

**Growing plants and domesticating the Revolution: tobacco, the  
revolutionary state, and the micro-politics of value in a community of  
tobacco-producers in western Cuba**

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## **Declaration**

I, Marian Viorel Anăstăsoaie, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the interactions between a local model of livelihood centred on tobacco-growing and the universalist policies and political cosmology of the Cuban state. It is grounded in 14 months of fieldwork in San Luis, a municipality in the Pinar del Río region. Based on an analysis of tobacco as a marker of regional identity, it is argued that growing tobacco is important to both the reproduction of local households (complementing food staple production) and the making of local male identities (complementing cockfighting). The thesis examines cultural metaphors and work practices that make up the distinctive model of tobacco-growing, characterized by a gendered division of labour. Economic practices are always intertwined with the politics of the Cuban Revolution, this (sometimes tense) relationship also leaving space for manoeuvre at the everyday level. Growers, despite operating under state monopoly, deployed tactics to obtain a better price for their crops. A further way of enhancing tobacco's value similar to branding is examined, by focusing on Alejandro Robaina's case, the only grower to have his name on state cigars. It is further demonstrated how producing food was not only essential for household reproduction but also politically charged because of the government's demand for food production to be increased. Cockfighting, a widespread illegal practice in rural Cuba, is further explored as a central arena for reinforcing male reputation. One of the main findings of the thesis is that, if staged as part of popular culture, cockfighting could find recognition from local state bureaucrats as long as more serious offences, such as informal commerce, illegal emigration, or acts of dissidence, were kept under control. Overall, this thesis suggests that people's actions and moral evaluations indicate a process of domesticating the Revolution, both by adhering to its principles and by resisting some of its policies, especially by younger people who feel less loyal towards it.

## **Impact statement**

By studying a community of tobacco-growers in the Pinar del Río province, the region of the best tobacco in Cuba, this thesis fills a gap in knowledge about daily life on the Caribbean island. For reasons pertaining to the internal process of the Cuban Revolution and to Cold War politics, it has been rather difficult to do fieldwork-based research in Cuba. It is only in the last two decades that a few foreign anthropologists have been able to carry out research in Cuba, most based in Havana and with a focus on Afro-Cuban religions. In contrast, very little is known about life in rural areas, including economic strategies, social transformations, and the way ordinary Cubans have experienced life during the Revolution. As such, this thesis shows how ordinary Cubans participate, challenge, and contest state policies and, in doing so, it contributes to larger public discussions on the current social and political transformations on the island. By bringing new knowledge to Cuban studies, economic anthropology, and post-socialist studies, the thesis is useful to both the academic community and the general public, in that it corrects deeply entrenched representations about Cuba inherited from the Cold War period, portraying a totalitarian society under the control of the Castro family.

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## **List of acronyms and organisations**

Acopio, *Unión Nacional de Acopio*, National Collection Unit, the state food procurement and distribution agency

ANAP *Asociación Nacional de Agricultores Pequeños*, National Association of Small Farmers

CCS *Cooperativa de Crédito y Servicios*, Credit and Services Cooperative

CPA *Cooperativa de Producción Agropecuaria*, Agricultural Production Cooperative

CUC Cuban Convertible Peso, 1 CUC is worth 24 Cuban pesos.

Habanos S.A., part of Tabacuba, deals with the promotion, distribution, and export of Cuban cigars worldwide

Agrarian Reform Institute, INRA

OFICODA *Oficina de Control para la Distribución de los Abastecimientos*, Office of Control for the Distribution of Supplies

Tabacuba, *Grupo Empresarial de Tabaco de Cuba*, The Tobacco Business Group of Cuba

UBPC Unidad Básica de Producción Cooperativa, Basic Unit of Cooperative Production

UMAP Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción (UMAP) – ‘Military Units to Aid Production’

UNESCO The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

## **List of names**

(All names are pseudonyms, unless stated. Age, status, and location of individuals are those of 2008)

Aleida, 39-year-old, wife of Alejandro, former economist, now unemployed: Chapter 6.

Alejandro, 41-year-old, originally from Camagüey, formerly worked in state administration as an economist, now dissident: Chapter 6.

Antonio, 35-year-old, self-employed (*cuentapropista*), owner of a snack-bar: Chapter 6.

Arturo, 53-year-old, producer of rice, beans, and vegetables: Chapter 4 and 6.

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Everaldo, a 62-year-old tobacco-grower and cockfight aficionado: Chapter 5.

Gabriel, a 65-year-old retired agronomical technician living in Pinar del Río: Chapter 5.

Geraldo, an 80-year-old tobacco-producer from San Luis: Chapter 6.

Javier, 31-year-old, barber and breeder of cocks: Chapter 5 and 6.

Joaquín, 26, tobacco buyer, the son of Riccardo: Chapter 3.

Jorge, 72-year-old, a retired technician lives in Pinar del Río: Chapter 6.

José, a 42-year-old farm worker, originally from Mantua, married in San Luis. He works with Eugenio: Chapter 2.

Juan, 60-year-old, farmer of tobacco and vegetables, father of Juanito: Chapter 4

Juanito, son of Juan, lives in the US, after illegally escaping from Cuba: Chapter 6.

Lázaro, a 65-year-old president of a CPA specialized in tobacco-growing: Chapter 2.

Luis, 56-year-old, brother of Eugenio, works with his brother: Chapter 2 and 4.

Margarita, 66, is the wife of Eugenio. She worked only briefly in sorting tobacco, otherwise took care of the house and their two daughters: Chapter 4.

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Nilda, 62, lives in the pueblo of San Luis: Chapter 4.

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Ricardo, 50, tobacco-grower, the nephew of Eugenio: Chapter 3.

Robaina, Alejandro (1919-2010; real name), the most famous tobacco-grower of Cuba, a native of San Luis: Chapter 3.

Robaina, Carlos, son of Alejandro Robaina and father of Hirochi Robaina: Chapter 3.

Rubiera family, farmers in San Luis: the father (71 years old), two sons (aged 43 and 39): Chapter 6.

Victor, 64-year-old, retired, former supervisor of tobacco production in a state farm: Chapter 6.

Zenovia, 63-year-old, worker in sewing, sorting, and classifying tobacco: Chapter 2.

## **Introduction**

This thesis explores social dynamics in Cuba between 2007 and 2009, a period marked by the formal transfer of power between Fidel Castro and his brother Raúl. It aims at understanding how the Cuban Revolution and its political, social, and economic policies enacted through the revolutionary state have shaped the livelihood of a community of tobacco-growers in contemporary western Cuba. For over a year, I studied livelihood strategies, forms of sociability, and negotiations of value in San Luis, a tobacco-growing municipality in western Cuba. I contend that tobacco production in Cuba is a strategic vantage point for understanding the current transformations of the Cuban polity. Economically, it is one of the export sectors of an economy in short supply of hard currencies and one of the most productive agro-industrial sectors of Cuba. Tobacco is the backbone of one of the oldest industrial activities on the island, cigar manufacturing, which provides employment to an important segment of the urban working class and other professionals in trade and tourism.

Cuban cigars have been worldwide symbols of the island for centuries and the revolutionary period (post-1959) was no exception to that. Images of Fidel, Ernesto Che Guevara and other revolutionary *barbudos* smoking cigars became emblems of the revolution. Historically, tobacco-growing has been one of the oldest forms of agriculture on the island, and, alongside sugar-cane, but in contrasting ways, has constituted an important commodity and a central symbol for the self-definition of Cuban national identity (Ortiz 1995 [1940]). Cuban tobacco has been subject to state interests, regulations, and interventions ever since it became a major commercial crop in the Western world in the 16th century (Nater 2006a; Norton 2008; Ortiz 1995 [1940]; Stubbs 2013). After 1959, cigar and cigarette manufacturing was one of the first industries to be nationalized and tobacco leaf production was further affected by the revolutionary policies of the nationalization of foreign properties and

agricultural reforms. However, despite the government's preferences for statist and collectivist agricultural projects, tobacco-growing remained specific to small-scale private Cuban agriculture between 1960 and the beginning of the 1990s. For this reason, an ethnography of tobacco-growing constitutes a privileged ground for the understanding of the relationships between state interventions, market forces, and household economies in contemporary Cuba. Cuban tobacco became a global commodity in the 16th century, being part of the larger flow of commodities, peoples, and ideas between Europe and Africa and the Americas. European colonial expansion to the New World constituted the laboratory for Western modernity (Mintz 1985, 1996a) and represented a 'first moment of globality' (Trouillot 2002: 846). Most important, the North Atlantic historical experience was transfigured into what Michel-Rolph Trouillot aptly called 'North Atlantic universals', which are 'words that project the North Atlantic experience on a universal scale that they themselves helped to create [...] They do not describe the world; they offer visions of the world' (2002: 847). Terms such as modernity, progress, nation-state, and globalization brilliantly reveal their prescriptive character (as standards of what is desirable, good, or just) and the conceptual and political work of erasing their local and parochial roots in order to be presented as universals. In his article, Trouillot intriguingly fails to mention revolution as another North Atlantic universal, even though he forcefully exposed the historiographical silences around the Haitian Revolution in one of his books (Trouillot 1995).

Universalist political projects and modern revolutions showcase the tension between universalism and cultural particularism, which is arguably the *ur*-theme in anthropology (Lévi-Strauss 1966; Hollis & Lukes 1982). For the purposes of my project, universalism resonates with the Cuban Revolution, whose leaders fought for the emancipation of Cubans and ultimately of the whole of humankind, while particularism is typical of growing tobacco, a plant of myriad distinctive qualities, depending on specific qualities of the soil, experience of the farmer, climate, and other factors (Ortiz 1995 [1940]). This 'local model' of livelihood (Gudeman & Penn 1982; Gudeman 1986) is not only about tobacco-growing, but also about cultural conceptions of place, work, morality, social and gender distinctions, a whole constellation of values,

schemas of perception, and action enacted in everyday life. Thus, this thesis is about frictions (Tsing 2005) between the universalizing project of the revolution and the local, material, and social specificities of tobacco cultivation in western Cuba.<sup>1</sup> However, I do not intend to explore the global reach of the Cuban cigar from Cuban farms to Western cigar-smoking clubs, but rather to focus on the local production and reproduction of livelihoods around tobacco-growing and consequently analyse the way these practices influence larger political and social dynamics in the Cuban society.

I conceptualize this ‘engaged universal’ (Tsing 2005: 270), which is the Cuban Revolution, as a political cosmology, i.e. as a holistic representation of society and human nature that is constantly re-enacted in everyday life. In this way, I build on a significant body of anthropological work on political cosmologies and on Cuba. As a concept, political cosmology has been mostly discussed in the anthropology of nationalism (Herzfeld 1992; Kapferer 1988; cf. Abramson and Holbraad 2014), but I argue that it could be usefully employed in the study of revolutionary regimes such as Cuba. Thinking of the Cuban Revolution as a political cosmology helps to comprehensively address one particular political phenomenon, of which concepts such as ideology, state socialism, Marxism, or nationalism capture only some aspects. Revolutions are, as the German historian Reinhart Koselleck (2004: 52–3) points out, universalist and permanent in their aspirations. They entail the idea of irreversible change and the acceleration of time. Revolutions function with a self-reflexive authority, i.e. the revolutionary political authority becomes the only legitimizing framework for political action. The Cuban revolutionary ontology is, as Martin Holbraad (2014a) stresses, opposed to the ontological principle of liberalism, i.e. people existing separately from the state and freely electing their political representatives. On the contrary, revolutionary ontology

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<sup>1</sup> Tsing’s ethnographic location is in Indonesia just before and after the end of the Sukarno regime, where she explores the interconnections among international corporatist interests, governmental policies, and environmental groups in relation to rainforests. She proposes the metaphor of friction to understand the interconnections between universals such as (ideals of) prosperity, knowledge, and freedom and particular localities and cultures. Abstract universals become ‘engaged’ or ‘real existing universalisms’ through constant practical engagement, reformulation, and translation into local contexts.

dissolves the distinction between the people and the state. The ethos of the revolutionary process is one of self-sacrifice (Holbraad 2014a).

These revolutionary principles constitute a charter for social and political life in Cuba, but they also produce frictions when in contact with reality. 'Friction inflects historical trajectories, enabling, excluding and particularizing,' writes Anna Tsing (2005: 6). Focusing on frictions, one can understand the 'sticky engagements' of universals (Tsing 2005: 6) as they operate in the world. Friction is not equal to resistance, even though it can subsume acts of resistance. It is not the result of oppression either, as universals have an emancipatory potential. This explains both the emancipatory potential of the revolution as well as its exclusionary and conflictual aspects, as it fights internally and externally against sources of danger and disorder. This is arguably a consequence of the political mechanism to preserve the revolutionary state against dangers of schisms and disloyal acts (Humphrey 2001; Guerra 2010). For example, in Cuba, violent exclusionary practices were less frequently used than in the Soviet Union, but they remain a permanent possibility.

Much of the effects of the revolutionary cosmology on everyday life could be explained by the internalization of schemas of action, moral evaluation, and shared metaphors about existential meaning and social life. Various ethnographies of revolutionary Cuba have emphasized the importance of the idiom of struggle (*la lucha*) in political terms (the revolutionary struggle), and also in existential terms as the struggle for survival and making ends meet (Pertierra 2006; Bloch 2006; Wilson 2014). This is closely related to the idea of self-sacrifice, a core principle of the revolutionary cosmology (Holbraad 2014a).

The ethnographic present time of this thesis is 2007–09, a time interval belonging to a period known officially as the Special Period in Time of Peace, an oxymoron coined by Fidel Castro in 1990, to mark the debut of the economic crisis suffered by Cuba in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's

demise.<sup>2</sup> It is extraordinary that more than 20 years later Cuba is still in the Special Period, in spite of recurrent false predictions of the imminent end of the revolution in Cuba made by numerous Cubanologists who read Cuban realities through Cold War interpretative schemas designed mostly for eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.<sup>3</sup> Alternatively, less loaded ideological temporal denominators, like post-Soviet, post-socialist, or post-Castro, are of little epistemic help since they still carry teleological assumptions about the nature of current transformations in Cuba.<sup>4</sup>

Tobacco-growing is a centuries-old practice and became typical of certain regions in Cuba, among which the province of Pinar del Río stands out for the excellence of its tobacco. In *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, the Cuban polymath Fernando Ortiz (1995 [1940]) presented a *longue durée* perspective regarding the material, symbolic, and socio-political implications of the production of these two commodities for the making of modern Cuba. These series of contrasting material, symbolic, and social aspects of tobacco and sugar traverse the totality of Cuban society across its social, racial, psychological, gender, moral, and political domains. Building on Ortiz's work, I argue that tobacco-growing operates according to a logic of social distinction, particularism, and incommensurability, in contrast to the universalist logic of

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<sup>2</sup> I am aware that claiming that Cuba was still in the Special Period when I did my fieldwork is not uncontested (Kapcia 2016: 152–53). In 2004 Cuba recovered its gross domestic product to the 1989 level, before the economic crisis. However, most of the structural problems of the Special Period, including the dual-currency mechanism, the low productivity of agriculture, and the growing social inequalities have persisted until now. In a 2011 roundtable about the Special Period published in the *Temas* journal most of the Cuban experts argued that the Special Period was still going on at that time (Espina et al. 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Anthropologists have been critical towards political economists' and political scientists' accounts of the Great Transformation from socialist regimes to democratic regimes and market economies in eastern Europe after 1989 (see in particular Burawoy & Verdery 1999).

<sup>4</sup> While at the time of my fieldwork Fidel Castro was still alive, his decision in February 2008 not to renew his candidacy for the position of president of Cuba caused discussions about a post-Castro Cuba in international media. Inside Cuba, Fidel's retirement was not perceived as him relinquishing all control and influence over politics in Cuba, since he continued as the First Secretary of the Cuban Communist Party and he continued to make statements on current affairs in Cuba and elsewhere until his death in November 2016. Raúl Castro stepped down from being president of Cuba in April 2018 as Miguel Díaz-Canel was elected as president of Cuba by the newly elected National Assembly. However, Raúl remains the First Secretary of the Cuban Communist Party, the strategic centre of decision in Cuban politics.

the revolution. Ortiz's analysis anticipated recent culturalist approaches in economic anthropology (Gudeman 1986, 2001; Gudeman & Rivera 1990), which pay attention to the local models of livelihood based on cultural assumptions and practices different from those underpinning Western universal models of economic life. Therefore, my thesis is also an analysis of the intersection of a local model of livelihood built around tobacco and a universalist model of economy based on a Marxist abstract understanding of human nature and social life.

Throughout the thesis, I use interchangeably terms such as peasant, producer, or farmer to refer to growers of tobacco and other crops. The category of peasant has been addressed in considerable anthropological studies (Dalton et al. 1972; Kearney 1996; Redfield 1956; Shanin 1971, 1990; Wolf 1966, among others) but only a minimal consensus has been reached on what defines the peasant way of life. Despite the heterogeneity of peasant production, anthropologists agree that the household is both a consumption and production unit and that the relative controls over land and labour are the constitutive elements of peasant livelihood (Isaacman 1990; Kearney 1996; Trouillot 1984). Peasant productive strategies entail growing crops for self-subsistence and gift exchange as well as for cash. Moreover, culturalist (Redfield 1956) and Marxist (Wolf 1966) approaches alike have stressed the peasant subordinate position in society and the world economy. However, the nature and dynamics of links between peasant and non-peasant sectors vary from context to context and need to be carefully reconstructed, especially by examining the political nature of the relation between either rural and urban environments or the rural population and the political centre (Leonard & Kaneff 2002). Moreover, conceptualizations of peasantries have political and policy consequences as they influence governmental policies for rural populations.

Cuban revolutionaries have considered the peasants (*campesinos* or *guajiros*) as their natural allies and the main beneficiaries of the revolutionary struggle in the Sierra Maestra (Wolf 1969). After 1959, the Agricultural Reforms and the Literacy Campaign were aimed at improving the living conditions of rural inhabitants and at closing the inequality gap between urban

and rural Cuba. However, private, individual, or subsistence agriculture was not abolished, but considered as a transitional step to superior forms of agricultural production based on cooperatives and state farms. Contrary to the more coercive and even tragically repressive ways of collectivizing agriculture in socialist eastern Europe (Kligman & Verdery 2011), the Cuban revolutionary leadership has chosen a more gradual, incentive-based and pragmatic stance towards the collectivization of Cuban agriculture. Tobacco, in particular, has remained the domain of individual producers belonging to cooperatives with more autonomy and less bureaucratic control than the rest of Cuban agriculture (Stubbs 1991).

### **1. Revolutionary cosmology and the revolutionary state**

The Cuban Revolution was received enthusiastically by most Cubans as a new beginning in their history and, like the French and the Russian revolutions, it too tried to create a new society and a new individual. My overall strategy is to approach this universalist political project by studying its refraction in a particular ethnographic location, a municipality of tobacco-growers in western Cuba. I conceptualize the Cuban Revolution as a particular form of modern political cosmology, both similar to and distinct from nationalism, the other major type of modern cosmology. Etymologically, cosmology – discourse about the world in ancient Greek – as used in anthropology denotes a view of the world expressed in both discursive and symbolic ways (Viveiros de Castro 2000). While ‘every society has a more or less coherent set of representations regarding the form, the content and the dynamic of the universe’,<sup>5</sup> these representations also imply a vision about society or the place of humans in the universe. For its comprehensive character and its applicability beyond the domain of religion, I will adopt the definition of cosmology proposed by Stanley

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Toute société dispose d’un ensemble plus ou moins cohérent de représentations portant sur la forme, le contenu et la dynamique de l’univers’ (Viveiros de Castro 2000: 179). The translation into English is mine.

Tambiah. His conception is Durkheimian at core, but with a special interest in the pragmatic dimension of rituals. He writes:

By ‘cosmology’ I mean the body of conceptions that enumerate and classify the phenomena that compose the universe as an ordered whole and the norms and processes that govern it. From my point of view, a society’s principal cosmological notions are all those orienting principles and conceptions that are held to be sacrosanct, are constantly used as yardsticks, and are considered worthy of perpetuation relatively unchanged. As such, depending on the conceptions of the society in question, its legal codes, its political conventions, and its social class relations may be as integral to its cosmology as its ‘religious’ beliefs concerning gods and supernaturals. (Tambiah 1985: 130)

His definition extends the application of the concept of cosmology beyond the more restricted domain of religious beliefs and rituals to the domain of morals, politics, and practices of social distinction.<sup>6</sup> Most of the studies in this line have tackled the study of nationalism, the most widespread form of political cosmology, in the form of folklore studies (Herzfeld 1982, 1987), bureaucratic classifications (Herzfeld 1992), secular rituals (Abélès 1988; Handelman 2004; Kapferer 1988), or risk and catastrophes (Douglas & Wildavsky 1982). Ernest Gellner (1994), in a different vein, offered an analysis of the Soviet socialist project in terms of a secular religion or ideocracy: a regime that wanted to implement a moral order on earth, combining Marxism as a philosophy of history with the social messianic currents of Russian society.<sup>7</sup>

Conceptualizing the Cuban Revolution in terms of a political cosmology allows me to avoid the insufficiencies and ambiguities of a concept like ideology. Even if we go beyond the most popular meanings of ideology as false

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<sup>6</sup> Tambiah’s analysis of cosmologies is consonant with other efforts that go beyond the great divide between the ‘West and the Rest’, which plagued anthropology for much of its history. In the early days of the discipline, the study of cosmologies was carried out mostly in non-Western societies on ‘primitive’ or non-Christian religions from an evolutionist perspective. Only in the early 1960s, did Western cosmologies, and especially political cosmologies, come under the scrutiny of anthropologists, under the influence of structuralist anthropology (Claude Lévi-Strauss, Mary Douglas, Louis Dumont) and Marxism (Eric Wolf), but also due to the repatriation of anthropology back to the metropolitan societies and to their hinterlands (southern Europe, for example).

<sup>7</sup> Gellner’s analysis is consonant with other analyses of the Soviet Union inspired by Max Weber’s sociology of charismatic rule, especially Ken Jowitt (1992).

consciousness or mystification of reality, it would be difficult to pick up a clear and undisputed definition of it out of the immense secondary literature, mostly of Marxist orientation (Lichtheim 1965; Eagleton 1991). The array of definitions, as summarized by Terry Eagleton, is very broad, ranging from narrower definitions of ideology as deceptive beliefs, ideology as ideas and beliefs reflecting the life experiences of a certain group or social class, to the broadest conception of ideology as an equivalent for culture. Making things even more confusing, the concept of ideology as a system of fundamental ideas and values held by a community was used by the non-Marxist anthropologist Louis Dumont (1980, 1994) in his comparative analysis of India and the West. However, as Caroline Humphrey argues, we need to distinguish between political cosmology and ideology since the latter belongs to the domain of the *realpolitik*, conceptualizing politics in terms of social reproduction, class, interests – ‘a kind of politics that is known in advance’ (Humphrey 2014: 229). She rightly points out that ‘one cannot conceive of a full sense of politics *inside* an ideology, for the initial and crucial political act is involved in setting it up’ (Humphrey 2014: 229, *italics in the original*). This impossibility of inscribing politics inside a single ideology is even more obvious in the case of the Cuban Revolution – a political process of various ideological sources and orientations.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Historian Antoni Kapcia defines Cuban revolutionary ideology as a collective world-view made of a number of codes, or ‘a set of related and cognate beliefs and principles that can be grouped together to make a coherent belief in a single, given, value’ (Kapcia 2000: 13). This definition of ideology in terms of a world-view or belief-system is close to my proposed conceptualization the Cuban Revolution as a political cosmology. One of the functions of such a world-view is, from Kapcia’s perspective, to express the collective sense of the past, present, and very importantly, of the future. The ‘collective world-view’ of the Cuban Revolution is crystalized around eight major codes: agrarianism, collectivism, moralism, activism, culturalism, internationalism, statism, and revolutionism. These correspond to core values like the agrarian-ness of the Cuban nation, the collective solidarity, morality, participation/mobilization, education, internationalism, the centrality of the state in social transformation and the belief in the idea of revolution.

### **1.1. The basic principles of the Cuban revolutionary cosmology**

In one of the most perceptive and nuanced discussions about the meanings of the Cuban Revolution, the anthropologist Mona Rosendahl (1997a) explores four emic meanings of the term *revolución*. The first refers to the historical event of the armed struggle led by Fidel Castro and the consequent victory against Fulgencio Batista in 1959. The second meaning, reminiscent of the Marxist interpretation of revolution, indicates the processual and unstoppable character of the revolution on the road to build a communist society. In this usage, the revolution takes the form of ‘a closed system with its own logic, a system which cannot easily be ruptured by mistakes and errors but which, as the leaders explain it, is strengthened by the struggle with difficulties’ (Rosendahl 1997a: 153). The third meaning covers the temporal ruptures and evaluations of the past, present, and future of the revolution. In the fourth usage, the revolution stands for Cuban society as a whole and also as a ‘way of life’, including common patterns of socialization, livelihoods, and classification (Rosendahl 1997a: 154). These four meanings offer a reading of the revolution as a political cosmology, a holistic representation of society and human nature that is constantly re-enacted in everyday life. Furthermore, Rosendahl explores how revolutionary cosmology is perceived, evaluated, made meaningful, and contested in everyday life and in the construction of people’s subjectivities. Human dignity (*dignidad*), sacrifice, and emancipation through fighting social inequalities are essential values of the revolutionary project. Nevertheless, the economic crisis of the Special Period has been translated into a major societal crisis as the growing social inequalities and discrepancies between the professed revolutionary ideal and the reality have been widening. When Rosendahl revisited her fieldsite in eastern Cuba in 1993, she observed how people felt shame and loss of agency regarding the worsening of their life conditions during one of the worst moments of the Special Period. While her analysis from the 1990s is still largely valid and many people do feel shame towards the deterioration of their economic conditions, I would contend that the disconnect between revolutionary ideals and empirical social realities has not necessarily translated into cynicism (cf. Navaro-Yashin

2002), a rather more common form of criticism of the state, since many people still feel loyalty to the Revolution.



Fig. 1. Student March, 28 January 2009, San Luis, celebrating the Birth of José Martí

Recent ethnographic works on Cuba have made use more explicitly of concepts like political cosmology or even political ontology (Holbraad 2014a). Kenneth Routon, for example, has explored the connections between popular idioms of power circulating in the Afro-Cuban ritual world and the ‘moral and political imaginary sustaining the revolutionary state in Cuba’ (Routon 2010: 3). His ethnography reveals the capacity of the revolutionary state to tap into various Afro-Cuban ritualistic idioms of power, ancestry, and struggle in order to reinforce its political legitimacy and economic redistributive power (the latter by exploiting the touristic potential of Afro-Cuban rituals and symbols). A revealing exploration of the imaginary of power and its occult aspects, Routon’s ethnography is less helpful for the understanding of the more mundane aspects of state power in Cuba. Furthermore, by tracing back to colonial times the continuities of cultural ideas about political power in Cuba, Routon overlooks the ruptures and specificities of the revolutionary period.

