice their profession, except for those who were self-employed before 1964 and translators-interpreters. On this subject, see Resolution No. 32/2010.

mid', which means that, generally, greater responsibility corresponds to lower incomes.<sup>9</sup>

Worldwide, after the Second Industrial Revolution, graduated professionals have been considered as the “educated middle class” who can access important and remunerative positions in the global labor market (Kocka 1995, 784). On the contrary, in contemporary Cuba, by accessing the private market, a hairdresser could earn about 200 CUC per month, a taxi driver about 700 CUC per month, meanwhile a cardio-surgeon on the State payroll earns an average of 50 CUC per month<sup>10</sup>.

During my doctoral dissertation fieldwork, I spent eleven months between 2008 and 2010 doing participant observation at a Mental Health Community Center in La Havana.<sup>11</sup> At that time the center was open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. approximately. When I went back to Cuba in December 2016, after the law-decree from 2013 that allowed state workers to have a second private job, I was surprised to discover that the mental-health center now closes at 2 p.m. This is because all the workers have second jobs, mainly within the tourism sector, which made it impossible for them to have full-time commitments to the clinic. Inasmuch as working privately is acknowledged to be a general need and not an act of negligence, the center simply closes earlier and nobody has been replaced.

The psychiatrist who leads the therapeutic team became a part-time tourist guide, due to the impossibility of making a living with his state salary: 1200 Cuban Pesos (CUP) per month, which is about 50 Convertible pesos (CUC).<sup>12</sup> He is a highly educated man in his sixties and has been employed as a psychiatrist for almost thirty years. He has participated on behalf of the Cuban government, in two international health missions, one in Angola during the civil war, and the other in Nicaragua in the late Eighties. “I cannot live on the back of my daughter” – he told me referring to his daughter, also a medical doctor, who lives in the US – “I need to be able to pay for my food. I still work here because of the patients... you know what it means

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9 The congress was held on February 22, 2014, and Raul's speech was published on the local news website [www.cubadebate.cu](http://www.cubadebate.cu), accessed on March 2018.

10 After the CUC ceased to circulate, the monthly salaries of the state worker were quadrupled, meanwhile the cost of common goods and utilities is twenty-five times higher than it was. In brief, in the early 2021 a medical doctor salary value range around 200 US Dollars, and a single pound of onions cost up to 4 US dollars (De Miranda Parrondo, 2021).

11 I was investigating how the Cuban political and economic model influences both mental illness and mental health treatment.

12 For understanding the purchasing value of those salaries, one should consider that a bottle of shampoo costs on the local market about 3 CUC, and 4 rolls of toilet paper cost between 1 and 2 CUC.

to be a doctor in this country, we are dedicated human beings” (Informal conversation).

The Cuban sociologist Martin Romero discussing the puzzling Cuban labor market, wrote: “The fundamental economic condition – the fulfilment of the function of work for making a living – fails because of the insolvency relative to the national currency that supports the wage and due to the insufficiency or obsolescence of the work means” (Romero 2014, 130). To manage this shortcoming, the citizens cannot solely rely upon their State job. They need to employ themselves in other income-generating activities, entering what he calls the economic multi-spatiality of labor reality. Romero uses this term to indicate the multiplicity of labor relationships that a single worker could simultaneously engage with (on the State payroll, as self-employed, as a salaried private employee or operating in the informal market). This multiplicity is ‘economic’ because depending on the work relation one chooses, the labor wages can be supported by a different currency (Romero 2014). So, for instance, the above-mentioned Cuban psychiatrist is paid from the State in CUP for his work at the clinic, and then he is paid by the tourists in CUC for his work as a guide, earning in a couple of days as a guide the equivalent of his monthly salary as a medical doctor. The phenomenon of the inverted pyramid, which Raul Castro referred to, points out how the recently enacted reform has mostly affected the highly educated class (graduate and more), which despite a lot of work responsibilities, could not access a salary that satisfies the basic needs. However, another aspect that needs to be considered is that dollarization of the market has been promoting a transformation in terms of what ‘basic needs’ could mean (Holbraad 2014). While the Eighties could be considered as a ‘golden age’ just because the food market was well supplied and accessible with a state salary, nowadays ‘to be wealthy’ is a concept judged by different standards: to own a car, travel abroad for vacation, buy a house, and have access to expensive smartphones on the global market. The enhancement of the availability of global market products in the local shadow marketplace, stimulated by the possibility for some private workers to purchase those commodities, contributes to a shared sense of growing inequality and frustration. This ultimately erodes not only the paradigm of planned consumption, but also the entire law of value Guevara envisioned in his speeches.

