

COMPETITIVE SOLIDARITY AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF *INVENTO*

Roberto I. Armengol^{1,2}

When I first visited Havana, in 2003, I was struck by the fact that people there were always trying to sell me something. Usually, of course, these sales were proposed “on the left”—that lovely double-entendre meaning economic transactions generally not sanctioned by the socialist state. Through enigmatic productive activities known collectively as *invento*, my new friends offered an endless assortment of oddities: packs of noodles, rooms for rent, home-cooked meals, fruits and vegetables, used books, illicit cuts of beef, handmade trinkets, rum and tobacco guaranteed to have been “resolved” (i.e., absconded) straight from the factory floor. The burgeoning of market enterprises, legal and illegal, throughout Cuba since the collapse of the Soviet Union has been well documented. The standard academic and popular discourse holds that market forces, and some actual reforms, have grown inevitably out of socialism’s faults, and that the new entrepreneurs represent a class of people following their natural instincts—like the rest of us, at last—to “truck, barter and trade” in their own self-interest.

In the course of ethnographic research in urban Cuba over the past decade, and especially during an 18-month stay in Havana in 2007 and 2008, I grew suspicious of this logic. The stock narrative did not sit

well with those things I was seeing and hearing from the people who befriended me on the island. Contrary to the metanarrative of resurgent capitalism, my interlocutors were telling me that, as much as they wanted to sell things, they also wanted to create social bonds of mutual security, to be good socialists on their own terms. Paradoxically, many felt they achieved this best through the market—a particular form of it that I call the “invento market”—and did so in a certain moral paradigm, a morality of invention, that I call “competitive solidarity.” Self-employed Cubans (*cuentalpropistas*) practiced this inventiveness even, and often, at risk of intimidation and harassment by officials representing the same state that inculcated in them in the value of reciprocity. As such, action in the invento market entailed a political disposition curiously at odds with both state socialism and the discourse of neoliberal capitalism. In this article, I argue that to understand this situation requires a rethinking of “the market,” drawing on and furthering new theoretical perspectives in the anthropology of political economy. The Cuban case, in turn, suggests a new potential for the relevance of anthropological theory throughout the social sciences, and especially in economics.

1. Editor’s Note: This essay was awarded First Prize in the 2013 ASCE Student Prize Competition for graduate students.

2. Author’s Note: I would like to thank Ira Bashkow for his tireless support of my research. The ideas in this paper also benefited from the feedback I received over the course of a yearlong writing workshop with fellow graduate students at the University of Virginia. Thank you, David Flood, Arsalan Khan, Jack Stoetzel, Julie Starr and Rose Wellman—all inspired scholars. Finally, I would like to thank Sena Aydin, my dear friend, for her kindness, patience and sharp wit, and for letting me join her in “recycling Mauss.”

I develop this argument below in three parts. The first part provides a focused review of the “second economy” literature on socialism, so as to help situate my discussion of competitive solidarity. In passing, I also wish to suggest how everyday praxis in Cuba has something to offer the anthropology of late socialism. The second part outlines competitive solidarity and provides ethnographic evidence for this perspective. Finally, I conclude with a brief discussion of the theoretical implications of these data for revitalizing the study of political economy from a “neo-Maussian” anthropological perspective.

IT’S NOT OVER YET: WHY THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF SOCIALISM MATTERS

The Cold War produced in the West a political science intent on pointing out everything that was flawed or lacking in the socioeconomic systems of the Soviet socialist bloc rather than analyzing it on its own terms. An idealized vision of capitalism served as the measure of civilization against which socialist societies were expected to perform, and against which they inevitably failed. Though no less critical of socialist formations and their inherent contradictions, anthropologists have tried to rescue social science from this shortsighted perspective by understanding socialism on its own terms—its own “laws of motion” (Verdery 1991). The anthropology of work and consumption under socialism in Eastern Europe has helped show how some of those laws of motion played out in the real world. Understanding how these “laws” unfolded in such contexts informs not only what socialism was, but also our current picture of the Cuban context and the so-called postsocialist transition.

Because the Marxist project tried explicitly to reorganize productive practices, here we have an arena of social life where we would expect to find fundamental differences between “actually existing socialism” and the capitalist universe against which it was opposed. This is indeed the case, but ethnographic studies in this area reveal some surprising facts that challenge the mainstream view of state socialism (Stark and Nee 1989). In this section, I synthesize these studies so as to inform a subsequent discussion of the invento market. Taken together, the ethno-

graphic research on socialist Eastern Europe demands that we rethink the informal exchanges of goods and labor on which people living the Soviet bloc relied to supplement their livelihoods. This work suggests that the informal sector should not be seen as the capitalist underbelly of socialism (see, for example, Berdahl, Bunzl, and Lampland 2000; Burawoy 1988; Dunn 1999; 2004; Humphrey 1995; Lampland 1991; Lampland 1995). While appearing to operate on maximizing, accumulative principles, socialism’s second economy produced complex networks of reciprocal relations. Ironically, it was official, “scientific” socialism that especially encouraged commodity fetishization, autonomous individuality, rational utility and profit maximization.