Maria Gropas (2007) has examined the ways in which the revolutionary cosmology is inscribed in the materiality of urban and rural landscapes in Havana.<sup>9</sup> She argues that, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, ideas of building up a communist society have receded into the background to make place for a more patriotic discourse stressing moral-national dignity and the virtue of sacrifice for the *patria* (fatherland). She labels this shift as repatriotization, a process she examines through studying the ideological and mnemonic functions of the billboards and the secular ritualistic sites. This is an innovative attempt to analyse the political cosmology of the revolution by focusing on the materiality and symbolic aspects of the urban landscape of Havana. Various critics and commentators were quick to validate Gropas's crucial points. Revolutionary political cosmology first is built on moral and political values, such as solidarity, sacrifice, patriotism, and equality (see especially Rosendahl 2007; Holbraad 2007). Second, it can accommodate changing political economic conditions, especially in the context of the Special Period. Third, this cosmology has a dual register: universalist (socialist, anti-imperialist, and anti-capitalist) and patriotic. In the end, what Gropas labels as repatriotization is a temporary ideological shift not an irreversible change in the revolutionary discourse. I would argue that the revolution cannot but remain a universalist project, since otherwise its nature would be altered irremediably.<sup>10</sup>

Martin Holbraad (2007: 545), commenting on Gropas's article, analyses the Cuban Revolution as a 'cosmological enterprise', comparing the meanings of the 'revolution' with *mana*, the floating signifier in Lévi-Strauss's famous

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<sup>9</sup> Gropas writes about revolutionary ideology, but she also uses the concept of cosmology: 'My concern here is with landscape as a canvas upon which a Revolutionary construction of Cuba's historical past is painted and *through which a particular cosmology is constructed and perpetuated*. This cosmology is founded upon notions of morality, patriotic duty, and historical justice that are encompassed by the idea of "the Revolution"'. (2007: 532; italics mine)

<sup>10</sup> The difference between the universalist logic of revolutionary cosmology and the territorially circumscribed application of nationalist cosmologies has implications for the way state policies are evaluated by citizens. As a universalist engagement with the world, a revolutionary project is, in principle, beyond any statist framework (which means that the policies of the revolutionary state cannot be evaluated according to liberal criteria, either the measurable result of policies or the fulfilment of an electoral deal between an elected party and a constituency). A revolutionary government is, therefore, subordinated by default to the universalist logic of the revolution. I owe this point to Mihai Popa (personal communication).

reinterpretation of Mauss's *Gift* (Lévi-Strauss 1987). Holbraad sees the shared notions of the 'revolution' as being 'at once fluid in their meaning and supremely salient to Cubans' ideological discourse not only politically but also [...] at a personal and emotional level' (Holbraad 2007: 545). In a more recent article, Holbraad (2014a) expands his earlier commentary by spelling out the principles of the Cuban Revolution's political ontology based on ethnographic evidence and exegetical readings of revolutionary pronouncements and discourses by Fidel Castro and Ernesto 'Che' Guevara. Holbraad differentiates between the ontological premise of liberalism, i.e. people having both an existence outside politics and the choice to elect the political forms to which they are subjected, and the revolutionary one, which dissolves the distinction between the people and the state. Moreover, revolutionary politics is based on an ethos of self-sacrifice, the *sine qua non* condition of the revolutionary process. This 'ontological fusion of state and people' (Holbraad 2014a: 12) is the emic vision of the revolution. If ontologically the identification between the state and the people is correctly seen as the base of a revolutionary process, in practice things get muddier, as Holbraad himself acknowledges. What Holbraad calls binary equivocation explains the apparent incompatibility between the commitment to the revolution of many Cubans and their dissatisfaction with daily life in Cuba:

Borrowing a term from Viveiros de Castro's (2004) analysis of the constitutive role of ontological divergences in social life, I suggest that the apparently self-contradictory stance of Cubans represents, not a binary opposition, but rather a binary 'equivocation'. Cuban people can so viscerally pledge allegiance to their Revolution while also being so fed up with it because the object in either case is different: 'revolution', *qua* object of allegiance and morbidly depressed discontent respectively, is *two different things*. (Holbraad 2014a: 6)

As a process, a cosmogony in the making is ontologically secured against criticism. But when Cubans complain about how things are going in Cuba, what are they complaining about? Of course, they are complaining about shortages and economic difficulties, about the Kafkaesque bureaucracy and the poverty (*necesidad*) people experienced during the Special Period (Holbraad 2014b). Therefore, while most Cubans might be still attached to the Revolution as a

process promoting core values they cherish (national independence, equality, free education, solidarity), they have much to criticise about how things are run by the government, the practicalities and everyday politics in post-Soviet Cuba. I will return to this aspect after I have explained how a political cosmology based on ideas of equality and human emancipation can be at the same time exclusionary and violent.

### **1.2. The exclusionary aspects of the revolutionary cosmology**

The above anthropological interpretations of revolutionary cosmology discuss only tangentially the exclusionary and disciplinary aspects of revolutionary statecraft in contemporary Cuba.<sup>11</sup> Revolutionary change presupposes violent, radical social change that often triggers acts of physical violence, not only in military action, but also through forms of containment, terror, or repression. The success of the Cuban Revolution was the result of an armed struggle and numerous acts of sabotage and urban resistance, and these moments of struggle are commemorated in various national and local civic rituals for the revolution's martyrs. However, the Cuban revolutionary cosmology has perpetuated the idea of military defence in the context of the long-term antagonism with the United States, including crucial moments like the Bay of Pigs invasion and the missile crisis. Moreover, in the early 1960s, the revolutionary government had to overcome internal armed counter-revolutionary actions in Escambray and the Pinar del Río region (Guerra 2010).<sup>12</sup> Today, however, by using particular classifications (*gusanos*, *merolicos*,<sup>13</sup> *jineteros*, 'dissidents', 'criminals', 'mercenaries of the empire',

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<sup>11</sup> This could be attributed partially to anthropologists' rejection of interpreting Cuban socialism as an example of totalitarian society (see Arendt 1951), a dominant paradigm of the Cold War.

<sup>12</sup> Once this civil war ended, Cuban revolutionaries got involved in the revolutionary struggle in Latin America and Africa, notwithstanding their decisive involvement in Angola's post-independence civil war (Gleijeses 2002).

<sup>13</sup> The term *merolico*, which could be translated as middleman, started to circulate in Cuba at the beginning of the 1980s, borrowed from a Mexican telenovela, *Gotita de Gente*. The word *gusano* (worm) is used derogatorily for people critical of the revolution or counter-revolutionaries. The term *jinetero* (derived from *jinete*, horse-rider) would largely correspond to the English hustler.

among others), the official revolutionary discourse perpetuates the symbolic boundaries of the revolution. In this respect, I am interested in how ordinary people adhere to or contest these symbolic boundaries and classifications in their lives, and how they deal with the moral dilemmas that such symbolic boundaries bring about in their lives.

Conflicts and crises are therefore essential for the continuity of the revolution since they are focal moments of the enactment of the revolutionary vision and the mobilization of the population. Antoni Kapcia outlines the history of the Cuban Revolution as a succession of five major crises (1961, 1962–3, 1970, 1980–85, 1990–94), each cycle being defined by ‘a repetitive process of crisis, debate, decision and certainty, until the next crisis’ (Kapcia 2008: 26). In each case, the temporary resolution of crises was realized through the mobilization of a majority of loyal supporters animated by a strong nationalist and anti-imperialist sentiment stirred by the idea of a permanent external threat to the revolution from the United States and anti-revolutionary American-Cubans.

In addition, I contend that the logic of the revolutionary cosmology could be approached in light of Mary Douglas’s claim that ‘[s]o many ideas about power are based on an idea of society as a series of forms contrasted with surrounding non-form. There is a power in the forms and other power in the inarticulate area, margins, confused lines, and beyond the external boundaries’ (Douglas 2001 [1966]: 99). The taming power of the revolution, which orders the surrounding disorder, helps explain the permanent classificatory effort and disciplinary practices of the revolutionary discourse. Even though the sources of disorder and danger are the United States, counter-revolutionary Cubans, capitalism, economic illegalities, waste, hurricanes, or the global economic crisis, I would argue that disorder is also internal to the system. Always provisional, this cosmological process of ordering has real effects on the lives of Cubans, especially on the so-called enemies of the revolution. According to Valerio Valeri (2000), Douglas’s general thesis in *Purity and danger* is that anomaly is the result of a universal classificatory drive of the human mind. He remarks, however, that taxonomies

cannot be separated from normative and moral evaluations and their socially pragmatic aspects. Classifications are embedded in cosmological frameworks and have moral implications in everyday life:

Exclusivity, and thus rigidity, begins when being one way instead of another acquires some symbolic value and some moral consequence. The classification reflects not so much a descriptive impulse as a normative, moral one. It reflects the way the world should be rather than the way it is. It is a protest against reality rather than an account of it. (Valeri 2000: 79)

This is an important point since it draws attention to the moral and political grounding of classificatory practices. It also explains the moral and political implications of the ways the revolutionary discourse classifies certain categories of people and social practices.

Drawing on the case of the Soviet Union, Caroline Humphrey analysed how certain exclusionary practices are the consequence of a political impulse to preserve a socio-political whole against dangers of schisms or disloyalty. This ‘political-social anxiety about unity (and its correlates schism and disloyalty’ (Humphrey 2001: 332) operates throughout society, from the state to local communities. These exclusionary practices could include exile, banishment, and restrictions on residence or employment. Humphrey’s analysis is insightful for two main reasons. First, it shows how even the most egalitarian political projects generate inequalities through various political practices of exclusion and banishment. Second, it points to the deeper connections between political ideals, state practices, and subjective emotional experiences. When Humphrey writes about ‘this profound paranoia about the corruptibility of the body politic, the correlate of the desire for its purity, that generated practices of exclusion at every level, culminating in the concept of the “enemy of the people” (2001: 334), one can see largely similar dynamics taking place in revolutionary Cuba. The revolutionary project is built on the idea of loyalty excluding and denying the political agency and voice of those critical of the revolution, as in Fidel Castro’s famous dictum in his speech to Cuban intellectuals gathered in the Cuban National Library in June 1961: ‘Inside the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution, nothing’. Antoni Kapcia (2014:

189–91) underlines that the binary formulated by Fidel was not that of inside and outside, as it has been often misquoted ever since, but between inside and against, meaning that:

*only those who acted *against*, openly and unmistakably, could not find a home *inside* the definition of the Revolution and therefore enjoy cultural freedom and possibilities, and that all others would be assumed to be *inside*, since the absence of the term ‘for’ (instead of ‘within’) removed the requirement for all artists to be explicitly revolutionary in their work.* (2014: 190, italics in the original)

Kapcia sees Fidel’s formula as a quintessence of an ethos of inclusion and loyalty that transcends the domain of cultural production to touch all aspects of social life under the revolution. Only those who explicitly oppose or contest the revolutionary principles or leadership risk exclusion and banishment; for example, Cubans who left Cuba as economic migrants without openly contesting the revolution could be considered in the official discourse as being inside the revolution (not contesting it) and outside the island (Kapcia 2014: 192).

In Cuba, the infamous UMAP labour camps had a short existence in the 1960s.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, exclusionary practices are still at work and are more pervasive throughout society, and direct criticism of revolutionary ideology creates tension and friction between kin and friends. These moments are highly emotional, revealing deep attachment but also dissatisfaction and open criticism towards the revolution. The nexus between emotions and politics in revolutionary Cuba has been analysed as a particular form of political mobilization, which has certain continuities with ways of political mobilization during the early republican period (Fernández 2000). However, as Lillian Guerra recently argued, the emotional politics of the twenty years of the

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<sup>14</sup> Unidades Militares de Ayuda a la Producción (Military Units to Aid Production, UMAP) functioned between 1965 and 1968 as forced labour units in the sugar-cane production area of Camaguey Province, where homosexuals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Catholic priests, Protestant pastors, intellectuals, artists, and peasants were interned. The Cuban National Union of Writers and Artists and other religious organizations denounced the existence of such camps in Cuba and Fidel Castro decided to close them, most probably because he feared an international campaign against such abuses (see Guerra 2010; Tahbaz 2013).

revolution was different in many ways and of a more intense quality than in the decades before it (Guerra 2012). The early revolutionary period was a time of extraordinary effervescence, something hard to compare with the present situation in Cuba. However, it might be mistaken to conclude that many people no longer have an emotional attachment to the revolution, something which is underlined in many nostalgic recollections of its highly effervescent early decades.

### **1.3. The revolutionary state and revolutionary values during the Special Period: metaphors, equivocation, and paradoxes as domestication of the Revolution**

One particularly productive way to understand the relation between the revolutionary cosmology and the revolutionary state is Pierre Bourdieu's idea of the state as having not only the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical violence (Weber 2008 [1919]), but also the legitimate monopoly of symbolic capital. Thus, he said:

The state [...] would be the ensemble of fields that are the site of struggles in which what is at stake is – to build on Max Weber's famed formulation – *the monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence*, i.e. the power to constitute and to impose as *universal* and *universally applicable* within a given 'nation', that is, within the boundaries of a given territory, a common set of coercive norms. (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 111–12; italics mine)

The Cuban revolutionary state assumes not one but two universalist perspectives: first, in a Hegelian sense, the state is the realization of the universal reason; and second, the state is the promoter of the universalist project of the Revolution. Bourdieu writes in his *Pascalian meditations*:

If the universal does advance, this is because there are social microcosms which, in spite of their intrinsic ambiguity, linked to their enclosure in the privilege and satisfied egoism of a separation by status, are the site of struggles in which the prize is the universal and in which agents who, to differing degrees depending on their position and trajectory, have a *particular interest in the universal*, in reason, truth, virtue, engage themselves with weapons which are nothing other than

the most universal conquests of the previous struggles. (Bourdieu 2000: 123; italics mine)

In fact, the Revolution is defined as an all-encompassing and universalist project because of the monopoly held by the political leadership of the Revolution over defining what it is. This monopoly, however, was contested by revolutionaries such as Huber Matos and by peasants in the Escambray Mountains in the early 1960s on the grounds of previous participation in the revolutionary struggle.<sup>15</sup>

Cleansing politics and the administration of the corrupting effects of money and US influence was one of the objectives of the Revolution. Also, strengthening the state and reinforcing its role in economy and social change was one of the most urgent objectives of the revolutionary government after 1959. With the rapid nationalization of the economy after 1959 and the declaration of the Revolution's socialist character in 1961, the state took control of social and economic life in Cuba, based on the economic model of a socialist planned economy. While we need to acknowledge the danger of reifying the state (Abrams 1988) as an all-encompassing entity of social life in Cuba, we cannot stress enough how state institutions have provided the basic institutional framework of social life in Cuba, from security to social provisioning. The revolutionary cosmology proposes a vision in which the state and the people are fused (Holbraad 2014a). Still, images of the Cuban state as vertical (Ferguson and Gupta 2002) or as being 'above' society are quite strong in the country. My understanding of the Cuban state is shaped by the growing literature on the anthropology of the state (Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Das and Poole 2004; Sharma and Gupta 2006; Trouillot 2001) which goes beyond functionalist and institutionalist approaches. Thus, my focus is on how the state is culturally embedded in everyday life and experienced by ordinary people in their interactions with state bureaucrats. Images of the state ordinary

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<sup>15</sup> Joana B. Swanger (2015) researched the Escambray region with specific reference to local understandings of the state in the context of the pre- and post-1959 armed struggle. In contrast to the more inclusive and racially diverse region of Oriente, Escambray was inhabited by an individualist and predominantly white peasantry more inclined to resist the collectivist and radically egalitarian early revolutionary policies.

people uphold are constitutive of their interactions with state officials and of their expectations, hopes, and moral judgments about state policies (Sharma and Gupta 2006). My approach in examining the articulations between the revolutionary cosmology, revolutionary state and ordinary Cubans is to look at how revolutionary principles, values and state effects (Mitchell 1999) impact on the lives and livelihoods of tobacco growers and how the latter react to, adapt, change or resist against the effects of the revolutionary state – a process I call, using Gerald Creed's (1998) work on socialist rural Bulgaria, of domesticating the Revolution. By domestication, Creed refers to an ongoing process of accommodating the socialist revolution and state policies in accordance with the needs and constraints of rural households in Bulgaria.

Even though ordinary citizens, state bureaucrats, and revolutionary leadership draw on a common pool of values, images, and practices belonging to the historical unfolding of the Cuban Revolution, their expectations, visions, and actions do not necessarily harmonize. This is a consequence of the paradoxical nature of state authority founded on national independence movements or revolutions, as underlined by Michael Herzfeld in his analysis of modern Greece. Herzfeld writes:

The nation-state is often situated on the cusp of a dilemma that is directly related to the tension between selfhood and authority: founded in revolution against authority, the official national entity must now impose an authority of its own. Whether American 'rebels', Greek *kleftes* (literally 'thieves'), or Italian *Carbonari*, the mythologized figures of revolutionary zeal must be tamed, lest they give moral force to new forms of insurrection, from petty illegality to political violence against the state. (1997: 171–2)

The selfhood is realized and expressed through this paradoxical tension between the individual and state authority, when challenging the government actions could be framed as proofs of patriotism. In Greece, Herzfeld argues, ordinary people, bureaucrats, and politicians share a 'natural symbol' (Douglas 1970), which is blood. In the case of revolutionary Cuba, *lucha* (struggle, fight) and the associated idea of *sacrificio* (sacrifice) are the root metaphors of social

life.<sup>16</sup> However, as I discussed above, setting the boundary between patriotic and unpatriotic criticism of the Cuban government is a sensible issue, charged with risks, anxiety, and emotion. Open criticism of the government can create tensions inside families as people struggle to reconcile kinship and politics.

Anna Cristina Pertierra in particular analysed the meanings of *la lucha*, the ‘struggle’ for everyday survival in Santiago de Cuba during the Special Period, in relation to the semantic register of the revolutionary ‘struggle’.<sup>17</sup> ‘Struggling’ could be seen as a root metaphor of the Cuban Revolution, offering a rich set of images, meanings, and scripts which people draw on in order to make sense of their lives. Pertierra argues:

The Cuban Revolution, both as the symbol of a set of values, and as a series of institutions that regulate the practical conditions of citizens’ lives, is extremely intertwined with how Cuban individuals understand their own life trajectories and life philosophies. (2009a: 155)

She shows that even people who are indifferent to or even critical of Cuban socialism employ the idiom of *luchar* to make sense of their experience and express their aspirations.

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<sup>16</sup> This difference between Cuba and Greece entails different meanings for processes such as nation-building, political independence, and revolution. The symbolism of blood implies various ways of distinguishing between political insiders and outsiders. While in Greece ideas of common descent, genealogical relationships through blood relations, and religious endogamy are paramount, in Cuba blood is associated with the idea of (ultimate) sacrifice for a political cause, which ideally transcends differences of race, nationality, and religion, which allowed many Creoles or Spanish descendants to be outspoken Cuban nationalists. One could also interpret in this light the significance of granting Cuban citizenship to Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara (an Argentinian), one of the first revolutionary acts in 1959.

<sup>17</sup> Vincent Bloch analyses the normative ideological order in Cuba and shows that it can accommodate marginal and illegal practices which are part of ‘the struggle as experience and hope’ (2006: 292).



Fig. 2. The Cuban flag and revolutionary slogans in Pinar del Río

Furthermore, Guerra's recent historical synthesis (2012) on the early decades of the Cuban Revolution convincingly showed how its radicalism was the result of both popular fervour around a radical change of the Cuban society and the revolutionary leadership's claims of moral redemption through self-sacrifice. However, Guerra argues, many revolutionary sympathizers who had subscribed to and put into practice the revolutionary programme of erasing social, gender, and racial inequalities arrived at some point of inadvertently or consciously challenging official views proposed by bureaucrats and the revolutionary leadership:

Nonetheless, self-styled revolutionaries' efforts to fracture the state's analytical omnipotence and to reassert tolerance and flexibility into the calculus of power left an important legacy: a richly woven pattern of defying the Revolution on its own terms, *within* its foundational paradigm of moral justice and spiritual redemption. These revolutionaries inscribed counter-narratives into the grand narrative, making the Revolution's story their own. (2012: 289)

Guerra uses the metaphor of the palimpsest to account for the history of the Cuban Revolution, as a process of continuous overlapping, erasure, and

struggle between the official meta-narrative of the Revolution and its personal, vernacular experiences and meanings. The contestation of the revolutionary meta-narrative has grown during the Special Period, since changes of policies concerning the economic role of the state have made Cubans painfully discover the need to rely on themselves and live with growing economic inequalities, which they remember as being characteristic of the pre-revolutionary past. Moreover, there is a sense of a moral crisis in Cuban society (Frederik 2012; Guerra 2007; Holbraad 2014b; Palmié 2004), reflecting the impact of economic difficulties and the lack of hope for a brighter future.

Some analysts argue that the Cuban Revolution – as a process – is extinguished. Rafael Rojas (1997, 2015a), for example, claims that the Cuban Revolution lasted only until the promulgation of the constitution of 1976 inspired by the Soviet constitution, when Cuba moved to a real-existing socialist regime like in communist eastern Europe. Later on, under Raúl Castro, Cuba has geared towards market socialism or a form of state capitalism (as Rojas considers China, for example) associated with various forms of exploitation and growing social inequalities (Rojas 2015b).<sup>18</sup>

Still, most specialists working in Cuba in the last decades still consider Cuba to be a socialist-type of society with specific characteristics, where the overall revolutionary framework is still relevant.<sup>19</sup> Even though the revolutionary leadership's monopoly of defining the direction of the Revolution has not been openly contested from the inside, there has been in this period a

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<sup>18</sup> Historically, critics of the classical Stalinist model such as Leon Trotsky and Charles Bettelheim used the concept of state capitalism in order to denounce the domination of the workers by the *nomenklatura* who appropriated the surplus and had decision power over its redistribution. However, Alec Nove (1986) and Ivan Szelényi (1980) question the validity of this concept when applied to existing socialist regimes. Even after the reforms adopted under Raúl Castro, Cuba is still a state socialist economy of a more classical type than socialist Hungary under János Kádár or Vietnam now (Font & Jancsics 2016). Rojas, notwithstanding, makes his criticism of the Cuban political regime from a liberal standpoint.

<sup>19</sup> In Guerra's most recent book, she underlines that 'the Revolution cannot be defined as a political process without accounting for it as an *unending* event, that is, as a triumph over U.S. power that beat the odds and continued to beat them, no matter how high they became' (Guerra 2012: 28; *italics in original*).

growing sense of contradictions and disenchantment with the current state of affairs inside Cuba. Guerra writes:

[S]ince 1992, an intense cataclysm of ideological contradiction and paradoxical political practice has come to define life on the island. The fact that the Cuban state continues to espouse the motto of ‘socialism or death’ despite its near total reliance on capitalism and foreign investment to survive provides an obvious case in point. Yet, arguably, it is not so much the structural contradictions as the ideological tensions that assault the senses of the three generations of Cubans who were raised and educated in the Revolution. (2007: 176)

She argues that Cubans have started to carve out spheres of ideological and economic autonomy from the state, criticizing the *doble moral* (double morality) of official discourse. Guerra herself (2007) and other social scientists (Fernandes 2006; Frederik 2012; Hernández-Reguant 2009a) working on Cuba have investigated how the contradictions of the Special Period are engaged, reflected upon, and represented in the domain of popular culture (joke-telling, naming practices, music) and in the performative, visual, and writing practices of Cuban artists.<sup>20</sup> Less is known and researched on what happens outside these circles of artists, most of them based in Havana. This thesis is a step in filling a gap in the literature on what is happening in the more remote and peripheral places in Cuba under the current contradictions and paradoxes of late socialism in Cuba.

Therefore, I argue that the binary equivocation mentioned by Holbraad could be seen as an expression of an existential paradox lived by many (or most?) Cubans who remain attached to core values of the Revolution, while at the same time being critical of state policies and bureaucrats, sometimes in the name of those revolutionary values. This explains also why most Cubans remain indifferent to the counter-revolutionary rhetoric proposed by anti-Castro

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<sup>20</sup> See the collective volume edited by Ariana Hernández-Reguant (2009a) for an overview of artistic and cultural practices during the Special Period, which emerged in the 1990s with the internationalization of music and interest in film, art, and literature from the island. Hernández-Reguant (2009b: 11–12) underlines that, in comparison with socialist eastern Europe in the 1980s, where artists and writers chose to openly criticize the authorities, Cuban intellectuals were less inclined to oppose the regime and more ready to use the commercial niches opened up in the cultural sphere.

Cuban-Americans. In another socialist context, the Soviet Union between 1970 and the first years of *perestroika*, Alexei Yurchak (2006) attempts to understand a paradoxical situation that looked similar to what is lived today in Cuba. He aims at understanding how the last Soviet generation experienced the official ideological discourse. Based on a performative theory of subjectivity, he argues that most Soviet citizens did not pay attention to the constative aspect of the official discourse, but rather to its performative dimension. Through their performative engagement with official discourse, Soviet citizens managed to make their lives meaningful under socialism. Holbraad engages with Yurchak's argument and argues that there is a difference between Cuba and the Soviet Union. In Cuba, the constative, referential dimension of the revolutionary discourse is still meaningful.<sup>21</sup>

The above considerations about what I have called, after Holbraad, the effects of revolutionary equivocation, have been formulated as rather general points concerning Cuban society. In this thesis, however, I will explore the effects of this late socialist situation with its existential paradoxes and dilemmas in the world of Cuban tobacco-growers. They occupy a particularly symbolic place in the Cuban national imaginary, as Ortiz forcefully argued. Building on his work, I argue that, on the whole, tobacco-growing functions according to a social logic of distinction, particularism, and incommensurability, quite opposite to the universalistic logic of the Revolution. Tobacco has always had a peculiar place in Cuban socialist development since it has been predominantly a sector of independent producers in a state-controlled Cuban economy. I will argue that this mode of livelihood (Gudeman 1986) specific to Cuban tobacco has political and symbolic/cosmological implications, since it helped to sustain an ethos of individualism and distinction among tobacco-growers and, by doing so, contributed to domesticating the Revolution in tobacco-growing communities.

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<sup>21</sup> This difference could be explained, in terms of Yurchak's theory, by the fact that in Cuba the master enunciator, Fidel Castro, had been in command and assumed the role of the ideological guide of the revolution until some years before his death.

