UiT The Arctic University of Norway

Lo informal: Habaneros In-Between System and Struggle

Navigating Cuba´s Economy as a Möbius Strip

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Department of Social Anthropology

Faculty of Social Sciences

University of Tromsø

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Abstract

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, Cuba's economy has been virtually at a standstill, trapped in a persistent state of stagnation following the loss of subsidies from the Eastern Bloc. Without subsidies from the Soviet Union, new economic dynamics, such as global tourism and digitalization, have played a decisive role in shaping the population's economic practices in contemporary times. Scarcity has been an ongoing reality for many Cubans, and for the younger generation, profound shortages has characterized their entire lives. When the Covid-19 pandemic halted tourism overnight, the already weak formal system was further weakened, and the economic downturn reached a boiling point that reinforced the social and economic stratification of the island. Through ethnographic fieldwork in Havana, this study explores how *habaneros* in different social positions find ways to survive and secure social mobility when inflation has reached historic heights and over 10% of the population has left the country. The study argues for understanding Cuba's economy as a duality of formal and informal sectors—a "Möbius strip" of intertwined and dependent structures where the distinction between legal and illegal often becomes blurred and where informal networks become essential for covering basic needs. The ethnography seeks to understand how Cubans navigate the economic duality between formal and informal sectors to survive in a society characterized by persistent economic scarcity. The research questions include: How do Cubans use informal economic practices to meet daily needs? What role do social networks play in the distribution of resources? And how does digital development affect Cubans' economic adjustment strategies?

Through detailed ethnographic descriptions, and in dialogue with theoretical approaches, this study shows how Cubans with different backgrounds, based on their position in the labor market, continuously navigate a challenging economic landscape through adaptation, either by pilferage of state resources, touristic encounters, or technological innovations.

Acknowledgements

I vividly remember the summer before my first semester as a master's student at the University of Tromsø. After a typical Norwegian summer day in my hometown, Tønsberg, I recall how news channels on the TV screen covered widespread protests on the Cuban island. New questions about the country I thought I knew began to emerge, and even without knowing exactly what I was searching for, I knew I had to return to this so-called anti-imperialist island in the Caribbean peninsula. If we rewind to the spring of 2018, I landed in Havana for the first time, visiting the Cuban capital after spending a month on the nearby island of Hispaniola for a study trip. This was my first encounter with anthropology up close, as our study leader, social anthropologist Marit Brendbekken, introduced us to ethnographic methods. Marit's extensive field experience gave us students unique access to social life on Hispaniola – whether it was sugar plantations in border areas, voodoo rituals in Haiti, or economic elites of Santo Domingo. I look back on this experience as the spark that marked my first step into my anthropological journey. I would therefore like to extend a special thank you to Marit, who has also enthusiastically followed and supported my Cuban project. Thank you for being a key figure in laying the foundation for the anthropological curiosity and quest for knowledge that are reflected in this thesis.

The path from my initial fieldwork to completing this thesis has not been without challenges. At the end of this journey, I reflect on my anthropological formation as an open process, shaped by people in various contexts who have all influenced this journey. I would therefore like to start by extending a big thank you to the people at the University of Tromsø. First and foremost to my supervisor, Tommy Ose, who not only stepped in when my original supervisor, Matthew Magnani, returned home across the Atlantic (Magnani also deserves thanks for his guidance in the early stages of the project) but also provided positive support when, not once but twice, I chose to postpone my submission. Thank you for sticking with me. There are also a few others to whom I wish to extend special thanks: Bror Olsen, Jorunn Bræck Ramstad, Natalia Magnani, and, not least, my fellow anthropology students. However, the process underlying this completed work has taken shape not only through books, research articles, seminars, and lecture halls but also by the people in my close circles. I would like to extend a huge thank you to my dear Anniken, who became my girlfriend more or less around

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Chapter 1. Introducing *lo informal*

Introduction

During the global pandemic, on July 11, 2021, the Cuban population experienced a significant historical event as protests broke out throughout the island. What initially got sparked by local discontent in a neighborhood of Havana, amplified through social media, soon led to a rapidly expanded unrest among the population nationwide. The populace of the streets shouted, «*Patria y Vida*» (Homeland and Life») in unison, symbolically marking the break-up of Fidel Castro's revolutionary mantra, «*Patria o Muerte*» (Homeland or Death) (Sayre, 2021). According to Amnesty (2022), after decades of profound shortages, constant electrical blackouts, and the government's restrictive measures to "control" the spread of COVID-19 as well as the State consistently violating Cuba's rights to freedom of expression, the protesters demanded a changing course. However, the leading government replied with authoritative measures, leading to the detention of hundreds of people, increased means of surveillance, and cut off the population's internet access.

Less than a year later, I arrived in Cuba for fieldwork just a few months after the borders reopened. The lockdown devastated the island's economy, as the absence of tourism and the subsequent lack of foreign currencies led to economic stagnation, which, among other things, resulted in a significant migration crisis for Cuba (2022-2023). Cuban economist and demographer Juan Carlos Albizu-Campos (2024) estimates that the island's population has decreased by 18%, with most of the migrants joining the already significant U.S. diaspora, now totaling 2.7 million (Colomé, 2024).

For those still on the island, the voices that shook the nation on July 11 have yet to be fully acknowledged. Among those voices are many Cubans I encountered during fieldwork, who eventually became informants. Although they vary in positionality and life circumstances, they all struggle economically to satisfy basic needs for themselves and their families, and they are all deeply frustrated with the current political circumstances. Let me bring in the example of state employee Ramón:

I met Ramón on the first day of my fieldwork, when wandering through the streets of Havana. He approached me and grabbed me by the arm, smiling and asking: Anything I can do for you, sir? Like many other Cubans, Ramón approached tourists to make an extra income. For instance, he would suggest guiding tourists around the Old Town or taking them to a good restaurant. If the tourist needed a taxi or a place to stay, Ramón could help them out.

This could result in a tip in foreign currency, maybe another gift of sorts, a meal, or more importantly; if Ramón guided tourists to a restaurant, he earned a commission from the restaurant owner. If he had arranged with a taxi, the taxi driver would grant him a small cut.

Like many Cubans, Ramón struggled to make ends meet, this although he worked as a technician in the public health sector and received a state salary. Ramón used his spare time chasing tourists in the streets of Havana, this although (as he often said) he would prefer to spend his time with the family. But in a system where the formal economy fails to meet basic needs, Ramón was left with few other options than to find informal ways to feed his family, this although risking state persecution. In an interview later, Ramón expressed his despair in the following way:

> "This is poverty, this is misery, this is need! I want to get out of here! That's the only thing I ask God for before I die. Don't get me wrong, I love my country and culture… but the only thing that strikes me is the economy. The system is the problem. You work and work and work, and as the years go by, you see no future beyond what life gives you today. My wife and I have a son and a daughter together, but we cannot provide them with what they need. No matter how much I love my country, I want to leave. The only thing I want is for my children not to go through the same things I have so that they don't suffer what I have suffered. That they don't see what I have seen."

Ramón's frustration reflects a broader discontent that shivers among the hungry in the Cuban population: The formal economy fails to meet the population's basic needs, and Ramón and his family are not alone in facing these challenges. Like Ramón, 74% of all Cubans are employed in the state sector (Statista, 2024) and are paid in the national currency, the Cuban pesos. However, their state paid salaries are insufficient to cover basic living expenses, forcing most Cubans to rely on informal activities to supplement their income — an activity criminalized by the State. The informal activities are part of what Cubans refer to with the term *lo informal:*

The world of *lo informal* is what I will investigate throughout this thesis. *Lo informal* captures both the survival tactics of ordinary Cubans but also the simmering discontent that may challenge the political status quo. *Lo informal* refers to how Cubans navigate the challenges of making means meet ends and the relationships and networks involved. As Damián Fernández (2000, 108) notes; Cuban citizens create solutions to daily challenges by

relying on the point of departure that surrounds one's personal connection, where *lo informal* exists in everyday interactions, such as when a "…baker takes home some flour that was supposed to be distributed through the rationing system and sells it in the black market." Although penalized by the state and deemed embarrassing in the light of "official idioms" (the state's official narratives and symbolic expressions that seek to maintain authority and legitimacy in the population – kf. Michael Herzfeld 2005), such practices are not necessarily perceived by those involved as immoral acts. Instead, they are viewed as essential actions that individuals inquire about to cope with the challenges found in daily life. The Cuban world of *lo informal* provides the essential space for getting by in Cuba, a society marked by scarcity and internal restrictions.

One might say that the economic hardship that Cubans face continue to make the deficiencies of Cuba´s central plan economy more visible, not least in accordance with its dual monetary system which has created a gap between the national peso and the foreign US dollar (Ritter & Henken 2014, 210), and where today's inflation rates have drastically deepened this gap even further. Most people (like Ramón) are only able to access the former: Here it is essential to explain this contrast as Cuba operates with two currencies—Cuban pesos (CUP) and U.S. dollars (or their equivalent, the MLC – *moneda libremente convertible*, "freely convertible currency", which are dollar- denominated bank cards (Kunkel 2024, 69)[i] While state salaries are paid in Cuban pesos, the goods and services people need are increasingly priced in dollars, leaving most Cubans stuck in the peso economy without access to the hard currency required to purchase essential items. A food-rationing system embedded in the economy since the initial stages of Cuban socialism has effectively ground to a halt since the loss of Soviet subsidization and trading partners. This is also the case with service delivery within other critically important state-run institutions, like the health sector. People relying on the peso economy alone, without access to additional sources of supplementary income, are therefore in a "…desperate economic position and are at a below-subsistence level of income …[ ]… their very survival is in jeopardy" (Ritter & Henken 2014, 212). Most people rely on social connections, often linked to family members and friends abroad, for financial support or depend on the black market and related informal economic activities. This complex web of survival strategies, and the culture that sustain them, is known and locally understood as *lo informal*.

Lo informal as a research object: Examining the heartbeat of Cuban society

The Cuban-born political scientist and scholar of Latin American politics with extensive research on Cuban society, Damián Fernández (2000), moves beyond the distinction between formality and informality as sole economic concepts. Instead, he uses this dichotomy to uncover a dual reality that lies beneath Cuba's formal image as a socialist nation-state with a central plan economy. Férnandez argues that *lo informal* coexists as a central element in Cuban society: "Informality is everywhere. Its spaces are the home, the streets, the parks, and the locales of state agencies—anywhere individuals come together and form personal bonds that carry the cultural codes of 'lo informal'" (2000, 108).

In Fernández' analysis, he identifies how informal practices among the population express both a desire for a better future and a disillusionment with the unfulfilled promises of the 1959 Revolution. The informal sphere and its "culture of illegality and instrumentalism" (2000, 143) provide ordinary Cubans with a means of survival while fostering a culture of dissatisfaction with the Cuban state's failures. The widespread informal activity on Cuba reflects both economic necessity and the cultural norms embedded in the Cuban way of life:

On the one hand, *lo informal* reduces societal pressure by allowing people to channel their sentiments into daily survival rather than confronting "high" political issues head-on, as the average citizen "…who are constantly preoccupied with making ends meet have limited time, energy, and resources to engage in broader political concerns (Fernández 2000, 121). On the other hand, most Cubans are fully aware that any attempt to influence the political landscape is largely futile. In this regard, *lo informal* provides foundational support among ordinary Cubans through informal networks that create an emotional infrastructure, in Fernández terms, to relieve these existential pressures. However, I will underline that *lo informal* also involves the making of social networks – and a politics of affection - based on solidarity, trust and reciprocity among Cubans when confronted with governmental restrictions and repression.

These networks foster what James C. Scott (1990) terms "hidden transcripts"—spaces where the hopes, frustrations, and disappointments of thousands of individuals are shared privately – or something that takes place "offstage" in the sense of Goffman (1956, in Massoumi & Morgan 2024). These hidden transcripts may also serve as a bedrock for the cultural legitimization of informal practices, which also may influence future social movements and expressions of dissent (Fernández 2000,122). This can be seen in the 11 July

protests of 2021 that erupted the long-simmering discontent that had previously been contained within the realm of *lo informal*.

To further understand the economic difficulties Cubans colloquially face today and the practices people use to navigate these challenges found in daily life, it is crucial to highlight the 1990s 'Special Period,' a consequence of the Soviet Union collapse (Hernandez-Reguant, 2009). In this era, Cuba not only lost its primary economic lifeline, but the U.S embargo was also further tightened in the Helms- Burton Act (Bye 2020, 108)[ii] which are all key aspects to understanding Cuba´s contemporary socio-economic landscape. With shortages of food, fuel, and medicine, the informal economy became a crucial part of Cuban survival; this period shaped much of the economic infrastructure we see today, where informal activities, or *lo informal*, have become a central part of Cuba's contemporary economy, and in which Cubans find themselves within a system that often demands breaking or bending the rules and laws to get by.

Relevance & Significance of Research

The lack of ethnographic research into informal activities has left a significant gap in understanding how the Cuban economy operates beneath the surface - beyond what classical economic analysis and statistics typically capture. Fernández (2000, vii) questions general trends in the scholarly literature on Cuban society; especially that the political and the social systems are presented as detached from one another, and that Cuba is portrayed as far more 'formal' than his observations suggest. Archibald Ritter, an economist who has researched Cuba's development policy since the 1970s, concludes that the material of ethnographic research and qualitative analysis that addresses informal aspects of the Cuban economy in depth, is very limited (Ritter & Henken 2014, 9). For instance, he emphasizes that the official economic statistics is misleading, and that the official figures on economic offenses (regarding "informal activities") during Fidel Castro's rule have been underreported, and almost completely removed from the official statistics and figures, and that this creates a misleading picture of the reality regarding economic practices on the island.

> "Cuba's official economy—along with official Cuban economic statistics—was partly illusory, and the underground, informal, or "second" economy was an important component of Cuba's real economy, the one that most people relied on to make ends meet" (Ritter & Henken 2014, 203).

Although the Cuban state claimed that economic crime had been virtually eradicated, many Cubans self-reported participation in various forms of illegal economic activity. For them, these actions were not necessarily ethically problematic but rather necessary means to survive in a system where the official channels often do not cover basic needs.

Norwegian anthropologist Ståle Wig's (2020) PhD thesis, drawing on 20 months of fieldwork studying Cuba's market reforms, offers a unique and fresh perspective on the Cuban situation, contributing to this discussion. Building on this - and seeking to contribute to the closing of the gap previously mentioned - my thesis aims to provide a detailed ethnographic examination of how Cubans navigate the blurred boundaries between formal and informal economic activities.

Research Question

During my initial fieldwork, I found myself sitting on one of the many rooftops of Havana, sharing a cheap variant of home-distilled rum with one of my informants while observing the noisy, dimly lit street below. Frequent electricity shortages plunged the streets into darkness—a common occurrence in Havana. In a cynical tone, my informant shared a sentiment that has since stayed with me: “We all sail in the same pond, but we all move at different paces,” he remarked, gesturing toward the bustling people below.

His statement, though simple, was profound. Regardless of their social position, all Cubans face many of the same overarching challenges: navigating scarcity, crumbling state institutions, and a rigid legal apparatus. However, the strategies for survival are diverse: “Everybody copes in their own way,” he added, “but we all rely on lo informal.” He explained further that one’s education, professional role or formal employment are not necessarily the key to survival or to social mobility. Instead, social networks, whether local or connected to the Cuban diaspora, are far more critical. “Who you know is who you are,” he emphasized, asserting that personal connections are key to survival - and for the few: social mobility. This anecdote above serves as an entry point into the core research issue of this thesis:

How do Cubans navigate the blurred lines between formal and informal economic practices to secure survival and promote social mobility?

Ethnographically, I will focus on how Cubans, who are differently positioned within the labor market, navigate government restrictions and scarcity using informal economic practices, social networks, and technological innovations. The aim is to investigate how different strategies help people cope with the challenges of everyday life in a politically and economically strictly regulated system. Through their daily navigations, the complexity of the Cuban economy comes to light, revealing the intricate balance between formal structures and the informal networks upon which Cubans rely to get by.

The ethnographic research ultimately leads to a theoretically oriented discussion regarding the ways in which the formal and informal economies are interdependent and intertwined, and how this interplay reflects the broader structural challenges Cuba faces in response to both global and internal economic and political forces.

Outline of Thesis

In the first chapter, we touched upon the concept of lo informal as a central element in Cuban society, and I highlighted it as central among the population for shaping everyday life and acting as a form of resilience within the economic landscape.

Chapter 2 presents the theoretical and methodological framework for the study. The theoretical framework lays the groundwork for understanding economic activity in Havana as practices embedded in complex social relations, cultural norms, and historical contexts. Theories about reciprocity, social networks, and improvisation shed light on how the informants, given different positions in the labor market, navigate scarcity to get by or achieve social mobility. Methodologically, I outline the qualitative approach and ethnographic methods in use. Special considerations are given to research ethics in a politically challenging field situation, drawing on experiences from other researchers in both Cuban and comparative field contexts.

Chapter 3 provides a historical review to contextualize Cuba's economic development from the revolution in 1959 to the present day. Here, my emphasis is on the period and the

aftermath of the era locally known as "the special era of time in peace," which laid the foundation for the growth of the informal economy in today's Cuba.

Chapter 4 explores how *lo informal* plays out in streets, houses, and in the black market and officially sanctioned stores. The ethnography aims to map various positions in the labor market, both formal and informal, and the challenges that the dual currency system pose to Cubans. This will begin to shed light on the Cuban culture of *lo informal* as a source of social mobility, economic stability, and innovation.

Chapter 5 delves into how Cuban official restrictions, impositions and law not only enforce regulations but also create conditions for informal economic activity. We follow the stories of Geraldo, a pre-academic, and Javiero, a state-employed baker, to understand the complexities of formal and informal economic activities.

Chapter 6 explores the economic and social dynamics that arose due to the introduction of the tourism industry and how both legal and illegal actors derive a financial lifeline from foreign visitors, by delving into the lives of Manuel, the *cuentapropista* (“non-state” worker) and the *jinetero*s (informal workers) Carlos and Ricardo. I also examine how tourism helps create and maintain social networks beyond simple economic transactions.

Chapter 7 focuses on Cuba's recent digital development and how technological innovation has created new opportunities and layers of the informal economy. This extended case illustrates how the Cuban government has “adopted” the once illegal underground intranet SNET.

Chapter 8 ties together the findings from the ethnographic chapters and discuss these in the light of broader theoretical frameworks and research questions. The chapter also touches on shortcomings in the thesis and on proceedings.

Chapter 2. Theory and methodology

Introduction

The term “informal sectors” tend to evoke images of black or underground economies as breeding grounds of criminality where tax evasion, theft, prostitution, and drugs seem to flourish, often portrayed as spaces in the “shadows” or outposts of a society (kf. Bu et al. 2021). Therefore, it is perhaps not surprising that people quickly imagine the informal economic sphere as somewhat chaotic, in contrast to the "formal" economy, which is perceived to be under control. In a Cuban context, however, the informal economy represents a system of structured activities, social relations and networks that provide predictability – the opposite of chaos. These practices and norms form a culture that enables people to survive in a society where there is a persistent scarcity of resources.

In societies in which the formal economy is dominant (such as in industrialized nations with advanced economies, infrastructure and high standards of living), “informal economic sectors” largely consist of elements that are mainly associated with crime. However, in many parts of the world, especially regarding the Third World´s poor, informal practices have become a “safety-net” which emit a system in society where most people, or even the whole population, primarily act within (De Soto, 1988, 2-4) – something which precisely would be the case of Cuba (Fernándes 2000; Ritter & Henken 2014; Wig 2020). Within such circumstances, the underground or the informal economy is similar in many respects to the mainstream economy in Western societies: It involves employment in producing goods or services, which generates earned income; that is to say, activities that produce value-added and are conducted on a regular basis. In distinction to the official economy, however, such employment is neither registered, taxed, nor regulated; that is, not merely concealed from official statistics but conducted in violation of the tax laws, labor codes, and other regulations established by governments and trade unions (Weiss 1987, 218-219).

While these activities are illegal under Cuban law, it is noteworthy to add, as Ritter & Henken (2014) argues, that the Cuban case illustrates a different perception of the underground economy than the typical settings among Western nations. In Cuba, the informal or “legitimate underground economic activities” are critical in producing goods and services that the formal sector cannot provide sufficiently or affordably. Among most informal economic practices found in Cuban society (still criminalized by the State) involves the production of essential products or services “…by low-income people and for other low-

income people," which are of obvious importance to the overall functioning of Cuba's economy as a whole (Ritter & Henken 2014, 223). Conversely, people's supplementary incomes from the informal sector become vital for employees to continue their state-sector jobs, like Ramón as a health technician. In this way, the informal sector provides critical "support the much-touted "free and universal" health and educational system, the civil service, industry, and in effect most other parts of the socialist peso economy," as it makes people able to get by (Ritter & Henken 2014, 224).

Anthropological Research on Economic Informality

Since Keith Hart's (1973) seminal contribution to the concept of «informal sectors», based on his fieldwork research on economic activities in the urban context of Ghanian cities, the concept has stood out as an analytical lens that has been embraced in research within the branch of economic anthropology. Hart's work opted to extend Max Weber's (2013 [1864–1920]) theoretical concept of "rationalization," which suggest that the economic progress found in contemporary advanced societies is a structural outcome of the existence of modern states development of bureaucracy, efficiency, and formal institutions. While Weber acknowledged the existence of informal mechanisms, Hart (1973) filled this analytical gap of societal organization—presenting the "informal sector"— as a significant aspect of the economy, but which tends to operate outside the structures typically associated with rationalized bureaucratic economic life. Hart, contrary to observing "unemployment," rather observed individuals with "informal income opportunities", while empathizing the inability of prevailing economic models to account for a major part of the global workforce they alleged to define and explain (Hart 1973, 61-68).

De Soto also emphasized that terms like "unemployment" fall short in contexts where people must rely on informal work for survival, as formal systems often fail to meet basic needs. As De Soto himself succinctly put it during an interview: "If you don't make an income in the first month, you're dead in the second," highlighting how the concept of an "unemployed" sector becomes misleading in such environments where informal activities are a critical means of survival (De Soto, 2012).

Since Hart's work, studies on informality have expanded across disciplines, with three main approaches emerging: the dualist, viewing informal and formal economies as distinct; the legalist, focusing on informality as a response to bureaucratic constraints; and the

substantivist, which sees informality embedded in social and cultural structures (Wilson 2011, 205-206). However, the broad use of "informality" has not been let out of criticism. While some argue that the concept has become overly broad and imprecise, scholars like Sinha and Kanbur (2012, 91) highlight a general lack of coherence in the literature on informality. This aligns with Polese's (2023, 332-235) observation of a 'snowball effect,' where the term's popularity has led to increasingly broad applications, diluting its original meaning. Even Hart has critiqued the concept's overuse, suggesting it may lose its usefulness when most of the economy is considered "informal". However, Hart (1985:54) still emphasizes that "formal" and "informal" sectors in the economy continue to be a social phenomenon that is "real enough and of some antiquity". This notion is further supported by a broad consensus among scholars who continue to emphasize the need for discourse on informality, despite the challenges in defining and quantifying its economic categories (Cities Allience/UN-Habitat 2021, 7).

Anthropological Perspectives on Informal Economies in Post-Socialist Contexts

In post-socialist societies, anthropological studies of informal economies have shed new light on how informal practices can be explored as direct results of contemporary political and economic changes rather than as remnants of previous economic systems or early precursors to a fully developed market economy. In contrast to the normative perspectives that often see informal economies as "pathological deviations" from the ideal of a transparent market economy (Hasty 2005; Stan 2012,65), anthropologists such as Sabina Stan, Caroline Humphrey, and Katherine Verdery have argued that informal exchanges in post-socialist societies are integral parts of today's social and economic landscape, shaped by the state's gradual withdrawal from direct control over the economy (Stan, 2012, 65-66).

Verdery emphasizes that post-socialist societies must be understood through the particular structures resulting from centrally planned economies and how these systems influence the emergence of informal practices (Verdery 1996, 27-28). Economic analyses of Cuba support this view, as Ritter and Henken (2014, 205) highlight how explicit decisions within the internal policy framework have produced "structural, monetary, and institutional imbalances," and become central to the creation of an economic environment in which citizens, as a means all down to simple survival, are compelled to operate "outside the letter and spirit of the law" (Ritter & Henken 2014, 204-205). Furthermore, they point out that economic illegalities and

the underground economy in Cuba are a significantly rooted in deep historical processes (Ritter & Henken 2014, 208). In the same vein of understanding informal economies as "a direct consequence of current political and economic transformations," Sabina Stan (2012, 65) points out that normative approaches often categorize informal economies as either relics from state-controlled bureaucracies or as precursors to a "future" market-economy. Similarly, Slavoj Žižek warns against a reductionist portrayal of economic systems in post-socialist countries. After Fidel Castro's death, Žižek commented on how Western media often ask questions like "Will Cuba become capitalist?" which he considers to be a wrong question to stress. According to Žižek, Cuba´s economic challenges are woven into the social fabric of society, as he describes it, a society "without a new model for social practice," which results in a state where economic stagnation is met with the maintenance of symbolic ideals through self-denial rather than through economic renewal (Žižek, 2016).

A central starting point for this analysis, in line with Stan (2012, 66), is the perspective that all exchanges, whether commodities or gifts, always contain an element of calculation and that all market exchanges are deeply rooted in social relations, in line with Polanyi's concept of "embeddedness." As an analytical starting point, this aligned with David Graeber's (2001, 220-221) approach of viewing reciprocity as a "matter of degree" rather than a fixed form. "Open networks," which involve ongoing mutual commitment, may become more closed as the balance is established, while closed exchanges may open as the relationship develops. In this way, the analysis focuses on how informal exchanges adapt to and shape state-society relations. Through a historical and ethnographically oriented approach, as recommended in Caribbean anthropological research (Mintz and Price 1976; Palmié 1995, 2002), the study will explore how these informal exchanges function as a sustainable and adaptable practice that responds to contemporary economic and political realities.