Even this is an oversimplification, however. It gives the impression that these two realms, the official and unofficial, were neatly compartmentalized in people’s lives. On the contrary, these studies also show how the formal and informal economies were products of the same socialist logic and deeply implicated with one another.

To illustrate these claims, we might compare two emblematic ethnographies of socialism. Focusing on the agricultural second economy in Hungary, Lampland (1991) shows that private work activities were more than simply a byproduct of socialist engineering; they also mediated it. By the 1960s much of the work conducted in private fields and gardens was officially sanctioned, and by the mid-1980s the Hungarian state fully encouraged growth in this sector of the economy. Although government leaders minimized the importance of the agricultural second economy in their official talk, they supported it in deed, morally and financially, offering private producers technical advice as well as advantageous prices for the grains, feed and animals they needed. Managers sought personal gain through such machinations, and villagers saw right through it. Alienated from their labor, many villagers turned to the privacy of their homes and gardens to remake themselves as social beings and satisfy their material and psychological desires. As such, Lampland finds that socialism “fostered the attitudes it was founded to eliminate,” among both former peasants and their new bosses

(1991:475). In time, labor had been fully commodified. In Marxist terms, it was now fetishized not as an activity for its own sake but as an object of exchange value. Along with labor, Lampland argues, the rural Hungarian concept of the self thus had also been re-fashioned. In trying to engineer a collectivity, the state had succeeded in engineering possessive individuals. Having begun as a social sphere for challenging such notions of selfhood, the second economy was fast becoming the prime place in which to realize an individualistic subjectivity.

But let us compare Lampland's findings with the factory life that led so many villagers to flee to the cities of Eastern Europe during much of the last century. Burawoy (1988) offers an invaluable account of working for piece rates in a Hungarian steel factory. On the shop floor, state control was exercised through the imposition of piece norms dictating how many times per hour a worker should complete a given task. Line workers were paid on the basis of how well they fulfilled the norms. Often unrealistically high, these goals could drive workers to "fury and panic" (Burawoy 1988:216). And yet, so went a typical joke, the Hungarian worker ruled in the factory. There was a certain truth to this. Burawoy discovered that informal reconfigurations of state socialist practices and ideologies of control in this official work setting tended to produce the kind of solidarity that the system claimed for itself as a key objective. All this while the state, meanwhile, employed mechanisms of control that tended to atomize the workforce.

A close reading of some ethnographic details from Burawoy's text will help explain this paradox. Burawoy writes that the two factory institutions ostensibly designed to protect workers—the party and the union—were essentially ineffective. Party hacks were not trusted, and the idea of taking a grievance to a union representative rather than one's supervisor was nothing short of farcical. Since managers flexibly deployed their workers, bouncing them from machine to machine, workers often responded by becoming very adept at particular jobs. In this way, a certain worker could accumulate bargaining power "by virtue of his or her importance in the work process"

(Burawoy 1988:214). It was not how much you could make, strictly speaking, that mattered, but what you could make and how well you could do it. And the easier it was to meet or exceed piece norms, the more time a worker could spend using the instruments of his labor on side-jobs for friends and relatives.

Whereas Lampland saw village second economies transformed into realms of rational utility, Burawoy saw socialist policies in an urban factory create, in unexpected ways, solidarity among steel workers. These perspectives can be reconciled with a nuanced view of state socialism: wherever state intervention served to legitimate and co-opt informal exchange, the work involved in such exchange took on more and more the character of alienated labor. Fully recognizing such tensions inherent in the structure of "actually existing socialism" will make it easier to understand the system's collapse as well as its current transformations in Cuba. In other words, to understand what's going on with everyday life in Cuba, we must return Cuba to the Soviet sphere, conceptually, and draw on the best of what we know (which I can here only sample) about socialism in Eastern Europe. In doing so we will see there are many ethnographic parallels to draw with respect to Cuban socialist praxis. What's more, evidence from Cuba can help inform the postmortem literature on socialism. Many analysts writing in this mode—even those whose path-breaking work in the 1980s and 1990s speculated on the possibility of a "Third Road"—seem to have accepted, tacitly if not outright, the aura of inevitability that pervades the more recent "transitology" scholarship.