## **2. Tobacco-growing: models, values, and metaphors of livelihood in contemporary Cuba**

Stephen Gudeman (1986) advanced an elaborate analysis of local models of economy, cultural assumptions concerning the reproduction of material life, around the world. His premise is closer to the substantivist position because he postulates the embeddedness of economic practices in local cultural frameworks.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, he refuses to take a relativist position typical of more extreme versions of substantivism (cf. Sahlins 1972) by sustaining a comparative analysis of local models (Gudeman 1986) and of Western models of economics (i.e. physiocratic, Ricardian or neo-classical economics). The latter form an instance of what Gudeman calls ‘universal models’ of livelihood since they are applied cross-culturally based on an abstract understanding of human nature and social life. These models are Euclidian in form, made of a set of axioms and operational rules and, from a logical point of view, they operate like tautologies since ‘the derived results must mirror the beginning propositions’ (Gudeman 1986: 29). He further identifies another model of livelihood, which is locally designed by communities engaged in their economic activities and social life. It has a reflexive quality, ‘for it both derived from and applied to social activity’ (Gudeman 1986: 37), and it functions largely by using a pool of schemas, metaphors, images to make sense of the practical engagement with the world in the domain of productive, distributive, and consumption activities. He digs into the rich ethnographic records for such models present in Africa, Papua New Guinea, and South America in addition to his own ethnographic research in Panama (Gudeman 1976, 1978) and Colombia (Gudeman & Rivera 1990).

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<sup>22</sup> An overview of the formalist-substantivist debate would run the risk of oversimplification. However, one could say in a nutshell that the first position assumed a universal model of humans as maximizing actors in conditions of scarcity, while the second claimed that such an ethnocentric, Western model could not be applied to other cultural contexts or historical periods other than Western modernity. For a recent synthetic view of economic anthropology see Hann & Hart (2011).

From such a culturalist perspective on economic models, Ortiz's *Counterpoint* represents an elaboration of a local model of livelihood, based on a careful phenomenological, ethnographic, and historical research on Cuban tobacco and sugar-cane.<sup>23</sup> This model is not built on universalist assumptions about the rationality of economic life as Western models of economy do. On the contrary, Ortiz undertakes a refreshing perspective on economy by advancing a set of schemata that transcend a strict separation between the domain of materiality and that of social relations. In the following section, I will present the main points of Ortiz's model.

### **2.1. Tobacco's singularization aspect versus the uniform and universalizing characteristics of sugar in Ortiz's *Counterpoint***

Ortiz's *Counterpoint* presents an original vision of Cuban history and society that has transcended the local intellectual debates to achieve a wider relevance in discussions concerning issues of national identity, cultural hybridity, and modernity.<sup>24</sup> Fernando Coronil (1995), while acknowledging that it would be far-fetched to consider the Cuban scholar as a Marxist, notices Ortiz's counter-fetishist reading of these commodities, not unlike Marx's attempt to unpack the meaning of capitalist commodities, the hieroglyphics of the modern world (Marx 1976 [1867]). Nevertheless, Ortiz's purpose is different from Marx's since, as Paul C. Johnson aptly puts it, 'tobacco and sugar in Ortiz's hands became nothing less than a total semiotic system of contrasts through which the world was humanly experienced' (2005: 9305). This series of contrasting material, symbolic, economic, and social aspects of tobacco and sugar traverse the whole of Cuban society across its social, racial, gender, moral, and political domains. These binary oppositions should not be

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<sup>23</sup> Ortiz's work is not referenced in Gudeman's publications, which is a noticeable absence given the latter's ethnographic expertise on Latin America.

<sup>24</sup> Ortiz did not carry out formal fieldwork with tobacco-growers or with sugar-cane producers, as has been required practice in Anglo-Saxon anthropology since Malinowski's 'fieldwork revolution' (Jarvie 1964). His research methodology was that of an intellectually engaged polymath dedicated to the understanding of his society and to its economic and political progress (Font & Quiroz 2005).

considered, as Coronil (1995: xiv) notices, as fixed, but ‘hybrid and productive’, in the process of transculturation. Ortiz coins this term as a substitute for the term acculturation in order to render more aptly the processes of social change in situations of cultural contact, such of those that shaped the history of Cuba.<sup>25</sup>

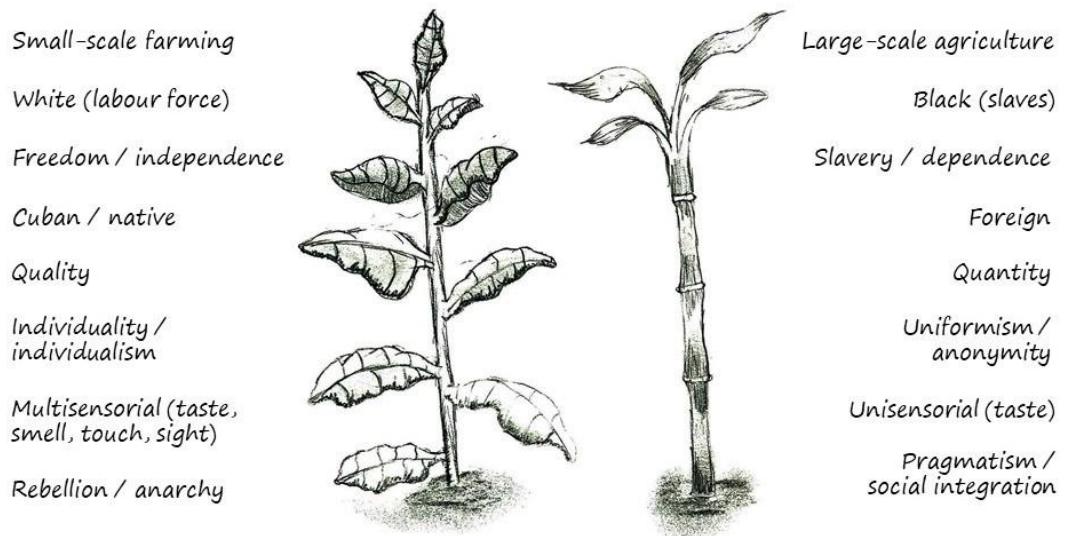


Fig. 3. The Cuban counterpoint of tobacco and sugar, according to Fernando Ortiz. Drawing by Dimitri Anastasoaei-Oger

The most appealing insight of Ortiz’s analysis is, in my view, the contrast between various cosmological and moral-political aspects of the agronomical, ecological, and symbolic practices around tobacco and sugar. He compares tobacco production with artisanal and artistic work, since the producers’ skill, knowledge, and experience determine the quality of the product. Therefore, tobacco is a product of distinctive characteristics, a singularity, as defined by the French sociologist Lucien Karpik (2010),<sup>26</sup> similar to wine, a comparison

<sup>25</sup> For Ortiz, acculturation means unidirectional cultural change from one culture to another. The concept of transculturation more aptly renders a larger spectrum of processes of cultural loss, but most importantly of cultural creation in the context of the Caribbean where colonization and immigration disrupted or destroyed previous patterns of life and allowed for the creation of new ones, through experiment with new ideas, materiality, and institutions.

<sup>26</sup> Karpik defines singular products and services or singularities as ‘goods and services that are *structured*, *uncertain*, and *incommensurable*’ (Karpik 2010: 10). These singularities are made of configurations (or structures) of qualities, whereby the evaluation of each of the dimensions is inseparable from the evaluation of all the others. Qualities are uncertain and not easily commensurable. Singularities include, among others, goods which are evaluated by their originality (e.g. works of art, music, and literature) and personalized services (doctors, lawyers).

Ortiz himself makes. In contrast, sugar is a product of standardized quality; hence quantity rather than quality is the defining factor of this commodity:

Sugar is common, unpretentious, undifferentiated. Tobacco is always distinguished, all class, form, and dignity. Sugar is always a formless mass...Tobacco may be good or bad, but it always strives for individuality. (Ortiz 1995: 24)

From a phenomenological perspective, tobacco appeals to four senses (taste, smell, touch, and sight), while sugar is mainly appealing to taste. Furthermore, considering their botanical origins, tobacco is native, whereas the Spaniards brought sugar to Cuba. The first is a gift of nature, while the second is fabricated through technology. Moreover, Ortiz underlines the Cuban-controlled organization of tobacco production in contrast to the (neo)colonial sugar production. Ortiz sees opposite political propensities in the two products, through his hermeneutical reading of the historical and ethnographic sources. Tobacco is associated with rebellion, individualism, and anarchy, while sugar stands for social pragmatism and social integration:

There is no rebellion or challenge in sugar, nor resentment, nor brooding suspicion, but humble pleasure, quiet, calm, and soothing. Tobacco is boldly imaginative and individualistic to the point of anarchy. Sugar is on the side of sensible pragmatism and social integration. (Ortiz 1995: 16)

Ortiz's analysis opens fruitful theoretical avenues for the understanding of the model of tobacco-growing and its relation with the sugar-cane model of production or other large-scale, industrial projects during the 1970s and 1980s Soviet-style socialist economy. Even though tobacco is a cash crop, its mode of production in Cuba has remained typical of a local mode of livelihood based on the experiential and skilled knowledge of tobacco-growers who operate with complex local standards of valuing the crops.

The local model of tobacco-growing became one example of the better functioning economic sectors of the Cuban economy. Regarding agriculture in general, in the 1980s the government turned from a strongly collectivist and statist orientation towards more decentralization, a move which led to the reviving of small-scale agriculture (Gropas 2006). In the next section, I will

discuss the socio-economic specificities of tobacco-growing in relation to the encompassing state economy.

## **2.2. Tobacco-growing in contemporary Cuba: a local model of economy in a state-controlled socialist economy producing for international markets**

Even though tobacco production is embedded within the state economy, Cuban tobacco and cigars are export-driven commodities and the two main enterprises dealing with tobacco- and cigar-manufacturing, Cubatabaco and Habanos SA, orient their production and marketing according to international markets' demands. However, taking into account the small-scale production of the tobacco leaf based on a peasant economy, we have a hybridization of various economic logics not dissimilar to what has happened in China in the last decades (Yang 2000): a peasant economy, a state socialist economy, and an international capitalist economy.<sup>27</sup> These logics are not necessarily harmoniously integrated; on the contrary, they are often in contradiction regarding their dominant value orientation. The articulations and influences of various economic logics should not be thought in simplistic spatial delimitations between the local, the national, and the global context. For example, while the local community of tobacco-growers is protected from the direct influence of the international market forces, tobacco production is nonetheless affected by international economic changes.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, processes of brand-making, which are more typical of a market economy, start to play – even if in a limited way – a role in tobacco production, like in the case of late Alejandro Robaina, arguably the most famous Cuban tobacco-grower. New practices of quality control, material incentives, and marketing operate in the world of Cuban cigar-making and implicitly they also affect the supply side of the industry, i.e. the

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<sup>27</sup> Based on her fieldwork in rural Wenzhou (southeast China), Mayfair Mei-hui Yang (2000) has proposed the concept of economic hybridity as a way of making sense of the articulations between an emerging ritual inter-household economy, state socialism, and the international capitalist economy.

<sup>28</sup> In 2010 and 2011, the areas with tobacco were reduced as a direct consequence of the drop of demand in cigars, due to the economic crisis.

agricultural sector. Moreover, in the context of the growing importance of tourism in the Cuban economy and society, tobacco (both its agricultural and industrial components) has been reframed as heritage, typical of a particular Cuban way of life, in a certain territory and climate (Simoni 2012). In the last decades, tobacco has regained the symbolic status of a country brand which instantiates an eternal Cubanness beyond the current crisis of socialism: a combination of the generous gift of nature, hard work, and Cubans' skills. Cuban cigars circulate in a globalized world economy when increasingly commodities gain additional symbolic and economic value as quality products linked to a specific locality, to a particular community, and to specific ways of life. In the context of growing tourism, the landscape of tobacco-growing regions became an important cultural asset and one (the Viñales valley) even became one of UNESCO's world heritage sites. In the first chapter I will directly address the role of tobacco production in defining the regional identity of Pinar del Río.



Fig. 4. Working in a tobacco vega, San Luis, 2008

Similarly, one has to pay attention to the regimes of value at play in Cuban tobacco-growing. The concept of a 'regime of value', introduced by

Arjun Appadurai (1986a), refers to the cultural assumptions concerning (economic) values involved in commodity exchange acts. Cuban tobacco connects various regimes of value, from the local sphere of production to the state cigar-manufacturing sphere and further to various markets, spaces, and practices of consumption. My research addresses in particular the local production of tobacco and the interaction between growers and state employees and institutions. The focus on production is consistent with recent re-evaluations of the importance of production processes in various regimes and politics of value (Dilley 2004; Ulin 2002). The struggle of producers is to achieve a most favourable evaluation of their harvest during the selling procedure, thus obtaining a better price.

I find some of the recent approaches dealing with work as cultural production particularly inspiring, because they conceptualize labour activities as cultural processes involving practices of self-definition and social distinction (Ulin 2002). For instance, Robert Ulin's work (1996; 2002) among wine-growers in southwestern France offers larger theoretical and comparative dimensions which are relevant to Cuban tobacco-growers. French wine-growers and Cuban tobacco-growers produce goods of distinction or singularities, which largely explains some themes that are shared between the two ethnographic situations. In both cases, agricultural work is defined as artisanal, knowledge-intense, and based on a deep personal experience. Equally important, the locality is crucial for defining the quality of the product, and, implicitly, for the making of social and personal identities. The differences between French wine-making and Cuban tobacco-growing lie in the overall political economy and relations of power in which the productive processes are embedded. In the case of France, we have a capitalist market economy with a strong state, while Cuba experiences a modified version of a state socialist economy with a state monopoly on cigar production. This sets certain limits on the practices of distinction and prestige among tobacco-growers. In a socialist economy, bureaucratic control and political decisions define the prices for crops, grant titles of distinction to outstanding growers, and limit the economic benefits growers can get from tourists' interests in Cuban tobacco.

Ulin's work is useful in a comparative sense since it draws attention to the historical and political processes of creating and protecting brands, which link a quality product to a particular savoir-faire and locality. Beyond agronomical and technological aspects, differences between Medoc, Dordogne, and Languedoc wines have important political and historical origins, going back centuries (Ulin 1996: 44–50). Likewise, as I discuss in Chapter 1, the making of Pinar del Río into a region of excellent tobacco has its historical origins in the early 19th century, due to a particular political-economic dynamic unleashed by the expansion of sugar-cane plantation in western Cuba. This approach does not deny the importance of soil, savoir-faire, or climate in creating products of excellence, but it links these technical and practical concerns with larger historical and political-economic processes, a helpful move against essentialist images of a 'natural monopoly' of Cuban tobacco (Stubbs 1985: 43) or a 'natural supremacy' of Cuban tobacco.

Moreover, seeing Cuban tobacco or French wine as cultural artefacts opens up larger epistemological and cosmo-political issues, such as definitions of authenticity and the difference between nature and culture. Ulin elegantly shows how defining wine as a product of nature, and therefore naturalizing the criteria for its authenticity, strengthened the economic (and political) power of land-owning and commercial elites in the Bordeaux area (Ulin 1995: 523). This was executed mainly through the invention of tradition in terms of the (aristocratic) past and regional and national heritage. Ulin analyses how the château label was used as a strategy of social and economic differentiation by elite producers against the possibility of wine cooperatives claiming superior wine labels and better prices. The current situation of Cuban tobacco is understandably different. Although the discourse of authenticity and tradition naturalizes the quality of Cuban tobacco (what has been known as the natural monopoly of Cuban tobacco<sup>29</sup>), the political and economic contexts of Cuba do not allow a competitive internal market for Cuban tobacco-producers, as was, to some degree, the case before the Revolution. In 1960 the government nationalized the cigar industry and installed a monopoly on cigar-

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<sup>29</sup> To which arguably Ortiz's *Counterpoint* has contributed considerably, too.

manufacturing and marketing. The egalitarian and anti-market ethos of the Cuban Revolution introduced significant discontinuities regarding, in Bourdieu's theoretical terms (1990), the strategies of symbolic and economic capital reproduction among tobacco-producers. Market coordination was eliminated, as were independent brands for cigars. After limiting the amount of private land and means of production through the revolutionary agricultural reforms, the government became the only official buyer<sup>30</sup> of the harvest, thus having the discretionary power of setting the prices paid to tobacco-growers. After 1959, most of the prestigious and richer producers left the country and some took their brands with them.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, for growers who remained in Cuba, social recognition and their sense of worth continued to be defined by the quality of their tobacco,<sup>32</sup> which is seen as the result of hard work and skill. Moreover, ideological discourse of the importance of the family as a backbone for the reproduction of the tobacco knowledge has been perpetuated, in spite of the fact that during the first decades of the revolution manual agricultural work has not been pursued as a desired professional future for many children of tobacco-growers and agricultural workers, due to social and demographic transformations.

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<sup>30</sup> There is a significant informal sector around tobacco in Cuba, including cigars, illegally produced or smuggled from the state factories. However, this informal sector is deeply embedded in the state-controlled cigar economy, sometimes involving top managers. In 2011, *The Economist* reported the investigation by Cuban State Security of the vice-president of Habanos SA. who had allegedly masterminded, a large scheme of selling genuine state-produced Cuban cigars at a fraction of their price in various Caribbean cities, together with other accomplices (*The Economist*, 28 April 2011, 'Rolling up under-the-counter trading in an emblematic product', at <http://www.economist.com/node/18621276>, last accessed 11 November 2016).

<sup>31</sup> Jean Stubbs researched the activities of the Cuban diaspora in relation to the production and distribution of tobacco and cigars in the Dominican Republic, Florida, and Central America. She reveals fascinating family stories, which have continued the tradition of tobacco-growing abroad. The quality of the tobacco produced by Cubans in Central America or the Dominican Republic reaches standards comparable with the tobacco produced in Cuba. She labels this as a second counterpoint, one between the Cuban cigar and the cigars produced by Cubans in exile (Stubbs 2000, 2005, 2010).

<sup>32</sup> Defining the quality of one's tobacco is a complex process involving the interaction between state employees applying official standards and producers during the act of the harvest sale. This is carefully analysed in Chapter 4. These standards have a history predating the revolution.

### **3. Local forms of livelihood, gendered division of labour, and revolutionary values**

Cuban agriculture, state and non-state, has been a highly charged political field in the revolution. The reforms, policies, debates, and mobilization campaigns concerning agriculture are the background for understanding how mundane, everyday decisions and activities in the lives of farmers have political resonance. Even in non-collectivized agriculture, decisions about the type of crops, the quantities to produce and deliver to the state or sell on the free markets or keep for self-consumption are decisions with political consequences. Moreover, all aspects of local social life, including family life, gender relations, and work and leisure relationships, pertain to various policies taken at the centre. Local models of livelihood, ways of doing things and, more generally, value orientations, are embedded in the larger revolutionary cosmopolitan framework and institutions. How does the local mode of livelihood articulate with the general revolutionary ideology? How are the local value orientations and their ethos shaped by the embedding revolutionary discourse?<sup>33</sup> Because there are few ethnographies of rural Cuba (Rosendahl 1997b; Wilson 2014), it is difficult to build up a comparative base for understanding how rural Cuba has been changed by the policies of the revolutionary government from 1959 to the present day. Nonetheless, these two ethnographies allow me to raise two important issues regarding rural life in Cuba: the gendered duality of value orientation and the division of labour and the interplay between local and national moral economies.

Mona Rosendahl's (1997b) ethnography of a municipality of coffee-producers in eastern Cuba represents the only monograph of rural Cuba just before and immediately after 1989. It is valuable for giving a sense of rural life

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<sup>33</sup> One needs to be wary of assuming a uniform peasant ethos shared by the whole members of the community. Moreover, anthropological studies of peasantries around the world provide enough evidence of the cultural and economic adaptations of peasant communities to various political, religious, and cultural contexts (Edelman 2013; Mintz 1973; Narotzky 2016; Wolf 1966). Redfield and others emphasized some common value orientations and concerns of peasants around the world: attachment to the land, a positive evaluation of agricultural work, and, conversely, a negative evaluation of commerce and the marking of industriousness as a virtue (Redfield 1956).

in the late socialist period, before Cuba had to adjust to the changes brought about by the end of the eastern European socialist bloc. Her aim was to understand the impact of socialist state ideology on local values and practices in reciprocity and gender relations. She documents the local persistence of standards of social relations from before 1959, based on the aspiration of having *cultura* (being ‘cultured’), i.e. knowing the norms of social reciprocity, showing generosity, offering hospitality, and mastering the art of conversation. Her analysis of gender relations is important since it documents one of the crucial social domains where the difference between the revolutionary discourse and local reality is wide. Machismo as an ideal of masculine superiority and control over women has not been eradicated by the ideal of gender equality. Rosendahl (1997b) and more recent ethnographies of Cuba (Pertierra 2006, 2008) have pointed to the fact that Cuban society, in spite of much progress made with gender equality during socialism, shares many aspects of the patriarchal model of other Latin American countries. Cuban women are still associated with household activities (cooking, cleaning, child-rearing), while men enjoy the animation of the street, bars, and cockfighting. This largely corresponds to what Peter Wilson (1969, 1973, 1995) has called the ‘dual value system’ of the Caribbean societies or the dialectics between respectability and reputation. Respectability refers to an orientation towards more conservative sexual and social values, which are the concern of women, reputation belongs to the masculine competitive world, where virility, loquacity, and wealth are the standard of comparison.<sup>34</sup> Wilson’s model shows the importance of arenas and forms of exclusive male sociability, where reputation is made and unmade among one’s peers. In Cuba such exclusive masculine socializing spaces are around cockfighting, mostly in rural areas and baseball *peñas*, or associations of aficionados in urban areas (Carter

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<sup>34</sup> Wilson’s model of gendered value-orientation has been criticized (see Besson 2002: 14–16) for neglecting the unequal gender relations on which it is based and as proposing a too neat gender segregation of the two value spheres. However, such criticism in fact prompted the application of Wilson’s model to other ethnographic contexts. The dialectics between reputation and respectability has been applied in a more flexible manner by anthropologists working in Trinidad (Eriksen 1990; Littlewood 1993; Miller 1994). Rosendahl (1997) considers that respectability is a value for everyone in Cuba and not only related to social class as in Providencia, the island where Wilson did fieldwork.

2001). Being engaged in such practices and in exclusive spaces of sociability, while not directly productive and time- and money-consuming, creates personal connections and solidarities which can be useful for other instrumental endeavours and work-related activities.

In tobacco-growing areas (Stubbs & Alvarez 1986; Stubbs 1987) there has been a gendered division of labour: domestic work and other tasks around the house (feeding chicken and pigs) has been the women's responsibility, while farming has been the men's duty. However, women are exclusively employed in various tasks after the tobacco leaves have been harvested: threading (*ensarte*) leaves for drying and sorting tobacco in classifying centres. Although these women are remunerated, either by the state tobacco company or individual producers, there are arguments for recognizing an important contribution of unpaid family labour (including that of women) in the larger end-of-year profits in tobacco for individual tobacco farmers than for collective farm members (Stubbs 1987: 61). After 1959, benefiting from revolutionary educational policies, many women filled technical jobs and white-collar positions in the agricultural and state bureaucracy, for example as technicians, clerks, and tobacco buyers.

In more recent research, Marisa Wilson (2014) combines economic anthropology with insights from human geography on scales in her work on food provisioning in Cuba. Based on her ethnographic work in a rural municipality southwest of Havana, she offers an elegant interpretation of the connections between local economic practices and values and the overarching Cuban socialist moral economy under increased penetration from the global capitalist economy. Food provisioning is an ideal topic since it is at the intersection of different processes of valuation and moral frameworks: local moral economic ideas of food sufficiency, national socialist ideas of food as entitlement and public good, and the liberal market representation of food as a commodity. An aspiration for sovereignty (including in food) and socialist economic ideas have shaped revolutionary policies on food since 1959: food is not a commodity, but a public good, therefore food production is marked as a moral duty in Cuban society. With shortages during the Special Period, the

importance of increasing food production became even more salient in Cuban society, with growing calls for farmers to produce more food. The government had to give more autonomy for producers and authorized markets for food products as commodities. Furthermore, tourism and remittances have sustained a growing commodification of food provisioning. Therefore, producing, acquiring, trading, and consuming food locally has confronted ordinary Cubans with contradictions between moral expectations tied to norms of reciprocity and higher political calls for sacrifice, on the one hand, and a growing commodification of everyday life, on the other.

#### **4. Labour ideologies, labour mobilization, and local work practices in Cuban agriculture**

Conceptions and practices of labour have been a key domain of revolutionary action in Cuba, an internal battlefield for creating a new revolutionary consciousness (*consciencia*) and new revolutionary subjectivities (Bunck 1994: 125–84). Arguably the most paradigmatic moment of revolutionary debate on how labour should be conceived in Cuba is the debate between Ernesto Che Guevara and more orthodox Marxists in the early 1960s on the moral and material incentives for mobilizing labour (Yaffe 2009: 63–9). Guevara argued for a non-orthodox Marxist transition from capitalism to communism, based on a voluntarist, idealistic vision of the economy. Market mechanisms and material incentives should be abolished, Guevara argued, while Carlos Rafael Rodriguez (the director of the Agrarian Reform Institute, INRA) defended a version of market socialism, much more in line with economic policies in communist eastern Europe, rather than the Maoist line defended by Guevara. Ideologically, the Guevarist line had prevailed in imposing a voluntarist line in economic policies in the late 1960s, but with the failure of the 10 million tons sugar harvest in 1970, the revolutionary leadership reversed to a more institutionalized, planned economy socialist model, including material incentives for workers. The voluntarist, idealist line has never gone away, though; after a brief experimentation with market socialism in the early 1980s, Fidel reversed the trend with the Rectification of Error

Campaign in 1986, when independent peasant markets and other forms of private entrepreneurship were abolished (Pérez-Stable 1999: 154–66).



Fig. 5. May Day march in Pinar del Río, 2008

Agricultural reforms have been one of the ideological pillars of the Cuban revolution, with the objective of improving working, social, and educational conditions in the countryside. At the same time, it has constituted one of the main fronts of constructing a socialist economy and new productive relationships. However, non-sugar agriculture had mediocre results in the first decades after 1959 in spite of various campaigns to mobilize and motivate the labour force. State investments were mostly channelled into the state agricultural sector, with the lion's share for sugar production. There was also a structural factor involved: a shrinking rural population and the success of educational revolutionary policies of upward mobilization, which took people out of agriculture. Also, state control over procurement quotas and prices provided little incentives for producers to sell their food products to the state or increase their output. The experiment with free peasant markets (*mercados libres campesinos*) between 1980 and 1986 was cut short by the revolutionary government, which claimed that they were an opportunity for personal

enrichment, a deviation in a context of a voluntarist, centralizing orientation which became dominant again in Cuban revolutionary politics (Rosenberg 1992). The real reason was the better productivity of private farming in comparison with state farms, which did not go well with the collectivization drive launched in 1975 at the First Party Congress (Kay 1988: 1253–9). With the exception of a voluntary drive towards collective farms in 1960–1, Cuban non-state farmers were part of the National Association of Small Farmers (ANAP) as individual producers or members of Credit and Services Cooperatives (*Cooperativas de Créditos y Servicios*, CCS), where farmers kept their individual ownership and autonomy in production. Cuba embarked relatively late, in 1975, on a more vigorous collectivization campaign, by persuasion and not by force as in the case of eastern European socialist regimes (Kligman & Verdery 2011). The newly formed Agricultural Production Cooperatives (*Cooperativas de Producción Agropecuaria*, CPAs) were considered superior from a statist perspective since they were formed with members pooling their land and other means of production for better management and productivity.<sup>35</sup> After an initial phase of expansion until the mid-1980s, the drive for collectivization lost its impetus towards the end of the 1980s, and the number of CPAs declined after 1988, even more with the sharp cut in state investments and credits during the Special Period. Interestingly, research carried out by Cuban sociologists interviewing individual farmers in 1988 and 1989 detailed the reasons behind the refusal of individual farmers to join collective farms: higher incomes from individual farming than from collective farms, higher living standards, the dislike of collective work, and the refusal to ‘be bossed around’ (Deere et al. 1992: 137).<sup>36</sup> The research found

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<sup>35</sup> The number of CPAs increased from 44 (9,103 members) units in 1977 to 1,305 units with a total of 62,130 members in 1990 and totalling 833,700 ha (Deere et al. 1992: 123). The CPAs are autonomous enterprises with land and other means owned and worked collectively. Members are paid off for the land and other means of production they brought to the collective from funds especially reserved from the gains of the cooperative. Members are paid wages and receive the rest from profits, after credit, production costs, and amenities are paid.