Improvisational survivalism

To address some of the critiques of the traditional dichotomy between formal and informal economies, scholars like James Ferguson (2020) have proposed alternative frameworks, which I find particularly relevant for understanding the Cuban economy. Ferguson suggests that "improvisational survivalism" more accurately reflects the precarious and flexible nature of economic life in many developing contexts. Rather than viewing individuals solely as "informal" entrepreneurs, "improvisational survivalism" emphasizes the nature of how people

navigate daily survival through adaptive strategies which often heavily advocates for the reliance on social networks to access scarce resources (Ferguson 2020, 93-94). I find this perspective particularly relevant in a Cuban context, where informal economic practices are constituting adapting means of navigating shortages and state-imposed constraints in an improvisational manner. As portrayed by Mesa-Lago & Pérez-López (2013, 1), Cuba's economic trajectory resembles a pendulum swinging between pragmatic and idealist decisions since 1959, «...giving rise to cycles of different intensity and length that have alternated from the movement toward or away from the market". Accordingly, these shifts have outplayed by a political logic rather than an economic logic, where the emergence of independent economic actors, always, has been regarded by the Cuban state as a high risk that potentially could lead to weakening their control (Mesa-Lago & Pérez-López, 2013, 2-3). Consequently, the Cuban population has responded to these cyclical changes with resilience and adaptation.

In Cuba, where state control over formal economic activities is strict, and shortages are pervasive, improvisational survivalism aptly describes much of Cuban economic practices. Like in Ferguson's study of Southern Africa, Cubans rely on flexible, informal strategies to secure necessities such as food, medicine, and other essential goods. In Cuba, the activities—known locally as *luchar* (to struggle), *inventar* (to invent) and *resolver* (to solve)—are indispensable for coping with the inefficiencies and chronic shortages within the formal economy. It is a matter of sheer survival.

Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2016, 86) highlights that survival depends on constant improvisation in economies where informality dominates. As Eriksen points out, informal economies are not confined to the Global South. Still, their pervasiveness takes on a different scale and character in regions with weak states and the failings of formal institutions. In highly informalized contexts, such as urban areas in Africa—or in this case, Cuba—entire systems of material reproduction and social life operate on informal networks. For Cubans, as for many in the Global South, everyday survival hinges on adaptability and the ability to navigate daily life through informal channels. Eriksen's observations mirror the reality in Cuba, where individuals often find themselves improvising daily to bridge the gap left by formal state services. Whether through cultivating small home gardens, informal bartering, or engaging in minor trades like moonlighting as taxi drivers, the Cuban population has developed a resilient form of survivalism. This flexibility is emblematic of the wider "improvisational survivalism" that defines life in heavily informalized economies. As Eriksen notes, even when essential resources are absent—electricity, water, or fuel—people will

always find ways to get by, tapping into their social networks or finding temporary solutions to survive or improve their living circumstances.

The intertwining of "formal" and "informal"

As Hart underscores, "Economic theory proceeds by means of abstraction: but it is as well to consider from time to time what it has left out," and further asserts that "…the informal economy does not exist in any empirical sense; it is a way of contrasting some phenomena with what we imagine constitutes the orthodox core of our own economy" (Hart 1985, 57).

In Cuba, these economic sectors are often intertwined and constantly in motion. While the informal sector becomes necessary to compensate for the inefficiencies of the formal economy, the formal structure controls how the unfolding takes place through *lo informal*.

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatarri´s (1987 [1980]) concepts of vertical arborescent and horizontal rhizomatic structures may serve as a metaphor concerning the unfolding of and weaving of *lo informal* and *lo formal* in Cuba. (Here, *lo formal* will refer to state-led economic arrangements, governmental regulations, state structures, legal impositions,). Arborescent structures are understood as hierarchical systems with a fixed center and branching hierarchies – for me a metaphor for the formal economy in Cuba, which is centralized and controlled by the state. On the other hand, the rhizomatic structure represents the informal economy, which is network-based, decentralized, fluid, and operates outside the total control of the state, and with no fixed center. A rhizome "…connects any point to any other point" (Deleuze & Guattari 1987 [1980], 21). By thinking "through" these concepts, an alternative way of describing forms of organization and thinking is introduced, in contrast to the more classic substantivist-formalist anthropological framework for economic analysis. In Cuba, these structures are not entirely separate but are deeply intertwined and rooted in a context of scarcity shaped by both internal processes (the economic policies of the Cuban Communist Party) and external forces (US-led economic embargoes, the disappearing Soviet Union support, now the advent of tourism). Together, they create diverse conditions for social and economic activity on a local level.

Another metaphor is also relevant: I look at the dichotomy of informal and formal economic practices, theoretically, as a Möbius strip[iii]: a single surface with only one side, a continuous deformation symbolizing how Cuba's formal and informal economies are not separate entities but part of the same continuum. Just as one can move along the surface of a

Möbius strip and seamlessly shift from one "side" to another without crossing an edge, Cubans navigate between formal and informal economic activities fluidly, often without clear distinctions. The Möbius strip illustrates this dynamic existence's complex and fluid nature, where individuals are involved in formal work while relying on informal activities for survival and vice versa. As Hart (1973) points out, the relationship between economic activity and government regulation is not linear or clearly defined but rather in a constant state of negotiation and change. The Möbius strip illustrates how formal and informal systems are significantly linked and intertwined while reflecting a continuous cycle that directs several premises of the Cuban economy as a whole.

Furthermore, I build on Eric Wolf's (2013) insights about how informal activities operate within "complex societies", and how social network's structure economic activity in ways formal institutions often do not capture. This provides a broader perspective on the informal economy, not only as a form of economic survival but as an arena for social relations and cultural dynamics, in line with Karl Polanyi's (2001) concept of economic activity as socially embedded. I also draw on David Graeber's work (2001), which builds on Marcel Mauss' (1990 [1925]) work on the reciprocal nature of gift exchange to theoretically explore how social relationships based on open-ended reciprocity are central to understanding informal networks in societies such as Cuba, where such relationships can be decisive for everything from access to goods to social mobility. I build on anthropological work on social networks and exchange theory to strengthen my analytical framework and further explore my empirical findings.

As a general framework, these theoretical perspectives help to advance a notion of understanding how Cubans navigate everyday life using social networks. They focus on how Cuban economic life adapts through informal means within a constrained environment. On this account, I have immersed myself in the daily lives of various Cubans, integrating with informants in different sectors of the economy. Extending my own findings through this theoretical framework has allowed me to contextualize these personal experiences as part of Cuba's cultural dimension of *lo informal*, illustrating how informal economic practices are not simply a reaction to scarcity but an integral part of Cuban social fabric.

Methodology and Ethnographic Approach

Introduction

Methodologically speaking, this study employs a qualitative research design and is inductively oriented. Any qualitatively oriented researcher must, according to Cresswell & Cresswell (2018:4) make decisions regarding the choices of methods and sampling. Qualitative researchers search for the meaning ascribed to human action (Schwandt, 2001) and ask open-ended questions about phenomena as they occur in context, rather than by testing predetermined hypotheses. As an anthropologist, I am principally oriented towards understanding the actor's point of view (Barth 1981) and that meaning and interpretations arise out of - and build from - social contexts (Schweizer, 1998). I move from particular instances to more generalizable themes in my interpretations of what is *lo informal* in the Cuban setting. As an anthropologist, I generate data from experiences in the course of fieldwork. I rely on participant observation and informal and semi-structured interviews as my primary methods. Methods are: "…techniques for gathering evidence" (Harding, 1987, p. 2), or "…procedures, tools and techniques" of research (Schwandt, 2001, p. 158).

Methodological implications of "the presence of the Cuban state": Adopting a "hidden fieldwork approach"

Conducting anthropological fieldwork can sometimes involve significant risks and potential dangers for all the actors involved. Questions concerning access to the field, sampling, and which methods to employ when carrying out empirical research in Cuba, were far from straight forward undertakings for me, and needed serious considerations both before and during my fieldwork. Given the political sensitivity of my research, I decided to carry out a "hidden fieldwork," that is, hidden to the Cuban authorities, but not to Cuban key informants. I opted for a situation in which I could reach a level of openness, trust and confidence with a few key informants and that otherwise, I would rely on participant observation (with stress put on observation). My hidden fieldwork approach was not only a matter of personal safety but also a strategy to avoid attracting undue from state actors and protect informants from persecution. Hence, research ethical considerations impacted and limited this study, both initially when planning this study, when carrying out fieldwork, and when writing this thesis.

In Havana's field site, many topics are considered politically or socially sensitive, which further demands careful reflections and research ethical considerations before and during the active fieldwork and in the writing process. As Hope Bastian points out,

> “In a society where change comes from above and the state is positioned as the defender of social, economic, gender, and racial equality, it is at best — "bad form" to produce research that shows a social reality anything but perfectly equal. To collect information and talk about unsavory things like inequalities is seen by some as a threat to the system, which could possibly provide ammunition to the enemy and discredit the Revolution. This perspective has also made it difficult for Cuban academics interested in doing this research.” (Bastian 2016: 8)

Anthropologist Frank Pieke (2002) emphasizes that the state in socialist and post-socialist societies often manifests in many forms and is present in nearly every event or circumstance, leading to a research environment filled with unique challenges, dilemmas, and strategies central to conducting fieldwork in these contexts. The state's presence may be visible, symbolized in the physical landscape, or subtler forms of surveillance and control. Michael Gentile (2013) describes how authoritarian regimes, particularly in communist and post-communist countries, often operate through a system known locally as "the organ," a network of surveillance, espionage, and repression initially modeled after the Soviet Union. Cuba, closely aligned with the Soviet Union during the Cold War, mirrored its governance structure, including establishing a secret service (DGI) modeled on Soviet intelligence, with direct KGB involvement (Britannica: 2016). Gentile (2013) warns researchers in such environments to be acutely aware of the close relationship between science and politics. Being a foreign researcher in a Cuban fieldwork setting can make one particularly vulnerable to the state's "organ," leading to suspicion or, in the worst case, being viewed as a threat.

Katherine Hirschfeld's (2007) experience in Cuba illustrates this well. She arrived in Cuba as a research field, intending to document the island's impressive achievements in social medicine, including the alleged eradication of dengue fever. However, six months into the fieldwork, she was hospitalized with, precisely, dengue fever. During her hospital stay, she saw thousands of locals suffering from the same disease, which stood in stark contrast to both the academic literature and her earlier findings, based on formal interviews with Cuban doctors and government officials. The experience led, as Hirschfeld describes, to a more critical review of her original findings and methodological approach (Hirschfeld 2007, 1-3). Hirschfeld began to focus on gathering empirical conductions through daily conversations "in the shadows" with people connected to the hospital. What followed were several unsettling

visits from Cuban security officers questioning her political views and research agenda—something that had been absent before her hospital visit.

Norwegian anthropologist Ståle Wig had a similar encounter with Cuba's "organ" during his fieldwork on the island, where he studied market development following government reforms. He found that "higher ups" in the political system suddenly halted his original research plan, which an academic institution had initially approved. Afterward, he began noticing signs of surveillance, such as strange sounds during phone calls to Europe (Wig 2022,189-192), in which Gentile (2013, 5) warns “technical imperfections (through phone-calls) may occasionally uncover tapping”. According to Gentile (2013), surveillance in such contexts is not only a direct threat but also serves as a tactic to place psychological pressure on the researcher by creating a constant feeling of being watched. This aligns with the experiences of a master's student from a Norwegian university (UiB) whom an unknown police officer suddenly addressed her by name during fieldwork in Havana. "I had an uncomfortable feeling that I was being watched," she writes (Nymo 2018, 21).

Such episodes illustrate state surveillance's many hidden and overt facets in a Cuban fieldwork setting, which presents some distinctive challenges for researchers working in these environments. In politically sensitive contexts like Cuba, hidden fieldwork offers certain advantages, particularly when gathering genuine data that might otherwise be inaccessible. As Hirschfeld (2007) argues, informal data collection methods are critical for obtaining reliable information in a Cuban context. She explains that in many cases, fieldwork research in Cuba (in the subfield of medical anthropology and public health studies) tends to be conducted over short periods and is often mediated through government-provided translators or guides, leading to highly inaccurate conclusions. Hirschfeld (2007, 4) further raises concerns about the difficulties in obtaining trustworthy data through formalized interviews, which also sheds some light on the considerable risks to both the researcher and participants:

> “Unfortunately, research exploring negative aspects of the Cuban healthcare system cannot be undertaken with methodological rigor. Public criticism of the government is a crime in Cuba, and penalties are severe. Formally eliciting critical narratives about healthcare would be viewed as a criminal act both for me as a researcher and for people who spoke openly with me. As a result, it can be very difficult for foreign researchers or other outsiders to perceive popular dissatisfaction, and few Cubans are willing to discuss dynamics of power and social control in a forthright manner.

> Conversations on these topics can be quite cryptic, and meanings are deliberately obscured" (Hirschfeld 2007, 3).

Interactions between foreign researchers and local individuals are considered sensitive or potentially threatening by those in power, which here clearly includes the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC). As in the case of Cuba, these tensions often follow broader patterns of global political dynamics, particularly regarding the involvement of antagonistic nation-states (Ref; the United States). Such global relationships also shape aspects of local everyday life, where the anthropologist's encounter with the governing authorities can lead to suspicion, accusations, and, in some cases, formal punishments. When planning my fieldwork, I took this into consideration.

The state & social environment: on hidden fieldwork and cultural intimacy

The term "hidden fieldwork" can be closely linked to "cultural intimacy" as a methodological approach within anthropology. While hidden fieldwork allows researchers to navigate politically sensitive environments with minimal visibility, reducing risks and ensuring more accurate data collection, cultural intimacy provides a lens to understand the nuanced relationships between individuals and the state—aimed at uncovering the private, often hidden, aspects of ordinary daily life.

Herzfeld (2005) introduces "cultural intimacy" as a framework to understand how individuals engage with state-imposed ideas in nuanced ways, often revealing contradictions that challenge yet paradoxically reaffirm state authority (Herzfeld, 2005:1-2). Using "cultural intimacy" as a methodological tool requires a fieldwork approach that builds deep relationships with informants and thus provides access to the personal and private spheres where these tensions play out (Herzfeld 2005, 4). Cultural intimacy, therefore, involves recognizing those aspects of cultural identity that Herzfeld argues involves

> "…the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality, the familiarity with the bases of power that may at one moment

> assure the disenfranchised a degree of creative irreverence and at the next moment reinforce the effectiveness of intimidation" (Herzfeld 2005, 3).

By blending into informal, everyday life, researchers can observe the tensions, contradictions, and unspoken realities beneath official narratives' surface. He further argues for an anthropological account that should not treat formal organizations like the nation-state as a distant or hostile force in people's everyday lives but rather as integral aspects of social life. Cultural intimacy emphasizes how people engage with and reinterpret state-imposed ideas, revealing contradictions and ironies that undermine, yet paradoxically reaffirm, state authority (Herzfeld 2005, 1-2). Herzfeld's idea of "disemia" contrasts the official, state-sanctioned forms of cultural expression with the vernacular, private expressions in everyday life. The vernacular, often rooted in informal practices, can challenge and discredit the official representations (Herzfeld 2005, 14-15), and this is where cultural intimacy proves to be essential: it highlights how the public and private spheres of life intersect, how individuals adapt official narratives for personal purposes, and how these adaptations can expose the dissonance between the state's idealized identity and people's lived realities (Herzfeld 2005, 3-4). Herzfeld argues for an anthropological account that avoids perceiving the nation-state as distant or hostile forces in people's everyday lives but rather as integral aspects of a "common ground," where these structures of power can be more fluid – and this is where the concept of "cultural intimacy" becomes central. This perspective highlights why anthropological research can be particularly advantageous; our long-term fieldwork often grants access to sites of social intimacy, allowing us to observe and understand how individuals interact with state structures in more nuanced and personal ways (Herzfeld 2005, 4).

Shifting roles – adapting for access and trust

Initially, my plan involved enrolling in a Cuban university as a student. In this manner, I could be granted a long-term visa, build on my Spanish skills, and get access to a specific field context. My role as a student – and the task of getting to know Cuba as a student – would not raise any eyebrows; many foreign students do enroll for a semester learning Spanish. However, first upon arrival, I became aware that the subjects and classes intended for international students were terminated due to the pandemic. I arrived at the enrollment office, which previously had a well-known practice of accepting foreign students in Spanish, where participants can sign up "on the first Monday of every month," as I was told. Anyway, as I soon learned, the program was closed indefinitely, which led to a change of strategy and the necessity to return to the field again later. Hence, a long-term visa was out of sight, and my role in the field less obvious. I decided to carry out fieldwork during two periods: The fieldwork lasted four months, divided into two periods in 2022 and 2023 (from March to May).

Regarding my role in the field, my options were to stick to a narrative in which I was a backpacker tourist who really liked Cuba and who travelled Latin America, this especially in bypassing; if people who were strangers asked me. In the neighbourhoods where I conducted participant observation, I told that I was a student without elaborating further. In more intimate settings, I related that I was conducting fieldwork and that I was a student of social anthropology. I improvised on these roles depending on context and level of trust.

Data collection methods and issues regarding sampling

During fieldwork, I used a combination of participant observation and semi-structured interviews, which granted a flexible, methodical approach where I could get involved in Havana's daily life and explore informants' experiences regarding informal practice.

I lived in the same *casa popular* (private accommodation*)* during both of my fieldwork stays, which was valuable in that it provided me with insight into the life of a *cuentapropista* (self-employed small business owner). I informed my host about my true mission from early on. In agreement with them, and for the sake of avoiding exposing them to risk, I came to rely on informants socially distant to my hosts' immediate family and friends: Those who indeed were closest to me personally, and who became friends, do not figure

directly in this thesis, although the many conversations I have had with them were informative.

The fieldwork experience of everyday life in Havana was a continuous interaction with the social surroundings, and participant observation was a crucial part of the methodological process. For instance, the streets and nearby neighborhoods were places where smaller and larger acquaintances were allowed to be made, which gave rise to several empirical findings and investigations. When getting acquainted with someone, I slowly worked my way «snowball-wise» into networks of relationships and activities through which *lo informal* manifests itself. After several weeks, the local population of these areas/or neighborhoods got used to my reappearance and represented the "fieldsite" where I spent the most time. Here, I noticed that my positionality as a "European backpacker tourist" (and hence, “rich”) became a less visible identical marker in the public, in contrast to other locations, like the inner city center of Havana, where locals and foreigners often intermingle in a structured economic-driven context, which could also be understood as the heart of informal tourism activity in the former metropolis capital in the Caribbean peninsula. Observations and fieldwork took place daily, while the interviews mainly took place in the second field period when I had built enough trust to conduct the interviews in safe, private surroundings.

Doing fieldwork across two periods did turn out valuable; it helped me to prepare more strategically for the data collection in the second period. In times of the interim, I turned my focus to building on previous experiences, asking new questions, reformulating my basic research question, critically examining previous findings, and advancing the thesis direction. I also maintained regular contact with most of the main informants, strengthening our relationships from a distance, likewise, I was able to acquire insight into the changes (and absence of changes) over a longer timeframe than initially planned. This also proved valuable in developing an economic understanding, as well, as my fieldwork separation gave me a clear sense of how quickly economic conditions were deteriorating. (For instance, comparing the exchange rate when I first arrived (70 pesos to the U.S dollar and when I returned one year onwards, increasingly reached 250 pesos a dollar, while nearing 300 on the time of departure).

Refining research direction

In the course of fieldwork, I had to broaden my research question, from the initial, planned and sharpened research on *lo informal* in the field of digital development, social media and technology, to become an exploration of *lo informal* across different sectors of economic activity. This change was principally due to research ethical considerations, and not a question concerning access *per se*. I understood quickly that if I focused intensively on a handful of informants only, all of whom were very deeply engaged in digital development and Internet access, both the informants could potentially receive reluctant from Cuban officialdom and 'the organ' mentioned previously. I considered the danger of exposure and subsequent state persecution for all involved. Hence, by broadening the research focus and by choosing informants distant to each other socially both in terms of positionality, relationships, and type of activity related to *lo informal*, I was on safer grounds both in the field and when writing this thesis.

Second fieldwork period: Conducting semi-formal interviews

This thesis utilizes eight semi-formal interviews with five key informants who formed a part of the primary basis for the analysis. Also here I selected informants which are, socially speaking, distant to each other and distant to my hosts in the *casa particular* where I lived. The interview sessions always took place in private settings and secured environments, where the median time-length of the interviews settled on 1-to-2-hour long sessions. The "raw data" that originates from these interviews, (all conducted in a semi-structured manner), have been recorded, transcribed and analyzed thematically. This methodological approach gave room to explore the informants' experiences in depth, while, at the same time, the conversations could follow up and cover a passage with central themes. Estimates briefly counts well above 60.000 words of transcribed material, which was a heavy intellectual challenge of thematic analysis, but not least, which required a disciplined approach to repetitive work over a longer period.

Voice recordings and data safety

I was able to cautiously ensure data collection through voice recordings, which also allowed me to be fully present in the conversation with my informant without disturbing notetaking. It is essential to note that the files were stored strategically due to a strict research ethical action plan to ensure anonymity and access to the research material. The interviewees were fully

aware of my research undertaking and agreed to voice recording.

In the preparations for fieldwork in Cuba, in line with Gentile's (2013, 6) cautions about information in the face of digital technology, I chose to take with me only a factory-reset older P.C. without any forms of personal content as my primary writing tool, this also included to not bring physical articles, paperwork, or other sources that could be connected to the research project or somewhat deemed as "politically offensive." The computer was never connected to the internet during my stay, which might be of particular importance in a Cuban context, where any form of internet access to the "open web" is controlled and operated through the state company (ETECSA) monopoly, where any form of internet access, (without the use of a VPN), poses a potential risk of surveillance, especially if sensitive information were to be sent or received. From early on, I experienced that some informants specified that they did not want any form of contact via ordinary text messages but only through a medium with end-to-end encrypted message functions. However, as my P.C. served as my primary tool for note-taking, journaling, and storage of empirical findings (to name a few), it also entailed a set of ethical considerations and security measures to reduce risk and minimize confrontations of Cuba's «organ,» likewise to handle research material linked to politically sensitive topics. Essentially, this involved implementing strategic mitigating measures such as extensive password security and the use of external storage devices (USB) which ensured that all sensitive information was kept hidden, safe and protected, both during and in the process of departure. Security around the storage of data during the actual fieldwork was followed by a "precautionary" principle, where further mitigating measures were reinforced by writing in Norwegian and not leaving information that could be linked to any of the informants. All information was stored externally via the use of (USB), where all of the research material was stored within separate password-protected folders (furthermore, among several "fake" folders to obscure and make them "blend" in to minimize as many traces of suspicion as possible (in a worst-case scenario).

Anonymization

For research ethical reasons, when doing research and when writing my thesis, I have had to “decontextualize” my informants and hide part of my own discovery procedure; how I came to know them and also aspects of their participation in *lo informal*. I have had to either occlude or omit large amounts of detailed social data regarding kinship, family, *compadrazgo* (ritual kinship), friendship, and other important relationships of trust and reciprocity, from

which networks of *lo informal* develops. For the sake of protecting key informants from possible persecution, I had to practice strict anonymization of key informants in my writing, stripping them of many socially recognizable traits and relationships. Anonymity has been ensured by using pseudonyms and obscuring tactics throughout the analysis. As Gentile (2013, 427) highlights, in spaces of "authoritarian regimes," the procedure of censorship of informants " is not just matter of protecting these persons' integrity; their personal safety is at stake." Sharing a short section from a semi-structural, voice recorded, interview, echoing these warnings: "Remember that every word I say here can put me in jail." For this reason, my presentation of informants at times tends to appear somewhat «atomized», something which is a conscious choice. This is no doubt a limitation to this study and makes the justification of data somewhat problematic, given that the exposure of how I have built up data from the particular to the general becomes somewhat occluded. Hence, the sampling utilized when writing this thesis, does not reflect the actual scope of data and information I possess and from which I build more general themes and interpretations.

Validating findings

The interpretation of data also takes place in dialogue with prior anthropological research findings and overall research on Cuba and the Caribbean region. To give but an example: When in Cuba, I observed and engaged with what people did do, for instance, selling food illegally in the streets, as part of *lo informal*. When hearing someone shouting '*aqua aqua*' close by (literally meaning water), I knew from prior reading of research that this may symbolically imply a warning about arriving police. Later, when asking key informants about the incident, it was confirmed that this indeed was a warning and that there exists a local warning system protecting those participating in *lo informal*. The fact that street food selling is in principle illegal, was known to me previously through the scholarly literature on Cuban jurisdiction and laws. Again, when exploring this further, I compared statements and comments across different informants (for instance, the interviews). Hence, as an anthropologist, I rely on different sources – oral and written combined with observational - that I draw upon when interpreting, when building up from particular cases to general themes, and when justifying my findings.

Limitations to sampling – the gender issue and access to information not utilized

The semi-structural interviews are limited to male participants, which reflects issues regarding gender ideology and broader structural and cultural patterns of societal Cuba: In Cuban culture, there is a wellknown distinction between *casa* (the home) and *calle* (the street) according to the *machismo* gender ideology that pervades most of Latin American, and former Spanish Caribbean colonies such as Cuba (Gutman 1996; Brendbekken 2008). Härkönen (2016, 1) describes everyday life in Cuba as strongly gendered. Women who are "respectable" are primarily associated with *la casa* and reproductive labor, while men challenge and negotiate each others' male reputation (relative to each other) in the streets, in a never ending competetive climate (Wilson 1969). Men dominate the streets (Bye & Hoel 2014, 29). Being a womanizer is part of the game, and men jelously guard "their womenfolk" as against other men, to secure their own reputation. To be cuckolded is shameful and indicates a loss of positive, male reputation. The gender ideology did set certain limitations to my access to female informants, given that the gender ideology impacts the formation of relationship patterns.

However, Cuban women figure among the most educated women in the Caribbean and Latin American region, and women also may occupy a variety of formal jobs (Nunez Sarmiento 2005, 175), this although men are to a greater extent directly – and visibly - engaged in both formal and informal economic sectors, and "respectable" women's roles tend to be more centered around formal employment for those educated, and additionally care and household work.

One of the visible aspects at street level is that women play essential roles in generating hard currencies by approaching tourists offering companionship and, also sexual services in the role of *jineteras*. Widespread forms of prostitution (by *jineteras*) have become a central source of income in hard currency (Berg 2004). As a male foreigner and fieldworker, I decided to concentrate on male informants and avoid this part of *lo informal*. My take on female participation in *lo informal* is, hence, restricted.

I have also excluded informants with strong political connections to the formal system when carrying out fieldwork and when writing this thesis, this although I did had access. During fieldwork I met a state pensioner, an Angola veteran, and a man with lifelong service to the socialist revolution. Key informants assured it as unproblematic to interview them, but I refrained. This illustrates some of the ethical and practical challenges of fieldwork in politically sensitive environments.