In situating communist Cuba within the literature on Eastern Europe, another important touchstone is the work of Iván Szelényi, especially his analysis of "socialist entrepreneurs" in Hungary (1988), published the year before the fall of the Berlin Wall and based on extensive work in the preceding two decades. Szelényi describes how in rural Hungary a new petty bourgeoisie was emerging after decades of communist rule that, in theory, were supposed to have produced a monolithic socialist proletariat among the peasantry.

The empirical work on which *Socialist Entrepreneurs* was based is primarily demographic and, where ethnographic, is analyzed from a quantitative more than qualitative perspective. Szelényi and his colleagues collected years of survey data on rural households and supplemented them with structured interviews and life histories organized around classificatory paradigms. Under my own research conditions, I could not hope to reproduce such an effort; nor, in fact, was this my objective. One reason is practical: the demographic data on entrepreneurship in Cuba simply isn't reliable or easy to access, and the systematic collection of household samples was not practicable in a sprawling urban area of several million people. More than that, however, the difference in approach has to do, fundamentally, with our differing theoretical orientations. Szelényi is concerned with class formation and class-focused theories of social change. While we share an interest in articulating a new political economy for socialism, and in reflecting on the relationship between individuals and power structures, I am concerned with the variable nature of markets, their moral bases and their thoroughly political shape. Rather than determining exactly how many people are involved in the private sector in Cuba or exactly how large this economy is, or how best to classify entrepreneurs (all interesting questions to be sure), I want to know what makes this sector tick—how do people operationalize it in their daily lives and what language do they deploy to understand and justify their actions?

Coming from a background in sociology, Szelényi might call this a more “culturalist” paradigm, though the label as he deploys it doesn't seem to be as fine-grained as its use among anthropologists. He is not opposed in principle to value-oriented considerations and relies on such approaches where necessary. Namely, he speculates that the “entrepreneurial spirit” in rural Hungary was kept alive across several generations, in no small measure, by means of the transmissions of certain attitudes (cultural capital, cf. Bourdieu 1977) rather than actual wealth, and mainly among identifiably middle-class people. It is when making such claims that Szelényi is most hesitant because, as he says, these are difficult matters to quantify. For my part, it is precisely that which cannot be

quantified which, I think, needs most to be addressed and understood: that is the ideology inherent in the particular markets that Cubans invent. This is, arguably, where Szelényi's analysis is most lacking. The moral aspects of the Hungarian second economy are not at all accessed in his study, which takes for granted that if socialist entrepreneurs are buying and selling surplus goods produced on their own free time, they are by definition petty capitalists or on their way to becoming so.

When addressing their attitudes at all, Szelényi wonders, pessimistically, whether they are dominated by “greedy” personality types or not as civically minded as their Western counterparts (because they don't actively engage in dissident activities) or if they are promoting “corruption” in their dealings with the state apparatus, because they rely on bribes and payoffs to bureaucrats to keep their businesses running. Szelényi's implied “market” is not particularized but universal, and the pictures of his informants as a result appear flat. I maintain, in the hopes of pushing the most cogent aspects of Szelényi's observations forward, though by appeal in a different context, that we cannot successfully develop a new political economy of late socialism unless we also address questions of value, everyday praxis and discursive understanding—properly the stuff of anthropological inquiry.

THE MORAL LANDSCAPE OF INVENTION

Against a neoclassical economic perspective, mainstream sociocultural anthropology generally holds that all markets are moral, because they are embedded in implicit moral presuppositions. But this claim is empty if it is not particularized in a definite set of market practices, with a discernible moral grammar. It is one thing to show that even capitalist exchange happens in a cultural register. The more crucial fact is that such registers are variable across time and space, and not everywhere congruent with modernist assumptions about human nature. As I suggested at the outset, the political project my informants enacted (without understanding it as “political”) arose from what they constantly called *invento*, a form of economic inventiveness realized in dense networks of reciprocity, producing a morality of solidarity. I call

this morality of invention competitive solidarity because working-class Cubans involved directly and indirectly in self-employment engage in competitive market practices marked by the ethos of gift exchange. And yet, these are hardly social actors who have cut themselves loose from the moorings of state socialism. On the contrary, “the system,” as they themselves often called it, provided for them much of the moral reasoning for their everyday practices. This was true even if the authoritative discourse of the socialist state had to be turned on its head, or against itself (cf. Yurchak 2006). Not unlike Yurchak’s retrospective assessment of “the last Soviet generation,” my research suggests that in Cuba’s everyday economic creativity, the system was not infrequently made subservient to their inventiveness. This is ultimately what I find most compelling about the invento market. It is an economic morality capable of reshaping state power at the level of everyday life. In this section, I outline the contours of this particular market morality and illustrate its implications in an extended ethnographic example.