<sup>36</sup> A survey of rural households in three localities carried out in 1993 substantiates the largely held view, inside and outside Cuba, that private producers (members of CCSs or non-affiliated) have higher incomes than CPA members and agricultural workers on state farms (Deere et al. 1995).

that CCS members were strongly attached to their land, but that young people had low motivation to integrate into the collective farms. The research also showed that family farming was better suited to labour-intensive crops like coffee and tobacco than collectivized production based on mechanization and economies of scale.

One of the most important pedagogical and political *dispositifs* (Foucault 1994 [1977]) of the revolutionary state was the Escuelas al Campo (From the School to the Countryside) programme, which consisted of 45 days of mandatory agricultural labour carried out every year by urban secondary-school pupils. This took place usually in the period of the harvest of certain key food products, including tobacco.<sup>37</sup> The presence of untrained pupils, hard to control, in the tobacco fields was repeatedly criticized by most tobacco-growers I talked to, who feared the potential of crop damage by inexperienced teenagers.<sup>38</sup> Besides this form of educating revolutionary subjects, there were also other state mechanisms of labour mobilization for tobacco-growing: the work brigades and the re-education through labour of prison inmates. These were also sceptically received by individual producers who, when possible, tried to avoid employing such workers since they were judged as being not as experienced or reliable as the workers recruited through kin, neighbouring, or patron-client relations.

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<sup>37</sup> This collective and mandatory practice started in 1966 and ended in 2011. Its ideological roots were in the utopian thinking of José Martí ('Behind each school, a garden'), but one may also see similar practices of student and pupil mobilizations in agriculture in other state socialist contexts. There is little ethnographic research on this mandatory rite of passage in revolutionary Cuba (Blum 2008). Its official abolishment in 2011, under the presidency of Raúl Castro, was officially justified as part of a larger policy shift in order to reduce redundant expense in the economy. Nevertheless, this collective work ritual has familiarized many urban teenagers with tobacco-growing, as I gathered during my conversations with people from Havana and Pinar del Río, recollecting their own experiences in the tobacco fields. This revolutionary rite of passage made urbanites experience tobacco in its growing cycle, in contrast with pre-revolutionary, bourgeois masculine rite of passage of smoking a cigar on graduating from high school.

<sup>38</sup> Pupils were supposed to work in state farms not with individual producers. Nevertheless, after 1991 with the almost total disappearance of state farms in tobacco, pupils were also distributed in CPAs.

Another more direct association between the revolutionary ethos and tobacco-growing comes from the main principles of the revolutionary agrarian reforms: the land belongs to the person who works it and, most importantly, the land should not be left idle. These principles tie persons to places and shape landscapes, since people, animals, and technologies are politically compelled to work the land. The principles are hegemonic and those producers searching to circumvent them (for one reason or another) have to find informal arrangements or retire from farming and leave the land to the state, as the law requires them to do. I analyse in Chapter 5 how producers make arrangements concerning the use of land which they do not own but would like to work. Sharecropping is a widespread practice, especially in the production of food, which is vital for self-subsistence and as a source of cash by being sold to intermediaries, consumers, or the state.

## **5. Fieldwork experience: fieldwork *personae*, personal memory, and revelatory moments**

I have been often asked to explain how I chose my fieldwork destination to interlocutors puzzled about a Romanian doing research in Cuba. My interest in the country emerged during a course I attended in the academic year 1998–9 at Central European University (Budapest) with Istvan Rév, on the political significance of burial rituals (see Rév 2005). Writing a seminar paper on the state-orchestrated reburial in Cuba of the remains of Che Guevara brought from Bolivia in 1997, I immersed myself in the historical literature on the Cuban Revolution. This initial research triggered my imagination and motivation to go to Cuba for fieldwork. At the beginning of 2001, I visited Cuba for 10 days as a tourist. The experience evoked mixed feelings: on the one hand, I discovered the beauty of the landscape and the architectural richness of Havana, Trinidad, and Cienfuegos. On the other hand, the constraints of life under socialism reminded me of the difficult days in Romania under Ceaușescu; the empty markets, the *libreta* (ration book), transport difficulties, the control of the media. The restrictions affecting ordinary Cubans in comparison with foreign tourists was a crying contradiction at the heart of the system. In terms of interaction

with people, the guide and the driver were the only ordinary Cubans with whom we (my girlfriend and I) had more detailed and longer conversations. One night in Varadero, René, the driver, invited us to his hotel room to share some rum while discussing the difficulties of life in Cuba and the constraints of working in tourism.

After that trip, I knew that I would like to work with tobacco-growers. I assumed that working in the countryside would make it easier to establish contacts and get a grasp of a community than an urban context. I also read Ortiz's *Counterpoint* (1995 [1940]), which made me understand the importance of the two commodities for the history of Cuba. At the same time, while studying the post-1959 agricultural history, a particular statistical fact triggered my attention. Most of Cuban agriculture was nationalized, but tobacco was produced by small-scale producers owning their land. It became an interesting question to answer why and how these producers kept their land and activity after the revolution.

Before going into the field, I gradually developed a way of both familiarizing myself with Cuba and de-familiarizing Cuban socialism from my previous experience with late socialism and post-socialism in eastern Europe. The reasons for de-familiarizing were multiple: emotional, epistemic, and ethical. First of all, I personally needed my project to be emotionally rewarding and could only hope conducting research in Cuba, a socialist-party state, was not anxiety-inducing. I have never had any nostalgia for the communist period, quite the contrary. As far as I can remember, I was aware of the difference between what we could say at home and what we could say at school or outside the house. My parents were apolitical, pragmatically accommodating with living in an economy and suffering dire shortages in order to raise their three children. My grandparents were more critical of the regime, and in my maternal grandparents' house I often fell asleep next to my grandfather holding his Soviet radio to his chest while he was listening to Radio 'Free Europe' and 'Voice of America' programmes. He must have felt horrified but probably a bit proud when I, his 12-year-old grandson, asked him why the Romanian people did not revolt against Ceaușescu and overthrow him, as they had done in the

past against all oppressors (this was what I learnt in history classes at school). This was a year or so before December 1989, when popular revolt led to the end of Ceaușescu's regime. After 1989, my parents had to adapt to a new economic context and, in spite of some quite difficult moments, there was no nostalgia for socialism nurtured in our family. Second, why would one go to Cuba, if not in order to learn and understand something in a new way, instead of just carrying out an ethnographic study of peasants in another socialist country? Third, one must not morally condemn or dismiss something before understanding it. It is worth mentioning that this process of de-familiarization was not only happening as introspection, but also through exchanges with family, friends, and colleagues. Epistemologically speaking, Cuba was to be best approached not as a historical anomaly or as a surviving socialist country after the fall of communism in eastern Europe, but as an original social and historical experience in itself.

Ethnographers adopt the principle of interpretative charity in the manner of Monsieur Jourdain making prose, as Gerald Lenclud (1996) suggestively put it. In a nutshell, interpretative charity stipulates that in order to interpret the words and beliefs of others, one has to assume that they (the others) are similarly endowed with reason like oneself. However contentious this point might have been among anthropologists, in order to understand cultural alterity one has to subscribe to this constituent form of ethnocentrism (Bouveresse 1977), that is, the charity principle. Lenclud rightly points out that this does not mean abolishing disagreement or differences between the anthropologist and his interlocutors. He indicates, on the contrary, that most of the time what triggers the ethnographer's attention to attribute beliefs is when there is 'error' in the informant's accounts or disagreement between what the ethnographer and the informant think is right. There is an intellectual cost to this since we tend to leave unexplored the familiar, the common, the trivial: 'I don't diagnose adhesion to a system of values, or obedience to an internalized rule, in someone who behaves in unison with me' (Lenclud 1996: 11). In line with my pre-fieldwork approach, I applied the charitable principle towards people's discourses, comments, or postures in relation to the state, revolution, and politics in general. I tried to understand how and why someone can be a

Fidelista, even though I was in disagreement with many of Fidel's ideas and his way of exerting power. Equally, when someone expressed criticism of the political situation in Cuba, I tried to understand why he or she was doing so.

Retrospectively, I realize that I had spoken little of my socialist experience with Cubans. The fact that I was there with a French passport was what mattered to people: I was *el Francés* (the Frenchman).<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, I did not hide the fact that I was born and raised in Romania and when people asked how things were going after the end of communism, I provided answers. However, there were only a very few people with whom I felt that I could speak 'normally' (I mean critically and openly) about what I thought about Cuban communism. In the context of generalized suspicion among Cubans of informants and people working for La Seguridad del Estado (State Security), people were cautious with whom and about what they spoke. On a couple of occasions, people teased and provoked me by saying that maybe I worked for La Seguridad. Personally, I was also quite cautious and, sometimes, I had paranoid thoughts that some people were working for the secret services. Knowledge of how such services operated in eastern Europe made me careful about what I was saying and to whom. I was particularly careful with intellectuals, knowing that they were more likely to be informants for the secret services than the peasants (this, however, might be a false belief on my part).

There were a few rather ironic situations when people thought that I might be a communist. Once, while discussing issues of popular religion and sorcery with my host, a believer in God and in sorcery, I told her that I did not believe in God. She was shocked and said that I was a communist. In another

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<sup>39</sup> I went to Cuba with my then wife and our first son after several years of living and studying in France. Having acquired French citizenship before starting fieldwork in Cuba, it made more sense for bureaucratic reasons to apply for visas using the French passport like my wife and child. Moreover, I imagined that it would be better for us to be under the protection of the French diplomatic services than the Romanian. The anxieties prior to fieldwork aside, while living in Cuba we did not need any support or help from the French embassy. The issue of the nationality of foreigners in Cuba was not without importance, as I found later. Talking to Cubans who had licences for renting rooms to foreigners, I found that they were required to inform the Ministry of the Interior about the arrival of tourists from certain countries, like the United States, Bahamas, Middle East countries, Israel, China, and the Czech Republic, among others. France and Romania were not on this list, though.

situation, while I was listening to a speech of Raúl Castro on TV, another member of the family teased me about being a French communist. I followed speeches and the official press more than most people around me (it was, after all, part of my task as an anthropologist to pay attention to the official discourse). In the first week of fieldwork the same person asked me the following question, while we were drinking some rum: ‘A ti te gusta esto?’ (Do you like this?) I asked him what he meant by *esto*. He reformulated the question asking if I liked communism. I answered that I did not like communism, but that I considered that each country was entitled to organize its politics and economy independently. My answer probably sounded unconvincing and artificial. Maybe a full recrimination of communism was expected instead of a shaky diplomatic answer.

There is always a bigger or lesser dose of self-censorship in fieldwork, like in all social interaction, whereby ethnographers keep their reactions, judgements, and the feelings they experience to themselves. There are, nevertheless, cases of fieldwork situations when structural conditions (political and social) make self-control more systematic. Cuba, like all existing socialist countries, has a public life permeated by an institutionalized form of distrust and suspicion that Andreas Glaeser (2004), working on the former GDR, calls state paranoia. There is a growing literature on former communist eastern European countries, which provides ample evidence of how these societies were permeated by networks of informants working for state security services, showing the mechanisms of the recruiting and functioning of such systems of surveillance and repression (Glaeser 2004, 2011; Verdery 2014). Naturally, such research is not possible in today’s Cuba, where state paranoia’s origins are in the revolutionary process and the emergence of the confrontation with the United States, and it was further consolidated around the idea of the defence of the revolution against Cuban counter-revolutionaries and inimical US actions. *La Seguridad* has been the agency at the forefront of combating the enemy inside or outside the country (see the case of the five Cuban

heroes<sup>40</sup>). It is held to be one of the most efficient services of this type in the world, and it is not only propaganda. The defeat of the counter-revolutionary insurgency in the Escambray region in 1961–6 and the long list of frustrated attempts on the life of Fidel Castro are some of its notorious achievements. Nevertheless, a *seguroso* (a person working for the Seguridad) or *chivato* (informant) are derogatory terms among Cubans, showing a widespread suspicion of denunciation and informants.<sup>41</sup>

After my arrival for fieldwork in Cuba (November 2007), I had meetings with officials of the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of the Interior. They were gatekeepers allowing me access to the field-site. Once I obtained the resident permit through my affiliation with the Fernando Ortiz Foundation, Havana, with the help of their staff, I could organize my fieldwork in Pinar del Río. After two months in Havana, I moved with my then wife and child to the city of Pinar del Río. We were required to rent a house which had a licence for renting to foreigners. In San Luis there was no such thing for foreign residents. Nevertheless, I managed to make an informal arrangement with the local museum staff in San Luis who found me a family where I could stay while doing my research in San Luis. Pinar del Río and San Luis are only 21 km from each other, so I could easily spend five days in the countryside and be reunited with my family in the city over the weekend or on other days. This further informed my perspective on the connections between the rural municipalities and the regional capital as well as contacts with key informants living in the city of Pinar del Río. After my partner and child returned to France in the summer of 2008, I moved completely to the countryside.

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<sup>40</sup> In September 1998 five Cuban intelligence officers (Antonio Guerrero, Fernando González, Gerardo Hernández, Ramón Labañino, and René González) were arrested in Miami on the charge of espionage. They were heavily convicted with sentences ranging from 30 years of prison up to two life terms plus 15 years (the heaviest). They are celebrated as heroes of the revolution and anti-terrorist fighters for their work of infiltrating the Cuban-American counter-revolutionary organizations. Eventually all of them were released from prison, two after completing their sentences, the rest in a prisoner swap with Cuba in December 2014.

<sup>41</sup> This suspicion seemed similar to what Romanians were feeling about Securitate before 1989. Even though I do not have precise recollections of incidents with Securitate or family members being directly confronted with security officers, I knew about their existence. I learnt early enough not to speak about sensitive issues outside the house or to criticize Ceaușescu.

### **5.1. Locating and eliciting data**

The bulk of my data comes from fieldnotes, which contain observations, summaries of conversations, accurate transcriptions of conversations, descriptions, and some lists of expressions or words. I was reluctant to use a tape-recorder, due to the circumstances of the interactions (everyday conversations, working in the fields or simply walking with people), which would have changed in nature if my interlocutors talked to a tape-recorder. Moreover, the content of many conversations was sensitive and could jeopardize the safety of the people involved in them, since they often discussed or commented on illegal acts. Some interlocutors voiced criticism of the government or the leadership of the revolution and they would have certainly not done so in front of a tape recorder.

I only recorded interviews with people when I knew them very well and when they agreed to speak about their lives or matters relevant to my research questions, for example, tobacco cultivation. I recorded a number of semi-structured interviews and a few life histories with people I got to know very well, as a reciprocal trust could make people feel at ease talking about their personal lives and everyday concerns. Perhaps I was too cautious about recording more interviews with people, worrying that this could make them liable to state persecution, in case the recordings ended up in state hands. The precedent of Oscar Lewis's unfortunate end to his anthropological research in Cuba, when the state authorities confiscated materials and recordings and subsequently harassed and persecuted informants who criticized the revolutionary process, made me cautious about recording long interviews.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Oscar Lewis had already visited Cuba in 1946 and 1961, by the time he met Fidel Castro in February 1968 on another visit, obtaining the permission to carry out research on the effect of revolutionary policies on the lives of slum-dwellers in Havana and other poor people. With funding from the Ford Foundation, Lewis started the project in February 1969, with research assistants from the United States and local Cuban students. Initially planned to last three years, the project was halted in June 1970 by the Cuban government on various charges of receiving funds from the Ford Foundation and studying counter-revolutionary families. State security agents seized all research material and manuscripts of the research team, and arrested many of the project's informants. While Lewis and his colleagues had had hints that they might be under the surveillance of Cuban intelligence agents, it is only recently that Lillian Guerra (2015) has uncovered, based on interviews with one of Lewis's Cuban assistants and on the archives of the Cuban project kept at the University of Illinois (the transcripts and notes

Even if there was a sense of more permissive research conditions 40 years later after Lewis's oral history project (Lewis et al. 1977a, 1977b, 1978), I felt I needed to be careful and aware of the risk of repressive measures (a sense also shared by some Cuban friends).

In contrast, I recorded many TV and radio programmes about how various themes relevant to the social and political aspects of life in Cuba were discussed and presented in the official public sphere to use as research material. I used very little of this material in the thesis, but listening to some of the recordings was a way to trigger an embodied sense and memory of being in Cuba.

I collected a few genealogies, not sufficient for use as representative data. I did not carry a household survey and some of the reasons for not doing that were similar to the reservations I had concerning recording interviews. Asking people information about their economic practices would have entailed to be entrusted with sensitive data about various informal and illegal arrangements. I have made attempts with persons I had good relationships to have more comprehensive data about their income and expenses. However, again the data is not representative in a hard sense of having a sample of a particular group of people that would sustain an inquiry aiming at validating a hypothesis. This should not be read as a rejection of quantitative methods, but rather as a presentation of the research conditions and an acknowledgment of a partial failure. However, whenever quantitative data was available I have made use of it, even though at a rather basic level of analysis, especially regarding demographic and agricultural production data. I asked for more data at the level of municipality, but I could not meet the responsible of the ANAP after many efforts to get an appointment with him.

I also paid attention to significant events and debates, to the so-called 'revelatory moments' or 'dramatic episodes of social life' (Fernandez 1986: xi). Besides the local revelatory incidents of which I write in the thesis, there were

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Lewis could ship to the United States), the extensive surveillance and conditions under which the project was carried out.

national ones, such as the major hurricanes in the late summer and early autumn of 2008, which were new experiences for me, but, more important, were events that gave me revealing insights into Cuban society.

I have decided to keep the real name of the location of my fieldwork since San Luis is one of the most emblematic places for tobacco-growing in Cuba and there is strong local patriotism. Much would have been lost in the argument of the thesis had I decided to disguise the name of the municipality. In Cuba, my fieldwork location was also known because of the institutional affiliation and there was no reason to make the name of the place anonymous. However, I have used pseudonyms for my interlocutors and for the name of the cooperative and the *barrio* (ward) of the municipality where I did most of my fieldwork. In some cases I altered details about people which would have made them easily identifiable in the community.

My fieldwork in Cuba was very rich, and had a profound effect on my senses and body. For example, much of the operations in tobacco fields required physical skills (movements, visual, and tactile habits) which are hard to verbalize or describe. I wish I could have conveyed more of the sensuous experience of working in the field, of the various chromatic varieties of tobacco leaves, or other sensorial experiences of being in the Pinar del Río countryside.

The visual materials (photography) played an important part in the research, even though I used them only for illustration rather than to support my arguments. The photographs I took while participating in agricultural activities and cockfighting were also an important support in the process of writing, as a complement to the written fieldnotes or the recorded interviews.

Various authors (Fabian 2010; Coleman 2010) have pointed out the complexities of personal memory in fieldwork research and writing and how little of it can be subsumed to a positivist research agenda (Okely 2010). The temporal distance between fieldwork and writing allows a space for complex memory processes, triggered by reading fieldnotes, transcribing interviews, and reading ethnographies as re-cognition through remembering situations,

places, and actions (Fabian 2010). I have found in the concept of ‘virtual returns’ coined by Lisette Josephides (2008) a very appropriate description of the complexities of writing up and remembering fieldwork. She writes: ‘[e]thnographic evidence can be found in recollections of fieldwork in tranquillity, through re-readings, comparative readings, philosophical frameworks, dreams, subconscious feelings, and images enclosed in memories (or material artefacts)’. (2008: 196)

Inspired by Wordsworth’s technique of ‘recollection in tranquillity’, Josephides’s concept captures the way anthropologists remember and reflect on fieldwork events in such a way that new insights and possibilities of interpretation emerge, in spite of the purge of many details by the memory processes. Even being away from the field-site in time and space, I returned there virtually while reading fieldnotes and other texts, reflecting, remembering fieldwork events, and writing the thesis.

## **6. Synopsis of the chapters**

Having introduced the main questions, the history of fieldwork and the methods, the type of data and my positionality as a researcher, as well as my theoretical reflections on the relationship between the revolutionary cosmology, the revolutionary state, and the local livelihood model built around tobacco, I will outline the subsequent chapters of the thesis.

In Chapter 1, I present the regional history and the local context of my research, which is the municipality of San Luis, in western Cuba. Tobacco-growing has been a central aspect of the economic and regional development as well as the regional identity of Pinar del Río province. In the last part of the chapter, I show how inhabitants could invoke the culture and history linked to this regional identity in order to challenge the centralist and revolutionary policies, such as the territorial reform of 2010.

Chapter 2 provides descriptions of tobacco’s productive tasks, work schedules, rituals, and labour-gendered division. I provide an example of the

complexity of managing the various chains of operation on a tobacco farm. I elicit cultural metaphors and knowledge practices that make up a distinct model of tobacco-growing based on the idiom of care, built on an analogy between the tobacco plant and the human body, and a labour ideology that emphasizes dedication and skill.

In Chapter 3 I discuss the politics of value around tobacco, focusing on the key moment of the valuation and pricing of the tobacco harvest during the sale to the state company. Although growers operate under a tobacco state monopoly, they can, however, use various tactics to achieve the best price for their crops. In the second part of the chapter, I present a special case of value-creation in tobacco-growing – branding – by presenting the case of the late Alejandro Robaina, a native of San Luis and arguably the world's most famous tobacco-grower. I argue that the singularity of Robaina had less to do with his exceptional qualities as a grower, but more with the power of the government to use a representative peasant figure as a marketing strategy for Cuban cigars.

Chapter 4 examines the political and social significance of food production, especially staple products such as beans and rice. Even though San Luis is predominantly a tobacco-growing municipality, food production has assumed an important place in the local economy. As a result of inflation in food prices internationally, the Cuban government has pushed for more food production in order to replace the dependency on food imports. I analyse the reception of such campaigns for raising food production and the symbolic association between food and the Cuban Revolution.

In Chapter 5, I look at the widespread masculine Cuban popular practice cockfighting, surprisingly little analysed in the anthropological literature on Cuba. This has always been highly popular among men in San Luis and is an arena for masculine sociability and solidarity. Even though persecuted throughout the revolutionary period, cockfighting and cock-raising have survived and have recently seen a revival, due partly to the government's interest in preserving the breed of Cuban roosters. At the same time,

cockfighting has been framed and staged in local public places as a part of Cuban popular culture, not the least by a symbolic association between the bravery of roosters and the fighting spirit of Cuban revolutionaries.

Chapter 6 deals with situations when the moral and legal boundaries of the revolutionary cosmological framework are challenged and transgressed. The chapter is structured in three main parts, each dedicated to a different case. The first one is about the ambiguous status of middlemen in a socialist economy. Their activities are suspect to the revolutionary government, which stresses productive labour's superiority over trade and black marketing. Second, I analyse the case of a local dissident, a person openly criticizing the revolutionary leadership. Third, I examine the case of a man who, after illegally escaping from Cuba, returned back home and was detained for some days. The local echoes of his arrest brought into the open the discussions about risks and moral choices people have to face when deciding to illegally leave Cuba in a search for a better life.

In conclusion, I bring together the various threads of arguments discussed in the ethnographic chapters into a tapestry that aims to display how the local model of tobacco-growing refracts the universalist project of the revolution and various changes of policy from the centre. At the same time, I raise some questions of interpretation concerning the current social and political dynamics in Cuba in the light of my ethnographic experience.

## **Chapter 1. The region of Pinar del Río and the municipality of San Luis: tobacco-growing, local history, and regionalism**

In July 2007, I travelled from Havana to the region of Pinar del Río, as an auditor for an international conference on the history and culture of tobacco in Cuba. This event, organized by the Museum of Tobacco (Havana), gathered Cuban historians, agronomists, and cigar-making professionals as well as foreign historians, students, and aficionados of Cuban cigars. After two days of presentations hosted in the luxurious Ambos Mundos Hotel, everyone was looking forward to the high point of the conference: the trip to the region of Pinar del Río and, more particularly, the municipality of San Juan y Martínez (known as the Mecca of Cuban tobacco). The warm exchange between Cuban and non-Cuban participants during the first two days of the conference became more intense in the air-conditioning tourist bus. I sat next to Manuel, a famous *torcedor* (cigar-roller), an Afro-Cuban born in Marianao, one of the working-class neighbourhoods of the capital. Our rambling discussion ranged from the serious and technical topic of cigar-manufacturing to the more frivolous theme of seduction. As we were approaching the city of Pinar del Río, Manuel told me that this was the capital of *bobos* (stupid, simpletons). For example, he told me, it was there where construction workers had to partly tear down the wall of a newly constructed building in order to take out the concrete mixer left inside. And he went on to deliver more puns and devastatingly witty jokes about the alleged slow-witted inhabitants of the region. At the same time, he appealed his joking tone by praising full-heartedly the kindness and generosity of the people from Pinar, especially from the countryside. ‘The peasants are kind and hardworking people, not street-smart people like in Havana,’ he told me.

These stories about Pinareños (people from Pinar) and their diligence in working their fields denote century-long perceptions of the inhabitants of the region. In his *Excursión a Vueltabajo*, published in 1842, Cirilo Villaverde, the

greatest Cuban novelist of the 19th century, created some of the most memorable figures of *guajiros* in Cuban literature. A native of the region (born in San Diego de Núñez), Villaverde depicts the peasant way of life, built around the work of the family, attachment to the land, and passions for cockfighting, horses, and dance. Critical of the negative impact slavery had on Cuba's development and of the harmful environmental effects of sugar-cane monoculture, Villaverde considered that the self-sufficient peasant was the true actor in the economic development of the island. When he meets the family of an old peasant from his native place, he is enthralled:

The two sons had a healthy and strong physical constitution, of men born for sweat and dust. They combined love and work, something they learnt from their father at a tender age, through his example. They never used slaves to work the land. When I saw their father, so industrious, respectful, and having such a vital manner about him, I could not help remarking to myself: 'This is the farmer of Cuba! Here is the labourer of those countries which are truly industrious!' (Villaverde 1961: 48–9, my translation)<sup>43</sup>

This passage reveals Villaverde's political and aesthetic views in the context of mid-19th-century Cuba. A liberal and an abolitionist, Villaverde illustrates an unresolved tension between a romantic tendency of idealizing landscape and people and a modernizing political stance that aims at civilizing the Cuban countryside (Fischer 1998: 137). If this is a symptom of the ideological bifurcation typical of the *criollo* (Cuban-born white) intellectual – in the apt expression of Fischer – between 'mythical organicity and modernizing constructivism' (1998: 137), I will argue that this bifurcation is still present in the way the region of Pinar del Río has been represented since that time, and especially in the republican and revolutionary phases of Cuban history. The revolutionary cosmology has represented the peasants or *guajiros* as being the backbone of the revolution and simultaneously the main target group for

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<sup>43</sup> 'Los dos hijos, a la constitución física, sana y fuerte, de hombres que nacieron para el sudor y para el polvo, juntaban el amor al trabajo, que el padre les había transmitido desde tierna edad con su ejemplo a tal, que nunca han hecho uso de esclavos para cultivar la tierra. Al verlo tan afanoso, solícito y vivaz, no pude menos de exclamar entre mí: - ¡He aquí el agricultor de la isla de Cuba! ¡He aquí el labriego de los países verdaderamente industriosos!'

modernizing policies, among which the literacy campaign and agricultural reforms were the most important.