Further notes on research ethical considerations

When we discuss the ethical role of an anthropologist, we are talking about the elementary responsibility to make various decisions within a framework that creates security, both for one's informants and oneself, and to produce our research within the spirit of good academic practice and knowledge production. It is crucial to consider our positionalities and ask critical questions about the ripple effect of our published research. Considering the specific case of Cuba, Ludlam (2008) argues that «any claim to objectivity or neutrality appears meaningless, as whatever is said about Cuba can be used as ammunition by one side or the other. Therefore, to a greater or lesser extent degree, anyone who lives in Cuba, visits the island, or writes about it is drawn into the battle lines" (Ludlam 2008; Bell 2013, 112). Regarding Cuba's central role in the Cold War period, Katherine Verdery (1996, 4) pointed out that the Cold War was more than just a political confrontation between the USA and the Soviet Union; it represented a "cognitive organization of the world," profoundly shaping each side's perceptions and practices regarding "the other." This influence extended into the academic realm, in that ideological hostility shaped knowledge production. As Kuehnast (2000, 102-103) illustrates within a U.S. academic setting of Soviet studies, archival material from the 1950s to 1980s reveals a strong "top-down" theoretical orientation in Communist system studies, with significant gaps in research on the everyday lives of ordinary Soviet citizens.

It is perhaps crucial to illuminate the need for an anthropological approach to fieldwork in such contexts, (particularly in times of global dynamics of political unrest). A locally anchored approach that carefully considers the specific realities of ordinary people's daily lives is essential, especially in post-socialist settings such as Cuba. As I ventured into the active field setting, ethical considerations were always on my mind.

The informants partaking in this thesis were all aware of the potential consequences of publication, and simultaneously, all expressed a desire to share their life situations. A key strategy related to the semi-structured interviews was to avoid sensitive topics unless the informants insisted on bringing them up. At the same time, it also illustrates that the researcher's role can be put at risk, as what an informant chooses to share, especially in more informal conversations. Therefore, "trust" has served as a critical methodological element within my network of informants.

Finally, despite the limitations I have outlined, I feel confident that this thesis's data collection might provide a useful window into the lived experiences of (male) Cubans navigating a complex, state-regulated economic system and make an ethnographic

contribution to the scholarly discussion surrounding Cuba in contemporary times

This research has been registered in SIKT, no. b52ec03b.

Chapter 3: Historical contextualization: adapting to changes & crisis

Introduction:

In the early 1960s, Cuba and its citizens experienced a radical societal shift, transforming both its internal and external political and economic structures. Following Fidel Castro's 1959 revolution, which led to the fall of the Batista regime, after the failed U.S. invasion at the Bay of Pigs in 1961, a central factor in Cuba's movement toward socialism, the nation formally declared itself a socialist state later that same year (C.L. Staten 2015, 97-119). By 1965, the Cuban Communist Party (PCC) became the sole ruling party and the island's encompassing institution of power. The government's adaptation of the Soviet system of a centrally planned economy further led to the State's total economic control on the means of production and distribution of resources, which characterized the economic and political structure on the island for several decades (Staten 2015).

One significant era stands out as particularly relevant to the significance of the economic practices that take place today: 'the Special Period' (Hernandez-Reguant 2009). Several new political and economic conditions were imposed by external forces - and given new dynamics within the global political power game framework - they began to emerge in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early nineties. As the world without the Soviets became a reality, it led to significant consequences and ripple effects for several socialist blocs, and Cuba, as part of the so-called global south, was no exception.

Today, Cuba has reached another low point in its «history of revolution» yet aggravated by global processes (Covid-19), and further affected the informal economic institution on the island. The lack of "hard currency," exacerbated by the absence of tourists during the pandemic, has led to a new situation characterized by extreme scarcity, which can evoke associations with the harsh realities that hit the island back during what is known locally as 'the Special Period'. Rooted in this "Special Period," contemporary challenges have further exposed the ineffectiveness of Cuba's formal structures of a state-centered economy and the distress and economic differences within the population.

To cope/counter this, the population relied on the socio-economic underground, the local world of *lo informal*, which facilitated new, capital-driven structures within the

contemporary economy in the face of new crises that Cubans affect Cubans' everyday lives. That said, we shall now move chronologically back to the revolution's early days before it led us through nationalization and the implementation of socialist economic reforms, as well as to the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the subsequent "Special Period" (Varas et. al. 2002). These are all historical eras where Cuba's economic and social landscape has undergone significant changes, forming deep structures that impact several aspects determining economic behavior and the formational patterns of social ties, from individuals to networks, and neighborhoods to crossing national borders, which informally connects the island - as *lo informal*.

The dawn of the revolutionary era – the initial stages of Cuba's socio-economic transformation

On December 2, 1956, Fidel Castro and his group of 81 men, including Che Guevara (who would go on to become a pop-cultural icon and a symbol of socialist and anti-imperialist movements), reached the western shores of Cuba with the vessel *Granma* (now the name representing the national newspaper), formally initiating July 26 Movement. Hidden in the Maestra mountains, the guerilla group did covert warfare before gaining its way to power two years later, on January 1, 1959, as Fidel Castro announced victory over the former Baptista government. One week later - a historical moment on the island solidified Cuba's new nation-state identity through revolutionary ideology. (Staten 2015, 79-97)

The early stages of the Cuban Revolution were fueled by the desire to dismantle the deeply unequal social and economic structures of pre-revolutionary Cuba and replace them with a new socialist society. Key to the revolution's ideological framework was the role of Che Guevara, who was appointed president of the National Bank of Cuba shortly after the revolution's success which influenced Cuba's early economic restructuring aimed at wealth redistribution and poverty reduction (Staten 2015, Varas et. al 2002). With significant success, the Cuban government quickly implemented policies designated to eliminate widespread inequality, malnutrition, and unemployment, rooted in the Baptista era. As outlined by Bastian (2016, 1), "In 1953, 40% of Cuba´s population received only 6.5% of direct income while the richest 5% received 26.5% of the income (Brundenius 1989, 167)", while "In 1986, the poorest 40% of the Cuban population received 26% of the country´s income and the top 5% only 10.1% (Brundenius, 1989, 167)".

A critical element of these changes was the nationalization of key industries and services, which took place between 1961 and 1963 when the Cuban state took control of 80-92% of enterprises in most sectors, and as Mesa-Lago (2000) notes; «acquired an almost complete ownership and control in both wholesale and foreign trade, banking, and education» (Mesa-Lago 2000, 347 in Ritter & Henken 2014, 55). These measures had tremendous effects on the island´s international affairs, especially its relations with the U.S, which, before the Revolution, had strong ties with financial gain through the Baptista government, as well as decades of developing an "Americanized" infrastructure since the Spanish-American War (1898), involving large segments of ownership on resources and productions, including the island´s sugar industry and oil refineries (Ritter & Henken 2014, 55). Several symbolic measures were also taking place, where the new government aimed to target, especially, any previous U.S presence and further impose a "revolutionary transformation," for instance - casinos, brothels, and hotels got converted into state-run establishments and new public institutions (Gold, 2015, 95).

Forging a population of revolutionaries

The revolutionary government also focused on creating a new social structure, with efforts like the literacy campaign and land redistribution aimed to uplift the rural poor (Mesa-Lago, 2013). Central to the revolution's vision was the concept of *El Hombre Nuevo* (The New Man), introduced by Che Guevara in his 1965 essay *Man and Socialism in Cuba.*

Fidel Castro further embraced and adopted the idea of the New Man in his political discourse and as a guiding feature of many waves of internal policy changes. The New Man was envisioned and introduced as a utopian individual—a person freed from capitalistic materialism and selfishness who, in contrast, embodied the principles of solidarity, altruism, and collective responsibility (Guevara 1967).

For those who stayed on the island, particularly the rural poor, these programs brought undeniable benefits, such as access to education and healthcare. The literacy campaign, one of the revolution's most successful initiatives, dramatically reduced illiteracy across the island (Brundenius, 1989). At the same time, those who fled the country—deemed *gusanos* (worms) in the revolutionary rhetoric—became exiles, many of whom settled in Miami and formed the Cuban diaspora (Mesa-Lago 2013). This exodus, particularly of the wealthy and middle class,

marked the beginning of the deep divisions between Cubans on the island and those abroad (a theme that would later become central to the development of Cuba's dual economy).

Cuba between east and west

Economic sanctions (embargo) aimed to intensify Cuba's economic isolation. This had effective results, seen from the U.S perspective, but it also facilitated Cuba´s adaption of the Soviet economic, central-planned model (Mesa-Lago & Pérez-López 2013, 6). A Cuban nation of socialism and its new realization of state power led to significant societal upheavals, followed by external and internal consequences, which have drastically affected and characterized the country´s economy ever since (Mesa-Lago & Pérez-López 2013).

The triumph of the Revolution, its official ideology, and politics gained significance far beyond the island's national borders; the new reality in the Caribbean peninsula turned old friends into enemies (the U.S.) while paving the way for new fertile alliances (the USSR). In a short matter of time, the small island became a critical factor, existing amid two global superpowers in a broader context of shaping the Cold War period (Staten 2015). On the contrary, the Cold War period drastically shaped Cuba, and its internal policies were significantly affected by the antagonistic roles played out by the U.S. and U.S.S.R. (Mesa-Lago & Pérez-López 2013, 5).

While Cuba´s new relations with the U.S. contained the transition from having the second-largest amount of U.S. investments in the Latin American region to a total capital breakup, it was now wholly dependent on the Soviet sudden and positive presence (1960s—90s) (Staten 2015).

While the U.S. illustrated its stance by employing its “never-ending” economic embargo, the new stable ties with the Soviets, on the other hand, were defined by lucrative trades. While Cuba exported sugar and nickel to the east, it received oil and other imports of goods at strongly subsidized prices and via barter exchange, which minimized the effects of the initial economic sanctions provided by the U.S. (Eckstein 1986, 503, 508-509).

'The Special Period' and its aftermath

While the Cuban government was undoubtedly successful in tackling critical issues of poverty within its initial stages, the economic situation on the Caribbean's largest island has, for several decades, been characterized precisely by critical issues of poverty rooted in persistent scarcity and a growing stratified population. This condition seriously began to leave deep traces in society afterward. In the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 90s, which resulted in significant consequences and ripple effects on several socialist bloc states, Cuba in the so-called global south was no exception. The new world without the Soviets deeply impacted Cuban society - leading to a new era of economic stagnation - further compounded by the U.S extended embargo, further tightened one of the most enduring and comprehensive economic sanctions imposed on any state in modern times (Staten 2015).

Their economic reliance overseas to the East became Cuba's painful vulnerability, paving the way for what is known locally as 'The Special Period in Time of Peace.' In speeches and public statements, Fidel Castro indicated that the Cuban population had to prepare for a period requiring emergency measures and significant sacrifices, "like those of wartime," but deemed necessary to ensure the survival of Cuba's Revolutionary project (Ritter & Henken 2014:79).

The Cuban state faced an economic and political collapse threat, so the government was compelled to make significant changes. Mesa-Lago & Pérez-López (2013) points out that Cuba's economy has oscillated between market reforms and socialist ideals since the revolution; the particular period stemming out of the Soviet disappearance marked a fundamental turning point in this dynamic and the roots of the extensive informal sector that plays a crucial role for most Cubans in everyday life.

In short, one might say that Cuba's economy went from solely relying on the presence of the Soviets – to solely on the presence of mass tourism. Among the most drastic and pragmatic measures of the new reforms included opening opportunities for Cubans to become *cuentapropistas* (non-state workers) to facilitate the island's new masses of foreign visitors. Additionally, the legalization and use of the U.S. dollar, driven by the need to generate foreign currency and to encourage remittances from the Cuban diaspora, all measures which led to a "decentralization of economic decisionmaking, an acceptance of income differentials and preference for economic incentives over moral incentives" (Mesa-Lago & Pérez-López, 2013, 16).

On the other hand, the black market and the informal sector not only survived parallel

to the formal sector but flourished as a major source of employment (Wig 2019, 54). Cuban creativity flourished, giving rise to concepts like resolver (to solve) and El Invento Cubano (Cuban Inventiveness), which began to truly define the island's inhabitants (Carlos Ozora 2009). To survive, people had to find any solution to initiatives beyond the reach of the state, and while shortages grew, formal institutions came to a halt, leaving the Cuban mentality of "resolver" (to get) deeply ingrained into people's daily lives but also throughout the operations of economic institutions. To rephrase Wig (2019):

> "While the bending and breaking of rules happened at the legal margins, it was a cornerstone of the economy. Similar to shortcuts and minor infringements that employees commit in factories, without which production systems would come to an hault, Cuban flexibility vis-à-vis rules and regulations was oil in a rusty machinery. It put food on the table, helped run businesses, and allowed citizens to make it to the end of the month" (Wig 2019, 46).

Through the economic reforms, private small-scale businesses were allowed, leading to the emergence of Cuba's new workforce of *paladars* (private restaurants) and *casa particular* (private homes/bed & breakfast), a significant break from the strict socialist policies that had defined Cuba's economy since the early beginnings of the revolution.

Tourism and the dual currency system

Tourism quickly became a pillar of the new economic landscape in line with the centralized economy that could no longer meet the population's needs. The visitors became an essential source of hard currency, and it was just as badly needed for the state as it was for the people in the streets. As the vast majority were left out of the new private wave, the informal growth of the tourist industry was inevitable, with many Cubans finding new economic opportunities through direct contact with tourists, often in ways that bypassed government regulations.

One can say that these upheavals shook the island in several ways, where 'the Special Period' as a crisis is not only limited to an economic significance but a social crisis affecting politics, ideology, values, and, affecting people's faith and expectations in the sole ruling communist party (Hernandez-Reguant 2009, 1-27). For instance, while previously being caught with dollars in one's pocket could lead to a lengthy prison sentence, now, suddenly, the

same dollars were utterly needed to buy items from the State-run «dollar stores» that were otherwise unavailable with the use of pesos. On the other hand, private work, once considered a counter-revolutionary activity and a stark contrast to Che Guevara's *El hombre nuevo,* suddenly became legal and even encouraged, with wages far surpassing those employed in the state sector (Center for Insights in Survey Research 2017).

The introduction of the dual currency system established a formal distinction between those who had access to hard currency and those who did not, leading to a growing stratification among the population, where those with access to dollars – either through tourism or remittances from relatives abroad – gained a significant advantage over those solely depended on the peso (Ritter & Henken 2014).

Alongside the U.S. embargo the dual currency system has become a strategy aimed towards the Cuban State. The state "…needs to generate hard-valuta (foreign currencies) for imports and investment by exporting" (Benzing, 2005, 76,

Since 1994, the dual currency system consisted of a co-circulation of the Convertible Peso (CUC), pegged to the U.S.$, next to the National Peso (CUP). What distinguishes these currencies briefly, as already noted, is that the (CUP) is accessed through formal state salaries. At the same time, the (CUC) is tied to the tourist industry and is only accessible to tourists and mostly private workers, as well as by partaking in the remittance economy. While the CUP is used in state stores with subsidized prices and insufficient monthly rations to cover the minimum food needs, the (CUC), on the other hand, could be used within the newly ingrained "dollar stores." Next to these exists the black market, where most goods are obtainable through barter exchange or national or foreign currencies, though often following skyrocketing prices compared to the average Cuban income. According to Thanka (2018), an anthropologist who has conducted extensive research on this subject highlights that the dual-currency system partly dissolves economic bifurcation simultaneously heightened everyday life encounters and tensions with the socialist state ideology and its integration into the global capitalist economy (Thanka 2018, 111).

The traditional dual-currency system was abolished on January 1, 2021 (officially titled "Day Zero" – kf. Yaffe 2021). While "Day Zero" might be easy to grasp as a unification of its dual-currency system, it could be argued that the system still prevails, though it has changed into new cloaks, at least, the consequences of its unequal distribution of demands and stratification of the population keeps prevailing. Now, the (CUC) has turned into a digital credit system, Moneda Libremente Convertible (freely convertible money) or MLC as it is

locally expressed, where Cubans with access to foreign currencies could transfer any hard-valuta digitally into their debit cards. In similar veins as the CUC, the MLC is pegget to the U.S dollar (Yaffe, 2021).

Chapter 4. Living lo informal – navigating scarcity

Introduction

For over three decades, most of the population's day-to-day lives on the largest island in the Caribbean peninsula have been characterized by a never-ending search for basic commodities. By doing participant observation in the streets as well as in several households of Havana, I experienced firsthand how Cubans depend on their trusted social connections (*socios*) as much as the state-led *bodega* shops and the *quotas* for their sheer survival. The informal system (*lo informal*) arises where the state economy fails – which has become an ordinary aspect of Cuban living. *Lo informal* is observed where small barter, creative improvisation, and informal networks are essential for strengthening one's opportunities to get by. In Ferguson's (2020:94) words: «It is in large measure … about accessing or making claim on the resources of others» when he describes economic systems of «improvisational survivalism» which is «driven by a spare logic of simply making it from one day to the next.»

However, Cubans engage with, and manage, *lo informal* from different vantage positions in an increasingly stratified society. This chapter introduces the centrality of *lo informal* in people's lives, as it plays out in streets and houses, which are spaces central to its operations. How Cubans engage with and manage *lo informal* have, among other things, to do with how they are positioned in relation to formal/informal employment, and this chapter introduces basic categories to begin deciphering the intricate weave of formal/informal in Cuban survival and social mobility strategies.

Spaces of informality: la calle vs. la casa

Many of the walks I undertook in Havana's streets alone or together with informants were motivated by the search for food. This was the case whether the informants were formally employed by the state and hence received a meager salary, or whether they were *jineteros* (street hustlers), and hence officially categorized as unemployed. The official shops and the quotas distributed by the government to the households should in principle supply anyone with eggs, sugar, flour and so on; however, basic goods were regularly in dire supply and quotas insufficient. When encountering shortages, my informants would turn to their *socios* – that is, their trusted connections – to bring food home to the family. And I also relied on their *socios* for getting access to food for myself.

On one occasion, I went with Julio to his *socio* in pursuit of eggs in one of the

surrounding neighborhoods to the Old Town. When approaching Julio's *socio*'s selling spot in the street, I heard "*Aqua Aqua*!"[iv] was shouted beside me by a paid young lookout, followed by a further scenario where a stressed group of tradesmen found themselves obliged to hide their goods as quickly as possible to escape the problems of the sudden presence of Revolutionary Police guards in civilian cover. Later Julio explained to me that youngsters get paid for providing services as lookouts, and that "*Aqua Aqua*!" is one of many code words in use to communicate the danger of approaching police.

This observation provides insight into how Cubans organize themselves through what Fernández (2000) describes as trust and affiliation, where services, currencies, and goods flow in the shadow of officialdom. Surrounded by beautiful architecture, (if you can look past its dilapidated conditions), I discovered a Cuba where eggs are empty in the nearest *bodega* but can be bought (without a limited quota) from a *socio* in the neighborhood. This occurred a few steps out of Havana's busy Old Town with its tourist-friendly streets and moving towards its surrounding neighborhoods where the "ordinary" lives occur. Within reach of most neighborhoods are agricultural black markets and informal social institutions that make up for the deficiencies of the official bodegas and the formal rationing system of persistent food shortages. It also goes without saying that for most of the Cubans, if the monthly ration quota is already filled; most citizens cannot refill their refrigerators by shopping at the modern, air-conditioned "dollar stores."

Julio's *socio* is part of what may be termed "the daily agricultural market," which commonly manifests through informal family-run retail services at street level, usually where a window from their household on the ground floor is used as a sales counter or the collection of carts with fruit and vegetables, either on the street corner or in an alley. These are typically orchestrated in smaller segments and neighborhoods (but align with a larger context when we add the farmers, transporters, and go-betweens/facilitators, to mention a few). Most of these markets and economic activities are technically illegal but run most of the time freely - they are reminiscent of what Ritter & Henken (2014, 29) categorizes as «legitimate underground economic activities» at least in the opinion of most Cubans. However, as I observed, police raids do occasionally occur.

Most of the people in Havana rely on the dynamics of the street (*la calle*) for their survival. In Havana as elsewhere in Cuba, shortages of basic goods flow on a shared rhythm of improvising solutions, where inflation gives prices that tend to vary daily - as do whatever is available. As Wig (2019) points out, the street in Havana—*la calle*—becomes a center of

informal economic activity that contrasts with the State's formal control, it is an «ant´s nest,» a «commercial heartland,» and a « parallel universe light years removed from officialdom" (Wig 2019, 12). However, *la calle* is also where we find official stores (*bodegas*), and much of the legitimate, often more visible, side of Cuba's informal sector. *La calle* reflects the Cubans' ability to adapt to an economic reality that can often seem rigid on the surface but which, in practice, is far more flexible.

Invento Cubano: blurring the boundaries of casa and calle

Cubans draw a contrast between *calle* and *casa*; the latter ideally associated with the private sphere, family and household, and reproduction. If we understand this relationship within *lo informal*, we can understand it so that the boundaries between the private sphere of the home and the more unpredictable public space of the streets are not always as clear. As I observed it, the house regularly also became a production site or a place where barter, trade and services played out:

When returning to Cuba for my second fieldwork, I brought scissors, and a used hand hair dryer to Lidia and Julio, two informants whose living conditions were among the harshest I experienced during my stay. The couple had moved from another city to Havana together with some friends with a child, when conditions permitted it; that is, when a *socio* of theirs made a place to rent available to them. (Getting a place to stay is very difficult in crowded Havana). Having no legal work, and having moved illegally, that is, without official permit to do so by the authorities, they lived daily from hand to mouth. Lidia and Julio pleaded that I should bring scissors and the hair dryer because this could change their lives for the better. Such commodities were not available except for maybe in a dollar shop.

When I returned, I observed how, in one moment, the living room was a private living space, and the next, a casual hairdressing salon catering to local clients as a way of generating an income. It was astonishing to see the innovative and creative approach among the household members sharing a common goal, by replicating items they lack, through re-use of various materials while expanding their repertoire of services to offer. Lidia and Julio had found a way to solve (*resolver*) at least to a certain extent their dire situation with a pair of scissors, a second- hand hairdryer and their own inventiveness, and their increasing network of *socios* that in this case also included me.

Invento Cubano: Cuba's circular market

The circular market and the extensive and inventive reuse of materials in Cuba is a response to scarcity and resonates well with local concepts such as *resolver* (to solve, to get) and *invento Cubano*, that is, Cuban inventiveness and entrepreneurial spirit. This manifests in multiple ways: In homes, you might observe a creative reimagining of everyday objects: old vinyl records repurposed into stylish lampshades, vintage cigar boxes transformed into planters for medicinal herbs, or a water pump ingeniously built using parts from a motor that once powered one of Havana's many American vintage cars. Cubans look beyond an artifact's original design and purpose and reinterpret technology and materials to replace material lacks. A Cuban designer, Carlos Oroza, conceptually describe this as a «technological disobedience», which he claims is part of a Cuban mentality - a materialistic branch of *resolver*: «As the crisis became more severe, people's creativity grew more powerful, and everywhere you looked, you saw solutions to the needs that people faced all the time, in every aspect of life... Transportation, children's toys, food, clothing... Everything was replaced with substitutes." (Oroza, 2010)

Today, the unique "circular market" is still thriving. Stepping out of the household and into the seaside promenade, I observed *focforeras* who repaired and refilled old lighters on any corner, extending their life rather than discarding them. Alternatively, nearby, possibly outside a block of flats, you will find a cobbler or an optician with years of experience thinking creatively, whether it is fixing a pair of glasses or reinforcing an old shoe. While along the street *Malecón*, several fishermen cast their lines to secure their daily dinner with makeshift lures or hooks fashioned from scanned objects from nearby trash bins. All examples illustrate the countless scenarios that showcase Cubans' distinct innovations, resourcefulness, and adaptability to an environment rooted in scarcity. Such repurposed items enter the realm of *lo informal* in multiple ways, as materials, goods and services change hands.

The circular market also manifests in relation to the digital rise which in recent times has been central, but also contested and negotiated in step with its formal development. On several rooftops in the capital, one can observe tall aerials with a trained eye, where old serving platters and empty beer cans have been given new life as functional TV aerials and wifi transmitters. The creativity that reflects the physical technologies also reflects much of the digital content that, through a pervasive network, fills an information gap that for half a century has been under the substantial control of the state monopoly. At the same time, the

internet, with Cuba's gradual connection to the “world wide web”, has created new arenas for informal exchanges of goods and services that reduce the risk of public space. This I will return to in chapter 7.

Between pesos and dollars: the currency dilemma and the role of black markets

With the advent of tourism, dollar-only stores began appearing across the island, offering imported goods that could only be purchased with convertible currency. Meanwhile, the Cuban peso circulates through Cuba's traditional rationing system (state-run outlets: *bodegas*) established during the early stages of Cuban socialism, granting access to locally produced goods. Yet, the scarcity in these state-run outlets, a result of the loss of Soviet support, render monthly rations insufficient, often lasting no more than two weeks. Consequently, workers reliant on the peso economy are forced to supplement their income through informal economic activities or financial support from abroad, as we shall see in coming chapters.

One of my first encounters with this reality was on a walk through the Old Town in the first week of fieldwork. I encountered Juán, wandering the streets on an empty stomach. Juán said quite bluntly that he hoped to acquire foreign currency from me in order to buy milk powder for his child. His frustration encapsulates a broader discontent among Cubans: Necessities such as milk powder cannot be bought in state-led *bodegas*. When Juán needs an item from the dollar-only store, such as milk powder for his child, he faces two options: He can exchange his peso earnings to dollars in the black market, or he can search for foreign currency through interactions with tourists, often his only viable option. Afterwards, he can convert the dollars in the bank to convertible pesos (MLC) on his credit card. Then, he can go to a dollar store in case milk powder is in supply. However, inflation has rendered this exchange four times more costly (mirrors mass-migration, people want foreign currencies to their journey abroad).