Cubans *cuentapropistas*, of course, are no more inherently creative or clever than anyone else. What is odd is that they are exceedingly aware of their inventiveness. It is a social mode that is popularly theorized and metadiscursively elaborated. *Invento* is a native category, and arguably a master trope in contemporary Cuban society. One of my friends, something of a roving huckster who sold pirated videos on the street, liked to invoke a common refrain, in a tone at once admiring and cynical: “The Cuban people invent,” he would say, “the Cuban people invent everything.” He might say this referring with glee to the brand-name razors he once procured from a friend with connections in Miami, which he then sold in hard currency to trustworthy clients. Or he might say it with despair, in reference to an invention of the state’s making, for example: the dilapidated tenements in his neighborhood repurposed from abandoned whore houses.

Members of the entrepreneurial working class in Havana all had stories of getting by, of their own inventiveness, some more desperate than others. But, by and large, these were not stories of *individual* success,

quite unlike the fable of the American Dream. They were stories of how meeting something close to the culturally accepted standards of food, clothing, shelter and leisure was made possible while at the same time not central—not paramount with respect to one’s social obligations but fully subservient to them. In the invento market, you felt obliged to negotiate your needs and desires with the needs and desires of others, to varying degrees, depending on the proximity or distance of these others involved in your social world, in accordance with the unwritten morality of invention. In the farmers market where I conducted much of my research, it was not uncommon for one worker to spend a day’s wages treating his friends to quality beer purchased in hard currency, a seemingly illogical waste of money. But it was understood that on another day one of those same friends would return the favor in an unanticipated way, perhaps manning the first worker’s *tarima* (market stand) for him while he went out on an important personal errand.

In other words, to be understood as invento par excellence, one’s inventiveness could not as a matter of course amount to an individualist project. It could not constitute work solely for one’s sake, or even solely for one’s immediate kin, but was linked inherently to one’s larger network of social relations. *Invento* as such helped “resolve” (*resolver*) the everyday material problems of its subjects but was valorized, and made legitimate, through the mutual recognition of the ways in which one’s inventiveness was put at the service of others. Value, as Graeber (2001:70–77) notes, arises from the twofold action of human creativity coupled, through exchange, with the gaze of society. Here the dialectic of invention and moral judgment serves to produce solidarity as an end in itself—which becomes the object of accumulation. While not always followed, this proposition was implicit in the relations themselves, and conveyed time and again in personal parables about the importance of realizing one’s obligations in a field of exchange. I mean realization here in two senses of the term: realizing as recognition (of standing relations) and as creation (of new ones).

None of this is to say that Cubans deny the instrumental aspects of the relations they build through in-

ventiveness. When I pressed *cuentapropistas* about how they benefitted personally from such relations, or about the structure of wage labor in the *invento* market, they were often decidedly oblique, which seemed odd given that they otherwise loved to talk about the ways their activities skirted the law. After spending a whole day with a self-employed carpenter in a state-owned workshop—he used connections to gain access afterhours to this expansive and well equipped facility—I asked how much he typically paid the handful of men who worked for him, carving elegant cigar boxes. He was candid about many other seemingly more controversial issues, like the fact that his business was totally illegal. Yet he would not say much about wages or the agreement he had with his employees, acknowledging only that “yes, of course they get paid, but it’s not a fixed, definite thing.” As with most invented businesses, the staff were family and close confidants, and they did not receive fixed wages in the usual sense. There was compensation to be sure, but these exchanges worked in both directions and produced claims against one’s labor and one’s belongings on both sides of the equation, for workers and their ostensible “boss.” All the people I knew who were involved in businesses like this one, regardless of whether the enterprise was licensed, avoided concretizing their relationships for themselves, let alone for an outsider. This was one way among possible others to obviate the central paradox of reciprocity: that in uttering the name of the gift one threatens in that instant to undo its power—the power to bind giver and receiver.

Consider the common situation of the handyman working “on the left.” He rarely dictates a price for a particular job, inviting clients to pay “what you think is fair” or “whatever you can.” This exchange, arriving at the end of each job, has a common structure: first, a studied verbal back-and-forth on working with people you know you can trust; next, a performative reluctance to accept payment; and finally, having accepted a wad of cash, the following request or something very much like it: “Let me know if you or your family ever need anything else. And if you know anyone who needs plumbing work, look me up.”