The last region of Cuba to be colonized and opened to economic development, Vuelta Abajo<sup>44</sup> (the later Pinar del Río region) has been popularly known as the Cinderella (Cenicienta) of Cuba. This marginality has nourished the popular stories about its allegedly unsophisticated inhabitants, but at the same time has sustained images of Vuelta Abajo as an idyllic and authentic region founded on the figure of the *guajiro*, the hard-working, independent peasant. Moreover, in Vuelta Abajo, the term *guajiro* is used almost interchangeably with the term *veguero*, which is untranslatable in English. Vegas,<sup>45</sup> the tobacco-fields, usually near rivers, have been the dominant iconic representation of the region in paintings, photographs, and more recently tourist artefacts. Tobacco cultivation has been crucial in shaping the economic and social characteristics of the province.

This chapter describes how tobacco shaped the economic and social aspects of the region and of the municipality of San Luis, the site of my fieldwork. I first plan to show how this agricultural activity connected local economies and communities to regional, national, and international social and economic processes. In doing so, I present a historical framework of state policies and international markets affecting local life in various ways. I will then give an outline of the history and social composition of the municipality of San Luis. Finally, I will address some aspects of the regionalist discourse, including forms of open criticism of the political centre.

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<sup>44</sup> Or Vueltabajo (literally, the lower round trip). It became more used in the 19th century than Filipinas or Nueva Filipinas, the official name for the western territory of Cuba, from Cape San Antonio to near Havana (see Pichardo 1976 [1836]: 615).

<sup>45</sup> In Estéban Pichardo's dictionary *vega* is defined as 'piece of terrain planted with tobacco, usually on riversides' ('*Espacio de terreno sembrado de tabaco, regularmente en laderas de ríos*') (Pichardo 1976 [1836]: 606).

## **1. Tobacco in Cuba from the conquest to the beginning of the 19th century**

Before the discovery of Cuba by Columbus in 1492, tobacco (*Nicotiana tabacum*) was cultivated by the indigenous population mostly for ritual uses. Archaeologists working in the Caribbean and North America have found pipes on 3,000-year-old archaeological sites, and, even though Amerindians smoked dozens of plants, it is believed that tobacco was among them at that time. In fact, smoking was an ecstatic shamanic practice and many Amerindian cosmologies represent spiritual beings fond of tobacco. Nevertheless, tobacco was used also for domestic consumption, as many European accounts tell us (Von Gernet 1995).

The habit of smoking tobacco leaves, learnt by the Spaniards from the native Indians, became widespread among the sailors in the Spanish fleet and towards the end of the 16th century it gained popularity in Europe, where it was consumed in the form of snuff or smoking. Historians have puzzled over the rapid diffusion in Europe – some call it a ‘revolution in modes of consumption’ (Norton 2000: xlvi) – of the practice of smoking tobacco, given that there had been no European precedent. The capacity of tobacco to attenuate hunger and to produce ‘joyful intoxication’ (Von Gernet 1995: 74) only partly explains the rapid spread of tobacco use among sailors and its adoption as a part of tavern culture. Von Gernet mentions the influence of the humoral theory, the central medical paradigm of the time, on the rapid acceptance of tobacco. In the scheme of a balance of humours seen in dialectical oppositions of hot and cold, dry and moist, smoking was thought as helping to dry out the ‘superfluous humours’ for the re-establishment of equilibrium and healing (Von Gernet 1995: 76). In this perspective it is easier to understand why tobacco was thought of as a panacea in early modern Europe. It took several centuries of medical, legal, and political measures to reverse the early understanding of the allegedly beneficial medical effects of tobacco. However, tobacco use had its critics from the start. For example, the ecclesiastical authorities of the Catholic Church took a position against the

widespread consumption of tobacco, including among members of the clergy, as several 17th-century papal bulls against the use of tobacco attest.<sup>46</sup>

In a recent historical work on the Spanish adoption of tobacco and chocolate, the historian Marcia Norton shows how the early colonial experience of Spaniards in America was a transitory and crucial ground for the incorporation of these two products into European consumption practices (Norton 2008). The Spanish who lived in America gradually became accustomed to consuming tobacco and chocolate through their exchange relationships with Amerindians and through marriages or domestic unions with Amerindian women. Also, right from the beginning of colonization, African slaves were in contact with Indians, which explains Spanish accounts of slaves smoking tobacco leaves. Nevertheless, the two products received negative comments in the early official Spanish chronicles of the new world. Tobacco, in particular, was derogatorily associated with native rituals, representing to Europeans a sign of Indian idolatry (Norton 2008). However, late-16th-century medical treatises praised the curative and pharmaceutical uses of tobacco, therefore disentangling it from earlier associations with Indian idolatry. For example, between 1565 and 1574, Nicolás Monardes, a doctor from Seville, published the first treatise on the medical and herbal riches of the new world (which became a bestseller in Europe), in which he devoted many pages to the curative powers of tobacco (Monardes 1992 [1574]).<sup>47</sup>

The Spanish Crown was not interested in encouraging the cultivation of tobacco during the first century of the colonization of the Caribbean. As a matter of fact, from the 1520s onwards the Spanish Antilles became an economic backwater, since most of the human resources and capital of the colonial enterprise were concentrated on the mainland expansion and

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<sup>46</sup> In his later work *Historia de Una Pelea Cubana contra Los Demonios* (History of a Cuban Fight against the Demons) Fernando Ortiz (1959) presents tobacco in an allegorical and ironical manner, as being a demon subduing the Catholic Church, both because tobacco consumption was widespread among Spanish clerics and because the Church had economic interests in the cultivation and sale of Cuban tobacco in the 16th and 17th centuries.

<sup>47</sup> Fernando Ortiz (1995 [1940]) underlines Monardes's contribution to popularizing tobacco's medical uses in Europe.

development of the silver-mining industry in Nueva España and the central Andes. Cuba lost much of its economic interest after the depletion of the minor gold deposits during the first decades of colonization. Cuba's main role was as a defence and refilling station for the annual fleet's return with silver and valuable commodities from Mexico and Peru to Seville. Despite some infrequent experiments with sugar-cane plantations, the main economic activity in Cuba was cattle-raising for the export of hides to Spain (Moreno Fraginals 1996).

With the exception of Havana, a major harbour and trade city, the other Cuban cities and settlements engaged in contraband with other European ships as an economic survival strategy (Moreno Fraginals 1996: 71). Thus, in exchange for slaves and manufactured products, they offered hides and agricultural products. With the growing demand on the European markets, tobacco became a profitable crop and the object of a thriving formal and informal trade. Consequently, most of the crop produced in Cuba was siphoned off into the hands of Dutch, French, and English pirates and smugglers. Initially, the Spanish tried unsuccessfully to stop this illegal trade, either by destroying the tobacco crop or by temporarily banning the cultivation of tobacco, like in 1606, when a royal decree outlawed tobacco planting for a period of 10 years.

However, in 1636 the Spanish Crown instituted a monopoly on tobacco, as a way to tap into the highly profitable trade with tobacco in Europe. In fact, during the 17th century, most European states brought in taxes on tobacco which provided substantial revenues for their treasuries. In 1717, the Spanish authorities set up a monopoly company (*Factoría de Tabacos*) in order to buy the crop from the cultivators in Spanish America and organize cigar-manufacturing royal factories in Seville and Cadiz. This was in line with the general reorientation of the Bourbon mercantilist economic policy that aimed to increase the revenues of the Crown by transferring cheap raw materials from the colonies to the metropolis for manufacturing (Brading 1984).

Cuba was the central piece of the Spanish colonial trade of tobacco. The quality of the crop produced on the island was superior to all others produced in America, including the tobacco produced in British Virginia. To increase production, the colonial authorities facilitated immigration (especially from the Canary Islands) and granted farmers land for cultivation. In order to guarantee the premium quality of the Spanish cigars, the Spanish authorities carefully supervised the production and distribution of Caribbean tobacco. In 1684, the Spanish Crown issued an *instrucción* (directive), by which the Royal Factory of Tobacco in Seville, the most important cigar-manufacturer of Spain, was limited to using only tobacco from the Spanish Antilles, especially Cuba. At the same time, cultivation of tobacco in metropolitan Spain was forbidden in order to protect production in the colonies. The tobacco economy contributed substantially to the net income of the Spanish Crown from the beginning of the 18th century (Nater 2006a: 105). The late historian Laura Nater (2006b) studied the systemic articulations between various tobacco monopolies in the Spanish empire during the 18th century before the independence of Spanish territories on the American mainland came to disrupt them. The establishment of a tobacco monopoly in Cuba in 1760 perfected a complex system of exchange, distribution, and production between the metropolis (manufacturing and distribution) and Cuba (tobacco-growing) and other colonial regions such as Nueva España (silver mining). As the productive base of this tobacco trade, Cuba received a continuous flux of silver coins from Mexico, as payment for the tobacco crops, which stimulated the economy and helped the consolidation of an important local commercial class.

Nevertheless, the royal monopoly on tobacco brought about the first major conflicts between the local Creole elite and Spanish metropolitan authorities. Between 1717 and 1723, the Spanish troops crushed various protests and rebellions of tobacco-farmers in Cuba against the royal monopoly, which obliged them to sell the crops at fixed prices to royal functionaries. Many of the rebellious tobacco-growers fled to the western extremity of the island in Vuelta Abajo, where they introduced tobacco-growing in an area that had been previously mostly covered by forests.

## **2. Cuban tobacco from the 19th century to the Cuban Revolution**

Despite the fact that tobacco-growing lost its primacy to sugar during the second half of the 17th century, it remained an important economic activity in Cuba. The royal monopoly on tobacco was abolished in 1817, a measure which had a positive impact on the tobacco sector of the economy. Thus, tobacco production rose from 3,500 tonnes per year in 1810 to 5,200 tonnes per year in 1870. At the same time, the production of cigars followed a similar upward trend from 80 tonnes between 1835 and 1839 to 520 tonnes between 1870 and 1874 (Santamaría García 2009).

The number of vegas growing tobacco increased and the tobacco industry became the main industry in Cuba in the 19th century as a response to high demands in European markets as well as in the United States. British and American capital infused the Cuban tobacco industry decades before Cuba's independence. In the last 20 years of the 19th century, tobacco exports to the United States grew substantially, amounting to 50 percent of the total exports of raw tobacco and 45 percent of the total exports of elaborated tobacco (Fernández Prieto 2008: 148).

The Second Independence War (1895–8) disrupted the economy of the island and had catastrophic consequences for the population. The policy of forced re-concentration of the population by the Spanish army led to high losses of life due to disastrous sanitary conditions. The western part of the island, almost entirely under Spanish control, lost more than the eastern part. The Pinar del Río region, in particular, lost 23 percent of its population. Moreover, the military and insurgency actions almost entirely destroyed the tobacco barns and sorting centres, resulting in a loss of up to 90 percent of the tobacco production in some regions compared with before 1895. The requisition of oxen by the army left many farmers without the means of cultivating their land. After the war, a new influx of immigrants from the Canary Islands rejuvenated and increased the population of the province and contributed to the revival of tobacco cultivation (Pérez de la Riva & Zanetti 1975: 29).

With the establishment of the first Cuban Republic in 1902, American capital took a greater share in cigar manufacturing and tobacco leaves production. In 1901, the American Tobacco Company entered the sector of cigar-manufacturing, buying more than 22 factories in Havana and in the province of Pinar del Río (Stubbs 1989: 31). Nevertheless, in the first half of the 20th century the situation of tobacco-growers deteriorated, since many lost the ownership of their land, thus being forced to disadvantageously sublet land or sharecrop, or simply to join the ranks of the rural proletariat. In the 1940s, some 80,000–90,000 persons were involved in tobacco-growing (33,000 in the Pinar del Río region), which represented a reduction compared with the year 1865, when 120,000 persons were cultivating tobacco in Cuba (58,000 in the Pinar del Río region alone) (Stubbs 1985: 65–66).

At the same time, during the 60-year long republican period, tobacco made a regular contribution to export goods. This could be seen as a sign of a stability of production and prices. Nevertheless, with the expansion of exports, the proportional contribution of tobacco in the overall value of exports was diminishing, from 47 percent in 1899, to only 7 percent in 1958, with an average for the whole period of 10 percent (Pérez de la Riva & Zanetti 1975: 76). In the first half of the 20th century, Cuban authorities became concerned about the decline of tobacco exports to European markets, mostly as a result of countries like France or Germany raising taxation for foreign tobacco products. At the same time, Cuban producers were aware of the primordial importance of the United States as the primary destination of Cuban tobacco. In 1944, for example, the United States imported 91.3 percent of the total of Cuban tobacco exports, a figure that was explained by the limited access to European markets due to the war (Perdomo 1945: 39). Spain, which was the main importer of Cuban tobacco for centuries, was second in place (and first in Europe, but very closely seconded by the UK) by a huge amount.

### **3. Regions of tobacco production in Cuba**

Since the end of the 19th century, Cuban tobacco has been produced in five distinctive micro-regions: Vuelta Abajo, Semivuelta, Partido, Remedios (or Vueltarriba), and Oriente. Each has distinctive climatic and soil conditions for different sorts of tobacco. The most prestigious, in terms of quality, is the region of Vuelta Abajo, situated in the western half of the province of Pinar del Río. The tobacco produced there is used as wrapper and filler tobacco for the making of the best Cuban cigar brands. Semivuelta, also part of the province of Pinar del Río, but at its eastern end, produces a tobacco with a strong aroma, destined mainly for the filling (*tripas*) of cigars. Partido is the region south of the city of Havana, from Guanajay in the west, to Madruga in the east, at the border with the region of Matanzas. This was originally the main tobacco-growing area during the first two centuries of colonization, but became less important in this respect after the sugar cane expanded there in the 18th century. The tobacco produced in Partido is also of high quality, and is used mostly for wrappers.

Remedios or Vueltarriba is another important tobacco-growing region around the city of Las Villas situated in central Cuba. Its tobacco is sun-grown, with a distinctive strong aroma. Before 1959, it was exported to the United States, where it was mixed with less aromatic tobacco as filler tobacco for cigars. The region dominated Cuban tobacco production in terms of quantity in the 1950s. Like the region of Pinar del Río, Remedios attracted many immigrants from the Canary Islands, especially in the 19th century (López Isla 1998).

Tobacco had been cultivated in the Oriente region since the beginning of colonization, although on a much smaller scale than in the other regions of Cuba (Postigo 2009). The valley of the Mayarí River concentrated on the production of a darker and stronger tobacco, although the quality was worse than in the other regions. There was a certain demand for this distinctive tobacco in the second half of the 19th century in the Netherlands and Germany

(Marrero 1951: 246), but in the 20th century it was used only for Cuban cigarette production.



Fig. 6. Map of tobacco-growing regions in Cuba

#### 4. Tobacco production in Vuelta Abajo-Pinar del Río

Due to its economic importance, Cuban tobacco production was directly controlled by colonial bureaucrats and subjected to metropolitan legislative and administrative measures. Until the mid-18th century, production was protected and stimulated by the colonial authorities. However, as sugar-cane production expanded at the end of the 18th century and became the main export commodity, the harsh competition for fertile land driven by entrepreneurs and land-owners pushed tobacco into the background. The new sugar-cane entrepreneurs needed forests, cattle, flat and fertile land, and close harbours as key conditions for establishing *ingenios* – sugar-cane plantations and refining centres (Moreno Fraginals 2001 [1964]: 41). The rural hinterland of Havana constituted an ideal expansion area for this production in the 18th century. However, this area, which was within a 50-km distance of the capital, was also the major tobacco-growing region at the time. Thus, under the pressure of sugar-cane expansion, the prosperous tobacco farms south of Havana, in the Güines Valley, were gradually pushed towards the western extremity of the island (Pérez de la Riva 2004: 96–7).

The western extremity of Cuba was a poorly populated frontier region until the end of the 18th century. In the first two centuries of colonization, the main economic activity was cattle- and pig-raising on large landed properties (*mercedes*) granted to important Havana families (Moreno Fraginals 1996: 63). At the same time, due to its peripheral position, the region became a safe ground for various contraband activities, which used the various harbours on the north and south coasts. Guane and Mantua, two settlements in the northwest corner of the island, were inhabited in the 16th century by a population of coastal pirates and smugglers, whose descendants in the late 17th and 18th centuries were tobacco-growers (Pérez de la Riva 2004: 121–2). With a population of only 200 people in 1600, the region still had only four settlements at the beginning of the 18th century: Guane, Guanajay, Consolación, and Nueva Filipina (Santovenia 1946), of which the last received the title of *ciudad* (city) only in September 1867, in the name of Pinar del Río. The administrative structure of the region of Pinar del Río was organized only in 1879, comprising four jurisdictions: Pinar del Río, San Cristobal, Bahía Honda, and Guanajay.

The social and economic characteristics of the region came to be defined, as already mentioned, at the threshold between the 18th and 19th centuries with the expansion and consolidation of tobacco-growing and subsistence agriculture, run mainly by white growers (Moreno Fraginals 1996: 217). Preserved from the expansion of the sugar-cane plantations (even though there were portions intensively cultivated with sugar-cane from the beginning of the 19th century), the Pinar del Río region acquired a distinctive economic and social character compared with the region of Havana and the rest of the island. Although agricultural censuses at the end of the 18th century (in 1778 and 1792) still registered a limited number of tobacco vegas in the jurisdiction of Pinar del Río (122 in 1778 and 342 for the year 1792) compared with the region of rural Havana (1,609 vegas in 1792), the situation changed in a significant way in the first half of the 19th century, as Table 1 shows:

Table 1. Number of tobacco vegas and sugar-cane *ingenios* and *trapiches* (sugar mills) in *Vueltabajo* (excluding the northern part of the province, Bahia Honda and Mariel) and Havana in 1827, 1846, and 1862. Data compiled from Marrero (1984: 87–95)

Year	1827		1846		1862	
	Vegas	Ingenios and trapiches	Vegas	Ingenios and trapiches	Vegas	Ingenios and trapiches
The region of Vuelta Abajo (jurisdiction of Pinar del Rio and Candelaria)	1,932	0	3,450	4	5,038	14
Rural Havana region	614	238	463	577	61	174
Total Cuba	5,534	1,000	9,102	1,439	8,401	1,531

A quick presentation of the physical and ecological aspects of the region is essential to understand the way various economic activities have developed there. The region is crossed by two mountain chains. To the western end, the Cordillera de los Organos is a 180-km long chain, crossing from southeast to northeast. Even if it is not a very high mountain range (its peaks measure 300–700 m), it has important effects on the microclimate of the region. This mountain area receives the biggest rain quantities in Cuba, due to both intense cyclonic activities and the cold fronts coming from the north during the cold season (Marrero 1951: 414). Towards the eastern end of the province, there is a second mountain chain, Sierra del Rosario (highest peak 699 m), a parallel series of calcareous mountains, oriented from southwest towards the northeast. The Cordillera de los Organos is bordered north and south by two coastal plains with fertile soils and excellent climatic conditions for agriculture. The most western part of the province is the Peninsula of Guanahacabibes, a natural reserve area, with very few settlements, an area of restricted access for Cubans, but with important touristic potential, especially for diving.

These two chains constitute the northwestern and northern limits of the south coastal plain of the Pinar del Río region, an extensive flat area between the municipality of San Juan y Martínez in the west to Artemisa in the east. Geographers have noticed the geological unity of this plain that continues towards central Cuba, ending at the western extremity of the Province of Las

Villas. Nevertheless, they have also noticed the differences in soils between the Pinar del Río plain and the Llanura Roja (the Red Plain) of Havana and Matanzas provinces (Marrero 1951: 430). The southern plain of Pinar del Río has a diversity of soil types, but three main types dominate: sandy-clay, sandy, and alluvial. They offer very good conditions for the cultivation of tobacco, rice, vegetables, and fruit. The sparse presence of clay soils does not favour the intense cultivation of the sugar-cane, in contrast to the plain of Havana-Matanzas, traditionally a zone of sugar-cane production. The historian Manuel Moreno Fraginals sees in the soil difference between the two plains a decisive ecological factor that prevented the expansion of sugar-cane into the southern plain of Pinar del Río (Moreno Fraginals 2001 [1964]: 48). Tobacco-growers could not compete with the capital and influence of the sugar-cane producers and consequently they had to abandon their fertile lands in the region of Havana to move further to the west, where soils were not so favourable to sugar-cane. As a result, a richer agricultural diversity could be maintained along with tobacco cultivation in Pinar del Río. The red sandy deep soils with good drainage situated in the municipalities of San Juan y Martínez and San Luis have offered ideal conditions for the production of the best tobacco in the world.

Recent historical research in Cuban agronomy has brought a better understanding of tobacco production in the Pinar del Río region, especially in the period between 1880 and 1930 (Fernández Prieto 2005). Starting with the 1880s, scientific analyses of the soil of tobacco vegas tried to identify suitable land for obtaining a premium tobacco, which confirmed the practical experience of farmers, who had realized that sandy soils were the best. At the same time, the intense cultivation of tobacco caused a rapid loss of land fertility, even more so because of the greater risk of erosion of sandy soils compared with other soil types. To recover fertility, farmers employed organic fertilizers such as manure or guano imported from Peru already in the mid-19th century. However, guano had a mixed effect on the tobacco crop. In terms of volume the harvest recovered, but the quality of the tobacco dropped due to a change in the chemical and combustion properties of the dried tobacco leaves. Alternative methods of fertilization, either chemical (already largely

used in sugar-cane production) or organic, were employed from the 1880s. As a result of the growing export of tobacco to the United States and the US agricultural technology introduced into Cuba in the first years after Cuban independence, tobacco-producers experimented with new techniques of irrigation and new tobacco varieties, and most important, introduced the technique of growing tobacco under cheesecloth (*bajo tela* or *tabaco tapado*). The historical records certify the introduction of this innovation during the harvest of 1901–02. The next year, this technique spread throughout the province, including the municipality of San Luis, where the American-owned Cuban Land Leaf Tobacco Co. planted more than 1.5 million tobacco plants under cheesecloth (Fernández Prieto 2005: 249). The purpose of this type of cultivation was to produce bigger and thinner leaves for cigar wrappers especially for the US market. Now more than a century later, this technique is still largely used in Cuba, especially in the Pinar del Río region. As I will show in Chapter 3, the distinction between tobacco cultivated without (*tabaco de sol*) or under cheesecloth (*tabaco tapado*) has important cultural and symbolical relevance, since it brings into the foreground ideas about the authenticity of Cuban tobacco and the defining qualities of Cuban cigars.

## **5. The municipality of San Luis: local history and socio-demographic aspects**

The region of Vuelta Abajo was the last Cuban province to be settled, populated, and administratively organised. Important legislative initiatives in 1799, 1815, and 1818 regarding the property and use of agricultural land encouraged the intensification of agricultural activities and a growth of settlements and population in the region that put an end to the land monopoly exerted by the *haciendados* (owners of rural estates) dedicated to cattle-raising (Ortiz 2002 [1940]: 693).

The name of San Luis was mentioned for the first time in an official document in a juridical act from 1632. A Corral San Luis was granted to a certain Don Juan de Hevia (Gaiga 2006: 13) at the conjunction of the Feo and Seco rivers. Even so, the establishment of an autonomous municipality with

the same name only came more than two centuries later. The present territory of the municipality was part of the administration of San Juan y Martinez, the neighbouring western municipality, for more than a century. This had the category of *partido*<sup>48</sup> already in 1774 and became an independent parish in 1845 (Gaiga 2007: 17). By this time, San Luis was one of the 5 *cuartones* (administrative subsections) of San Juan y Martinez. In 1827, a local affluent hacienda owner, Don Nicolas Iglesias, donated 1 *caballería* (approx.13.4 hectares, ha) of land in order to facilitate the construction of a compact settlement which was to become the *aldea* (village) San Luis and later on the *pueblo* (town) of San Luis. Equally significant, the widow of Don Nicolas, Doña Juana Romero, financed the construction of a small beautiful stone-made church in 1835. It was 10 more years before the pueblo of San Luis was recognized as an independent parish, which was done in spite of the opposition of the reluctant priest of San Juan y Martinez, worried about losing parish members and their financial contributions to his church (Gaiga 2006: 19). The separation of parishes paved the way to a complete administrative separation in 1879, when San Luis finally became an independent municipality. This typical case of segmentary relativity (Evans-Pritchard 1940) explains the present sense of rivalry between the two municipalities. It is the quality of tobacco – similar to the discussions about the beauty of the cattle among the Nuer – that it is at stake in this competition between these neighbouring communities. There is no easier way to provoke the sense of pride of San Luiseños than to remind them about the claim that San Juan y Martinez is the Mecca of tobacco. They passionately reject this as preposterous, while boasting about the supreme quality of their own tobacco.

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<sup>48</sup> In the 18th century, *partido* was a subordinate administrative unit belonging to a province (Amalric 1976: 166).



Fig. 7. The Church of San Luis

Since tobacco is a labour-intensive crop, we can make the hypothesis that the rise of tobacco production correlates with population growth. This is what happened in San Luis throughout the 19th century. In the *cuartón* San Luis, the number of vegas of tobacco grew from 58 in 1838 to 183 in 1853. The population also followed an upward trend, as seen in Table 2.

Table 2. The population of San Luis in racial categories, various dates 1838–99<sup>49</sup>

Year	White	Free coloured	Slaves	Total population
1838	532	137	444	1,113
1861	1,051	185	558	1,794
1877				5,144
1880				5,179
1882				5,899
1887				7,327
1899				7,608

<sup>49</sup> Statistics from a work-in-progress history of San Luis carried out by the staff of the local museum.