The failings of the formal system to provide commodities such as milk powder, sanitary pads and toilet paper, liquor or mobile phones – together with the failing rationing system – (Cubans pay in CUP in bodega shops for their meager rations of rice and eggs), highlight the pervasive scarcity affecting nearly every aspect of Cuban society. Even in state institutions such as hospitals, hard currency is demanded to receive “universally free” treatment services:

Javiero, another informant whose mother required cataract surgery, described in an

interview the long process of obtaining the necessary $100 payment to ensure her treatment:

> "In the official hospital?" I asked.
>
> "Yes, in the official hospital, but underground," he clarified:
>
> "It's like the informal and formal coming together. If I have the money and the right connection, I can get introduced to the specific doctor who can help. I just tell them, 'Hey, I need this. I need you to remove the cataract from my mother's eyes.' Then I can bring her to the hospital as a regular Cuban patient. We complete the paperwork, and after I pay the $100 under the table, my mother receives the surgery. That's it—and everything becomes formalized through the paperwork."

Both Juán and Javiero's experiences illustrate the hybrid nature of Cuba's formal market as well as healthcare system, where informal activities, hard-currency and social networks are often essential for accessing what, in theory, should be universally available services and goods. Javiero's account underscores the broader reality of a dual economic system that, despite its recent reforms, remains deeply embedded in Cuban society: In state institutions, such as hospitals within Cuba's "free and universal" healthcare system, official peso prices still appear on paper. In reality, however, even within these supposedly free systems, the significance of dollars becomes undeniable—not only for doctors, who earn insufficient pesos, but also for patients who need specific treatments. According to P. Sean Brotherton (2008), ordinary Cubans could only effectively access basic health services, supplies, and medication through "informal practices." Similarly, Marina Gold (2015, 47) observes that to access scarce medications and improved medical attention, Cubans frequently rely on personal networks or *sociolismo* to access otherwise unattainable resources. Brotherton further underscores that these informal practices are not merely hidden or shadowy activities but are instead often visible and openly acknowledged as part of the daily operation of the formal health system (Brotherton 2008, 260).

Accessing Luxury

I was more than once asked to sell my phone when in Cuba. A mobile phone in Cuba is an expensive luxury item, and a limited number of informants possessed one. One of them was Ricardo, who helped a Russian tourist to buy one in the black market. Later, when departing, the Russian visitor gave him the mobile phone.

Mobile phones are scarce in supply, whether in dollar shops or the black market.

According to Ricardo, if you smuggled a bag full of mobiles into Cuba, you could probably buy a place to stay in Havana. By briefly exploring how a luxury item such as a mobile phone may be accessed in Havana officially as against informally, I did get an understanding of how different types of currency operate in market exchange, and the importance of foreign, hard currency in the operations of the Cuban economy.

When exploring this issue, I simply asked different Cuban informants: Which are the possibilities for Cubans to buy a mobile phone the official, or legal, way? Those I asked responded that if you are Cuban and if you want to buy a smartphone or other physical hardware the official way in Cuba, you have to go to a dollar shop/government specialty store. In the dollar shops, you can buy a smartphone but only with convertible pesos (MLC), that is, only with your credit card. You cannot pay with Cuban pesos in these stores.

These answers prompted further questions regarding how Cubans who receive their salary in Cuban pesos may access convertible pesos? This line of questioning also gave insight into how the workforce is differentiated in Cuba by the Cubans themselves: Those who 'live by their own account' – who are private workers or licensed small business owners with legal access to tourists, will usually receive payment from foreign tourists in convertible pesos (MLC), via credit card transfers. Ergo, they can buy a mobile phone legally, the official way, in a dollar shop. If they receive dollars (illegally) in cash, the Cuban banking system allows for foreign cash to be deposited legally as convertible pesos on credit cards.

Those who receive a state salary, on the other hand, are not paid in convertible pesos (MLC), but in Cuban pesos (CUP). It is not possible to convert CUP to convertible pesos (MLC) neither in a dollar shop nor in the banking system. Thus, the majority of Cubans are in principle officially blocked from legally acquiring a mobile phone (or other luxury goods) simply by using their own state salaries. There is, however, another option: Cubans can legally receive a credit card transfer – a gift - from a friend or a family contact abroad, or a mobile phone can be brought to the island by so-calles *mulas;* professional or private carriers of goods and commodities from abroad. (this I return to.)

Street vendors and others without formal employment or license cannot officially buy a mobile. The starting point here will always be outside officialdom; for instance, acquiring hard currency in terms of tips or gifts from tourists for services given.

Contrastingly, it is possible to buy a mobile phone for Cuban pesos in the black market for anyone with enough money, or it can be bartered for an equivalent luxury item. Mobile

phones are, however, scarce in supply and expensive. In the black market, any currency will do except for the convertible pesos (MLC) as credit cards are not accepted. Often a mobile phone will be priced in foreign currency (in US dollars) also on the black market, but foreign currency in cash is converted at a fixed rate against Cuban pesos.

Inquiring about the purchase of mobile phones in Cuba made it clear to me that the dual currency system that arose in the 1990s, segmented Cuba's labor force into distinct income groups; those who earned their income with state wages and those who relied on income from tourists, paid in convertible pesos pegged to the US dollar. Today, different categories of employment give differential access to forms of currency, whether the Cuban peso (CUP), the convertible Cuban pesos (MLC), or foreign, “hard” currency in cash. It also divides the population's access to resources within the formal market: While state wages are paid in Cuban pesos, with which goods can be bought in the state-led *bodegas* according to one’s allowed rations, essential goods and services can be bought in dollar stores, for convertible pesos (MLC) or hard currency (convertible to MLC). Many Cubans have come under intense pressure to seek additional sources of income (Ritter & Henken 2014, 212). According to them, another general cause of illegal economic activities has been the coexistence of the old peso economy with rationed products at meager prices and the new economy with convertible pesos (now MLC) and, to some extent, international or market-determined prices. The price gap between these two economies was, and still is, enormous, creating tremendous opportunities for profitable arbitrage within a black market where prices are determined by supply and demand. The black market also includes a significant segment of products stolen from state sectors, linking the dual currency and rationing systems to a broader "common property problem," as noted by Ritter & Henken (2014, 210) — a “general Cuban attitude.” This problem arises when state-owned resources, which in principle belong to everyone, are treated as if they lack a true owner. As a result, resources from government sectors are often misused or stolen, with individuals seizing opportunities for personal gain without a sense of responsibility toward communal property.

Most Cubans, especially those reliant on peso-based incomes, cannot access dollar stores. The dollar stores, integral to the dual currency system and directed towards tourists, serve as a deliberate economic strategy to meet the Cuban state's critical need for hard currency to fund imports and investments (Benzing 2005, 76). In practice, these state-owned stores function as "vacuum cleaners" for circulating foreign currency among the population,

allowing the state to retain control over this "urgently needed hard currency" (Yaffe 2021, 5), essential for maintaining political stability (Thanka 2018, 113). The dollar stores mainly to be found in tourist areas, provide so-called «luxury items» such as milk powder and toilet paper principally to tourists, items without reach for most of the Cubans.

On sectors, positions, and the blurred boundaries of the Cuban workforce

As we will begin to discover through the ethnographic cases, Cuban daily life illustrates "a continuous symbiosis" between the formal and informal sectors of the economy, where local terms such as *resolver* and *invento Cubano* are rooted in economic practices. Access to different types of currency will depend on the ways in which Cubans make a living, and I will begin by categorizing the general workforce (both male and female) into three broad income groups: State employees, licensed private workers/business owners, and informal workers formally identified as unemployed. (Here, I leave out the category of housewife - *ama de casa* – which is central to reproduction in Cuba. However, focusing on the contribution of housewives will need another study and other ethnographic access than the one I possess).

These broad divisions regarding how Cubans make a living will have a strong bearing on the types of currency they may get their hands on, and, as we will see through further ethnographic cases, on the ways in which they may manage scarcity. These categories provide the basis for – and reflect - different economic and social positions in Cuban society, with different rights and responsibilities attached. (For the sake of my purpose in this thesis, I leave out issues of race and gender that will further give direction to positionality).

A closer look: categories of employment

State employees make up most of the workforce, accounting for 74% (Statista, 2024). These employees are paid in Cuban pesos (CUP) by the government, but their wages are insufficient to cover a full month of basic living expenses. Consequently, the public sector remains the largest employment sector in Cuba.

Cuentapropistas **(self employed/non-state workers, license-holders)** belong to the working group that emerged during 'the Special Period.' The fall of USSR and lack of Soviet subsidies led to a series of reforms to stimulate this growth and avoid economic collapse. By 1993, the Castro regime allowed 118 private occupations, and by 2010, after the layoff of 500.000 state

workers, the Castro regime under Raól increased the number of licenses under 178 different categories of self employment. By 2017, the number of *cuentapropista* issued licenses had increased to 550.000 (Center for Insights in Survey Research 2018, 3-4). Even though they are non-state workers and 'live by their own account,' they are still a category within a formal sense via strong regulation and licensing by the State. Ordinary Cubans see *cuentapropistas* as lucrative work positions and one of the few opportunities for increased social mobility. This broadly covers Cubans with direct access to hard currency, usually connected to the tourism industry (excluding the diaspora economy): 70 % of the repondents in the survey previously referred to, said that income was generated from foreign visitors (Center for Insights in Survey Research 2018, 16). This means that *cuentapropistas* can, in addition to Cuban pesos, get access to convertible Cuban pesos (when receiving payment from tourist transferred to their credit card), or, alternatively illegal payment in cash directly in foreign currency (US dollars, Euro, or other currencies). It is also worth mentioning that informal practices are part of their private, albeit formally licensed, profession, whether it concerns tax evasion or more extensive "informal" economic activity.

Informal workers: These are people who operate outside the legal framework and engage in economic activities either within a gray area of legality or in terms of more traditional/severe forms of informal economy. Formally speaking, they are unemployed. Among these we find street vendors as well as *jineteros/as* (street hustlers, prostitution). Therefore, this group consists of many who are part given the simple necessity to survive; while it has proved to be very lucrative for others, it is also a group of positionalities that embraces broadly and is reflected within the working groups that originate from the formal system. *Jineteros* can get access to hard currencies in cash when dealing with tourists and will also depend on CUP for their operations.

Blurred boundaries

When presenting these categories, as other scholars have noted in the Cuban context, it is essential to recognize that their boundaries are often blurred—a complexity that also becomes evident through this ethnographic account. In practice, activities within the general Cuban workforce are not easily categorized, as the boundaries between roles are often blurred; for instance, a government employee may run an informal side-business to supplement their

salary. This could include ambulance personnel who, by leveraging access to petrol, balance critical evacuations with black-market sales—an essential addition for the paramedics' weekly survival (secondary source, retold by informant). These examples are countless, as nearly every state-paid worker—especially those outside the "diaspora economy"—relies on the informal sector to supplement formal state income in CUP. It is precisely here that entrenched corruption, and the pilfering of state resources reveal themselves as systemic issues (Ritter & Henken 2014, 203-205). As a result, this also has a critical impact on the failed formal infrastructure, like the rationing system which gives us a critical reflection of the legitimate informal sector:

A *cuentapropista* (private worker) within tourism may use a *jinetero* to keep his formal business going. A hotel chef pockets ingredients from his workplace and brings them home, either for personal consumption or resale at the black market. Or it can be a c*asa popular*-owner (a private business owner who rents a few beds to tourists) whose food quotas will not suffice to feed the visitors, hence, buying food in the black market is a necessity. Ethnographic cases will show that for instance *cuentapropistas,* whether male of female, with access to hard currency from tourists can expect social mobility, albeit within the given limits of Cuban society (if not migrating).

Barter remains central to how many Cubans make ends meet. For instance, an administrator in the government sector might be approached by a friend—who knows someone needing help to overcome a bureaucratic hurdle. This friend's friend may not have money but raises a few chickens in his household alongside working as a state-employed truck driver, which also may allow him to offer informal transport services. As a result, eggs, chickens, or even transport can be exchanged for the administrator's influence in solving the bureaucratic issue (based on extract from field notes).

Let us say instead he was a skilled plumber rather than a chicken farmer; then the administrative service could be repaid as a plumbing service later when the need arose. This simultaneously strengthens the relationships between the friends and both parties and can also create new bonds, for example, directly between the chicken farmer (or the plumber) and the administrator. In Cuba, a list of such examples will never end, and neither did the informants' stories about such connections. Such dynamics are pervasive in *lo informal*, where social networks across different positions, in concert with improvised actions, play a decisive role in Cubans' ability to navigate an economic landscape marked by scarcity.

For my purpose, I use the employment categories to identify different windows of

opportunity in terms of, for instance, survival strategies, opportunities for social mobility, and how informants can build relationships with *socios* and manage the relationship between *lo informal* and *lo formal.* Regardless of the sector in which they operate—state, private, or informal—they are all primarily dependent on networks to circumvent or complement the limitations of the formal system/governmental regulations, as ethnographic examples further on will show. Taking these categories of employment, with differential access to forms of currency as a lead, can also help identify network formations across Cuba's different social layers, where people with different positions engage in *sociolismo* (the building of networks of *socios* to fill the resource gaps they experience daily) across the official formal/informal divide.

Chapter 5. At the edge of law: survival strategies among state employees

Introduction

Laws do not just prevent crime; they also create it by defining which actions are criminal. While many exchanges existed long before the advent of laws, only black markets came into existence because of them. As Brooks (2020) points out, black markets and the informal practices attached to them are essentially legal constructs—without laws to prohibit certain activities, there would be no illegal or "black" trade. In other words, it only arises due to state-imposed restrictions on what can and cannot be exchanged or tolerated behavior (Brooks 2020, 151-152).

In Cuba, a well-known saying —*"todo está prohibido, pero vale todo"* (everything is prohibited, but anything goes) —captures the everyday reality of life under a tightly regulated state, where despite extensive laws and strict enforcement, illegal economic activities remain widespread and diverse (Ritter & Henken 2014, 10) (Fernández 2000, 137). This dynamic reflects Herzfeld's (2005) cultural intimacy—the tension between the official laws of the State and the informal practices people take part in to navigate daily life. In this chapter, I will investigate this cultural intimacy; how individuals and communities work around the State's rules, knowing that breaking or bending the law is not only inevitable but, in many cases, socially accepted. While the State projects an image of control and legality, the reality on the ground is one of constant negotiation between formal regulations and informal survival strategies, which includes even the official authorities or individuals associated with the political party. This situation illustrates how legality and illegality are socially constructed, with the population creating an alternative system of moral and economic behavior in response to the State's restrictive policies, leading our analytical steps toward the concept of "moral economies (Thompson 1971)."[v]

Former college teacher Geraldo's career and his moral discourse

In Cuba, the line between legality and illegality is often blurred, particularly for those working within the formal economy. Those among my informants who were or had been state employees insistingly told me that it is utterly impossible to acquire one´s basic needs on a state salary alone. For instance, Geraldo, an educated man in his fifties, argued that "I don't know a single person working for the government who doesn't take for well-being or sale in

the black market." For Geraldo, like many other Cubans, working for the government did not provide enough income to cover essentials such as food, housing, and other daily necessities. State employees often resorted to *resolver*—finding informal ways to supplement their income, typically by engaging in black market activities or pilfering state resources. This became a widespread survival mechanism ingrained in everyday life, or as Geraldo put it: "It was our ironical way to rebel and fight the stupidity of socialism."

Geraldo's career can provide a glimpse into the dilemmas that state employees face as the economic situation in Cuba has deterioriated during the last three decades. In the following, I will recount part of Geraldo's story as provided to me in interviews.

From state employee to tourist entrepreneur

Geraldo, now in his fifties, recalls his work as a young college lecturer as a good period in his life, although he came short every month while working. He was enthusiastic about his subjects and connected greatly with his students. However, there was another reality in the shadows of his scholarly pursuits, a reality of *resolver* (solve) - characterized by a day-to-day life of coping with an insufficient state salary echoing every month, alongside a clandestine world where personal necessity trumps academic ethics.

Inside the classroom, between lectures and ideas exchanged, Geraldo and some of his students engaged in a silent dance—a dance where the exchange of money and improved grades ran parallel to an otherwise busy semester. These students belonged to prosperous families, most of them offspring of the political and military elite—carrying high scholarly expectations from their parents. «It was a struggle (*lucha*)", said Geraldo, "but I was able to cope with it this way…Money was not a problem because the students' fathers could provide for them. (…) Some of them did not like to study, and some of them, who were very close to me, were just happy to be able to handle me some money. (…) They were showing me a lot of money from their wallet, things like that. In a way, they were compromising me.»

For Geraldo, the students became his way of resolving the parental demand for good grades; likewise, he became the students' way of resolving the parental demand for good grades: «I had no choice. Well, we didn't see it as an ethical or moral issue. We see it as.. hmm, like; *vamos resolver un problema*! (Laughing). It was just the way to provide for myself. It was a risky situation, but something that I needed to do.»

One day, Geraldo received an official appointment by the authorities that ultimately

would open another career avenue for him at a later stage in life. His official appointment was to serve as a guide for a group of official visitors from an East European country. As the Cold War era unfolded, Cuba, alongside other socialist and communist states, maintained their alliances by sharing leftist and revolutionary ideas and politics by the arrangements of solidarity conferences. During one of these arrangements, a group of filmmakers had been invited to partake, and Geraldo, owing to his linguistic skills, was offered a guidance role during their stay. His mission was to facilitate their documentary production within the city of Havana, a task given to him by someone he characterized as an actor with political responsibilities "higher up the latter." Geraldo argued that the main task was to show them the good areas and that the Revolution was improving. Geraldo argued that indeed, it was also partly true that there had been some improvements over the years and decades. True or not, he had to be cautious in his role as facilitator for the film team: "Remember, that was an institution that was very closely watched by the ideological members of the Communist Party (…) With these people, I never got into any contradiction. I just went with the flow. (…) In order to save myself from the aggravation of having to go through a hard time, it was easier to show the best, cleaner image of our society»

During one of their sunny walks around the better neighborhoods in Havana's city center, one of the photographers asked him curiously why he did not bring his own camera: «You could show and tell your students about the work of our project, » one of the visitors had argued. Geraldo had to admit that he did not possess a camera. Geraldo told him that he could not get a camera as it was more likely that there were none available for sale in any of the retail departments in Cuba. Secondly, even if he did get access to a camera, he could not get the film to shoot it out. "Then, the film makers gave me a bunch of films and a Polaroid camera on point," Geraldo told.

Years later, in the awakening era of 'the Special Period', Geraldo´s practice of handing out grades for money had reached the attention of the university leaders: «I don't know if some of my students ratted me out or if there was a microphone or something in the classroom. Anyways, I was summoned up to the leader's office. (…) You know what? I told them I was going to quit. In a way, I quit voluntarily, but in reality, I was kicked out of the place because they illustrated things in such a way, like telling me that I was not feasible enough and not trustworthy enough to be there. I wasn't being an influence on the people. They also knew that the student was lending me money and that I was able to get some money out of some of them. »

Geraldo suddenly found himself without a job amid Cuba´s worst economic crisis within the times of the socialist Revolution. The State was on the verge of bankruptcy, the overall workforce was thrown into chaos, and Cubans had to find their own solutions outside the limits of the State to cope with the new waves of hardships they were facing. For Geraldo, the recently fired college lecturer, the camera hanging on his bedroom wall became his rescue. It became what he characterized as his «tool of survival» - now finding himself barking on a journey of becoming a photographer – always with a clear eye and a gut feeling of risk, whether it was a potential customer or a potential danger (Police, Cdr) around him. He already knew Havana inside and out, its people, and its places. He started hanging around the bustling heart of the city, looking for «moments of joy» at places where foreigners and the Cuban upper middle class tend to spend their free time: «I was only searching for people having a good time and who potentially would capture that moment. (…) There are both Cubans and foreigners over there, in Parque Central, La Florodita, Hotel Ingleterra, and in the Vedado neighbourhoods. I already knew that the Cubans loved to capture their moments of happiness and good times, showing a flash of the good life. If they had a bunch of beers… Whenever I saw a bunch of beers or glasses on a table, I knew that I had a great probability of getting a few dollars by shooting them. »

Geraldo´s changing reality, from being formally employed at a college to searching the streets and looking for smiles and happiness as it outplays in the heart of Havana, marked a turning point in his life. The shift to economic informality was not just a survival strategy but also turned out to be a means to thrive financially: "For the first time in my life, I was able to come one month in and one month out. I didn't have to ask anyone for money anymore. I was even able to send money and help my mother," he said.

Geraldo´s history serve as an example emblematic of what the Cuban population experienced during the Special Period and its aftermath. In tandem with the State's new reliance on generating hard currency (like opting for mass tourism), its societal ripple effects on individuals' access to resources and necessities resulted, among other things, in major changes in the formal workforce. At the same time, as many outright lost their jobs, most of the government jobs also became economically unsustainable, which has played a decisive role in the rapid expansion of the informal sector.

Scarcity and shifts in morals and values – the rise of sociolismo

Marisa Wilson's (2013) ethnographic work on the moral economy found within everyday-life in the Cuban town of Tuta reveals how access to food in Cuba is not solely dependent on commodities or the open market. Instead, it is shaped by a profoundly moral framework that extends beyond simple monetary exchange. Her findings in Tuta reveal that economic illicit behavior is an integral part of everyday life in the village (Wilson 2013, 7). The scarcity of resources forces people to seek alternative, often illegal, methods of obtaining food, as state-sanctioned markets do not suffice. One of her informants reflects on this shift: "There has been a change in values since the late 1980s"—where stealing from the State once provoked a strong moral outcry, it has now become so commonplace that "it doesn't seem to matter anymore" (Wilson 2013, 11).

This mirrors the reflections of my informant Geraldo, who also spoke of a shift in values over time. As he described in one of our interviews: "At the beginning, in the first two decades, the low salaries from the State compensated the real purchase of whatever you needed in society." Geraldo paused, then corrected the conversation in a new direction:

> "…But to tell you the truth, even before the Revolution, people were a heck more honest than after it. Back then, your reputation was the key part of life. If you were a good citizen, someone honest, you did not actually need money. The only thing needed was good behavior. That was basically the trading coin among Cubans around here, those at the lower level of society. (…) Two decades after the Revolution, there was a new wave of behavior and thinking, which became categorized as '*sosiolismo*'. Who you know is who you are, basically. Suppose you really want to solve whatever problem exists in society. In that case, who you know is more important than whatever amount of money you have in your pocket or whatever revolutionary ID you carry for yourself."

Havana´s cycle of pilferage of State resources – Javiero's enterprice and moral discourse

Another state employee among my informants, Javiero, engaged with *lo informal* from a different window of opportunity. He had just reached the age of 40 and had small children to

support. He primarily worked as a baker in a State Enterprise on the outskirts of Havana´s eastern area. He also attended several side jobs whenever something turned up. The people in Javiero´s close circles often referred to him as a man who only lived for working. "I just work so I do not need ever to think," Javier often quoted, while referring to Cuba as an open prison island.

Fueled on a mixture of coffee, cigarettes, and a couple of alprazolam pills to fall asleep, Javiero would rise before dawn and cover several kilometers each day on his bicycle to reach his job. If the worn tire on the bicycle punctures during the journey, he must take hold of his legs. The bus is not an option for Javiero; the timetable never matches, and, as a symptom of the long-lasting fuel crisis, one cannot count on whether it will ever arrive. Even the dilapidated buses that date from the Baptista era must also give way as victims of the deep-seated state pilferage in the country, similar to the inside of Javiero´s state-enterprise production.

Inside the bakery, located within one of Havana´s many buildings in disrepair, Javiero and his co-workers stand for hours in the heat, without air-conditioning, and with just a tiny light bulb hanging from the rooftop, lightning up their otherwise dark workspace. Here, they spend most of their days rolling small pounds of dough to make the same loaf of bread every week in and out. However, this should not be confused with a pastry shop where a variety of cakes are displayed at a beautiful front desk; this is a Cuban bakery - the only mixed-up ingredients that get into these ovens consist of flour, salt, yeast, and water. One can glimpse the overloaded workers behind the ground-level window, where loaf rolls swap hands for small pesos bundles. The pace is relentless, and as sweat pours down their faces, you hear Cuban slang among the workers echoing throughout the back of the room. Outside, customers and speculators press into the desk window, wondering if today offers a reasonable price.

Occasionally, the boss eagerly tries to speed up production, chastising his workers for delaying the process. However, each time, he is met with an immediate response (which aligns with the Cuban culture of *choteo*[vi]), often cloaked in humor, from his small workforce; Javiero adds with a slight grin on his face - “humor in Cuba is a way to tell the truth.” Javiero and his co-workers know that their hard work on the ground provides the boss with a lucrative paycheck on the side.

As I came to experience it, Javiero was considered a reliable worker by his boss, who also gave him extra responsibilities, like searching for extra ingredients in the realm of *lo informal* to increase the level of production: "I know where to get the stuff to get the job

done," he said confidently while referring to accessing specific resources like yeast, flour, and sugar – initially redistributed goods to other state-run enterprises – as means of maximizing their own enterprise informal production. In other words, someone had to enrich themselves on the flour or yeast along the transport stage, for Javier to access these commodities through the informal market.

Javier could also work this in the opposite direction, supplying the informal market with bread from the bakery. Even with direct pilferage from the bakery's warehouse, no critical questions were asked among the co-workers and the boss. "Nobody asks because everyone knows. Everybody knows..." Javiero says while shaking his head. Yet, despite this tacit acceptance, the risk was ever-present - "But if you get caught, you will lose your job, and you will lose everything," he quickly followed up.

A parallel market

First and foremost, the empirical case of Javiero is not just about a Cuban that strategically copes with a constrained formal system – we are more centrally concerned with how the informal sector intertwines the formal sector, the "interstitial, supplementary and parallel" mechanism as Wolf (2013, 3) notes on "complex societies." Javiero´s state enterprise, which has quite ordinary operations within any Cuban bakery, stands out as a futile example. During our interview, Javiero was saying: "In our bakery, we can double or triple the production investment. When we produce bread for the population (formal sector), we simultaneously work with the consumption index to gain an extra. It´s always a little bit here and a little bit there." As Javiero further explained, "We work in a parallel market. Underground!"

While they formally produced 13,000 loaves of bread for the population, they would "sacrifice" a portion—sometimes 2,000 pieces—for black-market clients who paid far more, which could, for instance, lead to other formal operating enterprises, like state-run hotels and restaurants. This also includes the *cuentapropistas* from the private sector, like *paladares* (private home restaurants) and *casa particulares*, who use it to serve breakfast for tourist guests. (This was also a daily routine of Javiero´s deliveries to people in closer circles). However, while actors within this chain of informal operation, a few might, undoubtedly, grant a lucrative share of the profit. At the same time, Javiero and his colleagues on the ground level relied on their daily side income as an economic lifeline.