Is this a market transaction or an exchange of gifts? The answer is both. Gregory (1997) demonstrates that preserving the analytic distinction between gifts and commodities is indeed useful for a comparative research on political economies. Yet this analytic distinction should not be conflated with the distinction of “market” as a mode of exchange versus different modes of exchange, such as the *potlatch* or the *kula* or feudal redistribution. While the formula “market equals commodity sphere” seems perfectly reasonable on first glance, it relies on an underlying category error. While capitalist markets are arranged so as to lend themselves well to the circulation of commodities (i.e., alienable goods), the “market” in the sense that I am proposing (as a site, be it physical or conceptual, where values are exchanged for professed equivalents) does not in and of itself preclude the exchange of inalienable artifacts or the mixing of gifts and commodities. Making this mistake allows us all too easily to see any private monetary transaction as “of the market” and therefore “of commodities,” and therefore “capitalist,” in both the formal and practical sense. But what happens when gifts move through markets, when a market becomes adapted for generalized reciprocity? The nature of the market, as such, is fundamentally altered. This is precisely my claim about Cuban *invento* and subaltern economies more generally.

To repeat, *invento* occurs in a thoroughly market context. Indeed, it is rooted in market mechanisms and has effloresced with the continued opening of markets and entrepreneurship in Cuba, to the point where it is fully, if incompletely, read as a form of homegrown capitalism, even by authorized Cuban scholars and the state press. But the ethos of invention is reciprocal—not merely the ethos, as a matter of fact, but the actual praxis.

Let us return to the handyman. In my example above he was imagined in composite form: I met many Cubans like him. Paco was among the more memorable and perhaps the best at describing his own line of work. A jack-of-all trades, he could fix just about any home or office appliance, repair any car or bike, find you gasoline or potatoes when no one else could, and knew whom to contact when he himself couldn’t do

the job. Although he did contract work for a state firm serving expats, Paco had no steady “job,” even by *cuentapropista* standards. But he did have a certain regular, reliable client: Lourdes, a middle-aged woman who was licensed to rent a room in her home to foreign tourists. Actually, like more than a few registered landlords, Lourdes often rented the entire apartment, located in one of Havana’s middle-class neighborhoods, to long-term tenants. She charged them the going rate in convertible pesos, about US\$700 per month—a huge sum relative to the typical state salary, though much of it was gobbled up from her in taxes and fees (cf. Henken 2002).

This practice flouted the usual rental rules, and there will be more to say about Lourdes’s relationship with the agents of the state. For now the relevant point is that homeowners in this line of work frequently required services for which, as a practical matter, no state enterprise existed. Also, given the marginal status of such inventions, availing oneself of state services could present legal challenges. Finding themselves in the paradoxical world of sanctioned but officially ostracized work, but also controlling a fair amount of hard currency, registered landlords in Havana all seemed to have a person like Paco on their side, if not several of them.

Paco and Lourdes met thanks to a mutual acquaintance some years earlier. As Paco recalled, Lourdes needed the iron bars on a window welded back together. He wanted to establish some rapport with her and didn’t charge as much as she expected. Paco liked to say, “I’m not into exploiting people or any of that.” Lourdes respected greatly his candor as well as the initial discount he gave her. Paco also had a good sense of humor and quite a personable disposition, which Lourdes appreciated. They hit it off.

As their patron-client relationship developed, the forms by which Paco received payment became increasingly convoluted and less susceptible to standard capitalist accounting, as if by design. Though their exchanges still involved money, and Paco might still “bill” for a job by explaining to Lourdes in some detail what a new showerhead cost, how much time he spent to replace it, etc., their transactions hardly resembled anymore the exchange of alienable goods.

Renewing their social bond and the trust they had in one another became as much an object of each transaction, large and small, as the work itself; sometimes no money traded hands at all. But Paco counted on Lourdes to lend him funds when he lacked the resources to visit his wife and children, who lived in another city. Like Paco’s services, the terms of these “loans” were difficult to disentangle from the overall web of reciprocal relations they had by now built up for themselves. Lourdes told me once about how she was happy to lend Paco 60 convertible pesos (CUC, the hard currency used alongside the national peso exchanged at about 25 national pesos per CUC) to help him get his brother out of some kind of trouble with the law. Lourdes’s husband, who worked as a state-appointed defense attorney, offered Paco legal advice. Another time, she provided her friend 40 CUC for another personal problem, and on this occasion told him absolutely not, under any circumstances, to worry about paying her back.

“Paco owes me a lot,” Lourdes once told me. “But he’s a very dependable guy, very faithful. When I have some kind of a problem with the house, he comes over right away and does the work right here and never charges me.”