The data on the racial composition of the population around the middle of the 19th century show an interesting fact, which is the presence of a considerable number of slaves in San Luis. This is largely explained by the existence of two *ingenios* of sugar-cane on its territory, La Constancia and Guacamaya, which operated approximately between the 1830s and the end of the 1880s. The slave labour force was mainly employed in sugar-cane production, but local historians attest the presence of slave labour also in tobacco-growing, although on a much smaller scale. In this situation, the white tobacco-grower coordinated the production and worked alongside a small number of slaves, a pattern closer to forms of domestic slavery or servitude than the more exploitative forms of slavery in sugar cane-production. At the same time, free coloured persons were also incorporated into tobacco-growing, more likely in the category of *operarios* (workers) than owners of *vegas*.<sup>50</sup>

Even though tobacco was the main crop of the municipality (and of the region), it was not a monoculture. Important quantities of rice, maize, beans, vegetables, fruits, and coffee were produced in San Luis in the last two centuries.<sup>51</sup> Cattle-raising continued to be practised, though on a much more

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<sup>50</sup> Recent historical works on tobacco in colonial Cuba are contributing to amend the prevailing simplifying vision of tobacco cultivation as the domain of white, free labour in contrast to slave-dependent sugar production. Cosner (2015) gives a much more nuanced picture for the period 1717–1817 of the much more heterogeneous composition of the tobacco-growers in western Cuba including slaves and free blacks. William Alan Morgan (2013, 2016) addresses the presence of slaves and former slaves in tobacco production in the Pinar del Río region between the abolishment of the royal tobacco monopoly (1817) and 1886. He argues that the tobacco labour regime was much less oppressive and more conducive to allowing a slave family formation than on sugar-cane plantations. Moreover, many slaves could cash in on the food and tobacco produced on their subsistence plots (known as *conucos*), raising the sums for their own purchase. Michael Zeuske (2016) points to a more intensive use of slave labour in tobacco-growing between the end of the royal monopoly of tobacco in 1817 and 1870, part of a larger phenomenon known as the second slavery in the Atlantic world. However, in the tobacco sector there were 10 times fewer slaves than in sugar-cane in 1862 (Zeuske 2016: 334). Zeuske (2016: 342) also argues that the occulting of slave labour's presence in Cuban tobacco was part of the marketing strategies of cigar manufacturers in Havana, targeting the United States and European markets with images of Cuban cigars as symbols of freedom and rebelliousness.

<sup>51</sup> Coffee production was introduced in Cuba by the French Creoles after their emigration from St Domingue in the aftermath of the Haitian revolution (1801). Vuelta Abajo proved to be a suitable region for coffee production (especially in the mountain area of Sierra de los Organos)

reduced scale than in the first centuries of colonization. As we will see in Chapter 4, tobacco-growing goes well with other crops, either using the same land (successive planting) or other land not suitable for tobacco-growing.

The population of the municipality continued to grow in the first half of the 20th century. This can be explained by the general demographic characteristics of the Cuban population of that period (high fertility rate), but also by international immigration and regional migration. The expanding agricultural production attracted regional labour from other municipalities with less economic potential. The use of a seasonal labour force for harvesting tobacco was important during the first half of the 20th century. These seasonal workers, most originating from northern parts of the province, were accommodated on the farms during the harvest. However, some of them settled in San Luis through marriage, cohabitation, or long-term labour relations with local producers. Many of these labourers, though, ended up in the two shanty areas at the periphery of the *pueblo*, popularly known as Llega y Pon (arrive and settle) and El Sacrificio (the sacrifice). These suggestive names captured the precarious living conditions of these people, accommodated in improvised shelters and shacks covered with palm leaves, without water, sewage, or electricity. They fit the image of the crying inequalities of pre-revolutionary rural Cuba, which the revolution aimed to abolish. In San Luis these settlements were dismantled in the first years after the revolution and their inhabitants were resettled in better houses (mostly belonging to families who chose to go into exile), but also in the new social housing provided by the revolutionary government. As a matter of fact, one of the first emblematic social architectural projects of the government was building the *pueblo* of Santa María, one of the rural *barrios* of the San Luis municipality. It was built between 1960 and 1965 as an example of a rationalized social housing programme. Table 3 shows the growth of the

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and for the first 30 years of the 19th century coffee cultivation looked very promising there (Pérez de la Riva Pons 1944). Several major hurricanes in 1844 ruined most *cafetales* and entrepreneurs invested the available capital in the more profitable sugar-cane production instead of reinstating coffee production (Pérez 2001).

municipality's population from the beginning of the 20th century up to the present.

Table 3. Population of San Luis, 1907–2009. Sources: *Historia del Municipio* and the *Anuario Estadístico de Cuba*

Year	Total population
1907	11,092
1919	10,547
1931	14,902
1943	19,236
1953	23,519
1977	31,924
2005	34,026
2008	33,913
2009	32,406

An important demographic tendency may be emphasized from these data. First, we may note that the population grew more slowly from the end of the 1970s up to the present. With a growth of only 482 inhabitants in 32 years, we can say that the population of the municipality stagnated (nevertheless, San Luis fared better than San Juan y Martínez, which lost 6,719 inhabitants in the same interval of time).<sup>52</sup> This could be explained by lower fertility rates and also by rural–urban migration and emigration rates. Overall in post-1959 Cuba, educational and employment opportunities have contributed to a reduction of the rural population. San Luis has been experiencing the same trend, but probably at a lower rate than in other parts of the country, which could be partly explained by the employment opportunities tobacco production offered locally. However, in the early part of the 21st century, the population of the country has declined as a result of various social, demographical and economic factors. Cuba has been undergoing an advanced demographic transition similar to that experienced by the developed countries (low fertility rate, high life expectancy and population ageing). Emigration is another factor

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<sup>52</sup> Centro de Estudios de Población y Desarrollo, *Población de Cuba, Provincias y Municipios, 1976-2009*, Oficina Nacional de Estadísticas, 2010.

contributing to this, but there has not yet been sufficient research done on the scale and causes of regional differentiation inside Cuba. In San Luis, young people leave the country every month legally and illegally (see Chapter 6), but political sensitivity around the topic made it hard for me to get quantitative data. The other significant demographic process, which is population ageing, has been causing concerns about the maintenance of productive activities, including tobacco. The general perception in Cuba that the countryside is worked by old *guajiros* and that the young people do not want to work in farming reflects some worries regarding these global structural socio-demographic processes in contemporary Cuban society.

## 6. San Luis in 2008–09

In 2008, the population of the municipality was 33,913 inhabitants, with a third living in the *pueblo*, its urban centre. The *pueblo* is not crossed by the *carretera panamericana*, the main road linking Havana and Guane, as is the case with most important municipalities of the province. Travelling on the *carretera panamericana*, after 13 km going southwest from the city of Pinar del Río, another asphalt road of 8 km on the left leads to the *pueblo* of San Luis. In the back of a packed *maquina*, the licensed taxis of modern Cuba, usually an old American car from the 1950s, one can admire the beautiful green symmetry of the tobacco fields on both sides of the road if travelling between November and March. One km before entering the *pueblo*, the road crosses the railway connecting Pinar del Río to Guane, and on the left there is the railway station. Opposite to it is the entrance to the state tobacco farm, La Esperanza. The *maquina* will stop at the entrance of the *pueblo*, just in front of the Masonic Lodge José F. Padrón.<sup>53</sup> The main street is large, the two sides separated in

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<sup>53</sup> The Masonic Lodge was built in 1948 and it was named after a local mason, Juan Felipe Padrón (1841–1905), who fought for Cuban independence and later on was a local judge. The building is still used every Wednesday for the meetings of the local masons. It was rather difficult to inquire about the activities of the Masonic group, even though I have known two masons very well. They, understandably, restrained from talking about the rituals of the group, and only gave me general information about the importance of masons in the struggle for Cuban independence and also of their support for the Cuban Revolution. This explains the fact that freemasonry could exist and function officially after 1959 until the present.

the middle by a pedestrian *paseo* with benches, under the protective shadow of tall trees. Walking along this *paseo*, you will pass shops, the Casa de Cultura (House of Culture), the municipal museum, and the Communist Party's headquarters before finally reaching the plaza. Here is the late-colonial Baroque-style church with its renovated, yellow-painted walls, imposing from its higher ground on the market square. In front of it there is *el parque*, where the bust of José Martí, the 'Apostle of the Nation', is displayed. Crossing the plaza, you walk 200 m on the *paseo*, before reaching the other end of the *pueblo*, with the bus terminal on the right. I choose to mention two rather contrasting moments in the life of the *pueblo* for one to have a sense of how the public space is used, lived, and made the centre stage of the social life of the municipality: an ordinary Saturday market day and the morning of 28 January, the national holiday celebrating the birth of José Martí.

On Saturday morning, the *pueblo* wakes up for the weekly agricultural market. The biggest concentration of people is around the *placita* (small market), next to the residential buildings of the socialist type erected in the late 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. Vegetables, fruits, and staples such as rice and beans are displayed on the counters of the agricultural market as well as on the pavement or improvised counters in the street. Vendors are legally required to have a licence and to be part of an agricultural cooperative in order to sell. Local vendors bring products from *el campo* (countryside), mostly by two-wheeled carts driven by one horse. Others come with loaded trucks from other municipalities of the region, bringing products not grown in San Luis, like pineapples. Before lunch the streets are full as many people come from different *barrios* to shop and meet friends, relatives, or acquaintances. Men share news about their crops, negotiate, or inquire about how to find implements or insecticides needed for the crop. They also exchange details and plan going to Sunday cockfighting. By lunch time (*el almuerzo*, a very important meal that most San Luiseños eat at home) the agricultural market ends. Streets empty as people go home to eat. Later in the afternoon and early evening the streets get busy again, mostly with men sharing bottles of rum or beers, sitting on the benches of the *paseo* or standing on the porches.

Gradually around dinner time, the *paseo* becomes empty again as people go home to eat and watch TV.

On official festive days, such as 28 January<sup>54</sup>, the *pueblo* is full of people, this time the massive presence of schoolchildren being the major difference. Dressed in their pioneer uniforms, they chat, laugh, scream, and occasionally annoy their *maestros* or *maestras* who try to keep the energy of the pupils under control in preparation for the official march. Groups of pupils, organized by schools, march in front of the official tribune, situated just opposite the church, after local political authorities have delivered speeches reminding people of the paramount significance of the nation's apostle, José Martí. The march has a precise choreography, which re-enacts allegorically key historical moments as well as educational ideals based on socialist competition and the harmonious combination of physical and intellectual efforts. Some children dressed as *guajiros* march alongside other colleagues dressed as soldiers and workers as an enactment of the unity of the Cuban people in socialism. The audience of parents, relatives, and public functionaries circle the plaza. At the end of the march, parents and children pose for a few cameras. If the day falls on a weekday, people working in the field are absent. A dozen horse-riders, dressed in traditional *guayaberas* shirts, wearing big hats and carrying machetes, evoke the participation of *guajiros* in the independence wars and the revolutionary struggle.

The *pueblo* is the administrative and political centre, but its population makes up only a third of the total population of the municipality. The other two-thirds live in the various rural *barrios*, situated 2–8 km from the centre. Only the road between the *pueblo* and the *barrio* El Corojo (3.5 km from the *pueblo*) is laid with asphalt. Already world-famous at the beginning of the 20th century for its tobacco, El Corojo gave its name to a tobacco variety whose leaves made exquisite tobacco wrappers, the highest standard at the time. Before the revolution, most of the land in El Corojo belonged to Daniel Rodríguez, owner of more than 200 *caballerías* of land (approximately 2,680 ha). He was

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<sup>54</sup> This is one of the most important public holidays in Cuba, celebrating the birthday of José Martí (1853–95), the national poet and martyr of the Independence War against the Spanish.

expropriated by the revolution, and eventually left Cuba in 1961. The other settlements and *barrios* are connected to the *pueblo* by country roads, which become hard to travel after heavy rains brought by northern *frentes frios* (cold fronts) during the cold season and rains during the hurricane season in summer and early autumn.



Fig. 8. Children marching in San Luis, 28 January 2009, celebrating the Birth of José Martí

Like all rural Cuba, San Luis was transformed by the Revolutionary Agrarian Reforms of 1959 and 1963. The first law brought about the nationalization of land properties larger than 400 ha, which affected mainly sugar-cane companies and large estates. The second Agrarian Reform restricted the quantity of privately-owned agricultural land to 67 ha. After the nationalization of classifying centres and commercial tobacco activities, the richest families of tobacco-producers, such as the Placencia and the Rodriguez from San Luis, left Cuba. With the exception of these big producers, owners of commerce, and practitioners of liberal professions (lawyers, notaries, doctors, dentists, and accountants, among others), most people in San Luis benefited from the new social and economic revolutionary projects affecting the countryside.

Actually, the support for the 26 July Movement<sup>55</sup> in the region and in San Luis was strong and some *San Luiseños* were tortured and executed by Batista's police for their underground activities and sabotage actions.

Tobacco-growing remained mostly in private hands after the agrarian reforms. In contrast to sugar-cane or livestock, tobacco had often been cultivated on smaller plots than 67 ha (the top limit of permitted private land). However, the agrarian reforms had an important effect on tobacco-growing, since it stipulated that the land should be owned by the person directly cultivating it, according to the principle that the land should belong to those who work it. Thus, the reforms gave titles of ownership to tenants and agricultural workers, ending the widespread practice before the revolution of land-leasing, where owners of bigger farms sublet plots of land for cultivation, in exchange for a share of the crop. In 1961, the independent farmers were integrated into ANAP. This is the main organization under which tobacco-growers have been operating since the revolution. From the mid-1960s. ANAP started creating CCS in the tobacco regions, where members keep their ownership and work their land independently (as noted above), and use credit, input, fertilizers, seeds, and other products provided by the state. They can also purchase tractors, trucks, and other equipment for collective use, which can be used by the cooperative's members. Nevertheless, in the mid-1970s, the government started to push for a new form of agricultural cooperatives, presented as a superior form of socialist agricultural production: the CPAs (also mentioned above). These were formed by individual producers pooling land, machinery, and labour with the purpose of creating larger and more efficiently managed economic units. The profits were distributed among members according to the amount of work they put in and the land and equipment they contributed.

Creating the CPAs was a politically motivated move in order gradually to get rid of private agriculture in Cuba (Alvarez 2004). By 1985, more than 63

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<sup>55</sup> Movimiento Ventiseis de Julio was the name of Fidel Castro's revolutionary movement, whose name comes from the date of the ill-fated 1953 attack on the Moncada barracks in Santiago de Cuba by Fidel Castro and his men.

percent of independent farmers had been integrated into CPAs. In San Luis too the formation of the CPAs was strongly encouraged, but people were reluctant to join such cooperatives. From my conversations with farmers, I gathered that those who had political responsibilities or were former members of the 26 July Movement had been more or less persuaded to join CPAs. Other farmers joined them when their sons were no longer willing or able to continue their fathers' farms, since many were state employees or had moved to the city. Economically, however, the CPAs proved to be a failed experiment, as by the end of the 1980s and during the economic crisis of the 1990s many of them started to run on deficits, with no profit being shared by the members. As a consequence, the number of the CPAs started to decrease at the beginning of the 1990s (Stubbs 2000: 236).

In 2008 and 2009, agricultural production in San Luis was carried out by 46 cooperatives, divided into 37 CCSs and 9 CPAs. In addition, there were three *Unidades Basicas de Producción Cooperativa* (Basic Unit of Cooperative Production), a new type of cooperative production created in 1993 by dismantling state farms. The members of these units of production have the free usufruct of the land for an indefinite period of time and manage the production by themselves. These new cooperatives did not become very common in tobacco-growing, since their productivity and the quality of their tobacco were generally inferior to the CCSs and even the CPAs.

Quite understandably for a socialist economy, an important proportion of the local population is employed in the state sector, including state enterprises, services, administration, and education. In 2009, 38 percent of the total population of the municipality were employed (12,529 out of a total of 32,406), with 75 percent of the working population being state employees (9,445 people).<sup>56</sup> Women made up 43.6 percent of the total labour force, but they were overrepresented in certain occupational categories, such as technicians (2,032 *tecnicos* out of a total of 2,986) and administration (175 out of 198). Men made up almost 70 percent of the manual labourers (*operarios*),

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<sup>56</sup> All statistics used in this section come from *Anuario Estadístico de San Luis 2010*, Oficina National de Estadística, La Habana, 2010.

including people working in the field, services, and other enterprises. In 2009, agricultural and forestry activities employed 47 percent of the labour force, followed by education (19.59 percent), and health and social services (14.1 percent). This reflected both the dominant place of agriculture in the local economy, but at the same time the consistent number of people employed in state non-productive domains (education and health). The state tobacco company was one of the main employers in the municipality, especially in its sorting centres (*escogidas*), that predominantly relied on women with their knowledge of the minutiae of classifying tobacco leaves.

Statistics on the structure of land use and ownership in San Luis show that most agricultural land is in the non-state sector with 86.5 percent of the total (here including the cooperative sector). Out of 3,036.2 ha of agricultural land in state ownership only 1,125 ha were cultivated (37 percent), while out of the 19,626.6 ha in the non-state sector, 9,834.2 ha were cultivated (50 percent). Even though San Luis has some of the best tobacco lands in Cuba, the statistics of agricultural production show a diversity of crops on the territory of the municipality, including rice (1,681 ha cultivated in 2009), maize (1,570 ha in 2009), beans (1,621 ha), tomatoes (1,236 ha), besides the tobacco (1,806 ha). In Chapter 4, I will show how these crops are managed in the non-state sector and the importance of food production for the reproduction of households. However, tobacco production remains the main agricultural activity which has defined the historical development of San Luis and fostered its sense of identity and reputation in Cuba and abroad. In the next section, I return to the importance of tobacco in relation to the regional identity.

## **7. Dimensions of Pinar del Río's regionalism: tobacco-growing and defensive anti-centralism**

The shaping of regional cultures in Cuba starts in the early colonial period with the establishment of a political centre. The first capital of Cuba was founded in 1515 in Santiago de Cuba, at the eastern extremity of the island. However, in 1589 the capital was moved to Havana, in the west, sanctioning its importance as a harbour and provider of services for the Spanish fleet linking the Spanish

America with the metropolis. This switch of official status fomented a rivalry and a sense of distinctiveness between west and east in Cuba (*el Occidente* and *el Oriente*), which embraces various social, political, cultural, and racial(ized) dimensions. However, this hierarchical opposition (Dumont 1980) between *Occidente* and *Oriente* overshadows other significant regional differences in Cuba, especially in the western region (Venegas Delgado 2001; Bodenheimer 2015). The hegemony of Havana has eclipsed neighbouring regions such as Matanzas, Pinar del Río, and the Island of Pines for a long time. These regions achieved their administrative autonomy during the 19th century and their particular ecological, geographical and political-economical aspects have led to the formation of different regional identities. In the introduction to the chapter I referred to the ambivalent representations of the people living in Pinar del Río, which attribute to them both simple-mindedness and kindness, simplicity and diligence. These representations and discourses about the region originate in the period when the region was a frontier economy and an expanding tobacco-growing area, inhabited mostly by peasants.

Ethnomusicologist Rebecca Bodenheimer (2015) has recently researched regionalist sentiments in Cuba, especially in relation to musical practices, and showed their pervasiveness and vitality despite the revolutionary discourse of national unity. Such sentiments are linked to regional identities structured by older distinctions between *Occidente* and *Oriente*, city (capital) versus countryside and by racialized perceptions between a ‘whiter’ western Cuba and a ‘blacker’ eastern Cuba. In Bodenheimer’s words, regionalist sentiments ‘betray the cracks in the wall of Cuban national unity and socialist egalitarianism and illuminate how regional provenance is an influential axis of identity formation that can foster divisiveness’ (2015: 57).

Claudio Lomnitz-Adler’s (1991) conceptual framework for the study of regional culture offers useful analytical tools for understanding the making of the regional culture of Pinar del Río and its relationship to central politics. He takes into account the internal differentiation and segmentation of any given regional culture, against homogenizing accounts, in which regional culture is

made up of the interactions between ‘intimate cultures’ belonging to various social groups. ‘Intimate’ refers, in Lomnitz-Adler’s view, to the localized class culture in local communities, which is reproduced in the dynamics between the home and the community. The idioms and forms of interaction between various intimate cultures make the ‘culture of social relations’ in a certain region: ‘The most basic element in the construction of a regional culture is the development of an idiom and a mythology for interaction between the groups that are being pulled together. I have called this conjunction of idiom and mythology the ‘culture of social relations.’ (Lomnitz 1991: 205)

These idioms of interaction include articulatory symbols connecting various intimate cultures, which work through practices of symbolic appropriation, resignification, and fetishization. Moreover, various groups define themselves and justify their particular positions in the social hierarchy of a region using localist ideologies. Tobacco is part of the domain of shared symbols that makes up the regional culture of Pinar del Río, from the emblem of the region which portrays tobacco leaves to tobacco plants being carried by supporters of the local baseball team into the stadium to cheer up the fans during important games. The premium quality of its tobacco is the counterpoint to the generally held perception among Cubans of other regions and the capital of backwardness and traditionalism in Pinar del Río.<sup>57</sup> Given its central economic and symbolic place, tobacco is part of the idiom of interaction between state bureaucrats and peasants on a local level as well as between provincial authorities and central government.

In the remaining part of the chapter, I will explore certain aspects of the regionalist discourse and identity of Pinar del Río. First, I will explore how tobacco plays a central role as an idiom of interaction between bureaucrats and peasants and how it figures pre-eminently in the (self)-representations of this province. Second, I will analyse some political dimensions, expressed in

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<sup>57</sup> In his ethnography of baseball aficionados in Havana, Thomas Carter (2008: 133–4) discovered that Pinar del Río, even though more to the west than Havana, was placed symbolically in the east or *Oriente* by baseball fans, as part of the imagined Other of the capital, standing for what is rural, unsophisticated, and racially black.

regionalist terms, as they became apparent in the reactions to the territorial reform of 2010, which deprived the region of Pinar del Río of three municipalities in its eastern part.



Fig. 9. Supporters of Vegueros de Pinar del Río, the local baseball team, lifting up a tobacco plant

### **7.1 Cultural relevance of tobacco-growing to regional culture during the Special Period**

The importance of growing tobacco for Pinar del Río's historical development and regional identity should be obvious by now. This is also reflected in popular perceptions about the region and in the very popular and picturesque artistic representations of the typical landscape of the regions: tobacco fields with diligent, hard-working straw-hat *campesinos* and drying tobacco barns in the background. The growth of tourism in the region throughout the Special Period has strengthened this hegemonic perception about the region, since Cuban cigars and tobacco retain a strong touristic potential. Pointing to a general trend, Laurie A. Frederik (2005) argues that in post-Soviet Cuba the figure of the *campesino* has been central to processes of identity redefinition in the

context of the crisis provoked by the end of the socialist international's economic cooperation. It is a form of pre-emptive nostalgia for a past which is not really gone, since peasants are still living and working in Cuba, but which reflects a sense of criticism of the corrupting effects of the marketization and dollarization of Cuban economy. In this section, I will illustrate in a few words how bureaucrats, intellectuals, and peasants evoke the tradition of tobacco-growing and the figure of the tobacco-grower.

In February 2008, I had a meeting at the regional office of the Ministry of Culture in Pinar del Río in order to introduce myself and to describe my research project. I met María, one official of the ministry, a 55-year-old white woman, and my local supervisor, Elena, a 43-year-old mulatto woman and local historian. They were enthusiastic about the theme of my project, which was initially defined around the issues of knowledge transmission of tobacco-growing in peasant communities. Most interestingly for me, they talked about tobacco-growing from experiential and biographical angles. María told me about her life: born into a peasant family in Consolación del Sur, she worked as a child in her father's tobacco *vega*. On the paternal line they were descendants of immigrants from the Canary Islands. She and her 10 siblings had helped their parents work the land. They had been raised with a respect for good manners and the importance of education. She had recently studied the history of immigrants from the Canary Islands in the region for a master's thesis and showed how they had influenced regional culture. According to her, the family's work and solidarity were the central values of the tobacco-growing families. The other colleague also shared her own connection with tobacco. Even though she was born in an urban family of musicians, some relatives had worked in the city's cigar factory as *torcedores* (cigar-rollers). When Ortiz's work was mentioned in the discussion, I suddenly realized that there was an interesting labour division: white descendants of the Canarian settlers were tobacco-growers and racially mixed descendants of African slaves worked as cigar-rollers. When I asked them about the lasting influence of tobacco-growing on regional culture, María mentioned hard work as a fundamental value transmitted in the families, while Elena pointed out the fact that the emblem of the region included a leaf and a flower of tobacco. She mentioned

the recent project by the staff of the regional history museum to establish a National Museum of Tobacco in Pinar del Río. She explained, however, that two important difficulties had to be overcome before such a museum could be opened in the city of Pinar del Río: the recent opening of a museum of tobacco in Old Havana and the fact that the capital had the most important patrimony of cigar-manufacturing. She confessed there were few chances to win against the capital. However, the unbeatable advantage of the region was in the rural patrimony of tobacco, something that the capital could not offer. Therefore, the potential of tobacco-growing as a tourist attraction was strongly advocated by her. The picturesque landscape of the Valley of Viñales, a UNESCO world heritage site, had already been offering tourists the experience of visiting traditional tobacco farms (Simoni 2009).

The high point of the July 2007 conference I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter was the meeting with pre-eminent tobacco-growers from San Juan y Martínez and San Luis, which took place at the State Agronomical Experimental Station of San Juan y Martínez. After a short visit of the station, we were invited to sit inside a *rancho* (thatched-roof dining hall). At a long table facing the visitors, there were the director of the agronomical station and next to him there were six top *cosecheros* (harvesters) of tobacco, among whom was the late Alejandro Robaina, the most famous Cuban tobacco-grower of San Luis. Each of them was introduced to the audience, but they did not speak much. They seemed to feel a bit awkward facing this mixed international and Cuban audience. The director took the floor and presented the history of the agronomical station and research. He paid tribute to the present farmers, who were active partners of the agronomists, for trying new varieties of tobacco and for giving feedback using their experience in tobacco-growing. The director acknowledged that family-run farming had proved to be better at obtaining premium tobacco than state farms and the CPAs, implicitly acknowledging the failure of the government's establishment of the CPAs in the 1970s and 1980s. At the end of the presentations, I seized the opportunity to ask the producers themselves directly how they saw the challenges of growing tobacco and how they saw the involvement of the younger generations in tobacco-growing. Robaina answered that he saw the future was in good hands, as he had started

to involve his grandson in the managing of tobacco production, teaching him what he knew about tobacco. Another producer answered that work in tobacco was hard and that many young people were not willing to do it. He said that what the farmers needed from the state was only more resources (*recursos*) in order to obtain the best tobacco, as they would put in the hard labour as they always did. The meeting ended with visitors taking pictures of the real stars of the meeting: the peasants. Robaina was the star of the stars, everyone wanting to be photographed together with him, some asking him for autographs. There was something paradoxical in this situation, the contrast between the shyness and modesty of the producers and the attention and praise they were receiving from visitors, both Cubans and foreigners.

The making of Robaina's celebrity will be addressed in Chapter 3, since he was one of the most recognized tobacco-growers from San Luis. His case nicely illustrates the paradoxical situation of tobacco-growers, navigating between a state-administered socialist tobacco economy and complex cultural and marketing processes which make them icons of a timeless, perennial Cuba, safe from current crises and easier to market for capitalist consumers. At the same time, as we are going to see in the next section, the sense of a regional identity has other pillars than tobacco-growing.