### **New forms of inequality and the changing value of labor**

I met Frances, a sixty-year-old Cuban pediatrician, during my previous fieldwork periods. In January 2017, I interviewed her at her home and talking about her salary, she told me: “I am a doctor, I am a specialist, I am sixty years old, and nothing I have in this house, or anything I have in general, is

obtained by my own career. Nothing. Neither a toaster nor a TV, nothing” (Recorded interview, January 11, 2017).

Frances’ husband Harry is a US citizen who arrived in Cuba with his parents when he was a little boy in the Sixties because his father -a union official- was accused of being a communist and escaped to Cuba obtaining political asylum. Harry became an engineer but, after the special period, he left his state job and started to travel back and forth to his native country purchasing goods to be sold in the Cuban shadow market. So, when Frances told me that she does own commodities that she could not afford with her salary, she was referring to the fact that despite her long and successful career as a medical doctor, she must rely upon her husband’s shadow market activities to purchase a simple toaster or a TV. Frances’ complaints do not concern consumption *per se*, but rather relate to a sense of frustration regarding the relation between commitment and purchasing power of the salary. When Frances wonders why a high grade of social commitment, such as being a specialized medical doctor who serves the public health system, does not guarantee the capability to acquire simple commodities such as a TV or a toaster, she is not just contesting the prices of those goods but their ‘moral size’, intended as their value in the labor relationship between the worker and the State.

As Holbraad argued, the relative rate between wage and prices was built to attribute intrinsic moral qualities to goods and labor, which goes beyond the mere flotation of the market (Holbraad 2014). Guevara spoke in terms of transforming surplus values into a surplus product; the latter was aimed to be symbolic public wealth and to become the object of distribution. Since earning more money was not considered fair within the socialist system, some moral rewards came together with white goods, as for instance winning a book award could lead to receiving a new TV (Gordy 2015).<sup>13</sup> Consequently ‘having more goods’ became the symbol of ‘deserving more’, not in terms of personal achievement or economic power, but in terms of social commitment and the correspondent rewards.

Under the promises of social equality, universal healthcare, education and housing, many Cubans committed themselves to the Revolution, accepting to devote their work-lives to the social project. Consequently, they agreed to consider the value of their jobs in terms of its ‘moral size’: a personal contribution to a common benefit. The attribution of moral rewards was crucial in allowing this perspective: when Fidel Castro defined Cuban physicians as the ‘heroes of the Revolution’ (Castro 1980 quoted in Feinsilver 2005, 25) he was both underlining that the possibility to achieve universal healthcare stood on the shoulders of local medical doctors and that the value of their work was immeasurable, just like an act of heroism on the battlefield (Feinsilver 2005).

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13 *Gaceta Oficial* (1963).

After the fall of the Soviet Bloc and the introduction of the second currency, the purchasing value of the State salaries decreased enormously (Pertiera 2007). However, after Raul enacted the new set of reforms, the moral value of State employment began to shrink. As a result, Cubans are moving forward a new theory of what is valuable in labor. When I asked Frances what she thinks is ‘worth working for’ she answered:

My generation, we were still very hard workers, we still had humility, the romantic conception of the medicine, we were less materialistic because we studied like this during our career. But things are changing, among our students, there is no longer this loving, idealistic devotion *per se*, “we are going to work because we are doctors” [...] the youth no longer thinks of being graduated professionals. Girls and boys go crazy to work in a restaurant or at a hotel to earn money. What does the government have to do? Improve economic and salary conditions, housing conditions, living conditions in general (Recorded interview, January 11, 2017).

Holbraad suggested that Cubans tend to represent their paradigm of consumption articulating it in terms of ‘past’, which generally indicates the strong and effective presence of State provision, and ‘present’, which is synonymous with the daily struggle to acquire CUC (Holbraad 2014). Frances represents this ‘past’ vs ‘present’ dynamic reasoning in terms of two generations: the ‘children of the Revolution’ generation, with a work-ethic lining up with the Revolution social project, and the ‘youth’, who have lost adherence to their parents’ social commitment and strive for a better remuneration without much concern about the quality of the job. The youth do not aspire to ‘being graduated professionals’ because of the salary condition of those who are. For this reason, Frances suggests that the Government should improve State salaries and therefore life quality.