Lourdes had similar relationships with others who helped keep her business afloat. She viewed her good fortune—the house had been left to her by an aunt with no children or other immediate family—as an obligation to share the wealth that she could extract from it. She lived well, by Cuban standards, and was decidedly bourgeois in her outlook, the sort of person who might have larger ambitions of wealth, but she understood and accepted the unspoken moral obligation that her access to the hard-currency world meant. Her work, for one, was the primary support for her husband’s extended family, which included several aunts who had little or no income of their own. Beyond that, almost all her closest neighbors were involved in the rental business and benefited financially from it. An elderly woman upstairs did laundry for the tenants and frequently offered to cook them meals. An elderly man down the street ran errands related to the household. Others kept an eye out for state inspectors or possible thieves. Lourdes

made sure to keep all these people in her good graces, and remain in theirs. She went so far as to support another neighbor who was infirm and could do little in return.

This was a pattern I witnessed among all the most successful *cuentapropistas* I met in Havana. Indeed, the degree to which others were involved in the business was a primary measure of success, and those who didn't spread their earnings competitively did not last long on the *invento* market. This was true in part because they might be more likely to run into bureaucratic troubles; not infrequently entrepreneurs would say they had to be careful not to incite jealousy in others, lest someone point the agents of the state in their direction. But by and large, *cuentapropistas* of all kinds considered the threat of a government crackdown less noteworthy than a personal breakdown in the affinal connections on which they relied.

Indeed, in the morality of invention, theft from the state and collusion with its representatives are not only permissible but at times all but prescribed. Not following this rule can be morally dangerous.

For example, Lourdes made regular payments to an inspector from the immigration office, part of the Interior Ministry. The inspector, Alfredo, was assigned to check up on her rental property and collect information about tenants. He knew well that Lourdes (like most licensed renters) did not in practice follow the letter of law, and understood why. As Henken (2002) suggests, in the hard-currency “bed and breakfast” business it was nearly impossible to break even without such arrangements. But rather than viewing themselves as “condemned to informality,” that is, engaged in a nonstandard, sub-optimal market, I have found that landladies such as Lourdes accepted these arrangements, including the payments they felt obliged to make to the inspectors who signed off on their work, as the appropriate functioning of the *invento* market. This was the usual course of things and, in their view, important to maintaining a competitive solidarity that might otherwise be put at risk in times of economic uncertainty. Lourdes, as we have seen, understood her good fortune not as hers alone but “of her people”—and this

sentiment extended even to the housing and immigration officials in her circle of confidence. It drew them into the *invento* market and implicated them in its moral landscape. “I’m going to tell you something, Robert,” Lourdes once told me soberly, the way she spoke when she wanted to draw my attention to some elemental datum. “I’m telling you this so that you know how it is we justify certain things. I see these payments as normal, as part of the system—these are the pathways that we have found in order to resolve a life for ourselves. That’s all that Alfredo is doing. And that’s the way it is. We’re helping each other out—each of us for each other.”

THE CUBAN CASE FOR A NEO-MAUSSIAN POLITICAL ECONOMY

I have, albeit in abbreviated form, brought to light the economic practices of *invento* through what might be called a neo-Maussian framework, drawing implicitly on the work of social scientists and intellectual historians who have of late reexamined the popular and scholarly oeuvre of Marcel Mauss (e.g., Schrifft 1997; Graeber 2001; Sigaud 2003; Hart 2007; Fournier 2006; Garces and Jones 2009; Liebersohn 2011; Mallard 2011; cf. Mauss 1990 [1925]). Theoretically, such a framework reasserts the importance of reciprocity as a key value embedded in many domains of modern life, particularly subaltern ones. Politically, it seeks to destabilize totalizing economic perspectives and their consequent economic practices that undermine the ethos of the gift. This perspective helps us understand how private-sector entrepreneurs in urban Cuba come to produce an alternative market morality—and in the process a subaltern political praxis. I interpret the particular morality of their social universe as a form of competitive solidarity, because it strives to build relations of solidarity through competitive market-oriented activities. This interpretation calls for us to think beyond the stark theoretical contrast between economic and culturalist approaches, and to revisit the potentiality for markets themselves to produce, paradoxically, a moral personhood that rejects the Western notion of the self-interested individual.