While this is only one of many examples of how formal workers normally rely on

informal practices to get by, they all—from ground level to higher-up positions—appear to be solely formal workers. According to Javiero, "within the circle of my enterprise, there are the economic admins (state-employed) who have the papers of all administrations of every bakery in Centro Habana. As for my boss, he pays those women in that economic administration who control these papers for making the account match our production to the formal market."

On paper, Javiero was just another formal worker earning a modest monthly salary of 2,500 pesos, the equivalent of 8.3 U.S. dollars. In reality, his actual income came from the daily informal payments he received from his boss, which illustrates one of the countless formal workforces that straddles the line between formal legality and informal necessity. The strategies people use to survive within this system—ranging from small-scale acts of corruption, as seen with Geraldo, to larger, more organized operations like Javiero's involvement in Havana's underground markets—highlight a complex moral landscape. For Javiero, Geraldo, and hence most other Cubans in the formal workforce, balancing what's illegal and what is necessary has become a daily matter of survival, not solely economic opportunities. Informal economic practices are not just tolerated—they are ingrained into the societal fabric of everyday life.

"The ends justify the means"

"Everyone acquires something on their own job," Javiero firmly stated in response to how Cubans with formal work positions receive peso-salaries equal to less than ten American dollars a month and are continuously able to get by. Like himself and his co-workers at the state enterprise, their dual operation across formal/informal is their economic lifeline. Javiero further described these Cuban lifelines enthusiastically: "It´s a part of the salary – of the salary. The daily salary upon the monthly salary. It´s all about it here in Cuba. The salary is something sacred, you know? It´s like a holy word, a holy thing that cannot be thought of under any concept. It is everything you want to solve, everything you want to *resolver* - you need to do it outside your normal or monthly salary. (…) The monthly salary does not cover all our essential needs. Whatever you call basic, here we need to *resolver* it."

As a socialist nation, Cuba´s formal economic structure was based on a centrally planned model, initially designed out of total dependence on Soviet subsidization, ultimately, also led to severe consequences, such as their disappearance in the early 90s. The economy of Cuba resulted in chronic inefficiencies, bottlenecks, and low worker motivation, paving the

way for a perfect environment for black markets and informal activities, where rent-seeking behavior and misappropriation of state resources, alongside profound corruption flourished (Díaz Briquets & Pérez-López 2006; Ritter & Henken, 2014, 17). As we have reviewed; theft and/or pilferage from State resources became so common among formal employees in all sectors, as it even gets colloquially known as *tocando el arpa* ("playing the harp"), which through hand-gestures (of playing a guitar riff) where used in Havana to denote such thefts covertly (Ritter 2014, 212).

The governmental response of "preaching, policing, prohibition, and prosecution" has occasionally appeared on various scales to overcome the problem but has ultimately never been able to tackle the problem (Ritter & Henken 2014:206). For instance, in 2005, the government launched the ideological campaign "Death to Corruption Operation," which targeted several state sectors. Among them, one of the government's large-scale moves aimed to curb the systemic pilferage of state resources by drastically replacing all of Havana's gas station attendants with as many as 28,000 young social workers. The goal to counteract the black market resale of fuel also uncovered the vast systematic pilfering of nearly half of the city's gas supply (Henken 2008, 172). However, despite the official crackdowns on corruption, pilferage, and other informal activities, have mostly been standing out as efforts that failed to address the root cause of systemic inefficiencies (Ritter & Henken 2014, 207). A more fitting outcome, as Härkönen argues, seems rather more likely to have "…added new layers to the existing system of corruption." Even officials—the primary representatives of the state (Abrams 1988; Wilson 2013)—routinely break formal rules to access commodities that are otherwise available only through state distribution channels (Wilson 2013, 10). This reveals how deeply ingrained informal practices are, even within the state apparatus itself. The CDR (Comités de Defensa de la Revolución), originally intended to promote political vigilance and social order, illustrates this dynamic well. As Härkönen (2016, 198) points out, many Cubans maintain their CDR membership and attend events to appear as loyal revolutionaries, thus only as a means of protecting their informal activities. In some cases, individuals, Härkonen mentions a telling example of «a man who is president of his local CDR so that he could better continue renting rooms to foreigners in his flat without a license».

The rigid grip of centralized economic decision-making, state monopoly over employment, and inadequate wages force workers like Javiero into informal activities to survive. As Javiero proclaims: "Here, *luchar* means to fight for your life. Fighting to get your stuff. Not to live in the system! To survive the system! Because the system is always trying to

kill you, and you need to survive. Sometimes betraying, sometimes stealing, sometimes getting done bad things."

Aligning with the concept of "moral economies," – while informal practices may serve as "oil in the machinery," helping individuals and enterprises navigate the inefficiencies of the formal system, they also have severe systemic consequences. As Ritter & Henken highlight, on one side, the cultural practices of *resolver* have effectively solved issues in response to state institutions' failings (Ritter & Henken 2014, 210). On the other end, however, the pervasive features of corruption and pilferage also undermine the formal institutions they opt to support. However, beneath the surface, it comes at the significant cost of public benefits and increasing rates of economic stratification in society. While those with privileged access benefit disproportionately, it comes with a cost that detriments society by exacerbating the unequal sharing of resources (Ritter & Henken 2014, 227).

As we have seen through this chapter, much like Geraldo´s corrupted nature within the college walls, the bakery operation of Javiero in which formal work provides a meager salary, it is the informal income pilfering that ensures his daily survival. In this, a broader network of various actors are engaged on all levels (aligning with what informants termed *sosiolismo,* not to be confused with socialism*)*. The term *sociolismo* may contextually denote either the moral spirit of *lo informal,* or concretely how Cubans' thematize how they enter into and engage with their interconnected and entrusted *socios* for trade, barter, gift giving and for friendship outside of the gaze of officialdom. The intertwining of formal and informal sectors in Cuba reflects, rather than immoral acts, a moral economy geared on survival. The social discourse reflected in the words of my informants bespeaks a constant struggle for survival (*la lucha*). I remember vividly Geraldo stating that either you are on top or bottom, all Cubans struggle with the hardships of scarcity. While paraphrasing Niccolò Machiavelli to emphasize his points: "The key activity is to survive - the end justifies the means..."

Chapter 6. The tourist as an economic lifeline: the dual reality of formal/informal positionalities

Introduction:

In step with a world without the Soviet Union and the emergence of Cuba's 'Special Period,' the country was forced to implement drastic political strategies. Fidel Castro described these as a "necessary evil" (Babb 2010, 30-31) and declared them necessary to ensure the "Cuba Revolutionary Project." The result has been a tourism industry with a dominant influence on the island's economy for the past thirty years. Economic reforms and recessions have led to extensive changes in society's dynamics, where rules and structures were reshaped - as if the whole "playing board" was turned upside down. As new waves of tourists began visiting Cuba, thousands of state workers lost their jobs due to the economic crisis, leaving many with few options other than to get involved in the burgeoning tourism industry. However, only a "lucky few" could obtain licenses and become official tourist workers, while most could only participate informally. At this stage, the informal sector and black market did not just survive alongside the formal sector; they flourished as a significant source of employment (Wig, 2019, 54). Many Cubans even voluntarily quit their formal jobs to partake in a lucrative underground economy, contrary to the failing state sector – ideologically rooted in the "long-forgotten" framework of Che's "New Man." This was also the case among several private (licensed) which shimmers some light on the advantages that "lo informal" facilitates the Cuban population.

It has been clear that the "Special Period" turned Cuba into not only an economic crisis but also very much a social and ideological one that included "a preference for economic incentives over moral incentives" (Mesa-Lago & Pérez-López, 2013, 16). This changed Cuba – where deeply ingrained formal institutions of society, like academic education and formal job statuses, have long since been eclipsed by the better opportunities provided by social/language skills and street-savvy knowledge. These new wave motivations of economic behavior also became physically observable in public space, primarily where a high degree of tourism occurs. In step with the formal development of the tourism industry, it developed in *la calle* a rise of *jineterros* (Cuban slang for street hustling/prostitution), a widespread workforce that became symbols of personal profit amid the socialist symbolic landscape. They became what Berg (2004, 49) described as a "visible symptom of a moral crisis of the nation."

Ritter & Henken (2014) bring in a complementary perspective, empathizing the era as

the beginning of a pervasive "brain-drain" in the formal sector – where some of Cuba's most educated and skilled citizens have emigrated abroad or been forced into a kind of "insile." The latter means that they are driven out of their fields of expertise and into better-paying—though often less socially beneficial—work in the black market (also seen in the legal *cuentapropista* sector) (2014, 211). The Cuban society, where it became more practical for a surgeon to leave their medical practice to sell Che Guevara memorabilia to tourists along Havana's main streets, highlights a stark contradiction to the once long-cherished ideology of "Revolutionary Socialism." With the rise of tourism and the growth of private enterprises, inequalities were fueled and, in turn, legitimated by Fidel Castro as a *mal necesario* (a necessary evil) to preserve the revolutionary project (Babb 2010, 30-31). This disparity became strikingly visible: alongside revolutionary slogans on public walls, new hotels were constructed for tourists while many Cubans continued to sleep under roofs that were literally collapsing—at an average rate of three per day in today's Havana (ArchDaily, 2021). This contrast highlighted the paradox at the heart of sustaining Cuba's socialist system, where foreign currency has been as desperately needed by the state as by ordinary people on the street.

Since Fidel Castro presented himself to the Cuban population as a *mal necesario*, the formal strategy of betting on mass tourism has led to several societal upheavals. These upheavals resulted in an increasing economic stratification in the population and action-oriented patterns of economic behavior within what is called *lo informal*, which has continued into contemporary times. In the recent aftermath of the pandemic and the year-long absence of tourism, the Cuban economy has, once again, shown how vulnerable and dependent it is on external antagonistic forces.

Against this backdrop, this chapter focuses on how tourism changed the Cuban socioeconomic landscape profoundly, with ethnograpic cases focusing on two *jineteros* (street hustlers) who operate in the tourist streets of Havana, and a *cuentapropista*, a licenced business owner, who nonetheless depend on informal *socios* for his tourist business to go around. The chapter basically asks, what does it take to profit by tourists from different vantage positions? Whether legally housing tourists or whether providing tourists with illicit cigars and prostitutes, both *jineteros* and *cuentapropistas* respectively depend on complex interveawings between formal/informal economic activities and their network of *socios* across this divide, when managing tourists. *Jineteros* are normally seen to belong to the low end of the economic spectrum, while *cuentapropistas* normally are positioned at a higher

socioeconomic level, and relationships with tourists are often key to social mobility. In this chapter, I also investigate the importance of connections abroad for Cubans, whether in terms of family and kinship in the Cuban diaspora, or by *compadrazgo* ties and marriage between Cubans and tourists.

Jineterismo in the era of tourism

One of my informants, Carlos, is an informal tourist worker - *a jinetero*, who depends on several sources of income to get by. One day when I met him, he was very joyful for having gotten access to a package of antibiotics provided by a French family:

"In Cuba right now," he said, "if you get an infection of any kind, the doctor will prescribe you those antibiotics, but when you enter the pharmacy, they will just burst into laughter and tell you that they haven't had any of this for the last six, seven months. If you go to the pharmacy right now and ask for this," he continued, "they will just look at you and start laughing!" Carlos enthusiastically held up the package of antibiotics, which he referred to as "pure gold" when entering the black market: "The pharmacies will tell you to go to the black market and buy it. Every medication that enters the pharmacies here, they will all be sold the first day to somebody who will make good money on it. The system is completely corrupt everywhere. Medicines, food, clothes, everything."

Carlos got hold of the package of antibiotics (scarce medicines) after meeting a French family who were on holiday visiting Havana's Old Town. Having lived abroad himself for more than 10 years, including in French-speaking areas, he could easily charm them in their language. He told me that he offered them a historical walk through the city, followed by a dinner arranged by the family. As a gesture at the end of the day, the family gave him some practical items from their luggage, including antibiotics, as well as Euros equivalent to at least one month's salary for an average government employee.

Carlos's case illustrates one of many everyday scenarios that unfold within the informal tourism landscape, where the significance of foreigners' short presence shines through Cuba's beaches and streets that are life-changing for many locals. The encounters between Cuban residents and short-term foreign visitors reflect a more complex dynamic than a simple dichotomy between "rich capitalists" and "poor communists." For many Cubans within the informal tourism sector, foreigners, especially tourists, often represent a possible access to much-needed resources. As Carlos's case illustrates, tourists can act as potential

conduits to relieve some of the pressures of scarcity in the country by supplying the black market. In today's Cuba, where not only "unique currency" is in short supply, objects – in this case, vital medicines, which are hardly found on the empty pharmacy shelves – are much needed resources that tourists can contribute. Carlos's survival depends on such encounters with tourists, although nowadays, they are less frequent than before.

«Los jineteros»

For many Cubans operating in the informal sector, local encounters with tourists have proven to be an essential and easily accessible opportunity for resources, for instance highly sought-after foreign currency. In the streets, *los jineteros* (the Cuban "street workers") survive by skillfully navigating the needs and desires of tourists, as well as partaking in the broad social group that counts as one of Cuba's most significant segments of the total workforce.

Ricardo, one of my most experienced informants, has been involved in this line of work for over 20 years and spoke with me on several occasions about the centrality of tourism for his line of work: "This is the only way", he argued, "without the tourists, we cannot survive. I am telling you, I am one of them. Without the tourists, I cannot survive," Ricardo exclaimed, explaining how his informal job relies entirely on the presence of tourists, which includes daily walks around Havana´s tourist-heavy areas where he is constantly aiming for profitable opportunities. He talks and describes his way of work, which certainly aligns with an "improvisational survivalism" tactic. He sees himself as a fixer; it might include, for instance, weaving clients to formally drifted restaurants. As mentioned in chapter 1, he is informally reciprocated "under the table" by the restaurant owner who normally is a *cuentapropista* with a legally approved license who also earns an informal extra (tips) from the clients Ricardo guided them.

Ricardo relates that he always depends on whoever he encounters on his way to earn an income: "In a way, I have to be a tour guide, a pimp, a historian, or a restaurant waiter—everything!" Ricardo explained before continuing: "You must read the minds of people and see from far away. You have to study the tourist. I always know their type before I approach them. You have to read them and the situation beforehand."

Ricardo elaborated that different tourists have different needs. Families with children require a different approach than, for instance, a couple of young backpackers or elderly travelers. While some interactions lead to quick transactions, others will on rare occasions

develop into longer, more trusting forms of relations, mostly followed by a context of re-visiting tourists.

The *jineteros* would often act as intermediaries between the formal and informal sectors, by networking with their *socios*, such as the already mentioned owner of the state-run restaurant, a restaurant which is also duly driven by informal practices. The same enshrines their role in boosting ticket sales for the government-sponsored show (Buena Vista Social Club), which goes nearly daily, only housing tourists and becoming a hotspot for the State to generate hard currency. However, the *jineteros* also critically stimulate black market activities, such as being "middlemen" between tourists and underground suppliers for illicit cigar trades or prostitution networks. Cuban street workers rely on a big repertoire of products and services, which also could include other people.

For instance, quite often a *jinetero* connects the tourist with a *jinetera* (woman/ prostitution) secretly. The *jinetera-socio* reciprocates him (as *socio*) with a commission - a cut of the total profit, usually given after the sequence with the tourist is over.

Regarding the illicit cigar-market case, this cooperation further secures the external parties (the tourist and the supplier) ever to meet face-to-face, based within structures that allow and ensure "the codes of *lo informal*," producing, what one might regard as an "informal-doxa" – where commission-based norms and expectations govern collaboration between *jineteros* and other actors, whether formal or informal.

It subsequently became quite clear from my field observations that Ricardo's ability to make a living as a foreign tourist was heavily surrounded by his social network. This also included collaborations with other *jineteros* such as Carlos, who has a similar background (More than 10 years abroad, possessing linguistic skills and experiences that align with the social capital of Ricardo). Their trust-based relationship also sometimes ensures that they both have access to the necessary resources when one of them is in need; Carlos and Ricardo are also each other's *socios*. However, life as a *jinetero* is marked by a constant uncertainty, where their income is unstable, and the daily profit can range from being highly profitable to yielding more or less nothing - even up to several weeks. Life is a strugge (*lucha*), as Carlos and Ricardo put it[vii].

Frontstage and backstage in touristic Cuba

The realities of the (local) Cuban and the (global) tourist operate at opposite ends of the social and economic spectrum. While tourists are on vacation, often seeking what they consider to be “authentic” cultural experiences, Cubans are frequently concerned with simply meeting their daily needs. The "improvisational-driven" *jineteros* present a "Cuban version" tailored to what they assume the tourist would expect. MacCannell (1973, as cited in Kozak, 2016, 99-100) writes about "frontstage" and "backstage" settings in tourism, where the "frontstage" is the carefully constructed presentation that tourists encounter, and the "backstage" is the hidden reality of locals' lives.

For instance, I remember staying close to Carlos while he was sitting on the *Malecón* street being busy interacting with a European tourist next by. The tourist was one of the passionate "Cuba-socialist-sympathizer," Carlos later explained. I remember Carlos engaged enthusiastically in the conversation on socialist politics and revolutionary figures, despite privately cursing the same figures in conversations with friends less than an hour of the same evening. These are all typical dynamics underscoring the performative nature of many observable interactions between tourists and locals in Havana - where authenticity is sometimes staged to meet the foreigner's expectations but often for economic survival, though expressed outwards as "friendly/surprising/happy" idioms.

An elementary feature of the nature of reciprocity found in Mauss' (1990 [1923]) descriptions of "gift-giving" centrally concerns its socially guided mechanism that impacts behavior amongst the involved individuals, like expectations (a psychologically powerful "social force" - or shame, not reciprocating something with a roughly equal value.) They are as Graeber (2001, 154) points out, even in cases where material goods are the focus, the people involved "…have to pretend otherwise," highlighting the social complexities involved. The "frontstage" becomes a tool, not necessarily a reflection of the "backstage" reality that most Cubans live through.”

Protection and prosecution in Havana´s calles

I recall when I met Ricardo for the first time on my way home from an errand. As I peacefully walked down a busy street close to Centro Habana, I was suddenly greeted by a strong New York accent. From behind, I could hear a fast-paced "Where are you from, my friend?" As I turned around and introduced myself, I conversed with the person in front of me, whom I, at first glance, took for being an American tourist. Ricardo, the *jinetero* in front of me, wore a large sun hat and a short-sleeved shirt with floral motives while carrying an empty backpack (just part of his aesthetics) to appear in public as a stereotypical "tourist from abroad."

Ricardo explained his outlook to me, by saying that "I try to pretend I am a tourist. The reason why I have to dress up like this is because when they (civil/police) see some Cuban guy with some tourists walking down the street, they will immediately come ahead and ask for my ID - only because you are walking with some foreign guy. Just like that, they could deem me as a *jinetero* – a hustler who could be charged with the law against 'harassment of the tourist'."

For Ricardo, everyday life in Havana's streets often involves dedicated vigilance in the social and nearby environment. Navigating the streets also means having to navigate around common civilian police spots and other threats to the *jinetero*. Ricardo relates that he moves around with a constant awareness weighing heavily in the back of his mind that the revolution's official protectors at street level and advanced surveillance strategies could always be present.

Ricardo kept talking about his previous encounters with civilian police:

> "They used to take me to the police station three, four times a day (…) I went to jail for doing this, you know – just for talking with tourists… They used to send people for nothing to the police station, like animals. They used to have a small and very old Russian truck here in Havana. They would put you in there nothing like an animal, like a dog, and take them to the police station where they would be put in a cell block for hours. Sometimes you can give them some money and they will let you go. Mostly, it was just about warnings, but if they take you to court, you could be sentenced to 1-4 years for nothing, only for talking with tourists.»

Nowadays, Ricardo carefully sidestepped the long arm of the law by being strategically mistaken as a passing tourist among the police officers. This role performed "frontstage" is reinforced by using his distinct New York accent to reduce suspicion and encountering the "organ of the state".

As Ricardo's statements mirror, while the government encouraged tourists to generate hard currency, it simultaneously cracked down on the informal practices that sprang up around the industry. Since the early 2000s, the legislative framework, such as the law against 'harassing the tourist,' was designed to "curtail the rapidly increased sexual encounters "and other exchanges" involving money," material objects, and diverse services between tourists and locals. However, in practice, Cubans tend to circumvent these state restrictions continuously" (Härkönen 2016, 8). The law, in practice, could prosecute anyone who interacts or communicates with tourists, with the consequential that could result in a fine or even prison sentence.

Reflecting on the view of the formal system as something that protects those with licenses creates a stark divide between individuals like Ricardo and Carlos, who operate in the shadows, and those legally permitted through their licenses. As Hernando de Soto (1988, 4) suggests in his findings on informal entrepreneurs in Peru, formalization often benefits some while pushing "the poor" further into economic precarity. In Cuba, this divide is apparent, with *jineteros* like Ricardo and Carlos facing constant legal threats while those with licenses enjoy economic opportunities and a safeguard from police harassment. Having a license is not just about avoiding prosecution; it also allows individuals to work within both the formal and informal economies. Many licensed workers and *cuentapropistas* skillfully blend these spheres by using their formal status to access informal economic opportunities to increase their earnings, rather than distinct sectors, they become highly intertwined.

Jineteros such as Ricardo and Carlos sometimes expressed frustration and envy towards *cuentapropistas* and generally those in the licensed workforce. During one of our interviews, Ricardo argued that they have, in his words, ".. a license to steal! He argued that those carrying a license never had been in trouble with the law.

One example was provided by Ricardo: During an interview, he related a story about his old neighbor, leveraging his role as a bartender, orchestrating a lucrative side business – a dual engagement of formal and informal sectors that enabled him to accumulate significant wealth. Through his connections (in the formal), he secured a coveted position at *La Bodeguita del Medio,* one of Havana's most famous bars, renowned as Ernest Hemingway's favorite haunt. This formal employment offered him a steady income and direct access to a constant stream of tourists, but it also provided a unique opportunity to capitalize on informal activities: "He got everything now. But how did he make all that money? Because he's dealing with the *mojito*!" Ricardo exclaimed. His neighbor now enjoyed a lifestyle of material

comfort and other luxuries that remained out of reach for Cubans like Ricardo. The ability to navigate these dual spheres was key to his success. Ricardo's envy was palpable as he described the advantages of his neighbor's dual-driven economic practice: "Those people have nice houses, cars, and everything because they are directly connected with many tourists. That is the way we live in Cuba. That is also how I do it, but I do not have a license, and that makes a huge difference!"

Cuentapropistas: Licensed yet informal – Cuba´s wave of privatization

The distinction between formal and informal work is often blurred in Cuba's tourism economy, where licenses or formal positions could provide individuals a legal facade or greater financial security, likewise taking advantage of one positionality that serves as a premise of daily improvisation by navigating both formal and informal sectors. For instance, a hotel receptionist might discretely offer private accommodations or other services to the hotel's clients, or an official tour guide might use "his position" to sell illegally sourced cigars to visitors he accompanied through State travel enterprises, leveraging the trust established through their official roles.

Among *cuentapropistas* I met during fieldwork, figure Manuel and Niña, a couple who offered accommodation to tourists in a neighborhood close by where I lived. We were introduced through my increasing network of *socios*; to many Cuban informants, I represented as “a returning foreigner” a possible supplier of scarce goods (as with the scissors and hair dryer, for example). In the following extract from my field notes, I recount a situation I experienced in which Manuel acquired food for guests through a *socio* in a nearby “daily agricultural market” but was discovered by civilian police, and hence, had to deal with this as well:

In an ordinary morning I happened to be just around the corner from Manuel and Niña's narrow entrance. I encountered Niña at the bottom of the stairs. She seemed tense as she sat on a 50-kilogram sack of rice (which I eventually helped carry three floors up to the kitchen of this c*asa particular*). I was invited to sit down, and Manuel entered half an hour later. He sat down, sweat glistening on his forehead while lighting a cigarette, before commenting with great relief on Niña's tense appearance and the heavy bag I had recently carried up the stairs. This 50-kilogram bag of rice turned out to be an essential supply for the meals served to their tourists. It had been acquired through a network of *socios*—insiders who

pilferage cuts of the quoting system in a *bodega*, which they informally sell under the table to specific clients. However, after leaving the store, revolutionary police witnessed the couple handling the bag in the street, which raised suspicions of economic criminality, leading them to intervene. Yet, as Manuel, rather unaffectedly, explained in a later conversation: "I paid them for this, obviously." Manuel further emphasized that paying government officials in hard currency is often necessary to circumvent such obstacles: “They also need to obey this corruption, because they have to eat too.”

Manuel’s statement reflects the shared understanding and inner codes of *lo informal:* Everyone is trying to get by, knowing one another as *luchador* (a fighter) after decades of scarcity. Manuel explained that no matter what a Cuban does, it's only about surviving and supporting his loved ones; it is where *la lucha* meets *lo informal*. Actions that are not perceived as immoral do not violate conventional ethics, but where the law, as a formalized production, aims to 'push' certain people down. In contrast, it 'secures' the position of others. This also reflects Ricardo's statement from the earlier ethnographic case: "Those carrying a license have never been in trouble with the law here."

The household: dynamics of lo formal & lo informal

In Manuel and Niña's *casa*, the formal and informal boundaries are often blurred. On the surface, they formally run a c*asa particular*, a legal form of accommodation, but under this facade, the household also represents a complex network that the couple uses in an improvised way to secure sources of income beyond simply renting out rooms. In addition to accommodation, they offer guests a range of additional services—everything from meals and transport to products from the black market. Manuel gets access to such goods through his contacts, including "luxury limited rum," which he said that he obtains from a cousin who makes a living from organized theft from one of Havana's well-known rum factories. A strong base of social connections is common among *cuentapropistas* such as Manuel. Through the household, they depend on close friends and family who remain central *socios* – connections that ensure that necessary goods and services are available to supplement the income through tourists. Although Manuel and Niña’s *casa particular* is a formally licensed and legal business, they depend on the cultural codes of *lo informal* and several illegal economic activities from the authorities' point of view, to run the place.