## **7.2. Regionalism frustrated: criticism of the 2010 territorial reform**

In June 2010, during one meeting of the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party, Raúl Castro announced the blueprint of a new political and territorial division of Cuba to be implemented at the beginning of 2011 through the creation of two new provinces, Artemisa and Mayabeque. The plan was to split the province of La Habana into two new provinces, Artemisa in the west, and Mayabeque, south-east of the city of Havana. The first new province would annex three municipalities of the province of Pinar del Río (Bahía Honda,

Candelaria, and San Cristobal<sup>58</sup>). The official justification for the first major administrative territorial reorganization since the major administrative reform of 1976<sup>59</sup> was a more efficient state bureaucracy and better economic efficiency. I was not in Cuba at the time, but through my discussions with informants and reading the official Cuban media and the critical Cuban blogosphere, I grasped that the announced reform provoked puzzlement and a negative reception among Cubans in Cuba and abroad. What is interesting for the theme of this chapter is how the reform triggered public reactions for keeping the integrity of the province of Pinar del Río. Many Pinareños resented the loss of three municipalities of their province, notwithstanding the fact that they had some of the richest agricultural land and a higher agricultural productivity. In addition, the new administrative division deprived the province of important tourist sites such as the botanical garden of Soroa with its unique collection of orchids and the tourist complex of Las Terrazas. The reaction was so strong that negative comments appeared even in the official Cuban mass media. The website of *Guerrillero*, the provincial newspaper of Pinar del Río, received dozens of comments overwhelmingly against the new reform. Reading them one is struck by the strong expression of a local patriotism and a sense of a regional pride.<sup>60</sup> A more general point was put forward by many of these comments. Contrary to the official justification for the reform as a way to reduce state bureaucracy and enhance economic efficiency, readers made the point – valid in my opinion – that two new provinces would create more

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<sup>58</sup> In 2009 the population of the three municipalities constituted 18.7 percent of the province of Pinar del Río and their territory made up 18.5 percent of the total area of the province (*Anuario Estadístico*, 2009, Pinar del Río, ONE, 2010).

<sup>59</sup> In 1976 a major territorial and administrative reorganization of Cuba was adopted, the first major one since 1959. Thus, the previous territorial division into six provinces (introduced in 1878 by the colonial authorities), Pinar del Río, Havana, Matanzas, Las Villas, Camagüey y Oriente, was changed into one of 14 provinces: Pinar del Río, Ciudad de la Habana, La Habana, Matanzas, Villa Clara, Cienfuegos, Sancti Spiritus, Ciego de Ávila, Camagüey, Las Tunas, Granma, Holguín, Santiago de Cuba, Guantánamo. In addition, the Isle of Pinos was renamed Isla de la Juventud, and given the status of a special municipality.

<sup>60</sup> I read the comments at the time on the *Guerrillero* site but I did not save them on my computer. Later, they were taken out of the newspaper's website, but I found some of the most critical cited and posted on two blogs written by two Cubans in exile. One is the blog of Emilio Eichikawa (<http://eichikawa.blogspot.com/>) and the other is maintained by Ernesto Hernández Bustos (<http://www.penultimosdias.com/>).

bureaucratic positions rather than fewer. A reader who signed as '*Pinareño*' lamented 'the snatching of most productive land from the poor Cinderella (*Cenicienta*)' and the loss of tourist sites as well as of health and sports infrastructure from his province. He complained:

To what purpose? To increase the bureaucratic machine of the state in order to have more directors with possibilities of corruption and outsourcing resources? I think we should return to the old six Cuban provinces, pride of all Cubans, and devote ourselves more to work and production of food, goods, and services, which is what we need.<sup>61</sup>

Another commentator picked up the same theme and provided a quantitative evaluation of the growing number of bureaucrats:

It is unusual and completely illogical at a moment when the country is reducing the personnel of state enterprises and units to propose the creation of provincial structures in municipalities that cannot finance it. This represents an increase of the bureaucracy, with more than 7,000 persons who are not going to produce anything but will constitute the structure of PCC, Provincial Assembly and CAP, all the structures of provincial centres, delegations, provincial, budgetary and mass organizations. (Carlos A. García Pérez)

Even the most critical commentaries were framed as criticism made from a perspective supportive of the revolution, not counter-revolutionary. Accordingly, one comment starts as follows:

The Cuban Revolution has defended as a principle the history and the identity, but the proposal [for the reform] forgets this completely. On the one hand, it is meant to eliminate functionaries and bureaucrats but, on the other hand, with the new province they are duplicated ... For nothing. Listen to people, they [the people] are wise and have supported for years the Revolution, ask the true people and then decide. (Antonio)

Counter-revolutionary or anti-Castro comments were probably also sent to the website, but they were screened by the newspaper staff and not posted online. Criticism of the reform was much more violent and much contained

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<sup>61</sup> The Spanish originals can be found at <http://www.penultimosdias.com/2010/06/09/las-citas-del-dia-11/> (last accessed 25 January 2012).

insults to Fidel and Raúl Castro on various blogs or news sites critical of the revolutionary government.

*Guerrillero* hosted some other articles about the new territorial division. In an interesting piece entitled ‘*Polo Montañez ¿pinareño o de Artemisa?*’ (*Polo Montañez : a Pinareño or from Artemisa?*), the journalist Mayra García Cardentey raised the question of the identity of the late Polo Montañez, the greatest popular singer of the region, a self-taught musician, who composed his own texts and music and became famous at the end of the 1990s.<sup>62</sup> He was one of the most emblematic and popular figures of Pinar del Río, a *guajiro natural* (natural *guajiro*), as he described himself in one of his hits. The journalist raised the question of Polo Montanez and of other figures representative of the region, which ‘for national interests now go to the cultural records of the territory of Artemisa’. She defended the importance of the unity of Cuba, but she emphasized that there was a plurality of voices and personalities and ways of living, of which the regional ones were very important. She enumerated various historical personalities of the province, who were integrated into other provinces in the reforms of 1976 and of 2010, but she expressed her opinion that they belonged to Pinar del Río. In a revealing and apparently contradictory statement, she denied being regionalist herself by stressing national unity, but at the same time she put forward the significance of the local history, culture, and traditions:

I don’t want at all to appear a regionalist in my statements, we are all Cubans, but every place has its history, its traditions, its culture that identify us, for which they mock us, for which we feel proud of. I do not know about you, but I do not believe in geographical fatalism, and in spite of the fact that this decision is necessary for the country, I will continue saying that I was born in the land of Polo Montañez.

The expression of these critical opinions (even though the most virulent were available only for a short time on the internet) is a counter-argument against the totalitarian thesis applied to the case of Cuba. The official media

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<sup>62</sup> See [http://www.guerrillero.cu/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=5345:polo-montanez-ipinareno-o-de-artemisa&catid=37:opinion&Itemid=57](http://www.guerrillero.cu/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5345:polo-montanez-ipinareno-o-de-artemisa&catid=37:opinion&Itemid=57) (last accessed 25 January 2012).

are in the government's control and voicing dissenting opinions and open criticism of the government or of the Revolution is strongly discouraged and repressed. It is, nonetheless, relevant here to shed light on the moments when criticism towards official policies is allowed in the official media. In the context of this chapter, I take these reactions and opinion pieces as an index, among other things, of a regional identity that has been forged since the beginning of the 19th century at the intersection of political economic processes, state policies, and intimate local cultures of peasant communities. Moreover, based on the form of this criticism, I contend that, in spite of the official discourse of the unity of revolutionary Cuba and the importance of bureaucratic centralism, some revolutionary policies have contributed to the production and channelling of certain ways of expressing regional identities. For example, some musical genres like *décima* and *el son*, typical of the countryside, were encouraged and promoted by socialist cultural institutions, allowing the expression of forms of popular culture. Furthermore, the educational and cultural programmes in each province, at all levels of territorial organization, from the provincial capital to the most remote rural communities, have fostered the appearance of a cultural intelligentsia and most important, local artists, musicians, and writers who have created work for local and regional public (Frederik 2012). Moreover, another domain of crucial importance for the development of popular expression of regionalism is sport (especially baseball, athletics, and boxing), which is central to the mass educational policies of the revolution. The baseball team of Pinar del Río, several times champion of Cuba, is one of the best and an arch-rival of Industriales, Havana's team.<sup>63</sup>

In addition to these cultural aspects, the loss of certain municipalities with important economic potential (diversified agriculture, sugar-cane

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<sup>63</sup> In the play-offs of the western region at the end of March 2008, the Pinar del Río baseball team crushed Industriales. I witnessed the celebration in the city of Pinar del Río and with other fans waited late into the night for the arrival of the team from Havana at the entrance of the city, next to the Hotel Pinar del Río. Once they arrived, people acclaimed their heroes, took photos and autographs from their idols, and accompanied the members of the team into the lobby of the hotel, where the celebration continued. It was the only spontaneous public celebration I witnessed in Cuba, in contrast with other public and political rallies I witnessed organized by mass and state organizations.

production, industries, and tourism) also contributed to the negative reaction of the Pinareños. Among significant industrial centres were the Mariel industrial centre and the Central 30 de Noviembre (San Cristóbal) sugar-cane refinery, the only one constructed in the region after 1959. Paradoxically, if the early revolutionary development policies for the region of Pinar del Río aimed at the diversification of agriculture and fostering industry, the new territorial division reinforces the dependence of the provincial economy on tobacco and tourism. Thus, tobacco production, one of the principal drives for settling and developing the region two centuries ago, is still the centre of gravity of the regional economy. As we will see in subsequent chapters, this is an asset and a development strategy with its own risks, because of the dependence on international markets and the vulnerability of tobacco to various climatic, ecological, and pathological risks that could compromise the economic status of the region and the livelihood of tens of thousands of Pinareños.

## **8. Concluding remarks**

The purpose of this chapter has been to present an outline of the historical and economic history of both the region and San Luis. Tobacco cultivation has been central to the region's and local socio-historical development and to defining a regional specificity in terms of a culture based on peasant resilience, hard work, and the knowledge of tobacco-growing. At the same time, the region has been known as one of the least developed and its inhabitants portrayed in both romanticized representations as pure, genuine, good Cubans and in derogatory ones as lacking sophistication and being slow-minded. In the last part of the chapter I dealt with how locals represent this regional identity and can express a sense of regionalism that contradicts the centralist and official revolutionary discourse and policies for regional development.

The place of the region of Pinar del Río in the hierarchy of value in the world of Cuban tobacco seems secure: it is the source of premium tobacco leaves and the mark of tobacco's authenticity and excellence. The revolutionary agrarian reforms did not change the property regime of tobacco

farms. The land remained privately owned after the 1963 Agrarian Reform, because most tobacco farms had land areas below the limit of permitted private land (67 ha). Moreover, the voluntary collectivization through the creation of the CPAs in the 1980s did not gain enough foot in tobacco-growing before the economic crisis of the 1990s determined the government to reverse the collectivization policy altogether. At the same time, the region is almost exclusively dedicated to the production and processing of leaves, with only two cigar factories located in the province, producing only a few brands of cigars. Havana, on the other hand, is the place where famous cigar factories manufacture world-famous cigars, which also use the tobacco produced in Pinar del Río. It is the capital that benefits most from the value of tobacco and tourism. Thus, the establishment of a museum of tobacco in the old city of Havana has left very little hope of having a museum of tobacco in the city of Pinar del Río, as decisions and resource allocation are decided at the political centre and not at provincial levels.

This top-down decision model is typical of the ‘vertical encompassment’ (Ferguson & Gupta 2002) way in which states project authority over a territory by claiming superiority in the hierarchy of power, generality of interest, moral authority and, of course, larger spatial scope than regions or localities. This vertical approach was criticised in the context of the territorial reform of 2011 by inhabitants of the province. The criticisms and debates of the territorial reorganization revealed the resilience of a regional identity and a sense of belonging to Pinar del Río, in spite of a largely homogenous vision of national unity that informs the revolutionary universalist project. Tobacco-growing practices are essential to the persistence of regionalist sentiments in the Pinar del Río province.

## **Chapter 2. Growing tobacco in San Luis: labour organization, local knowledge, and conceptions about tobacco work**

I arrived in San Luis in January 2008 when the tobacco harvest had already started, with the first pair of leaves at the bottom of the plant. I joined in the harvesting alongside Eugenio and his workers during my first working day on a tobacco vega. This was one of the most intense moments of the season, when hard work, speed, and all available workers were needed to pick the leaves and transport them into the tobacco barns. I asked Eugenio to instruct me how one should harvest tobacco and asked him to let me give it a try. '*Deja chico, te va a doler la cintura*',<sup>64</sup> he tried to discourage me. I was not sure whether he was concerned about my back or about his tobacco, but he let me try. I quickly lost sight of my co-workers in the green sea of tobacco as they bent to pick up a pair of leaves from the bottom of each plant. As I stood up to alleviate the back pain, I heard the rhythmic sound of breaking petioles farther and farther away as my companions were fast advancing, picking up the leaves with sure gestures, until the end of the furrows. Then they retraced their steps to collect the leaves they had put down and piled them on a wheelbarrow. '*Ei sol de Cuba no quema*' ('The Sun of Cuba doesn't burn'), I was teased by my co-workers, as it was obvious that I could not keep up the rhythm and I was sweating from the combined effect of effort and heat. Labourers employed this phrase now and then, which was attributed to José Martí, the national hero, intellectual, martyr for the independence, in a (self)-mocking way. Once a wheelbarrow was full, a worker took the leaves into the tobacco barn where women were sewing the leaves on cotton threads suspended on wooden poles. The tobacco leaves dried and changed their colour from lively green to the golden brown of cigars on these thousands of poles suspended in barns.

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<sup>64</sup> 'Leave it, mate, your back will hurt.'

In this chapter, I present tobacco's productive cycle and the various tasks peasants undertake, from the preparation of the land up to selling tobacco to the state company. This is the agricultural part of the productive chain of tobacco cigars, before processing and cigar-manufacturing take place in state grading centres and cigar factories. The agricultural phase is labour-intensive and highly specialized due to the specificity of tobacco-growing and the requirements for achieving premium tobacco. After presenting the social organization in a cooperative of individual producers, I give a technical presentation of different tasks in tobacco-growing and I provide an illustration of their succession and overlapping on a tobacco farm. I look also at the sort of knowledge involved in tobacco-growing and the cultural metaphors behind it. Tobacco-growing is conceived in terms of caring, signifying the intense attention and labour each tobacco plant requires for producing premium quality cigars. In the last part of the chapter, I present the gendered division of tobacco work and I analyse various conceptions about work and labour relations shared by tobacco-growers.

## **1. The social organization of tobacco production in cooperatives**

Eugenio, my main informant and my honorary father, was a member of the Almendares CCS.<sup>65</sup> This CCS had 58 members and had an area of 6 caballerías (80.4 ha) of land cultivated with tobacco in 2008. Besides tobacco, the cooperative's members produced beans, maize, tomatoes, and rice for self-consumption and selling to the state and at markets. In 2008–09, there were 37 CCSs and 9 CPAs on the territory of San Luis, the difference being explained by the predominance of private ownership and autonomy of farms in the tobacco agrarian sector. The members of these CCSs are individual producers, who keep property rights over their land and means of production and the autonomy over the running of the farms. Through the cooperatives they can access credit, inputs, and services and also acquire tractors and other technology which is collectively shared. The members of the cooperative elect

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<sup>65</sup> A pseudonym.

a president, vice-president, and administrator every four years. The cooperative is the entity mediating between the producers and the state banks, the state tobacco enterprise and the state procurement agency (*Acopio*).<sup>66</sup> The paperwork and mediation of the cooperative's management organizes each producer's credits to cover the costs of running the farm and the payment for his harvest. The cooperative also has a tractor and other implements for members to use. The cooperative management is also the link between its members and ANAP (the Political organization grouping independent farmers in Cuba). The cooperative leadership is in charge of informing the members about various political decisions taken at the national level and mobilizing members for meetings with ANAP officials.

One essential operation coordinated by the cooperative leadership is the production of tobacco seedlings at the beginning of the tobacco season. After receiving the tobacco seeds from the state tobacco company (Cubatabaco), the cooperative management is in charge of the production of seedlings for the members. Each cooperative has its own *semilleros* or seedbeds, ideally on virgin land, in order to avoid new tobacco plants being contaminated by the various fungi and viruses of tobacco or other plants. After 45–50 days, the seedlings are normally 15–20 cm high and are ready to be transplanted. Each cooperative has a production plan based on a certain number of plants calculated in relation to the area of tobacco land, so the production of seedlings has to be carefully planned in order to provide members with the necessary seedlings according to the readiness of their land for planting. The quality and health of the seedlings largely determines the development of the plants. Producers often complain about the quality of seedlings, even more so since they have to pay for them. Moreover, since seedlings are not always available for transplanting when producers need them in order to start a new production cycle or plant a new parcel of land,

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<sup>66</sup> For a comparison with other forms of cooperatives that departed from the collectivization model of the Soviet *kolkhoz*, see Hann (1980, 2006) for Hungarian specialist cooperatives operating in wine-growing. I thank Michael Stewart for reminding me of the distinction between right-wing and left-wing crops in the political economy of socialism, i.e. specialized, small plot crops (vine and onion) versus mechanized agriculture (wheat) in the Soviet Union. This distinction was made by the economist Peter Wiles cited in Nove (1983: 143).

people have to rely on their informal connections so as to obtain seedlings from other cooperatives. The choice of the tobacco variety is made by cooperative managers based on the recommendations of the state company. During my fieldwork, Habana 92 and Corojo 99 were the only two varieties available for the sun-grown tobacco cooperatives. In practice, nevertheless, I discovered that producers preferred the first variety since it had a stronger resistance to diseases and pests and because it weighed more than the Corojo variety (*'rinde más'*, 'it produces more', people would say), making for a more profitable sale.



Fig. 10. Shade-grown tobacco in San Luis

### 1.1. CPAs as contrasting organizational forms for the CCSs

The CCSs, however, were not the only type of cooperatives producing tobacco. After the ANAP Congress of 1977, the government initiated the formation of CPAs. Each member of a CPA received a salary and those who had contributed land and the means of production received monetary compensation. The profits were used to pay back state credits and services,

reinvested into production, and divided among members according to their labour contributions.

In the 1980s Jean Stubbs (1987) researched the differences in output and organization of tobacco-growing CCSs and the CPAs in San Luis. In the first years of their existence, there was a significant growth in membership and in land pooled into the CPAs, but by 1985 this new type of cooperative started to run into deficit. She noticed that 'more tobacco-intensive the farm, the greater the financial loss' (1987: 52). According to her, both CPAs and state farms specializing in tobacco farming suffered from the shortage of and high cost of labour.

Twenty years later, the CPAs were in a more difficult situation. In 2008, out of 46 cooperatives in the municipality, there were only nine CPAs. The state farms had disappeared and tobacco-growing was strongest in the CCSs. The Special Period economic crisis had reversed the state policy of eliminating the private sector. In 1993–5 more state land was leased to individual producers for tobacco-growing and by 2008 this was made a comprehensive state policy: idle state land was to be distributed to those willing to make it productive.

Producers expressed their scepticism to me about the experiment with the CPAs. Some, such as Eugenio, felt vindicated by the turn in the situation, recounting how he was repeatedly invited to join a CPA, refusing each time because of his sense of independence and attachment to his farm. He was not exceptional in that, as many individual producers were unconvinced by the arguments for the higher economic benefits of joining a CPA. During these meetings some even talked back to the ANAP leaders, like Diego, another member of the Almendares cooperative, who stood up and asked the ANAP officials about how long the producers' holidays would be, so as to allow them to spend as much money as they were promised to gain by joining the CPA, a question which provoked a hilarious reactions among the participants. However, others did not have a choice, since in virtue of their political function and their revolutionary activism they had to set up an example for other

growers about the advantages of the cooperative movement. Such was the case for Fernando Molina, the son of a well-respected tobacco-grower from San Luis, who, following his participation in Fidel Castro's 26 July Movement, took up various political positions in the local ANAP organization. With the push for CPAs, he had to give in and give up his land to set up a CPA with other growers, which he administered for some years before quitting to work for the state tobacco company. When I met him he had retired to Pinar del Río and was a defender of the achievements of the revolution in terms of education and health. However, he considered that the policy of setting up the CPAs proved to be failure in tobacco, as the logic of collective management and weak incentives for quality work led to mediocre or bad tobacco harvests and economic losses.

Although legally the land of the CPAs was defined as non-state/private property, since it belonged to a collective entity, it was telling that individual producers considered them as belonging to the state (*del estado*). Members of the Almendares CCS had their land near a CPA. Once walking with Eugenio back home from his farm, we passed by an uncultivated parcel of land. I asked him whose land it was and he said '*esto es del estado*' ('this belongs to the state'). Later on, I found out that the parcel belonged to the CPA. Often on the way back home he would point to the tobacco of the CPA, telling me that it was not well cared for. For established growers like Eugenio, the CPA represented the failed socialist version of the cooperative movement, not dissimilar to what Nikolai Ssorin-Chaikov describes in the case of socialism development in Siberia as the 'poetics of the unfinished construction' (Ssorin-Chaikov 2003: 134–9). Soviet development in Siberia produced many things half-built or half-ruined, a permanent transitional state, whereby progress became 'an already stagnant yet "new" condition' (Ssorin-Chaikov 2003: 136). Likewise in Cuba, the failure of socialist development, such as the unsuccessful cooperative movement of the 1970s and 1980s, meant that there were visible and inscribed traces of the socialist order in the social and cultural landscapes of San Luis. In a longer term and without the Special Period crisis, most probably Eugenio would have ended up joining a CPA, possibly the one which in 2008 looked like a failed project.

However, in 2008 the CPAs were not (yet) dead institutions; even if most had economic difficulties and had to scale down their activities, they had their role in the institutional ecology of tobacco production. Private farmers like Eugenio benefited from connections with CPA presidents and administrators. If one needed tobacco seedlings but one's own cooperative did not have any at a given moment, then one could try buying seedlings from a CPA. This happened with Eugenio himself, who bought 10,000 seedlings from the neighbouring CPA in December 2008. I asked Lázaro, the president of this CPA, a 65-year-old man, about the way the cooperative was run. It consisted of 21 men and 10 women as active members, and 8 pensioners. The land assets of the CPA represented 1 *caballeria* of tobacco land, 1 for other crops, and 1 *caballeria* of forest. In the past, the CPA had had more tobacco land, but unable to cultivate it all during the most critical years of the Special Period, it asked the state tobacco company to take charge of it. The latter leased the land of the CPA to individual producers who were members of a neighbouring CCS. Even in 2008–09, when economic difficulties were not as acute as in the early 1990s, the CPA could only cultivate 300,000 tobacco plants out of the planned 500,000. They used the wood of the eucalyptus trees growing on their land to make *cujes* (hoop-poles) which they sold to other cooperatives. They divided the land into working parcels, and appointed one person to be responsible for each area, who organized the productive tasks. The daily wage was 6–10 pesos, depending on efficiency. There was no working schedule; each team organized itself in the best way it could. The workers received food and they had also plots of lands which they could use for producing food for themselves. After paying the production costs, they made a profit of 27,000 pesos and 600 CUC from the 2007–08 tobacco harvest. This result was still judged unsatisfactory by private producers (who made more profit for the same number of tobacco plants).

## **2. Growing tobacco in a vega: tasks, workers, and rhythms of work**

I take as an example the vega of Eugenio, one of the most important producers in the cooperative I was working with. His tobacco production was considered one of the best by the cooperative members. Peasants speak about their harvest using the number of plants of tobacco rather than in terms of cultivated areas. Nevertheless, there is an optimum number of tobacco plants per ha, so people can translate the number of tobacco plants into the quantity of cultivated land.<sup>67</sup> Eugenio had a production plan of 100,000 tobacco plants for an area of 3.86 ha.<sup>68</sup> His farm was made up of land he inherited from his parents (2.07 ha) and land he received with usufruct rights from the state (1.79 ha). In fact, the land he received in usufruct was previously owned by one of his uncles, but when he retired he had to give the land to the state in order to receive the pension benefits.<sup>69</sup> Eugenio applied for and was granted the right to use his uncle's former land so that he could cultivate it together with his land.

The daily wage was on average three times higher for workers employed by private producers. There were no legal stipulations over how much workers should be paid. This was left to an agreement between the growers and their employees. In 2008–09, the daily wage in tobacco-growing was 30 pesos, which was paid weekly, usually on Saturdays. On top of that, there was an additional payment in convertible pesos (CUCs), if the producers managed to qualify for the stimulus package.

The working daily schedule was from 7 a.m. to 11 a.m. and from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. in winter time, while in summer time the work schedule was from 8 a.m. to 12 p.m. and from 2 p.m. to 6 p.m. On Saturdays, the workday lasted

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<sup>67</sup> One ha of land corresponded to 37,000 tobacco plants or one *caballería* (13.4 ha) to 500,000 plants. Quantification plays an important role in the world of tobacco, contrary to Fernando Ortiz's point about the lack of quantification in tobacco in contrast with sugar-cane production, dominated by quantification. One could ask if this change has taken place since the publication of Ortiz's work (1940) or it is an aspect he overlooked when he wrote his book in order to make the contrast between the two commodities stronger.

<sup>68</sup> Not all land was cultivated, since on his farm land there were also houses, his tobacco barn, and uncultivated parcels of land.

<sup>69</sup> If an independent producer wants to retire with pension benefits, he has to give the land, tools, and animals to the state in exchange for a monthly pension.

only till lunchtime, exceptionally till the afternoon. This schedule was generally respected and no supplementary hours were applied. There were, however, workers specializing in certain tasks (like toppling, i.e. spreading fungicides) who were not bound to a specific work schedule. They could come and go whenever they wanted as long as their job was done and they received the corresponding full daily wage. It is hard to characterize these workers simply as rural proletariat since their group is quite heterogeneous and wage labour would be an additional (temporary) economic strategy in addition to agricultural production for self-consumption or selling and other informal economic practices.<sup>70</sup>

The profiles of Eugenio's workers were quite diverse. Luis, Eugenio's younger brother, was his associate and worker. He received a salary equal to the other workers', but additionally got part of the beans and rice Eugenio cultivated on another parcel (see Chapter 4). José, a 42-year-old black, was the closest to what would be a rural proletarian. He was originally from the western part of the province but he had married into San Luis. He worked for a few years as a worker in the city of Pinar del Río, but with the economic difficulties of the 1990s decided to work in agriculture, since when he had been working with Eugenio. His wife worked as an *escogedora* in the *barrio*'s sorting centre. They had a parcel of land where they grew rice and beans. Paul was the 36-year-old son of one of Eugenio's neighbours, a farmer too. He worked for Eugenio for the season 2007–08 only. In the following season, he worked as a threshing machine operator for another farmer, a better-paid job. Enrique, a 61-year-old worker was married to a teacher from San Luis. He had also a parcel of land where he grew *viandas* (tubers/root vegetables), but only for his own consumption. Valentino, a 72-year-old, came from a tobacco-growing family, but it was one of his brothers who remained with the tobacco farm. He was a specialized worker, doing toppling. He also had a horse and a cart, with

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<sup>70</sup> The agricultural proletariat in Cuba, before and after 1959, has been the object of various debates in the first decades of the revolution (Martinez Alier & Martinez Alier 1972; Mintz 1974). Empirically-based studies by Pollitt (1979, 1980) and Deere et al. (1995) are rather an exception and present a much-nuanced view of the social composition of rural Cuba, beyond the dichotomy of state employees and private producers.

which he provided occasional transport services when time allowed. He had been working with Eugenio for a couple of years after the death of another grower, with whom he had been working since he was a teenager. Eugenio had developed complex ties with his workers based on kinship, friendship, or exchange and debt relationships. He tried to avoid antagonizing them and offered help and money on loan when asked, wishing to remain on good terms with them and keep them happy. In Eugenio's farm history, there was also the special case of a worker who had stayed on the farm in a small wooden house next to the tobacco barn. Originally from Mantua, he had lost both parents by the age of seven and ended up working in San Luis with various tobacco-growers before he came to work with Eugenio for more than 20 years. He was single and ate in Eugenio's parents' house until they died, and afterwards, Eugenio brought him food every day for 13 years until he died. *El viejito* (the old man), as Eugenio affectionately called him, was a reliable, motivated, and intelligent worker, skilfully and patiently executing some of the most specialized tasks in growing and curing tobacco.