The problem of formal economic theory is not so much that it is wrong, but that it is right only for a

certain finite expanse of human time and space, applicable only within the logic of that system, and on its behalf, and even then only to the extent that the lived reality of the system increasingly approaches the logic of the ideal type, which anyway is always still far less than economists presume. Indeed, as Gregory (1997) suggests, much of neoclassical economics serves to reproduce and intensify precisely the “free market anarchism” that, it purports, is a natural outgrowth of the human condition. Carrier and Miller (1998) use the term “virtualism” to refer to the self-fulfilling and self-justifying designs of this practico-theoretical complex, enacted in the name of the consumers it in fact constructs. Graeber (2001:7) underlines this point in suggesting that economic models are developed to make accurate predictions about “the economy” that are mainly useful to the major financial players who most benefit from the system.

The Cuban *cuentapropistas* I knew were not irrational—nor were they models of *homo economicus*. But there is more to my argument than that. In adopting a sustained focus on a particular “invention of the market” I have tried to turn our attention to a category of action, which we might gloss as monetized commodity exchange, one that in the anthropological literature has too easily been conflated with the cultural system of late modern capitalism. This conflation can be innocuous, even helpful, when talking about capitalist market exchange and its penetration across the globe. A problem arises however when anthropologists slip into a subtle form of the naturalistic economic assumptions we are otherwise experts in dismantling, by deploying the term *market* as an a priori category of human action that takes a timeless, placeless, formalized notion of capitalist exchange as its standard. Polanyi (1975 [1944]) traced the development of the “false commodities”—land, labor and money—and concluded that the 20th century’s spread of markets for these commodities in particular constituted the great economic transformation of our time. We have much to owe to that analysis; it inspired a generation of social scientists to probe the devastating impacts of capitalist expansion on indigenous peoples. But in articulating the historical process in this way Polanyi may well be to blame for inaugurating the essentialization of the *market* in

the abstract for anthropologists to come. While I am not the first to point this out, I am saying that I think this is a problem we have yet to claw our way out of.

For a good illustration of this problem I’ll turn back for a moment to the anthropology of Eastern Europe, this time the postsocialist variety. Humphrey and Mandel (2002), along with the contributors to their volume, have done a remarkable job in analyzing the everyday economics of this period. Together they highlight the kind of moral ambiguities late socialist subjects have faced when they are forced to confront the reintegration of their worlds with the global capitalist order. In good anthropological fashion, Humphrey and Mandel make sure to qualify their observations with the caveat that actually existing economic relations never conform to formal, neoclassical models of economic man. In doing so, however, they still reproduce an image of “the market”—in spite of the appropriate scare quotes—confronting people, penetrating their experiences, setting up a “clash” with their “deeply ingrained moralities” (2002:1). The analytical tension inherent in how we understand alternative moral-economic systems is palpable in a key excerpt from their remarks:

Instead of studies of transactional outcomes abstracted from historical time and social context, an anthropological perspective may point out the importance of long-standing and culturally specific patterns of economic activity. Existing socially-constituted practices, such as the sexual division of labor, ethnic work specialization, or local entrepreneurial traditions, may significantly affect the way in which the postsocialist ‘market’ is encountered and engaged with (Humphrey and Mandel 2002:4).

While it may hardly be the authors’ intention, in construing a role for the discipline that pits “morality” against “the market,” we risk giving up on deconstructing “the market” itself, and on the possibility of recolonizing the term *market* altogether. Humphrey, Mandel and their colleagues have demonstrated that postsocialist studies do have a lasting set of ideas to offer critical anthropological theory, a question that has been the subject of some recent, somewhat overwrought polemics (see Thelen 2011). They have shown, what’s more, that this contribution can be made in the realm of political economy, which has so many significant implications for modern life, and

not only in late, post- or quasi-socialist contexts. In this respect, I seek to expand the implications of their analysis. What I am saying is that having paired “markets and moralities” what we now need are more clearly articulated ethnographies of “market moralities,” and for that matter, “moral politics,” in the plural.

Such an anthropology of political economy would not shy away from active involvement in our subject matter and with the world at large. Here I might once more invoke Graeber’s politics of scholarship: there is hope, I believe, for an empirically informed social science opposed to the homogenizing structures of modernity. Examining the political consequences of culturally variable market action is one form of empiricism that could support an anthropology of political economy so framed. The good news—and the common ground we might yet establish with some of our ethnographically oriented colleagues in economics—is we need not vilify markets, or commodities, or money for that matter. The problem is not what people exchange, per se, or even the

medium in which they exchange it. The proper problem of political economy has always been found in the relations of production and exchange that these things and processes reproduce. The market is not the problem. The problem is how we think about it—how indeed we invent it.