I managed to get an interview with Manuel regarding his and his wife’s business. "We must always stay ahead," he said, reflecting on the constant uncertainty that scarcity brings

their business. He emphasized the significance of *la casa* as a space for generating hard currency, and that the list of shortages in everyday life is a never-ending cycle of *luchar* and *resolver*: If an air conditioner breaks down, it can be weeks or even months before they can find the right part, affecting their ability to attract tourists. If the internet shuts down or the computer breaks, leading to unanswered online (in advance booking) applications from foreign customers, which they know by experience, are rapidly lost if the time spans over a day. Their *socio*-connection inside the *bodega*, their many *socios* who are plumbers, electricians or the like, and the way in which Manuel manages the Revolutionary Guard police officers in the streets by way of payoffs in hard currency and hence, with corruption, are all crucial to the operations of the house.

Compadrazgo (ritual kinship) in Manuel's career as a private entrepreneur

The road to financial stability for Manuel and Niña, who now operate within the formal tourism industry, was anything but easy. Before Manuel became a private entrepreneur, he, like many others, worked in the government sector, but lost his job when the economic crisis hit in the 90s. After almost a decade in the "shadows" of tourism, Manuel experienced a decisive turning point in his life during what he describes as an ordinary "day at the office." This turning point came when he met a wealthy German, whom he refers to as a typical "high-class tourist" named Wolfram.

The relationship between Manuel and Wolfram started as a clientelistic relationship, but eventually their social bond developed into more formalized forms. Wolfram returned to the island several times, and their first good tone was established during the first meeting, when a driver was to take Wolfram into Havana for the first time. When Wolfram later married a young Cuban woman with Spanish roots, with whom he now lives in Germany, Manuel was his best man (*compadre*). When Manuel himself became a father for the first time, he chose Wolfram as his main godfather – an important cultural norm throughout Latin America, known as *compadrazgo* (ritual kinship) which also proved financially beneficial in the making of *socios*. Rooted in the cultural tradition of *compadrazgo*, which in Latin America emphasizes the relationship between *compadres/comadres*, Manuel received financial and material support from Germany, enabling him to enter the formalized sector of the tourist industry.

Managing the pandemic crisis: financial support across oceans & nation-state borders

The island's fragile economy was clearly exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. As international borders closed and the flow of tourists ceased, Cuba fell into yet another crisis due to the sudden inexistence of external forces. The economy, which had become heavily dependent on tourism, faced enormous challenges when the most crucial source of generating hard currency disappeared almost overnight, just like the Soviets during the 90s. The pandemic spread over an already heavily economically suffocated population - and in step with complications led by the global shutdown, the temperature among the population also increased, which ultimately helped fuel the boiling point that manifested itself when Cubans took to the streets across the island on 11 July 2021.

In my interview with Manuel, he related how he had managed the crisis in a better way than many others, owing to his overseas contacts. “Do you know why I was able to go through the COVID pandemic without the difficulty that even the Cuban government had, regardless of all their power?” he asked me, pausing for a moment, letting the question linger in the air, before continuing:

“It´s all, very simply, due to the act of friendship! People who have previously stayed at the house were very fraternal and solidary with us, in the moment when the big crisis hit Cuba due to the pandemic. Many people wrote to us, asking if there was anything they could do to improve our struggles. It is the beauty of social medias… Some of the people we communicated with helped us out, sending money and other items we needed (combo-package). In this way we could also help other people out in the neighborhood that were in need - like the old couple down-stairs. Sometimes I shot a short video while we were handling out some items, which I sent, so they also knew that we were sharing. Not at least was the godfather of my son, who lives in Germany, providing us with tremendous assistance. We pass through the pandemic without noticing any hardship! Not because we are pretty, handsome, or powerful. No! because of our human relationships in the most efficient way.”

Manuel’s reflections clearly illustrate the importance of connecting to the world outside of Cuba, especially in times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. For many, these transnational networks are their lifeline. Manuel explained, “Almost everything in this house has been acquired through relationships with tourists,” including anything from tourists who forget shampoo in the shower (a luxury item in Cuba) or travelers who leave/donate their belongings due to taking up space in an already packed luggage. Nevertheless, what is essential here surrounds those visitors who have gained a deeper connection with the local

family, as Manuel's statement reflects. Central to Manuel is his German *compadre* (godfather), which has developed from being a simple tourist relationship to a formalized bond through *compadrazgo*, a traditional system of co-parenthood rituals rooted in times of Spanish colonization in the Latin America region.

Social ties & entangled objects

Nicholas Thomas (1991) points out that objects gain their value not only through their practical function but also through the social and cultural ties of which they are a part. In Manuel's case, this becomes clear in his home, where the objects not only symbolize his friendship with Wolfram but also represent the continuing financial support that has helped the family transition from the informal to the formal economy. Within Manuel´s home, a tangible representation of his international relations becomes immediately apparent on the inside *la casa*. As one enters the living room, one sees a large, framed picture portray of Wolfram with his son Manuel - symbolizing the German's importance within the family, as well as the family's economic ties abroad. However, as one moves into other rooms, a variety of artifacts with German references further enshrines their relationship, either it be mugs with images of Wolfram´s hometown or favorite football team or the computer with a German layout keyboard. In the sense of Thomas (1991), they are more than daily artifacts - they are «entangled objects». They represent the material exchange between Cuba and abroad and the social and economic mobility Manuel and his family have achieved through their transnational connections.

Through Manuel and Carlos, we can observe how different relationships with tourists create a unique system of values, or what Appadurai (1986, 15) calls "regimes of value." In Cuba, where access to essential goods is very limited, especially during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, seemingly trivial objects – such as shampoo or antibiotics – can acquire enormous value, depending on the social and economic contexts in which they are located. For Carlos, the package of antibiotics he received from the French family was worth more than its weight in gold, as it symbolized vital medicine and represented economic value on the black market. In contrast, Manuel's relationship with his German compadre, Wolfram, has a completely different dynamic. Like Carlos, Manuel also receives practical benefits through his relationship with foreigners, but what separates them is that Manuel's connections are enduring and rooted in a cultural system that extends beyond simple economic exchange but ensures various capital among the actors involved and which secures the partnership

between those involved in the long term.

As several numbers and researchers suggest, having a connection with financial means to someone abroad is often a crucial decision for individuals between living in constant danger or achieving certain levels of financial stability. These relationships are gateways to diverse “regimes” where foreign currency and material resources flow at a pace distinct from the island's scarcity. Strong bonds and profound ties with overseas individuals grant Cubans, and vice versa, a form of entry into a shared material world. Notably, the majority of these relationships that cross oceans and national borders primarily involve Cuban family members from the diaspora.

A clear picture of this meaning can be seen through the following numbers: While the Cuban State does not provide official figures, studies estimate that up to "…70% of the Cuban population receives remittances in some form" (Reuters 2024). According to other research, over two-thirds of the population depends on financial support from abroad, with more than 90% of these remittances coming from the U.S. (Runde & Higashi 2021). Furthermore, 60-75% of these “remittance dollars” reportedly enter Cuba through unofficial channels (Eckstein 2004, 318.)

However, Manuel´s story during the pandemic (upcoming), not to mention his role as his son's godfather, show that tourists can transform into alternative and formalized roles that alter into (fictive) kinship ties, carrying economic implications where various types of capital are reciprocated, which sheds some new, fresh light on the complexity of tourism, social networks, and the informal and “remittances economy.”

Partaking in the remittance economy beyond the diaspora

According to Manuel, "… any Cuban, no matter how hard they work, if they do not have ties outside of Cuba, they are basically screwed." Manuel´s statement, clearly mirrors the statistical numbers of the diaspora remittance economy. For those without biological connections to the U.S. diaspora - like Manuel and the two *jineteros* Ricardo and Carlos - developing long-term relationships with tourists can become a reliable alternative for obtaining stable financial support. As Carlos expressed during our interview: "People without family abroad need to find other ways!"

Carlos explicitly referred to how many Cubans seek relationships with foreigners in various ways as a strategy for survival. Carlos himself made connections with a couple of

friends from the Netherlands, who donated 50 dollars to him on his birthday. However, as he pointed out, regular contact with former tourists often becomes peripheral social media connections. Nevertheless, tourists represent potential alternatives to the diaspora's economic significance, primarily through romantic relationships. In other words, older - foreign men and younger Cuban women are a common sight, whether in the restaurants of old Havana or along the beaches of the tourist paradise, Varadero.

For many Cubans, marrying a foreigner is not just an option, but a strategic move to improve their situation: A Cuban friend of mine recently married an older Spaniard. At the time of writing, she is on her way to becoming part of the historic emigration wave from Cuba. This dynamic shows how formal traditional relationships—such as marriage and *compadrazgo*—secure economic ties to the outside world, often through leaving Cuba and acting as a conduit for economic support to those who remain on the island. Although the *compadrazgo* is undoubtedly more unusual, both function as cultural practices of strategic economic importance at the local level in Cuba.

More on compadrazgo in touristic Cuba

According to Mintz and Wolf (1950), *compadrazgo* relationships involve three distinct parties: the parents, the child, and the godparents (*padrino/madrina*). Through the formalization of *compadrazgo* ties, they form a network of strategic alliances and gift-giving. Traditionally, *compadrazgo* has been linked to religious rituals, with roots in colonial times and Spanish Catholicism. However, today, these relationships have transformed into a broader and more adaptable network of chosen family ties. The modern interpretation often includes traditional rituals such as baptism but also concerns mutual responsibilities, both emotional and financial, where the godparent often plays a central role in the child's upbringing and financial support (Alum 2024). However, the relationships established between *compadres/comadres* take center stage. It showcases how cultural traditions are weaved into the fabric of changing economic and social conditions by economic consequences, making it a fascinating aspect of Cuban society through the lens of *lo informal*.

Compadrazgo has taken on an even more pragmatic role in today's Cuba, especially in a context marked by internal shortcomings and the economic blockade. Although studies focusing on compadrazgo in the context of tourism are rare, Härkönen (2016) mentions that many Cuban parents seek financially secure godparents, especially foreigners or Cubans who

have emigrated. This highlights the importance of having a connection to someone outside the island. As Manuel and his ties to Germany illustrate, the practice of *compadrazgo* ensures that the godparent of Manuel and Niña's children offers material support, which gives the child better opportunities and the family a financial safety net.

Valerio Simoni (2016, 146-147) highlights how relationships with tourists function as economic connections through the idiom of friendship. They facilitate "moral obligations and expectations" that can develop into deeper ties as they "encourage continuity in relationships," such as the changing statuses between Manuel and Wolfram (from client to friend, friend to kin into formal roles of *compadrazgo*. Mintz and Wolf (1950, 342) categorize these relationships into two main types: horizontal and vertical. Where the horizontal form of *compadrazgo* relations is based on a similar economic or social status among the actors involved, the vertical form—relevant within this empirical context—reflects a socio-economic asymmetry between the sponsor and the parents, resembling Eisenstadt (1984) description of a patron-client relationship. This distinction became particularly evident through a revealing pattern in daily life:

For instance, once I visited Manuel when he received a call from his German *compadre*, I observed a sudden shift in Manuel's voice during his video or phone conversations with Wolfram. Manuel could quickly change from a stressed and informal atmosphere to a professional and friendly tone when answering the phone, where laughter and smiles seemed more likely. His sudden hospitalness reflects the acute awareness of maintaining the relationship, which highlights his responsibility and role as *compadre* through fulfilling social expectations (to preserve the family's economic stability). The relationship between Manuel and Wolfram is vertical because Wolfram is a wealthy, foreign *compadre* who provides Manuel and his family with essential resources. This gives Manuel access to economic opportunities he would not otherwise have, forging the transnational bond between local Cubans and their mobility from the informal sector to the growing private sector. In this way, we see how traditional forms of organization develop and weave together religious and symbolic relationships with practical and strategic economic purposes within a socio-economic landscape in Cuba characterized by scarcity. This example illustrates how cultural traditions can be revitalized and function as practices to improve life situations in contexts of economic resilience.

Chapter 7. Cuba's digital economy and informal networks

Introduction

This chapter takes a dive into the digital economy in Cuba, especially focusing on the development of informal exchanges of internet content such as el *paquete* and *SNET*, where the former (according to some researchers) is one of "…the island's largest (unofficial) employer (Press 2015; Fazekas and Marshall 2016, in Cearns 2021, 99). *El paquete* is a collection of digital content on USB sticks and hard drives with files downloaded abroad and smuggled to the island, and which are physically passed from hand to hand across the island in the Paquete network of *socios*. It operates in a grey zone of exchange and involves physical meetings.

While during the 'Special Period,' Cuban ingenuity was most evident in how everyday objects were repurposed to meet basic needs amid scarcity, today, that same resourcefulness has shifted to the digital sphere. Here, Cubans creatively repurpose old technology and build informal networks, adapting to new challenges in an era defined by limited digital access. The birth of, and the sharing of, *el paquete*, and how it was exchanged informally between *socios* and extended across Cuba, is a quintessential example of the spirit of and practice of *sociolismo* operating in the shadow of a repressive state.

SNET, a DIY network originally comprised of gamers, developed later and spread across Havana. When confronted with the growth of illegal, but (despite state repression) unstoppable DIY networks, the government approached their founders, suggesting formalization and cooperation to realize the Cuban state's own digital distribution of ideologically approved content, called the *la mochila*. The formalization process resulting in upheavals in the original DIY network and hierarchization of the now governmentally accepted SNET operations - and social mobility for those who acquired formal positions/ licenses from the government in the process. This exemplifies another dynamic regarding the weaving of formal and informal in contempory Cuba, in which the state feeds upon, appropriates and formalizes *lo informal*.

Digital development in Cuba

Cuba is still considered one of the least digitally connected countries in the world[viii], however, digitization has already changed economic practices and challenged the state's monopoly on information flow[ix] within Cuba and overseas. Despite internet use being a relatively new

phenomenon on the island, it exerts significant impact: For the government, digitization is yet another necessary evil; without it, the economy would collapse, as the currency system (including taxation through convertion rates) and the flow of hard currency from tourism would cease, and imports of goods from abroad (outside the embargo) would suffer the same fate. For c*uenta-propistas* and license-holders such as Manuel, access to internet allows acquiring customers through international websites like Hotels.com and Airbnb. For those stuck in the peso economy, converting pesos to dollars on the black market, and thereafter to MLC on a credit card in the Cuban bank, can allow shopping in state-led dollar-only store. Transfers of currency from the diaspora to credit cards in Cuba, require digitization, such as for *jinetero* Carlos who receives gifts on his birthday from Europe. Hence, digitization impacts the entire economy and plays a central role in differentiating Cubans with respect to unequal access to resources and resource appropriation. The development of the digital domain can, in turn, be seen as reflecting Mesa-Lago & Pérez-López (2013, 16) economic interpretation of Cuba's progress under Raúl Castro's leadership: "decentralization of economic decision-making, an acceptance of income differentials, and a preference for economic incentives over moral incentives".

While encountering digital obstacles in daily life, whether due to state regulations, censorship or shortages, the actions taken by the population to overcome these challenges have not been an exception in the existing cyberspace on the island. In response to digital limitations (slow internet speeds, geographic restrictions, high costs, censorship, and surveillance), Cubans seek to tap into digital state resources, a *resolver* that has long been central to Cuban daily life:

One example from my fieldwork involves a man in a neighborhood who had ingeniously set up a hidden wifi transmitter on his rooftop. (As previously noted, the rooftops of Havana illustrate the inventive ways in which Cubans seek to amplify wifi signals.) By tapping into the wifi from a nearby government building—thanks to the building's height and proximity—he could share the connection with neighbors, including the owner of a c*asa particular*, who relied on internet access to attract clients. This man's ability to provide wifi connections to nearby others for a small fee or a return favor strengthened his social network, further echoing the Cuban concept of *sociolismo*, where personal relationships are vital in accessing scarce digital resources.

Quite noteworthy, initially, Cuba was far ahead of its region in terms of digital development during the 90s, though the leading government made a significant turn due to the

potential of disrupting the State information monopoly, or as Fidel Castro phrased it as “a wild colt (gun) that needed to be tamed.” (Henken, 2021). It was not until 2008 that private ownership of computers was allowed, and it was first in 2015 that the general population could access the internet through public Wi-Fi hotspots - that significantly marked the population’s first steps of encountering cyberspace.

As a tourist in Havana in 2018, I observed how these parks, packed with Cubans connecting to Wi-Fi, became a prominent feature of the public cityscape. For many Cubans, these outdoor parks offered their first encounter with the internet, enabling them to communicate with relatives abroad and access news and information otherwise unavailable (Whitefield & Mazzei, 2015). When the state introduced these Wi-Fi zones, they were primarily located in larger cities and tourist areas. The high cost of access paid in hard currency[x] excluded most of the population on the island despite the increased availability (Priluck 2016, 2-3), a limitation that remains relevant at the time of writing this thesis.

This situation also naturally led to informal practices: individuals with convertible currency could buy and resell Wi-Fi access (a one-hour scratch card, priced at 1 CUC, roughly 10% of a monthly salary) at a slightly higher price in pesos. Much like goods from the state "dollar stores" entering the black market, Wi-Fi access became an accessible commodity to sell and profit from by offering it at peso prices.

Internet for Revolutionaries: Censorship and VPN

Former vice president (2008-2013), José Ramón Machado Ventura, now second secretary of the Cuban Communist Party, stated in 2015: "Some want to give it to us for free (the Internet), not so Cubans can communicate but to infiltrate us for ideological work. ... We have to possess the Internet our way, knowing the imperialists aim to use it to destroy the Revolution" (Harris, 2015). This approach reflects Cuba's cyberspace, which mirrors the already established political climate regarding information on the island: strict control over the flow of information[xi] and strict restrictions on Cubans who want access to the "open" internet. For the few who can connect to the global network, access is exclusively through ETECSA (Empresa de Telecomunicaciones de Cuba S.A.), the state telecommunications monopoly. Needless to note, The US embargo also exert a huge impact on internet access.

Despite the state's extensive surveillance and censorship strategies, Cubans have found creative ways to navigate these restrictions. One of the most widespread methods is the use of

VPNs (Virtual Private Networks), which establish an encrypted connection between the user's device and the internet. VPN technology makes it possible to mask IP addresses and thus bypass state and geographic restrictions (Hobbs & Roberts 2018). VPNs give Cubans access to the "full" internet, and the ability to connect to services and information outside of state control. As Javiero, one of my informants, describes, VPN use has become an integral part of everyday life for those who want independent information or access to limited services.[xii]

VPN use among Cubans plays a unique and essential role not only in terms of accessing information, but also in the economy. This technological creativity is an extension of the flexibility of the informal economy internally (Köhn and Siré 2022), and these networks also extend far beyond Cuba's borders. I can highlight a personal example, from early on during my first fieldwork:

As already mentioned, when I, as a student, did not have the opportunity to enroll at the university, I found a private language school that offered Spanish lessons as an alternative. Despite the school being initially closed due to the lack of tourists, one of the teachers opened without a hitch just for me – his first student since the island closed its borders. However, the interesting thing is how the payment had to be made. Instead of paying on the spot, I had to use contacts at home in Norway to send money via PayPal to an account in an Asian country, where a person married to a Cuban woman regularly brings cash into Cuba. Through this transnational network and circuit of exchange, where those involved initially were buyers and sellers but also connected to others by politics of “affection,” as Fernández (2000, 16) describes in his portrayal of the underpinning networks of *lo informal*, the language school was able to bypass both the American embargo and the significant taxation imposed by the Communist Party on *cuentapropistas* (Gámez Torres, 2024). This example showcases the unique and complex nature of Cuba's economy, where a monetary exchange between a student and a teacher in the same room nevertheless requires a complex, digital solution for payment involving three continents, and partly is embedded in *sociolismo* extending across borders.

The formal granting of digital access

A significant leap in digital accessibility occurred at the end of 2018 when the State launched 3G mobile internet on the island, allowing many of its citizens access through their pockets. Despite these advances, several features of the "old infrastructure" remain barriers to digital equality[xiii]. The complications of the dual currency system extend into the digital realm[xiv], something which makes the State's promise of accessible technology, as outlined in Vice-President Diaz-Canel's 2015 statement to make technology "…available, affordable, and accessible to everyone" (Brooklyn, 2020), appear paradoxical. Anthropologist Tankha (2018, 111) explores how the dual currency system contributes to a gap and tensions between the State's socialist promises and Cubans' lived realities, a gap that also directly impacts who can connect. This disparity fosters cultural tension, creating what Herzfeld describes as "cultural intimacy," where official ideals clash with the everyday experiences of citizens. Those with a steady supply of capitalist dollars are well positioned to access technology, while those employed by the government (Che´s ideal workforce of the "New Man") are often excluded or forced to rely on more accessible black-market channels to connect.

Mulas in the digital economy

Due to these restrictions, much of Cuba's digital technology arrives through informal channels, often brought in by friends and family returning from the diaspora, or as seen in the ethnography on tourism, such as Geraldo's personal computer with a German keyboard—an "entangled object" in the sense described by Thomas (1991)—symbolizing a material connection shared with his German *compadre,* and taking place in a particular context of power relations, between a white patron and his Cuban client. However, as illustrated above, these relationships—friends, *compadres*, and close networks— reflect unexpected forms of reciprocity, aligning with Graeber's (2001, 159) concept of "open-ended" reciprocal exchanges. In this context, digital items are often gifted or informally exchanged within personal relationships rather than for profit, yet they make up a large part of the island's access to digital equipment (Nelson, 2016, 4). On the other hand, there are also what Jennifer Cearns (2019) terms "professional *mulas*," who primarily make a living by smuggling goods to sustain the black market with high-demand items, particularly digital technology. As Cearns (2019, 16) further emphasizes, these informal import channels, made possible by an extensive network of *socios* beyond the island's borders, serve as a primary—and often the only—source of material access for many Cubans.

During my fieldwork, I met a 70-year-old former economist who supported himself as a *mula* after travel restrictions were lifted in tandem with economic reforms in the '90s. He initially got into the activity by fulfilling requests from his local community, where he got paid in advance, ultimately saving up for the trip. However, today, he collaborates with a *socio* who organizes and finances these operations, allowing him to travel up to three times a month. He noted that the demand for digital technology has surged recently as Cubans increasingly seek access to essential devices in today's globalized world but remain primarily inaccessible through formal channels. Under current law, he told me, he could bring up to six phones without risking legal consequences. However, this only applies to the first entry; on later trips, each individual phone is heavily taxed, but this was something he constantly managed through his *resolver*.

Connectivity & informal networks

The informal economy has found new ways through digital platforms, where the importance of connectivity manifests itself in unexpected ways. After the introduction of 3G and LTE in 2018, new opportunities opened up for informal trade and social networks through digital spaces. Anthropologist Köhn and Cuban multimedia artist Siré (2022) highlight platforms such as WhatsApp and Telegram as central arenas for exchanging goods and services in times of shortages, where circumventing the law is an integral part of everyday economic life. The possibilities that these digital spaces provide also open new forms of organization in semi-public online groups, beyond spatial limitations.

Köhn and Siré (2022) further point out that although the Cuban State officially regulates the economy, it allows digital black markets to exist largely undisturbed, as they provide vital supplies where state systems fail. These digital markets thus fall within what Ritter categorizes as part of "legitimate underground economic activities" (Ritter & Henken, 2014, 29). Köhn and Siré argue that these digital black markets continue Cuba's historic informal economy and arenas for a 'moral economy' that takes shape parallel to the informal market. Köhn and Siré highlight how the moral economy, digitally, is expressed in the tension between solidarity and personal gain and the negotiations between different values and motivations, depending on the context. Within these groups, people have clear expectations about what is considered a fair and unfair price, and many of the groups practice a form of social control where overpricing or exploitation is openly criticized or punished by being

thrown out of the groups (Köhn & Siré, 2022, 92-93). As Köhn and Siré note, on the one hand, this is an echo of the revolutionary values, which emphasize the needs of the collective before the individual, but on the other hand, a reflection of market economic values such as profit maximization (Köhn & Siré 2022, 81-83).

The internet opens new opportunities of resource appropriation and creates new divisions, and especially in the Global South (Coleman 2010, Horst & Miller 2012).[xv] "The digital divide" is marked in Cuba, and Van Dijk (2017) argues that it is essential to understand the consequences of unequal access to technology, not just the reasons why the digital divide affects community participation on several levels – economic, social, political, and cultural – but how digital divides reinforces already existing inequalities, as those who have means to get access also tend to get more advantages of resources more generally (Van Dijk, 2017, 3).[xvi] I recall an episode when Manuel was contacted by a family friend seeking help to look up information for their children's schoolwork. As a former nurse employed by the government, this friend could not afford either physical or digital access. This scenario illustrates the stark contrast between private and government workers, underscoring how access to hard currency impacts not only participation in the World Wide Web but also (formal) opportunities for educational advancement and knowledge access.

Closing the digital divide informally: El paquete and SNET – an extended case

Faced with government restrictions and limited internet access, Cubans – in the familiar style of *inventar* and *resolver* – have developed several informal digital alternatives in response to a structurally exclusionary formal development. Already for several years before the internet became available, file-sharing via El Paquete has been the Cubans' primary method of media consumption, which has proven to be a significant solution to "solve" the barriers associated with limited internet access and the state's monopoly on news and media (Henken, 2017, 432-433). As Cearns (2021) notes, Cubans created informal networks already back in the 1970s and 80s to circulate foreign media, such as films, magazines, and music, which were otherwise unavailable on state channels. El Paquete, as we know it today, continues this sharing culture with a structure adapted to modern digital solutions. Since downloading from the web is both slow and expensive (not least, previously non-existent), the socially organized system El Paquete gives individuals access to «…thousands of hours of international TV shows and movies, video games, music and music videos, sports matches, e-books and

magazines, cell phone apps, antivirus updates, and classified advertisements.» (Cearns 2021, 99). Cearns relate that digital content was originally downloaded abroad and smuggled into Cuba on hard drives and USB sticks. By 2015, the weekly *paquete* content circulated the island with bus drivers and pilotes, exchanging hands for fees and favors within the realm of *lo informal*. According to Cearns, «…by 2017 it had become a daily phenomenon, with content copied, recopied, and sold through networks of paqueteros (packagers), who in turn distribute the material for a profit in their local area.» This has also promped Cubans to change from «…offline digital devices and television set into the equivalent of cloud-enabled, data-rich smart phones and TVs" (Henken 2017, 433 in Cearns 2021, 100).

The technical infrastructure is both simple and efficient: There are four main matrices, or «houses» that produce most content of El Paquete – three in Havana and one in Santiago de Cuba. These matrices spread the content to regional distributors, who in turn pass the files along through local *paqueteros*, reaching customers in every nook and cranny of the island. (Cearns, 2021, 101-103). It has become a major source of informal income.