Durkheim maintained that different kinds of labor divisions produce different forms of work-ethics, intended as the moral connection between workers and the economic process (Durkheim 1893). The decision of dividing workers into two groups, one allowed to enter the private labor market and the other not, had legitimated a juxtaposition of two competing work-ethics. One is the duty-driven system based on the extreme egalitarianism lived by state workers, and the other one is based on individual choice and personal achievement, lived by private workers and their employees. For the first group, the value of work should be measured in terms of ‘moral size’ – participation, commitment and idealistic devotion. For the second one, it could be measured in terms of economic power and purchasing capability. The clash between these two work-ethics has enhanced a sense of inequality and frustration among those who are questioning the value of their own work. When it is not possible anymore to measure a medical doctor’s value in terms of heroism –because Raul has distanced himself from the rhetoric of his brother’s public speeches (Mujal-León 2011) – shouldn’t it at least be

possible to do that –in Frances’ words- in terms of the possibility of buying a toaster or a TV? The core issue in Frances’ speech is that the same white goods (i.e. the TV) have been shifting from a socialist regime of value to the market regime. In the first scenario, its moral size could be measured in terms of the value of commitment because one could receive a TV as reward or because of State distribution. In the second one, it is just a purchasable good, which is connected to a price, and moreover, to a price beyond a State worker’s means. As Appadurai suggested, it is possible to describe the dynamics whereby an object travels back and forth between different “regimes of value” (Appadurai 1986, 14), mostly because the “commodity context refers to the variety of *social arenas*” even in the same cultural context (1986, 14-15). What makes Cuba an interesting case is that the different social arenas that Appadurai referred to can be found even in the same household.

## **Conclusions**

Since the ‘socialist emulation’ started, Cuban citizens, or at least the great majority of them who stayed on the island and committed to the social project, learned to measure labor in terms of its social value. Accordingly, they started to disentangle commodities and services from their prices, reasoning in terms of rewards and distribution of goods (del Aguila 1994). The relation between labor and wage was not crucial in their life since they were guaranteed a solid central system taking care of their ‘needs’ (Holbraad 2014): social needs, such as education and healthcare, as well as material needs, such as food and housing.

After the fall of the Soviet Bloc first, and then later after Raul Castro’s implementation of labor market reforms, Cuban citizens started to measure their wages in terms of their purchasing power (Holbraad 2005, 2014; Pertierra 2011). However, they do not reason in terms of commodification; for instance, none of my interviewees estimated, or even considered in our conversations, the economic value of public healthcare or education. They ascribed different forms of labor to different categories of value, which represent diverse moral connections between the worker and the act of working.

Indeed, by dividing forms of labor in two parts, the ones that can be privatized and the ones that cannot, the Government encouraged citizens to believe that only certain forms of labor produce ‘exchange value’ that allows the workers to purchase goods on the market. All the other forms of labor, such as those in the fields of education and healthcare, produce ‘values’, seen as crystalized social actions that should not be converted into money. The value of both forms of privatized and non-privatized labor is ascribed to two different systems, symbolically demarked by the type of currency they are paid with: the national pesos which have very little exchange value in

the local market, and none in the global one, or the ‘convertible currency’, which is changed 1:1 with the US dollar.

When Cuban citizens accept to keep working for the State, even if their wages are from five to ten times inferior to local private workers, they are defending the moral size of their jobs, even while complaining about their wages (Yurchak 2013, 5-8). They are reasoning in a framework of a concept of value as *function of acts*, rather than as *function of objects* (Graber 2013). Therefore, they act in (and thus perpetuate) the social arena where the law of value that Che Guevara and Fidel Castro pursued in their vision is realized, by way of a Marxist-Leninist system of value. At the same time, they question the exchange value assigned to their workload by neglecting their work schedule to be able to have a second job, as it is for instance in the case of the Mental Health Community Center workers, or by struggling to obtain another income source in the informal labor market (Fernandez 2000). Thus, they are also challenging that law of value, and claiming that a new set of market values have entered the society. The clutch between those two opposite attitudes, symbolized in their accounts by the ‘golden past’ vs ‘difficult present’ narratives, constitutes -I argued- the Gordian knot of the *children of revolution* generation.

Moreover, the multiplicity of the job relations that can take place in the same worker’s day seems thus to correspond to a multiplicity of value categories. Due to the dichotomous labor regime, these categories could not be ascribed faithfully to socialism nor to a market economy, but are constantly travelling back and forth, fluctuating between these two-diverse politics of value.

This fluctuation, I argue, by pointing out the present disconnection between social commitment (values) and the market value of labor, could lead to a reformulation of how society at large is organized. Indeed, aligning with Turner’s perspective that politics is ultimately about the power to “define what value is” (Turner quoted in Graber 2013, 228), and with Gordy’s idea that ideology is not a stable rule-setting but a living principle which emerges out daily practices (Gordy 2015), while defining the meaning and the value of labor, Cubans are redefining what being a socialist country means in their contemporary society.

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