Elsewhere (Armengol forthcoming, Chapter 4; see also 2011) I have argued that in a peculiar twist of fate it is the economic and political elite in Cuba, and the state itself, which most promote neoliberal and consumptive subjectivities, finding themselves at odds with the morality of invention as I have outlined it. In this article, conversely, I have shown how ordinary Cubans working in the invento market constantly draw the state into their everyday lives and remake socialism in the process, if only in localized, intimate ways. It is no wonder then that they also call this *la luchita*—“the little struggle,” poking fun at the grand struggle in which the socialist state envisions itself engaged. Invento is already as “political” as it is “economic.”

REFERENCES

- Armengol, Roberto I. 2011. “Making Heroes and Heretics: On Symbolic Tension in Socialist Cuba.” In *Tropical Socialism: Rethinking Socialism and Postsocialism In/through Cuba*. Paper presentation, Annual Meetings of the American Anthropological Association. Montreal.
- Armengol, Roberto I. Forthcoming. *The Invention of the Market: The Political Economy of Everyday Life in Late Socialist Cuba*. Dissertation, University of Virginia.
- Berdahl, Daphne, Matti Bunzl, and Martha Lampland, eds. 2000. *Altering States: Ethnographies of Transition in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union*. University of Michigan Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Burawoy, Michael. 1988. “Piece Rates, Hungarian Style.” In *On Work: Historical, Comparative and Theoretical Approaches*. R. E. Pahl, ed. Pp. 210–228. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Carrier, James G., and Daniel Miller, eds. 1998. *Virtualism: A New Political Economy*. New York: Berg Publishers.
- Dunn, Elizabeth. 1999. “Slick Salesmen and Simple People: Negotiated Capitalism in a Privatized Polish Firm.” In *Uncertain Transition Ethnographies of Change in the Postsocialist World*, Michael Burawoy and Katherine Verdery, eds. Pp. 125–150. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Dunn, Elizabeth C. 2004. *Privatizing Poland: Baby Food, Big Business, and the Remaking of Labor*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.

- Fournier, Marcel. 2006. *Marcel Mauss: A Biography*. Jane Marie Todd, tran. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Garces, Chris, and Alexander Jones. 2009. "Mauss Redux: From Warfare's Human Toll to L'homme Total." *Anthropological Quarterly* 82(1): 279–309.
- Graeber, David. 2001. *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams*. New York: Palgrave.
- Gregory, C.A. 1997. *Savage Money: The Anthropology and Politics of Commodity Exchange*. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic.
- Hart, Keith. 2007. "Marcel Mauss: In Pursuit of the Whole; A Review Essay." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 49(02): 473–485.
- Henken, Ted A. 2002. "Condemned to Informality: Cuba's Experiments with Self-employment During the Special Period (the Case of the Bed and Breakfasts)." *Cuban Studies* 33: 1–29.
- Humphrey, Caroline. 1995. "Creating the Culture of Disillusionment." In *Worlds Apart: Modernity through the Prism of the Local*. Daniel Miller, ed. Pp. 43–66. London: Routledge.
- Humphrey, Caroline, and Ruth Mandel. 2002. "The Market in Everyday Life: Ethnographies of Post-socialism." In *Markets and Moralities: Ethnographies of Postsocialism*. Ruth Mandel and Caroline Humphrey, eds. Pp. 33–51. Oxford: Berg.
- Lampland, Martha. 1991. "Pigs, Party Secretaries, and Private Lives in Hungary." *American Ethnologist* 18(3): 459–479.
- Lampland, Martha. 1995. *The Object of Labor: Commodification in Socialist Hungary*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Liebersohn, Harry. 2011. *The Return of the Gift: European History of a Global Idea*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Mallard, Grégoire. 2011. "The Gift Revisited: Marcel Mauss on War, Debt, and the Politics of Reparations." *Sociological Theory* 29(4): 225–247.
- Mauss, Marcel. 1990 [1925]. *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. New York: Norton.
- Polanyi, Karl. 1975 [1944]. *The Great Transformation*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Schrift, Alan D. 1997. *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity*. New York: Routledge.
- Sigaud, Lygia. 2003. "The Vicissitudes of The Gift." *Social Anthropology* 10(3): 355–358.
- Stark, David, and Victor Nee. 1989. "Toward and Institutional Analysis of State Socialism." In *Remaking the Economic Institutions of Socialism: China and Eastern Europe*. Victor Nee and David Stark, eds. Pp. 1–31. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.
- Szelényi, Iván. 1988. *Socialist Entrepreneurs: Embourgeoisement in Rural Hungary*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Thelen, Tatjana. 2011. "Shortage, Fuzzy Property and Other Dead Ends in the Anthropological Analysis of (Post)socialism." *Critique of Anthropology* 31(1): 43–61.
- Yurchak, Alexei. 2006. *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.