In Havana, El Paquete is easily observable in public – an integral aspect of daily life of being semi-connected to global web – whether you hear it over the music of a passing car or see a student engrossed in a digital book on their phone. However, either way, one can be reasonably sure that the content originates from a USB memory stick. While El Paquete today, let say, brings families and friends together in front of the TV screen – for example, to watch a blockbuster that premiered in Hollywood just a few days before, an informal media-sharing culture has been profound in Cuba for a long time.

From informal to formal: The illegal gaming network between socios that became a DIY network covering Cuba

In the wake of Cuba's increasing access to digital technologies and the expansive, informal file-sharing infrastructure through *El Paquete*, new and technically complex forms of innovation and social organization have emerged. This has pushed the boundaries of the Cuban culture of *resolver* and *inventar*, where new forms begin to further characterize the island's digital sphere. In the streets and backyards of Havana, a new wave of Cuban entrepreneurs emerged of self-taught programmers who had acquired equipment through visiting relatives from the diaspora. This group first arose among friends but quickly grew into a grassroots movement of computer networks that began spreading throughout neighborhoods in the Cuban capital, giving rise to the "organically growing" intranet known

as SNET (Street Network). This unique Cuban invention began in the early 2000s, when a new wave of video game enthusiasts, often given equipment by relatives visiting from abroad (as a result of new openings in the borders), were inspired by the concept of online multiplayer games, which they themselves became excluded from. Without the Internet, these Cubans created their own multiplayer experiences in their backyards, connecting to each other via physical cables (later including wireless transmitters), quickly spreading from house to house, and developing into a LAN network with a rhizomatic spread. The "underground" connections of SNET eventually became the world's largest community-driven network, operated and maintained by thousands of volunteer users and non-users (Dye & Jacobs 2020:1-2), with estimations suggesting over 100,000 active users (Bellini, 2020). Although the project was initially started by and for gamers, SNET quickly developed into a platform that included user-generated content such as chat functions, discussion forums, and alternative websites identical to, for example, Wikipedia and Craigslist, or Cuban versions of social media such as Facebook and dating services (Dye et al., 2019, 11).

During my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to meet and interview one of the leading figures in the intranet's beginnings. I met him in a private setting where I ate my meals daily for two months (in exchange for an old PC of mine[xvii]). One day, he came in to help reform the PC and check their Wi-Fi connectivity options. Through him, I learned more about the network called SNET. He told me that he had been part of the network a few years ago, and it was also through his network of contacts that I subsequently gained access to a rare research space and an interview with Pablo, one of the key administrators of SNET, at the outset a network of video game enthusiasts and their computers.

Pablo on the birth and spread of the intranet SNET

Pablo welcomed me into his modest home, where he lived with his mother, wife, and newborn daughter. He lit up as he described what has become a life project - an innovation developed parallel with the country's formal digital development, the latter guided by the state telecommunications company, ETECSA. Pablo was among the first to connect to the fast-growing intranet. As one of the founders, he has witnessed how SNET has grown from a small project of friendship to a complex, unofficial infrastructure that now covers large parts of Havana. Today, he works full-time as a state-employed engineer, but SNET has become his "side project" - a job he humorously referred to as his "first child."

During the interview, Pablo explained that this unique Cuban invention to which he contributed significantly, began in the early 2000s, with a new wave of video game enthusiasts inspired by the concept of online multiplayer games, who were often given equipment by relatives visiting from abroad. Without the Internet, these Cubans created their own multiplayer experiences in their backyards, connecting to each other via physical cables (later including wireless transmitters), quickly spreading from house to house, and developing into a LAN network. This new wave of Cuban digital entrepreneurs, often young men but also with several key women at the head, were often self-taught programmers. The group that first arose among friends quickly grew to represent a grassroots movement of computer networks that began to spread through Havana's many neighborhoods through what became known as SNET (Street Network) - all ever being connected to the "open internet."

During the interview, Pablo seemed nostalgic as he smilingly reflected on past times. He told how he and his friends used found equipment to fix network parts (technological disobedience) or to protect it from the tropical climate: He also recalled how his group of friends used creative materials, like womens nylon stockings to cover the physical appearance of the network to hide it against the police, who actively tried to put an end to the network. Nevertheless, back then, cohesion was strong, and although much has changed, many of the original members are still active – many of them are now main administrators or serve critical tasks of operating, and central to the further development of SNET.

«Look at SNET", he said, "we started out as a family. A family of gamers. (…) We all possessed the same goal: to make this a better place.» Pablo pointed out that Cubans, like other people in the world, want to do the same things—play games, share files, and communicate. Although today's SNET has become more complex and hierarchical, it has retained its original sense of community. Pablo was clear that it is not about money or positions but about enthusiasts who have gathered to realize a dream that, for many Cubans, has always seemed unattainable.

«SNET is an unusual and unique story on a global level. The needs will improve how this network is created; necessity is the engine that creates all of this system and initiatives,» Pablo said enthusiastically during our interview. These "bottom-up" inventions provided fertile ground for a digital social connection between neighborhoods and friends, and the network eventually extended to other municipalities and neighboring regions such as Matanzas.

SNET and the state

The road to partial formalization and legalization of SNET in 2019 has been twofold. On the one hand, the network focused on digital innovations, with the main emphasis on access to entertainment, communication, and interaction. On the other hand, the underground network was seen through the eyes of the State with great suspicion. For good reasons, the authorities feared SNET's potential to enable political or unregulated communications over large areas. However, with SNET expansive growth, the authorities were forced to take other measures other than repression, to control the situation:

"When it was still illegal," Pablo relates, " the State realized that it was something out of their control and that they could not act to stop us. They were like, 'We cannot stop you, so you join us' - because this technology is unstoppable, and they just had to find a way rather to associate."

Pablo relates that SNET was partially formalization and legalization by the Cuban state in 2019. This was, however, not an easy process. As Pablo said: "It was a titanical task within the SNET community - getting associated with the State." The formalization of SNET implied creating a vertical organizational structure, that Pablo related in detail. [xviii]

Opinions among the administrators varied, and friction arose between different membership segments, where some of them left. However, as Pablo said, most were positive and they had never an intention to pose a threat to the State. All they wanted was to play along, and for many, the compromise with the State was lucrative. Not only could they operate freely, it was also officially recognized and encouraged, ensuring further network development. Instead of continuing to pursue users, the state and SNET administrators reached a compromise. SNET was to remain a legal activity as long as specific rules were followed: no sharing of pornographic content and no political discussions. Through the Youth Party the State integrated itself into the network and offered its own version on the SNET platform:

Pablo explains that like *El Paquete* (but with a different structure and content), *La Mochila* is the State's version of digital content distribution via SNET. SNET makes the distribution of state-censored content more efficient: Produced through Cuba's Youth Computer Clubs (*Joven Club de Computacion y Electronica*), *La Mochila* distinguishes itself by offering entertainment and educational content in a controlled environment based on the official idioms and ideology of the government. Pablo relates that "there is a great difference between *'El Paquete'* and the official one. *Mochila* is a way for the State to provide education,

mostly to the younger population. They do not have a weekly update like us. We update every Sunday with new content. We also have much more content!”

Another informant, Wilson, a Paquete distributor in the neighborhood, responded this way when I asked about Mochila: "Nobody watches that. It is not any good. It is shit and limited. Because the stuff you find there is what they want you to watch. With *Paquete*, you can choose whatever you want.”

Wilson explained that *Mochila* is another way the State tries to control the population through "educational" measures. He pointed out how the internet and the Cuban version of *Paquete* provide many opportunities to make money - something he believed was every Cuban's priority: "It is a hard time with everything in Cuba. A lot of people use this new opportunity to really learn what they want, for their own profit, to educate themselves. Instead of learning the stuff that the government tells you to learn." Wilson went on to say that he had started offering additional services, including professional courses aimed at specific professions or academic subjects: "Not the ones from YouTube," he stressed, saying these courses are often priced upwards of $500 to buy legally. He got this content through his boss, who "downloaded it when he was in Uruguay”, by traveling back and forth as a *mule*. He explained that "he got them in another (pirate-copied) way, and now he sells them to his clients here in Cuba."

SNET and personal advantages

For Pablo, the semi-formalization of SNET was an ideological and moral drama within the network community. While many welcomed the change, as it provided greater stability and resources, others were skeptical. Some even left the network for reasons of principle, as they felt that the formalization would compromise the original grassroots character and autonomous spirit which it originated from. In light of this, the integration with the state, via the influential Cuban Youth Club, moved not only the technical but also the social landscape of SNET to a new level. This is reflected, among other things, in the nostalgia that many feel for the "good old days". Although a part of SNET still lives on in the informal, another part has been lost - less personal and more digitized.

Nevertheless, as a leading figure, Pablo has gained new advantages after the formalization. He said he has now been granted a license allowing him to import electronic equipment freely without facing legal challenges. He said, "Every technological artifact here

in Cuba comes from abroad." He also said that he had recently returned home from Ecuador, and in addition to filling his luggage with technical items - both for his formal work and for SNET - he had also brought household items, including several packets of vitamins for the baby. (In a country where 9% of Cuban children suffer from severe food poverty (UNICEF, 2024), and where a lack of vitamin A in particular has led to health challenges such as blindness, such goods are invaluable.)

The digital weaving of formal and informal

The interview with Pablo exemplifies how Cuba´s digital landscape is an outcome of both formal and informal structures. While the government monopolizes access to the formal internet via the state company "ETECSA," Cubans have created alternative routes to connectivity through grassroots digital infrastructures such as "El Paquete" and "SNET," which bypass formal restrictions and democratize access to global content while disregarding copyright issues. These digital networks highlight how informal—along with creative solutions such as VPNs, informal imports through "mules" and peer-to-peer exchanges—provides opportunities of access to limited resources in a digital context, whether it surrounds entertainment, communication or by facilitating capital (to mention a few).

Henken's observation (as cited in Q24N, 2021) of the struggle over «control, direction, and impact of digital technologies» in Cuba captures the core of Cuba's digital development, where a persistent negotiation, rather than conflict, between state control and the people's adaptability leave its mark on the digital landscape, further influencing the very economic, social, and political fabric on the island. This ongoing battle over Cuba's technological future and control over the narrative aligns with what anthropologist Bryan Pfaffenberger 1992, 291-292) describes as a "technological drama"—a discursive space in which different actors vie to socially shape technology's use and development according to their interests.[xix] The first stage of this drama is what Pfaffenberger calls *technological regularization*, in which dominant actors (in this case, ETECSA) control technological systems to serve specific cultural and political aims (Pfaffenberger, 1992, 291-292). Informal innovations like "El Paquete" and "SNET" can be understood as what Pfaffenberger calls "counterartifacts" or "appropriate technology," embodying features designed to counteract or reverse the political implications of the dominant system.

In the case of Cuba, both formal and informal actors, driven by necessity and

creativity, have developed parallel digital structures, aligning with Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of rhizomatic and arborescent systems. Informal digitization has given rise to a new dimension of Cuban innovation and collective ingenuity—paralleling the resilience seen during 'the Special Period' and embodying Oroza's (2010) concept of "technological disobedience." Nevertheless, this ingenuity has once again shifted the power dynamics within Cuban society: As Bye (2021) also confirms, the digital sphere has fundamentally transformed the state's grip on information flow, creating new spaces for adaption (including resistance) where Cuban informality—*resolver* and *inventar*—takes shape within this constitutive structural power balance[xx]. The Cuban government's response, such as introducing *La Mochila*, reflects Pfaffenberger's (1992:307) concept of "reintegration," where the state seeks to reclaim control over disruptive counterartifacts by integrating them into the formal structure, diminishing their revolutionary potential. SNET's administrators acknowledge this dynamic, noting that "the state had no other choice than to integrate," signaling a reluctant concession to the technological realities shaping Cuban society. Responding to Henken's rhetoric of Cubas uncertain digital future, we might, through the lense of Pfaffenberger, suggest a potential outcome: If this process continues, Cuba's informal digital networks may undergo what Pfaffenberger describes as "designification," where previously disruptive artifacts become routine fixtures of daily life, stripped of their subversive connotations. Over time, platforms like SNET and El Paquete could lose their revolutionary character, becoming simply accepted, everyday parts of Cuban society (which it is hypothetically already)—taken for granted even as they continue to reflect the ongoing tension between authority and agency. As Pablo nostalgically recalled SNET's early days, describing it as a "titanical task" when the State wanted to integrate, that some members left behind out of principle, this shift mirrors the gradual loss of SNET's original spirit of *sociolismo*.

Chapter 8. Discussion and conclusion: Cuba´s Economy as a Mobius Strip

Introduction

In this thesis, I have explored how a selection of *habaneros,* who are positioned differently within Cuba's informal and formal labor market, engage with and navigate between Cuba's formal and informal economic systems for the purpose of survival - and for a few of them; for the sake of social mobility. By exploring the economic strategies of *jineteros*, *cuentapropistas* and state employees, I have shown that formal and informal economic activities are tightly weaved together. I have focused on *habaneros* during post-pandemic times—a period when the economy had yet to recover from the prolonged absence of tourism.

Officially, informal economic activities—such as the selling of eggs in the street, or even something as small as a pensioner selling individual cigarettes to supplement a struggling pension—are criminalized by the state. Unofficially, these informal exchanges may fall within what Ritter & Henken (2014, 29) term "legitimate underground economic activities." However, certain types of *jineterismo* will in any instance be persecuted, as Carlos related. The formalization of SNET illustrates that the state may legalize a prior criminalized activity, when suiting the state's own purposes, such as the spread of the content of *la mochila*.

The conundrum of informal practices in Cuba may involve production of goods, pilferage and smuggling, and exchange through gift giving, bribes, commodity exchange, and bargains between *socios* (either between inferiors and superiors, or between persons on equal footing) who practice *sociolismo*. *Socios* may be linked together in networks that traverse the entire island, such as in the case of *el paquete,* or may extend across national borders; to the Cuban diaspora abroad, or to foreign tourists who have turned into friends or godfathers. In any case, Cubans themselves argue that they rely on *sociolismo* for their sheer survival.

At the same time, these activities contribute to social stratification, pushing already marginalized Cubans into increasingly precarious living situations. This is is especially the case among those who are stuck in the Cuban peso economy, as against those with access to hard currency and convertible pesos (MLC). One might call it "an evil circle," where the means to survive financially are closely intertwined with the social and economic marginalization of specific population segments, reinforcing class distinctions at the nexus of a centralized economy and an uneven distribution of resources. The need to *resolver* an

informal income alongside state-issued monthly paychecks permeates everyday preoccupations among the many state employees:

The baker Javiero's role in the production of bread illuminates how informal networks operate alongside formal state systems, supplementing limited rations with unofficial channels. The tacit, daily negotiations of grades and money between Geraldo and some of his students is another example, and so is Manuel's experience in the *bodega* shop, where hard currency provides unlimited quotas of rice in the shadow of the formal rationing system. Further on, paying dollars under the table to a surgeon for "universally accessible" health services, is yet another example, further underscores how the dual currency system partially blurs economic divisions while simultaneously heightening everyday tensions between socialist state ideology and Cuba's integration into the global capitalist economy (Tankha, 2018, 111). The introduction of the dual currency system and the market reforms did not merely segment Cuba's labor force into distinct income groups; it also divided the population's access to resources within the formal market: The licensed *paladares* (family-run restaurants) and *casas particulares* (private accommodations) can legally access hard currency and convertible pesos (MLC), a privileged position in contemporary Cuba, as against that of *jineteros* – for instance Ricardo who is criminalized when receiving tips in hard currency from tourists for services delivered. As Thomas (1991, 7) underscores; exchange involves «a political process. »

The informal *paquete* digital economy is an example of horizontal *sociolismo* writ large, where access to foreign internet-derived content develops partly in resistance to the censorship of the state (and copyright laws abroad) and where *el paquete* tends to change hands horizontally across nodes; either shared freely, including a symbolic payment or gift, bartered for eggs or vegetables, or capitalized upon (but the latter evokes reactions). Köhn and Siré highlight how the moral economy, digitally, is expressed in the tension between solidarity and personal gain and the negotiations between different values and motivations, depending on the context. Within these groups, people have clear expectations about what is considered a fair and unfair price, and many of the groups practice a form of social control where overpricing or exploitation is openly criticized or punished by being thrown out of the groups (Köhn & Siré, 2022, 92-93). As Köhn & Siré note, on the one hand, this is an echo of the revolutionary values, which emphasize the needs of the collective before the individual, but on the other hand, a reflection of market economic values such as profit maximization (Köhn & Siré 2022, 81-83).

The practices of *sociolismo* do, however, lack clear-cut boundaries in terms of a sphere of reciprocity and that of market exchanges, although the *casa – calle* distinction may point in that direction. Commodity exchange, bargain or gift giving may take place between *socios* in the home as much as between *socios* in the agricultural street market or in the *bodega*.

For example, consider the informal exchanges —and the *sociolismo*— involved when Manuel (self-employed) buys a sack of rice with US dollars from his state employee *socio* who is in charge in the *bodega;* rice that is pilferiged from the quotas of Cubans stuck in the peso economy. The commodity exchange between Manuel and the state employee in the *bodega* is expressive of a long-lasting trading relationship between *socios* – a relationship also embedded in friendship, and confirmed and expressed through commodity exchange, in which the partners show their willingness to facilitate resource appropriation for each other (and at the cost of others). In this case, market exchange, and the commodities that change hands (including money) express and produce personal, social relations in Manuel and the *bodega* employee's horizontal *sociolismo*.

Thereafter, Manuel must give a gift (a bribe) to a Civil Police in US dollars. This is «…part of a system of practices in which participants express, conserve, lose, and gain position in the sphere of social value» (Gudeman 2001, 89-90 in Stan 2012, 12). When Manuel pays bribes to the Civil Police, he also confirms a power relation: The police officer has a superior position or status. The bribe may initiate a relationship of instrumental, «vertical» *sociolismo.*

Again, when Manuel buys the rice at the expense of Cubans without a license and access to hard cash, he confirms his position of superiority vis-a-vis theirs. In this regard, we are dealing with positions defined by unequal access to resource appropriation (Wedel 2002) and power distribution.

One of my findings is that the informal exchanges exemplified in this thesis, and the political context and the values that embeds them, defy neat categorization in terms of a sphere of gift giving versus commodity exchange (Gregory 1982), informal versus formal, and cannot presuppose «traditional» versus «modern» forms of economic exchange. The latter has not been an explicit theme, however, the historical trajectory of colonial Cuba, with a plantation economy past empowered by commoditized slaves, lasting from the 16th to the late 19th century in Cuba[xxi] (Mintz & Price 1976, Palmie 1996) defy a neat distinction between "tradition" and "modernity."

Lo informal - and the chasm between ideal and real

Throughout this thesis, I have reviewed how Cubans navigate the intertwined structure of formal and informal economies. The findings have analyzed Cuba as a society within a context of limited resources and opportunities met by the economic agency of social networking, improvisation skills, and cultural values in the shadow of a Cuba that formally appears as a socialist nation. As Fernández (2000, 26) articulates, *lo informal* is more than a response to state limitations; it reflects a fundamental "chasm between the ideal and the real" in Cuban political culture—a tension with a long historical standing: «El hombre nuevo» - and Fidel Castros 1959 revolution promoted noble ideals and represented a violent break with a violent past. The ideals of socialism are, however, still ingrained in the Cuban mindset, despite the contemporary failures of the Cuban state to provide for citizens, and despite the Cubans contempt for authoritative figures: According to Ritter & Henken (2014, 208), «Part of the disregard for economic authority on the part of Cuban citizens has deep colonial and pre-Revolutionary roots».

Cultural intimacy provides a lens through which we can understand how Cubans reframe and reinterpret state-imposed values in response to these changes. In this way, individuals engage with the state's ideals not only by outward conformity but also by adapting them within informal, economic everyday contexts. This blend of public conformity and private pragmatism unveils the contradictions between Cuba's formal socialist image and the realities of survival that characterize daily life. The complexities of daily life in Cuba are not readily visible in the state's official narratives but instead unfold within what might be dismissed as the mundane exchanges of daily survival. Rather than being confined to the formal sphere, the essence of Cuban life emerges in informal, private spaces where contradictions, adaptations, and unspoken realities surface. This is where we find expressions of *luchar*—to struggle—and *resolver*—the practice of finding solutions—anchored in the sentiment of *todo prohibido, pero vale todo* (everything is forbidden, yet everything is permitted). By using the lens of cultural intimacy, we can observe how Cubans navigate and reinterpret state-imposed ideologies in ways that simultaneously challenge and sustain official narratives. As Herzfeld explains, cultural intimacy reveals the gap between "official idioms" and the vernacular expressions of daily life, capturing ironies that subtly critique yet paradoxically reinforce state authority (Herzfeld, 2005, 1-2). Herzfeld's idea of "disemia" contrasts the official, state-sanctioned forms of cultural expression with the vernacular, private expressions in everyday life. The vernacular, often rooted in informal practices, can

challenge and discredit official representations (Herzfeld, 2005, 14-15), as Fernández (2000, 109) points out with the mocking practices of *choteo*:

> "the language of *lo informal* is a great equalizer, but like *el choteo* it also serves to demarcate group membership: it keeps others out as it creates an in-group with a grammar not taught in schools. With its vocabulary, a society of sorts – that coexists with the formal ones of the modern state, challenging state socialization, governability and legitimacy".

In Cuba, verbs such as *luchar* (to fight) and *resolver* (to arrange/fix/solve), and *sociolismo* resonance far beyond their immediate literate meaning; their connotations reach into deeply rooted identities in daily life and reflect the tension between the state's ideological framework and the lived realities of scarcity and inequality in today's Cuba, as in this case; adapts "official idioms" for personal, unofficial purposes. Extending this, Fernández (2000) points out how informal social networks, driven by affection rather than revolutionary passion, challenge the strict "rules" of the state where informal networks open spaces for alternative behavior patterns and norms, highlighting the dissonance between official ideals and lived experiences (Fernández 2000). As Keith Brown (2006) notes, nation-states strive to define "their" culture in an essentialist and homogenous manner, often by controlling such notions and identities within the official public discourse. This aligns with Benedict Anderson's (1983) concept of "imagined communities" but adds a lens that uncovers the informal underpinnings through which state-society relations are actively negotiated and reinforced in everyday life. According to Brown, anthropologists with local knowledge and research practices, however, "…represent a particular threat to that control," as they expose the complexities and contradictions within these state-imposed identities, offering insights into the lived realities that challenge the homogeneous national narrative (Brown 2006, 578).

Through the concept of cultural intimacy, we see how the public and private realms in Cuba intersect, revealing a socio-economic landscape that is fluid, negotiated, and continually contested. This framework illuminates how individuals adapt state narratives for personal purposes, exposing the dissonance between the idealized image of the state and the lived reality of Cuban citizens (Herzfeld, 2005, 3-4). Applying Herzfeld's notion of "defiant pride" in a Cuban context, we observe how the rhetoric of the revolution has been reappropriated by Cubans to serve present-day survival needs: Where *luchar* once symbolized collective

struggle against imperialism, it now encapsulates the daily struggle within the constraints of the state itself. The practice of *sociolismo*—a humorous twist on socialism that equates social connections with monetary value—exemplifies how pragmatic, individual agency complements *luchar's* collective ethos.

Fictive kinship – from sociolismo to macroeconomic dynamics

According to Wig (2020), personal networks and connections, rather than formal membership in the Communist Party, have often been decisive for social mobility in Cuba. Wig points out that "among the *cuentapropistas*, where one came from and where relatives had traveled was of great importance to achieve economic success. These findings show how important personal connections are, and how so-called "strong ties" can be decisive for social mobility and economic behavior" (Wig 2020, 106).

In light of this, we can understand the *compadrazgo* system as an example of such "strong ties" and as an alternative relational pattern that mirrors the biological ties between the island and the diaspora, constituting a critical segment (remittances economy) of the Cuban economy. C*ompadrazgo* represents a form of (fictive) kinship in which biological ties are replaced by ritual processes that formalize economic asymmetrical into symbolic relationships (Mintz & Wolf, 1950), which recently has evolved from its religious origins into more secular forms (Alum, 2024), serving as a framework for exchanges involving various types of capital and mutual interests. The relationship between *compadres* is not only about financial transactions but also about moral responsibility to ensure the continuity of the relationship, as pointed out by Simoni (2015). In Manuel's words: "The German guy, spitting money in here or whatever, is also making it possible for Anthony (Manuel's son) to study in Germany, getting a high-quality education. Wolfram, on his own will, has set aside money for his education. The only thing Anthony needs to do is prepare himself, and I will provide the conditions. In another way, his education is guaranteed by the Padrino."

The *compadrazgo* relationship constitutes a social bond carrying emotional and financial obligations. In Manuel's case, we see how this consists of funds used to renovate a house and become a *cuentapropista* or as an investment in his son's future education. In this way, relationships are expanded and strengthened over generations. In Mauss's (1990 [1924] essay, what is understood as the central core of gift exchanges operates on the social nature of human practices of giving and receiving. The "gift" initiates *momentum* that impacts the course of social relations and could potentially turn into new ties of meaning and identities. In

this context, we see how relationships develop from being clients to friends, from tourists to family – a process that reflects the structures the gift exchange produces and how the accumulative cycle of exchanges binds people together on different levels, as described by Mauss. Despite the socio-economic asymmetry involved, economic «gifts» provided by the German godfather are often given without the expectation of immediate reciprocity. Instead, they foster obligations that secure the relationship's longevity and tighten a broader commitment that is not strictly transactional. As Graeber (2001) empathizes, Mauss' rigid premise of gift-giving, suggesting that the recipient feels compelled to return a counter-gift of roughly equal value (Graeber, 2001, 35), becomes somewhat redundant in this setting. Graeber (2001, 218) notes that in such relationships, "no accounts need to be kept because the relationship is not treated as if it will ever end".

Through *compadrazgo*, informal relationships are formalized, where global actors within the capitalist economy are intertwined with local cultural systems of ritual kinship. The relationship between Manuel and Wolfram illuminates the emphasis on maintaining long-term social bonds, which do not necessarily require an immediate balance in transactions. This mutual understanding—that the relationship has a value beyond concrete exchanges—ensures these ties are sustained over time. Wolfram's investment in Manuel's c*asa particular* is one such moment where gift-giving opens up new future relationships and identities, where the social commitment linked to the relationship is just as important as the financial support. As Graeber (2001, 225) points out on "open reciprocity," they represent a "structure of action" aimed at "maintaining the value of timeless human commitments."

The interweaving of Cuba´s arborescent and rhizomatic structures

In analyzing Cuba's economy, we encounter a structure that is neither wholly formal nor informal but rather like a Möbius strip where state-regulated sectors and informal networks geared on improvisational survival strategies are seamlessly intertwined backstage, although Cuban frontstage of "official idioms" will have it otherwise. The Möbius strip metaphor captures how Cuba's formal and informal sectors, ostensibly opposite in nature, function as interconnected and interdependent elements of the same economic reality – "a chain of situations and people" as Javiero, the state-employed baker, proclaimed, further empathizing "*lo informal* has been institutionalized."

This structure is neither wholly hierarchical nor decentralized; instead, it operates

through a logic of controlled, arbor-like formal growth and the rhizomatic spread of informal networks and transactions. Drawing from Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concepts of 'arbor' and 'rhizome', we can interpret Cuba's formal economic systems—state-run enterprises, touristic licensure, and digital regulations—as branches growing from the trunk of state control. In contrast, the informal economy spreads rhizomatically across the island, establishing webs among nodes of *socios* into complex social networks. The informant reflections: "we all sail in the same pond, but we move at different paces," capturing both this shared economic situation of crisis and the vast disparities in access resources and social mobility that shape Cubans daily living.

The issue in this thesis focuses on the interweaving of formal and informal structures, inspired by Hart's (1985) perspective that these are not separate spheres but appear as two distinct analytical units in one integrated economic system. This can be implemented within the theoretical framework of rhizomatic and arborescent structures, both of which, in this analysis, are included as economic spheres that are mutually dependent on each other. As Wolf points out, all group interactions must adapt to economic or political power relations (Wolf 1956, 1067), further noting that in complex societies, "…the formal framework of economic and political power exists alongside or intermingled with various other kinds of informal structure which are interstitial, supplementary, parallel to it" (Wolf 2013, 3).

In Cuba, it is precisely this dynamic between formal power and informal practices that enables the population to survive. A further noteworthy argument from Wolf is that those societies (where the informal aspects play a critical part in the overall functioning of the total system), in many instances, initially display as a sole "formal table of organization" from an outside perspective but in reality, would fail if its informal mechanism is lost. For example, Wolf explicitly mentions the 'blat system,' the operation of social networks which is deeply ingrained in everyday life, consisting of various forms of informal relationships that weave through and coexist with formal institutions in the former Soviet Union (Wolf 2013, 2). This resonates strongly with what is referred to in Cuba as *sociolismo*, a play on the word "socialism," reflecting how personalized connections influence access to resources by navigating the internal policy framework. «*El que tiene un amigo tiene un peso en el bolsillo*» (He who has a friend has a dollar in his pocket) is an old Cuban saying that reflects the reality of the Cuban socialist system, where the limitations of the central state-planned economy make personal relationships essential (Fernández 2000, 107). In a direct translation, *socio* means partner – *lism* means friendship, and as one of the informants expressed it: "It was our

ironical way to rebel and fight the stupidity of socialism. Even the people designated in an administrator position by the government to run or administrate, let us say, a restaurant or a hospital, require the need for "know-how" and the dependence on "who you know" to run whatever place or institution."

As well as "Blat," *sociolismo* entails a set of practices that encompasses a wide array of roles and functions characterized as a mutual system of favors based on trust and affinity, mainly to obtain and secure material goods and services, spanning from the simple to more severe matters, by the use of personal networks. As it occurs on all levels of Cuban society, *lo informal* works as a responsive effect of the systematic flaws of a centrally planned economy and mismanagement of the State apparatus, which also «…paradoxically accounts for its political stability» (Staniszkis 1984, in Aguirre 2002, 85). Ecchoing Wolf (2013), this phenomenon of social organization is comparable to other places that previously have followed an economic structure of a socialist-like model of central planning, such as the system of Blat found in the former USSR or Guanxi in China. In comparison, both of these systems gave patterns of social organization that reflect the significance of informal practices and exchanges among the population as crucial in order to satisfy their necessities in times of material shortages, likewise functioning as a central aspect of both supporting and subverting the economic system (Ledeneva 2008, 118).

Contrary to Hart's approach, where formal and informal economic spheres are understood as reflecting the hierarchical, politically driven authority and the market's horizontal, egalitarian relations, respectively (Guyer 1999, 245), my findings in Havana show a far more complex interweaving. As up to almost 80% of the population is employed in positions assigned by the state, *sociolismo* emerges as the vital relational patterns that binds these spheres together and creates what we can consider a distinctive Cuban "value system" or regime of value, where hierarchical and solidarity tendencies merge rather than being based on a duality between economic sectors. Within this system, hierarchical and solidaristic relationships are interwoven, shaping individual calculations and collective resilience in dynamic interaction with changing sociopolitical contexts.

We discover that *sociolismo* manifests as a mid-passage intersection where the formal and informal sectors partially overlap and constitute each other. For instance, when Javiero supplements his limited state salary through informal channels, or when Manuel sources goods from *socios* to meet customer demand.

Taking Deleuze and Guatarri's (1987) organizational philosophy (the metaphor of arbor and rhizome) into account, we can explore Cubas's dynamics of complementarity, competition, and conflict and weave these different aspects that expands and nodes individuals and social groups into a coherent economic structure, within a compelling theoretical framework. Wolf's (2013) work on "kinship, friendship, and patron-client relations in complex societies" highlights how social networks form the bedrock of economic and political interaction representative of a Cuban economic context. Among the informants, it was a central premise based on strategic networking among friends, families, and neighborhoods. It forms the basis of Mauss's notion of reciprocal obligations, providing a lens through which we can understand why individuals maintain social ties to "certain others." As Mhyre (2013) argues, "exploring social networks facilitates an adaptive analytical tool, with its proven usefulness, especially in the context of «complex societies'» (2013, 3-4). It calls for a need to make us focus on the aspects of how certain individuals are socially tied to one another, as Wolf emphasizes – "the focus of study is not communities or institutions, but groups of people" (Wolf 1956,1066). Following Mauss' (1990 [1925] reciprocity, trust functions as the glue that holds *sociolismo* together in Cuba. As Fernández (2000) explains, "the maxim suggests the politics and economy of affection, equating friendship with monetary value," highlighting how «emotion» and «reason» are intertwined in everyday economic interactions (Fernández 2000, 108). However, the reciprocal nature of trust and reliability in *sociolismo* facilitates how "…these networks expand from family to friends, from neighbor to neighbor and to distant acquaintances, branching out through the neighborhood to municipalities (towns) and well into other provinces" (Fernández 2000, 110), which leads to "…complex webs of distribution through bartering, monetary exchange" outside the scope of formal organization, which effectively "supply goods and services that the state and the planned economy do not" (Fernández 2000, 111).

This thesis concludes by viewing Cuba's economy is an interdependent system of formal and informal economic activities, challenging simplistic distinctions between legality and illegality. In line with the thesis's main issue, the findings reveal that *lo formal* and *lo informal* are not sharply defined categories. Viewed through the Möbius strip metaphor, formal and informal create a continuous cycle that sustains Cuba's precarious economy. Social networks, as captured through the lens of *sociolismo*, function as both practical and symbolic links between state and population, where hierarchical structures and solidarity networks merge in a distinctive Cuban "logic of values."

Limitations and proceedings

In line with the research recommendations for Caribbean anthropological studies, this thesis is historically and ethnographically oriented (cf. Mintz and Price's seminal work in 1976; with a research agenda that still predominates, see Baca et al. 2009). Baily et. al. (2019, 7) accentuates that historically speaking, informal economies (and how they are studied), differ across Latin America, the Middle East and North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and Europe/Eurasia. One of the shortcomings – which can become a proceeding - is that I have not compared across Caribbean and Latin American societies with respect to how the weaving of formal and informal economies have a long, historical (and also trans-Atlantic) trajectory[xxii] with respect to former colonial societies, which were slave-based and plantation-based, such as Cuba, Jamaica, Brazil, Colombia and Haiti (Palmié 1995, Mintz 2006, Brendbekken 2008). The weaving of formal and informal economies still prevails in the lives of peasantries and urban populations in these societies today, although under different jurisdictions and political systems.

Also «race» relations, gender ideology, *compadrazgo*, and the before mentioned culture of *choteo*, form part of «the long duree» (Braudel in Wesserling 1981) of former Spanish Caribbean societes such as Cuba: Another shortcoming has to do with the intersection of race/ethnicity and gender, which have participatory implications in informal and formal economies. For instance, Baily et al. notes that «…the informal economy is highly gendered. All too often, gender determines who gets access to the most profitable resources and enterprises and who, as a result, will have the worst. This points to the deep entanglement of gender with economic dynamics and means that, almost always, analyses must take gender into account. » (Baily et. al. 2018, 9). In a coming study, these limitations will be part of the research agenda.

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- ***Habaneros*:** refers to the inhabitants of Havana, the capital of Cuba. It is often used for people who live in the city and can also refer to cultural associations linked to Havana.
- ***Lo informal*:** means informal or informal networks and markets—a central social, political and economic aspect of Cuban society.
- ***CUP (Cuban Peso)*:** The CUP, or Cuban Peso, is the national currency of Cuba used by the local population for everyday transactions (bodegas). The unit is separate from the CUC which was previously more valuable and used for tourism, a similarity to the new MLC system (see two next points) .
- ***CUC (Cuban Convertible Peso):*** The CUC, also known as the Cuban Convertible Peso, was used in Cuba as a currency parallel to the CUP and was long tied to the US dollar for use in tourism and imports. (Note: CUC is now abolished; CUP and MLC operate today)
- ***MLC (Moneda Libremente Convertible):*** MLC, or freely convertible currency, is a form of electronic currency in Cuba used for international transactions and imported goods. In this regard, it is an advancement of the previous CUC.
- ***Dollar-stores*:** in Cuba refer to mostly the stores that previously accepted CUC (Cuban Convertible Peso), but now only accept payment in MLC (Moneda Libremente Convertible), which is a currency tied to foreign hard currencies such as US dollars, euros, or other international currencies. These stores, often called "MLC stores" by locals, sell items not found in regular stores that use the CUP. The goods in these stores are often imported products such as household goods, electronics, and food - also known as luxury goods in Cuba. For Cubans who have access to foreign money or MLC cards (which can, for example, be topped up by relatives abroad), these shops are practically inaccessible, creating a dichotomy in access to goods.
- ***Bodegas:*** is the local, state-owned grocery store where goods are sold in CUP (Cuban Peso), the currency in which most Cubans receive their official salaries. These stores are an essential part of everyday life for ordinary Cubans since the prices are adjusted to the wage level in the country, but the economic setting results in the State struggling to supply the population with minimum necessities. These bodegas often offer staples such as rice, beans, sugar, and other groceries (intended for 1 month but

rarely lasting more than 2 weeks), which are allocated through a rationing system known as the "libreta de abastecimiento" (ration book).

- ***Remittances:*** (in Spanish, remesas) are money transfers, mainly from the Cuban diaspora in the United States, to families and friends in Cuba. These financial supports give recipients access to hard currency used in MLC stores or for purchases outside the government system. Remittances are essential for many households, as they cover basic needs such as food and medicine. However, they also contribute to widening economic differences between Cubans with and without financial support from abroad.
- ***Resolver*****:** means to solve or to find a solution, but in Cuba, it also has a broader meaning that covers the ability to "find a way" through challenges, often via creative solutions in the face of scarcity.
- ***La-Lucha (luchar):*** means "struggle" and refers to the struggle to survive under economic and social challenges in everyday life in Cuba.
- ***Inventar/Invento Cubano*****:** means Cuban ingenuity and describes the creativity of Cubans in the context of economic hardships and material shortages (often by repairing and repurposing objects creatively).
- ***State-pilferage*****:** is about stealing from the State. It refers to when Cubans "borrow" or steal government resources for personal use, a practice that can be widespread due to the scarcity of many goods.
- ***Cuentapropista*****:** a self-employed person in Cuba, usually small business owners or self-employed people working outside government employment.
- ***Casa particular*****:** is a private home/bed & breakfast rented out to tourists in Cuba. This is a popular form of accommodation and an alternative to hotels.
- ***Special Period (Periodo Especial)*****:** This era refers to Cuba´s economic crisis following the fall of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s. The country lost its largest trading partner and struggled with economic stagnation and profound scarcity.
- ***PCC (Communist Party of Cuba)*****:** The PCC is the Communist Party of Cuba and the only legal political party in the country.
- ***El Hombre Nuevo:*** means the new man and is an ideal of the Cuban revolution: a selfless, solidary, and devoted person who builds socialism.

- ***Revolution*:** refers to the Cuban Revolution of 1959, which led to the establishment of a socialist state under Fidel Castro, as well as to the contemporary government, currently led by Miguel Díaz-Canel (2018–), who took over after Raúl Castro. (Raúl assumed leadership when Fidel Castro stepped down in 2006 due to health issues).
- ***Socio:*** means buddy/partner and is commonly used to describe relationships with an economic or mutual benefit aspect. In Cuban society, it implies not only friendship but also a practical, resource-sharing bond that is often crucial for navigating economic challenges.
- ***Sociolismo:*** is an expression in Cuba that refers to mutual help between friends, *socios,* and family through sharing or exchanging resources in times of scarcity.
- ***CDR (Comités de Defense de la Revolution):*** are local community organizations created to monitor and support the PCC regime and maintain control over local activities.
- ***Compadrazgo*:** refers to the Cuban concept of co-parenthood or "good friends" who are almost like family. Compadre means a close friend or mate, while padrino means godfather.
- ***Jinterismo:*** describes activities in which Cubans try to make money, often from tourists, through legal and illegal services. *Jineteros* (men) and *jineteras* (women) participate in this type of business.
- ***ETECSA:*** is a state-owned telecommunications company in Cuba that controls the infrastructure of the country's internet and mobile networks.
- ***SNET (Street Network):*** is the intranet of Havana—an informal private computer network created by *Habaneros* to connect and share content domestically as an alternative to limited internet access. (It is Integrated with the formal system today.)
- ***El Paquete:*** means the package and is a weekly distribution system on USB hard drives that gives Cubans access to foreign films, music, news, and other digital content.
- ***La Mochilla*:** ("the backpack") is a government alternative to *El Paquete/SNET*. It offers content such as films and documentaries approved by the State but is rarely used by the population.

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End Notes

[i] MLC can be used in MLC – or dollar stores «…that originally were set up to sell a limited range of goods, mainly household appliances, which were being sold on the black market (Kunkel 2024, 69).

[ii] «The Helms– Burton Act (1996) further extended the territorial application of the initial embargo by applying it to foreign companies trading with Cuba. More importantly, while the previous acts had been executive orders that also could be abandoned by any future president through another execu- tive order, Helms-Burton was signed into federal law by President Clinton, thus requiring a qualified majority in Congress to lift it. This would, for instance, make it impossible for President Obama to abolish the embargo/blockade without 60 supporting votes in the US Senate.» (Bye et al., 2020, 108).

[iii] See https://www.britannica.com/science/Mobius-strip for a mathematical explanation: "..two objects are considered equivalent if they can be continuously deformed into one another through such motions in space as bending, twisting, stretching, and shrinking while disallowing tearing apart or gluing together parts.»

[iv] Literally meaning water, water. This is one of several code words in use to warn about police. Another code is *naranja* – literally meaning orange (Wig, 2022).

[v] The term and meaning of "moral economies" was first introduced by the Marxist historian E.P. Thompson through the article "The English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century" (1971). In this article, Thompson criticizes a systematic error in economic historiography - a kind of existing form of academic laziness, where he points out that our economic history is strongly characterized by an "abbreviated view of economic man". Within analyses of food rioting, such events were typically presented as an elementary and instinctive reaction - a simplified understanding, where the phenomenon of rioting is reduced to the simplicity of "rebellions of the belly". However, Thompson argued that people do not simply riot as a result of hunger or distress; instead, they react when their sense of justice or sense of right ("moral economies") is violated (pp. 77-78). To illustrate this, If a flood destroys the wheat fields, which in turn will lead to a shortage of bread and, consequently, hunger, people will not necessarily rebel. However, let us say that the flood never took place, and the price of bread doubled overnight for no apparent reason; then, people can quickly take to the streets – and this is precisely where the core of "moral economies" lies.

[vivi] According to Fernández (2000), *choteo* is a way of mocking authorities and thereby deauthorizing them *(31).*

[vii] "Luchar is the daily struggle to get money - to get by today! You do not know what will happen tomorrow, but you can never stop la lucha. La lucha is daily. It is the daily struggle every day." (Carlos)

"In a way, luchar means to do something. Don´t stay at home. Do something. Try to find a way to survive, and that is what it is. We are surviving here, only to get something to eat. Because what else?" (Ricardo)

[viii] According to DPL News (2021), Cuba ranks 125th out of 166 countries in terms of telecommunications infrastructure. Only 3.7% of the population has internet at home, and in rural areas, the figure is as low as 0.9% (UNICEF, Martinez-Garcia et al. 2023, 168). Existing data clearly shows deep and persistent social and regional challenges linked to Cuba's formal development (Martinez-Garcia et al. 2023:185). The recent pandemic has accelerated digital transformation in Cuba, as in the rest of the world, but also emphasized the marked differences between those with access to technology and those outside the digital community (Martinez-Garcia et al. 2023, 187).

[ix] In light of the July 11, 2021 protests—Cuba's largest demonstrations in decades—the spread of videos and images via social media illustrates how digital technology has challenged state information control. In the wake of the July 11 protests, Vegard Bye remarked: "The official media image in Cuba has lost its information monopoly and is unable to compete for the description of reality" (Bye, 2021).

[x] Reflecting Cubans' general access to resources in hard currency, those who wanted to connect had to pay with convertible currency, meaning that the first users were often those with access to money from the diaspora or tourism.

[xi] Internet in Cuba remains expensive, limited, and often slow, which is not only due to Cuba's technological limitations but also the consequences of the US embargo, which excludes Cubans from several global used services originating from the United States. Furthermore, internal limitations are also of central concerns: a large-scale investigation by Amnesty International (2017) revealed that censorship in Cuba could encompass almost any website, whether it concerns global mainstream sites (especially news channels) or those specific to the Cuban context, such as independent bloggers. A common denominator for censorship relates to content that criticizes the government, addresses human rights issues, or provides information on bypassing restricted online access, among other topics. Amnesty could also discover clear signs of surveillance strategies, particularly in the form of sending and receiving SMS.

[xii] This is not exactly unique to a Cuban context, as VPN usage as an integrated part of internet access has proven to be widespread within spaces where authoritarian states operate, where the government´s features of online surveillance and censorship are routinely circumvented by its population (Hobbs & Roberts 2018). For instance, Chinese citizens have long used VPNs to circumvent the Chinese Communist Party's "Great Firewall" to access foreign websites (Anderson, 2012). Similarly, in Russia, despite the government spending millions to block VPNs, new specialized services continue enabling citizens to bypass state censorship (Vereykina, 2024).

[xiii] Cuba's digital sphere is restricted not only due to its censored web but also in terms of people's access to get connected in the first place. Rural populations are primarily disconnected, and internet access is often costly in the cities relative to the average Cuban income. ETECSA, the state-run telecom provider, tightly controls any formal, legal, options of acquiring digital equipment (such as mobile phones, computers, etc.) on the island. ETECSA offers a limited selection of mobile phones and other devices through a few outlets in tourist areas. These devices are typically cheaply manufactured imports from China and are sold at very high prices. For most Cubans, particularly those paid in pesos, access to such technology is limited by availability and cost.

[xiv] where access to technology similarly reflects broader resource disparities. Like the dollar stores that restrict access to imported food to those with MLC, ETECSA's legal outlets effectively exclude many Cubans, as we saw in chapter four. Cuban pesos can be exchanged to US dollars in the black market at a disadvantageous rate — often up to four times the official value—just to afford an overpriced phone from an ETECSA store.

[xv] https://dig.watch/updates/itu-report-one-third-of-the-global-population-remains-unconnected. Retrieved 29.10. 2024

[xvi] The digital divide is not binary (a typical misconception) but consists of several nuances – access such as motivation, physical access, skills, and actual use. Van Dijk suggests that a methodological approach could be to look beyond individual differences and instead focus on how social relations (and/or location) affect access to technology as the central units of analysis (Van Dijk, 2017, 4-5). This approach aligns with the thesis's broader framework, highlighting how social networks play a crucial role in obtaining resources that are difficult to access through formal channels and reflecting broader patterns of resource accessibility. To illustrate this, we saw in former chapters the importance of internet access as an essential strategy. for instance, among c*asa particular* owners: For Manuel, Wi-Fi access is a critical factor in the success of the tourism industry. This underscores the economic implications of the digital divide, particularly in the tourism industry where access to technology is crucial. As Van Dijk notes, access to technology often reflects broader access to resources.

[xvii] In the first stages of fieldwork, I quickly learned that I had to adapt to a different economic reality than anticipated. In contrast to the official narratives and what I beforehand knew about *lo informal* in daily life, I was prepared for the currency to agree with DNB's own information. However, when I arrived in the field, I encountered a completely different situation and found that I had far too little money, and that food was scarce. For the sake of my own survival, I was forced into my *resolver* – bargaining an old PC for 2 months of food - before I learnt the meaning of the word.

[xviii] After state integration, SNET is led by 14 "main-administrators", including Pablo himself, each responsible for their local municipality in Havana. Pablo is engaged in ensuring an overall stability of the connected node, as well as being the leading supplier of updated files and media, which he receives weekly through a "matrice". Nevertheless, around the time of the interview, Pablo and a group were in the middle of advancing SNET entertainment possibilities to new heights. In front of the PC, he proudly showed me "SNETFLIX"—Cuba's first streaming service, a direct copy of Netflix but with an even bigger selection. All this, free of charge and without any direct access to the internet. (However, the service was unavailable to most Cubans, as it required advanced and new equipments).

Below the main administrators like Pablo are local administrators who maintain nodes in different neighborhoods, where nearby individuals can connect to one´s local node. The users at the bottom of the structure are still not passive – they contribute actively by reporting the need for upgrades, suggesting new functions, upload content, and maintenance practices. Pablo explained how users often join local splicing groups

to buy new parts or maintain equipment when nodes fail – a practice that reinforces the voluntary and community-driven nature of the network.

[xix] Through the costliness, geographic restrictions, limited access, and censorship associated with ETECSA, the Cuban government implements technological regularization to enforce ideological narratives and restrict broader access to resources. However, as Pfaffenberger notes, “technological processes and artifacts generated by technological regularization are subject to multiple interpretations, in which the dominating discourse may be challenged tacitly or openly” (Pfaffenberger, 1992, p. 285). In Cuba, the social networks of *lo informal* and individual attributes of *inventar* and *resolver* all potentially represent such challenges to the official discourse, as they subvert the state’s restrictions and create spaces for self-directed access to information. These challenges are what Pfaffenberger refers to as technological adjustment or technological reconstitution, where "impact constituencies"—those disadvantaged by the formal technology (in this context, the majority of Cubans limited by ETECSA’s high costs and the dual currency system)—engage in practices to regain autonomy and compensate for the loss of social power that the regulated technology causes (Pfaffenberger, 1992, p. 286).

[xx] This digital sphere in Cuba also echoes the experiences of other countries where autocratic states face resistance from populations using digital tools as strategies of dissent. For instance, in Myanmar, online protests were countered with government shutdowns, and in Sri Lanka, circulating videos challenged state propaganda. Similarly, during Cuba's July 11 protests, the internet emerged as both a tool of liberation and a means of control.

[xxi] Cuba is a former colonial society where the majority of those who came to inhabit the island, arrived as commodites (slaves); the children they gave birth to were commodities and the private property of their slave masters, this lasting as long as up till late 19th century in Cuba (Palmie 1996, Mintz 1976). On the background of this relatively recent and extremely violent history, it is hard to imagine a historically transmitted and sharply delineated domain of personal relations of reciprocity, which is strictly separated from the domain of short-lived market-like exchanges: The slaves in 19th Century Cuba could in some instances formally buy themselves free, or their children, by acquiring money through informal black market sales (Mintz &Price 1976).

[xxii] Here, the slaves facilitated their own meager survival (and a sense of identity and agency although enslaved) by growing their own food at the outskirts of the sugar plantations and by creating «black» markets, upon which the entire colonial population came to depend, although criminalized by colonial law. The informal market also increased the profitability of the sugar cane transatlantic trade. However, according to Ritter and Henken (2014, 208 -209),

> «… from earliest colonial times, Cubans broke the enforced bilateral trade relationship with Spain. Contraband trade with the French, British, and later the United States, as well as with pirates in defiance of the Spanish Colonial authorities and the naval command at Havana, was not uncommon. According to censuses of the time, the town of Bayamo in eastern Cuba was almost as populous and developed a city as Havana and Santiago, but its development was based almost entirely on contraband trade, supplying meat and leather to pirates and corsairs and obtaining goods from them [ ]. By the 1950s, while Cuba had developed a diversified range of large modern corporate business, large numbers of small-scale cottage industries continued to exist in many areas of the economy. This was an authentic “informal economy”—of the sort defined by the International Labour Organisation (ILO 2002)—producing legal goods and services and tolerated by the state even though the sector stood outside the state’s regulatory framework. Some of these attracted the attention of the 1951 International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (“Truslow”) Mission to Cuba, described in Chapter 3. These small enterprises evaded taxes, paid lower wages than the large firms, were not unionized, avoided social benefit payments, and were generally outside the regulatory framework of the state. The large enterprises complained to the IBRD Mission of unfair competition from these small producers. However, the IBRD Report did not recommend their elimination, recognizing the economic and social benefits they generated. Instead, it urged the large-scale firms to operate more efficiently so as to be competitive with the small firms (IBRD 1951: 944, 957). There was probably a considerable degree of continuity between the pre-Revolutionary

era regarding underground economic activities and their continuing operation, as well as a culture of illegal underground enterprise after 1959. People already functioning “in the shadows” in 1958 were in a reasonable position to continue to operate underground after the Revolution. The ethnographic research carried out in 1969 on the Revolution’s efforts to transform the existent “culture of poverty” in Cuba by the anthropologist Oscar Lewis (at the invitation of Fidel Castro) describes some of these still-existing informal operations in some of Havana’s more “marginal” neighborhoods.”