When tobacco harvesting was completed, it was customary for each producer to give a fiesta to his workers (men and women). This usually consisted in preparing a lavish lunch, usually the typical *caldosa*, a Cuban *ajaco*, a dense stew of different vegetables and meat, much appreciated in Cuba, and the indispensable bottles of rum and *refresco* (soda) for women. These fiestas took place at the *vega*, inside tobacco barns, and friends and neighbours dropped by in addition to workers and members of their families. Producers were expected to be generous with food and drink, so much so that at the end of these fiestas men were drunk and participants took unconsumed food home.

These informal fiestas contrasted with the official and bigger celebrations such as the Day of the Peasant (*El dia del campesino*), 1 May, or other official celebrations. The latter involved a high degree of political symbolism and staged celebrations in the *pueblo* in the presence of party officials. In Cuba, every 17 May is celebrated as the Day of the Peasant in remembrance of the passing of the first Revolutionary Agrarian Reform Law in

1959. In 2008, I participated in this celebration, which was at the office of the Almendares CCS. It was a Saturday, usually a working day till lunch. There was no official event organized in the *pueblo*; instead, every cooperative was expected to organize the celebration among its members. The management of the cooperative paid for and organized a lunch, and distributed a box of food (*caja de comida*) and a bottle of rum to each member of the cooperative. The celebration started after lunch in the presence of about 30 members of the cooperative. Before food and drinks were distributed, the president of the cooperative and an official from the ANAP made introductory speeches. First, the president congratulated all members of the cooperative for their work and their contribution to the production of food, taking into account the international rising prices of food. Then, the ANAP official developed the theme of food production, an issue of national interest in Cuba. He said that he was aware that the cooperative was for tobacco production, but he stressed the contributions members could make from their plots to cultivate rice, beans, tomatoes, and maize for their own consumption. In relation to tobacco production, he mentioned the importance of using any favourable moment for the *zafadura*,<sup>71</sup> since the prolonged stay of tobacco in the barns could affect the quality. He also mentioned the fact that producers should take care of tobacco in the barns, alluding to the thefts of dried tobacco in previous years. His remarks on speeding up the *zafadura* were challenged by two producers, who said that there was no point in trying to carry out the process as long as there was not enough humidity. After the bureaucrat left, the atmosphere became more relaxed and increasingly festive as food and rum were distributed to the cooperative's members. This atmosphere contrasted with other cooperative meetings, which were more formal, with a clear distance between officials and cooperative members, and with unidirectional

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<sup>71</sup> From the verb *zafar*, meaning 'to come undone or unstitched' (of a thread or a seam), according to the Oxford Spanish English Dictionary. This operation consists of taking the dried leaves from the poles on which they have dried and joining them into sheaves (*gavillas*). These sheaves are carefully piled into stacks inside tobacco barns for curing and their first fermentation before being sold.

communication of decisions and recommendations from the bureaucrats to the producers.

### **3. Tasks in growing tobacco**

At the beginning of September the land is prepared for ploughing. Usually, farmers employ a tractor pulling a vertical disk harrow to mix various herbs with the soil (a natural way of fertilization). Afterwards, a week before transplanting, the land is ploughed in order to make furrows (*surcos*). This is done using oxen (*bueyes*) pulling a plough called a *criollo*, a wooden plough reinforced with a steel tooth. The depth of the furrows is around 15 cm, considered ideal for tobacco seedlings, which measure on average 20 cm long with roots of 3–5 cm. This task, called *surcar* (from *surco*, furrow), is fundamental since it defines the pattern of spatial arrangement of the tobacco plants in the field and their exposure to sun and watering. Usually a skilled person carries out this task in order to find the best design for smooth irrigation. On the day of transplanting, the furrows are watered so that the soaked, mud-like soil would help sowing the seedlings. These are planted at a distance of 30 cm apart, by simply pushing the root into the wet soil with the index finger. After a week, growers check the transplanted field in order to replace those seedlings that have failed to take root.

Between planting and harvest, the tobacco needs a series of operations for obtaining the optimum quality. A week after transplanting, producers again harrow (*pasar grilla*), to loosen the land before spreading the fertilizer. This work is done using a harrow implement with spikes pulled by an ox trained to follow the space between the lines of tobacco.



Fig. 11. Sun-grown tobacco in San Luis



Fig. 12. Earthing up tobacco

Three weeks after the transplanting of tobacco comes the moment of earthing up (*aporcar*), one of the most important and physically demanding activities in tobacco-growing. This is carried out manually, using a *guataca* (metal hoe) to

move land at the base of the plant in order to provide stability and nutrition for the plant's development. This task tests the endurance of workers since it presupposes hours of bending while working.

### **Topping (*desbotonar*)**

This is one of the most delicate operations, which consists in getting rid of the flower buds. By preventing the plant from flowering, the leaves grow bigger and mature faster. This operation is performed by experienced workers who pinched off the buds with delicate movements of the thumb and index finger. After this operation seven or eight pairs of leaves (*mancuernas*) are developed. The right moment for topping tobacco is considered to be around 42 days after transplanting day. Sometimes it has to be done twice in order to guarantee that all the plants have lost their buds. Even people who have the skill do not have always the patience to top thousands of tobacco plants a day. It is considered that only one out of every 15 workers can carry out the task well.



Fig. 13. Topping tobacco

## **Suckering**

Another operation connected to the previous one is suckering (*deshijar* or *quitar hijos*) which consists of removing all offshoots or suckers that appear at junctions of the leaves and the stalks of the plant as a consequence of the growth that follows the topping. This has to be carried out consistently so as not to allow these shoots to develop too much, since that could translate into a loss of nutritive substances for the leaves. This is carried out twice or three times on the same plant.

## **Harvesting (zafra)**

This is the busiest moment of the season, involving men for harvesting tobacco and women for stringing the leaves. The right moment for the harvest is judged by each producer after examining the texture of the leaves and their colours. According to agronomists, the harvest should start at least 45 days after the tobacco seedlings have been planted.



Fig. 14. Harvesting tobacco

Harvesting needs to be carried out when the leaves are dry, so rain, moisture, and dew are major impediments. Usually harvesting is carried out during the first half of the day, or as long as the leaves do not wither from high temperature and humidity. A tobacco plant is harvested between five and seven different times, starting from the bottom up, in pairs of two leaves. The names of each pair starting from the bottom of the plant are: *libre de pie*, then *uno y medio*; *centro ligero*, *centro fino*, *centro gordo*, and the two at the top of the plant, *coronas*.

Table 4. Type of tobacco leaves in sun-grown tobacco and the recommended time to harvest after planting. Source: *Guía para el cultivo del Tabaco, 2007-2008*: 21

Type of tobacco leaf	Harvest timing after planting (Habana 92 variety)
Libre de pie	43-45 days
Uno y medio	48-50 days
Centro fino	55-58 days
Centro gordo	62-65 days
Corona	70-75 days

This is the conventional timetable for harvesting the leaves, but producers adjust it to their labour force and calendar of tasks. I noticed that for sun-grown tobacco many producers picked *uno y medio* and *centro fino* leaves together or *centro gordo* and *corona* together in order to save labour and time. Others maximized their tobacco harvest by even collecting the first leaves which grew closest to the soil called *mañanitas*, instead of discarding them as was recommended by agronomists. To a certain extent growers could mix different types of leaves in order to increase the quantity of some leaf categories which were worth more. For example some people mixed quantities of *corona* with *centro gordo* leaves, since the latter were better paid.

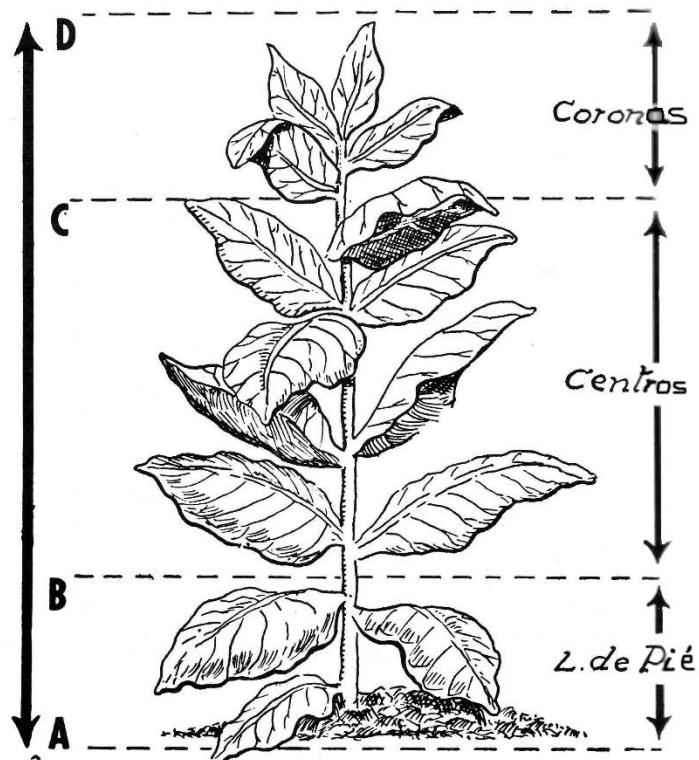


Fig. 15. The foliage architecture of the tobacco plant

### Curing tobacco

In Cuba there are two ways of curing tobacco: natural air curing and artificial curing. The latter is carried out in specially built installations called *cafrizas*,<sup>72</sup> where the temperature and relative humidity are artificially controlled through a system of air ventilation. The natural method is employed for sun-grown tobacco, while the artificial one is used for curing the shade-grown tobacco. In the latter, producers bring their tobacco to the state centres for artificial curing, a service they have to pay for. It is generally held that artificial curing is a much better and faster way to obtain uniformly cured tobacco. Any error during the curing process, however, can have damaging effects on the quality of the harvest and consequently on its price.

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<sup>72</sup> This is the corrupted form of Kalfenza, the name of a Spanish company specializing in producing these installations, including in Cuba.



Fig. 16. Curing tobacco

The natural curing has its challenges, too. It depends largely on the weather; nonetheless, experienced producers know how to improve these natural conditions to a tiny degree. Optimum conditions for curing are a high temperature (above 28°C) and high humidity. Generally, the winds from the south, coming from the Caribbean Sea, bring humidity and higher temperature, while those from the north, dry air and cold temperatures. The expressions '*El viento está al norte*' or '*El viento está al sur*' ('the wind is from the north' or 'the wind is from the south') signals the weather conditions according to which the peasant organizes the curing of tobacco. Colder temperatures make tobacco leaves contract in the barns and, in association with less air humidity, cause the leaves to dry not in a uniform way. Too much humidity can be damaging, especially in the early stage of drying, since leaves would stick to one another and dry with stains.

Every day producers have to go and control the process of drying by checking and moving the poles inside the tobacco barn. After the leaves are dried, they occupy much less space, so producers take the leaves from five poles and add them to a sixth one, hence emptying five wooden poles for receiving more freshly harvested tobacco (this is called *rellenando tabaco* in

colloquial Cuban Spanish). Dried tobacco should also be preserved from too much humidity, by moving it to a higher place in the barn in order not to develop mould.

After a minimum of 40 days of the tobacco being in barns, the *zafadura*, the last activity of the curing process, can start. Tobacco is taken from poles and put together in sheaves (*gavillas*), and then into stacks (*pilones*) which are constructed on the floor of the barn. These stacks, 0.5 m high, consist of well-packed sheaves, piled up on wooden poles and protected on the sides with *yaguas*.<sup>73</sup> Even though the tobacco may be dry and ready to be piled, it should have enough flexibility due to the humidity in the air so that it can be manipulated without destroying the leaves. I came to realize the importance of these conditions in 2008, when the air humidity was not sufficient to start the process of *zafar* for the two months of May and June. Many producers had to delay the process up to six weeks, since the tobacco lacked the necessary softness (*blandura*). ‘*No hay blandura*’ (‘there is no softness’) was the complaint I often heard from people worried about the delay in the preparation of tobacco for selling. Normally the tobacco should stay in these piles for another 40 days, a period during which it would go through its first fermentation. The state tobacco company discouraged producers from selling their tobacco earlier, but for growers, the more tobacco fermented, the less it weighed at the moment of the selling.

After this period of lying in piles inside the barn, tobacco can be packed in order to be transported and sold to the state tobacco company. The packs of tobacco (*pacas* in Cuban Spanish) contain on average 128–30 sheaves (*gavillas*) each, wrapped up in *yaguas*. This task is carried out by men since it demanded a lot of physical strength making compact packs and solidly binding them. In 2008, since the selling of tobacco was done according to samples from different packs, producers tried to conceal the worst tobacco in the middle

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<sup>73</sup> These are the dry tissues wrapping the upper parts of the trunks of royal palms, which fall naturally every lunar month. This material is largely employed in the tobacco industry as a protective and wrapping material for the *tercios*, the piles of tobacco, manufactured for transporting the sorted leaves to cigar factories.

of the packs in order to avoid having their worse tobacco being chosen to establishing the price for the entire crop.

#### **4. Rhythms of work and tasks on a tobacco farm**

On the Google Earth snapshot of Eugenio's farm, I delineated the parcels of land according to the order of tobacco transplanting, from 1 to 5. The areas delineated with red colour belonged to his farm, and the area delineated in blue was a piece of land owned by his neighbour, Rosalda, but given to him to be cultivated. In revolutionary Cuba individual owners of the land cannot lend land, since the revolutionary agrarian reforms stipulated that land belonged to those who labour it. In practice, however, there are several ways by which a person could work land he did not own, mostly by sharecropping, or simply using the land of a relative or close friend with or without compensation.<sup>74</sup> Tobacco was transplanted in parcel 1 (45,580 tobacco plants) in the third week of November 2008, followed by the tobacco in parcel 2 in the following week (16,734 plants). Parcel 3 was planted on 18 and 19 December (25,877 plants), and parcels 4 (12,453 plants) and 5 (14,680 plants) in the first week of February 2009.

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<sup>74</sup> I know only of one case when a man leased a part of his mother's land for money, and he was fined by state inspectors. Leased land could be confiscated.



Fig. 17. Google Earth view of Eugenio's farm and different parcels cultivated with tobacco

Table 5. Calendar of the detailed tobacco work undertaken in the fields of Eugenio's farm

Parcel	November	December	January	February	March	April
1	Plantation	Earthing up	Harvest	Harvest		
	Harrowing	Topping				
2	Plantation	Harrowing	Topping	Harvest		
		Earthing up	Harvest			
3		Plantation	Earthing up	Harvest	Harvest	
		Harrowing	Topping			
4				Plantation	Topping	Harvest
				Harrowing	Harvest	
				Earthing up		
5				Plantation	Topping	Harvest
				Harrowing	Harvest	
				Earthing up		

This table summarizes the principal tasks and their calendar. What can be easily perceived is the identical chain of operations carried out with each lot of tobacco, and the juxtaposition of different works during the same period of time. The secret of a good harvest was to be able to maintain the flow of these operations by doing the required tasks at their appropriate time. As Eugenio put it to me, ‘Tobacco tells you what it needs and when it needs it.’ He explained to me how one could decide that it is harvest time by observing the colour and the texture of the leaves. Similarly, it is obvious that the moment to execute a certain task was also dependent on weather conditions and various contingencies, such as shortage of labour force, fuel, fungicides, or fertilizer.

Table 6. Agricultural calendar for Eugenio’s farm

Jan.	Feb.	March	April	May	June	July	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
Tobacco	Tobacco	Tobacco	Zafadura	Zafadura	Zafadura				Tobacco	Tobacco	Tobacco
			Maize	Maize	Maize						
						Rice	Rice	Rice			
									Beans	Beans	Beans

Table 6 gives a larger picture of the work calendar of Eugenio’s farm throughout the year, including other crops he produced on his own land and on land owned by others but cultivated by way of sharecropping (a topic I discuss in Chapter 4). The most intense and labour-demanding period was January–March, corresponding to the harvesting of tobacco. It is then when women get involved in tobacco work, as I will discuss in the following section.

## 5. The gendered division of labour: men and women in tobacco-growing

According to official statistics, women were barely involved in agriculture in pre-revolutionary Cuba. For example, the 1953 Population Census counted less than 2 percent of those working in agriculture as being women. Stubbs (1987: 54–5) argues that the official statistics, pre- and post-1959, did not take into account the real contribution of women in subsistence and unpaid agricultural work. While doing research on tobacco cooperatives in San Luis

and Cabaiguán in the late 1980s, she documented women's work in private-sector tobacco agriculture before and after the revolution. The domestic division of labour was clear-cut, with women involved in household chores such as cooking, cleaning, taking care of children, and feeding pigs and poultry, while men were involved in agricultural production. However, during the tobacco harvest, women were involved in threading tobacco leaves for drying and in the sorting centres. At the time of my fieldwork, this gendered division of labour still existed, with men fulfilling the tasks in the fields, while women worked sewing tobacco leaves during the harvest, a process called *ensarte*. Using needles 20 cm long with cotton threads, the women sewed tobacco leaves on to wooden poles (called *cujes* in Cuban Spanish). The number of leaves was standard: 60 pairs of leaves per each pole for the tobacco grown under cheesecloth, and 80 or 90 pairs for sun-grown tobacco. This task was exclusively carried out by women. I once asked my co-workers if there were men doing the *ensarte* and they mentioned mockingly the case of a man who was regarded as a half-fool, an oddball who worked his small *vega* by himself without employing anyone else. I wanted to try to sew tobacco, and one woman working for Eugenio was willing to teach me. I tried to finish a *cuje*, to the embarrassment of my male co-workers, when some kids who happened to be in the tobacco barn at that moment started to giggle and asked one of the women if I were gay (*Este es maricon?*). The next day one of my male co-labourers warned me that to do it once was fine, but I should not repeat it since this was a task for the women, like cleaning and cooking. My understanding of having transgressed commonly shared expectations of the gender division of tobacco work was reinforced in the following days when some acquaintances in the *barrio* asked me teasingly if I had learnt how to sew tobacco.



Fig. 18. Sewing tobacco leaves

During tobacco harvest there is a high demand for able and fast *ensartadoras*, since without them tobacco cannot not be harvested and put to dry. The number of women able and willing to sew tobacco had diminished steadily over the years because younger women chose to study and look for jobs outside agriculture. I witnessed two consecutive *zafras* (2007–08 and 2008–09) and I was amazed to see that the payment of *ensarte* almost doubled from one year to another (from 60 centavos to 1 peso for one *cuje*). Producers lamented the rise in labour costs, but they were happy to have found workers in time for the harvest. A very able *ensartadora* could sew up to 100 *cujes* a day, but the average is usually around 50 *cujes* a day. Peasants relied on their kin for help in sewing tobacco, but in many cases their wives and daughters worked full-time, or took care of children, or they were physically unable to work. It was understandable that producers tried to hold on to their most reliable *ensartadoras* from one *zafra* to another, by giving them some extra payment

or small gifts and, sometimes, bringing them lunch<sup>75</sup> in order to maintain good relationships and keep them happy. Women came to work only when there was tobacco to be sewn, and after enough tobacco had been harvested in order to have enough for them to work continuously for several hours. Women did not work on Saturdays for they were expected to devote the day to domestic work. They had to cope with other obligations like household chores, queueing and shopping for the house, child caring, visits to the doctor, or preparation for evening classes in the *pueblo*. Older women with less domestic work might sew tobacco for two different producers on the same day.

While women worked inside the tobacco barns, men carried out work in the field. I never saw a woman working in the fields (with the only exception of a day or two of preparing the seedbeds for tobacco seedlings), and I interrogated my co-workers whether there were cases of women growing tobacco. They could come up with only one case of a woman who had worked for a while in the fields because her husband was an unreliable and lazy man.<sup>76</sup> Considerable progress had been achieved under the revolution in instituting a more equal gender balance in other domains of activity like education, public health or services (Pérez 2006: 281–5), the gender imbalance in the countryside remained stronger in spite of the socialist ideology of equality between men and women. The various mobilizing campaigns of the Cuban Women's Federation in partnership with ANAP increased the participation of women in agricultural work in the 1970s, and the campaign for setting up the CPAs resulted in a third of all CPA members being women in 1979. However, in 1984, in San Luis, women made up 24 percent of the membership of the CPAs, but only 1.6 percent of the CCSs' members (Stubbs 1987: 56).

When I conversed with and interviewed women about their tobacco work, they often complained about younger ones not being willing to sew

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<sup>75</sup> On work days people generally ate their lunch at home, but I noticed a few cases when growers brought lunch to some of their workers.

<sup>76</sup> I interviewed a retired tobacco producer who had worked for a couple of years as a technical adviser for tobacco-growing companies outside Cuba. Among other things, he told me that in Santo Domingo women made up 60-70 percent of the agricultural labour force because of the lack of sufficient male workers, due to international migration or to more lucrative jobs.

tobacco. They acknowledged also that the young had better chances with education and easier jobs provided by the state and that they were entitled to take advantage of that, since most of the older generation (over 60 years old) had not benefited from such opportunities before the revolution. At the same time, some nostalgically remembered many moments in the years after the revolution when they participated in working brigades, sometimes making night shifts in order to keep up with the quantities during the height of the harvest. In 2008, this could not be imagined, they said, since hardly anyone would agree to work at night.<sup>77</sup> Most *ensartadoras* worked during the year in tobacco-sorting centres (*escogidas*) carrying out various tasks, mainly opening the sheaves of tobacco and sorting them into different categories.<sup>78</sup> For instance, Zenovia, one of Eugenio's five *ensartadoras*, a 63-year-old woman, had been working sewing and classifying tobacco since she was a teenager. Her father had a small land parcel on which he grew tobacco, but not sufficient to maintain his eight children. They had experienced poverty before the revolution, but things got better after 1959. In the early 1960s, Zenovia, the oldest of her siblings, started to work in the classifying centre of the *barrio*, soon becoming one of the fastest and most skilled *abridoras* and *ensartadoras*. Her professional merits were recognized with the title of Hero of Work, one of the highest distinctions in socialist Cuba, personally delivered by Fidel Castro in Havana, a ceremony she recollects with pride and effusion. She became a member of the Communist Party and was rewarded with a memorable trip to the Soviet Union. Her only child was Juanita, a 23-year-old mother of two children who also worked as an *ensartadora*. Juanita was attending evening

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<sup>77</sup> Several times I was told that before the revolution there was also a night shift in the tobacco field. Producers ploughed and irrigated during the night and even removed the tobacco's flower (topping) on nights with a full moon. Nevertheless, those were the times of capitalism and nowadays in Cuba the right to rest or dispose freely of the night is seen as inalienable. The nocturnal regime of work exists in contemporary Cuba, mostly for workers in tourism and for watchmen and protection agents (*guardias*) and, on the illegal side, for those involved in stealing, trafficking, or prostitution.

<sup>78</sup> I did not work in these centres, which I only visited twice to witness the selling of tobacco by producers I worked with. The work there is a crucial one in the chain of cigar-manufacturing, but it is different from the agricultural phase, which was my research focus. Even though I was tempted to do some weeks of observation, these would have taken weeks of embarking on a complicated bureaucratic procedure for approval from the Ministry of Agriculture, which I was not emotionally prepared to do.

classes in order to finish her 12 grades of education, hoping to get a better job (*coger una carrera*). Zenovia hoped the best for her daughter, since she herself could only finish six school grades before having to start work. In 2008 she was officially retired, but still worked as an *ensartadora* for Eugenio and other producers. They had known each other since their childhood, they had grown up together in the same *barrio*, and Eugenio's parents, even though poor themselves before 1959, were helping Zenovia's family whenever possible. The other women employed by Eugenio were kin (two sisters-in-law) and two neighbours. The youngest of all was one of his sisters-in-law, Patricia, aged 49.

In contrast to men, who were paid a flat daily wage, women were remunerated according to the number of *cujes* they sewed. This could be explained by the difference between task-oriented, short-term jobs (sewing tobacco) and the more permanent character of some of tobacco work, where workers had to carry out different tasks on the same day and in a longer time span. It is worth underlining another aspect of payment in tobacco work. Employees in state sorting centres (mostly women) got an incentive payment in *divisa* (convertible pesos, CUC) when they carried out the allotted amount of work plus additional payment if they did more. Agricultural workers in tobacco got a fixed amount of *divisa* besides their payment in national currency. This *divisa* was paid by the producer to his workers if he received the convertible pesos bonus on the top of the national currency price of the harvest at the end of the season. So, men (wage labourers) were paid a flat rate per day, while women received their extra payment according to their individual performance. This created frustration among some agricultural workers, since they had a flat share of the *divisa*, irrespective of how much the producers received as a bonus for their crops. On their side, producers argued that workers should not complain because they received their wages irrespective of the harvest's outcome. I knew of a couple of cases when the producer (after a good harvest) gave extra payments to his workers in order to maintain good relations and to persuade them to work with him the following harvest.

## **6. Knowledge and metaphors of tobacco-growing**

The description of these tasks is a schematic account of an extremely rich local model of tobacco production, which has taken centuries to refine. These cultivation practices have been developed into an elaborate model of tobacco-growing, which is shaped by larger cultural understandings of land, and the vegetal and the animal world. Moreover, scientific agronomical knowledge has also played an important role in influencing the cultivation of tobacco at least since the last 30 years of the 19th century (Fernández Prieto 2005: 209-254).

Akhil Gupta (1998) writes about the hybrid understanding of agriculture in India, pointing to their multiple genealogies that cannot simply be traced to traditional humoral Ayurvedic understanding of the human body nor easily be opposed to the modernist capitalist model of agriculture. Likewise, it is almost impossible to exactly trace any specific task or classification in tobacco-growing to local indigenous practices. In contrast to India, where a written ‘big tradition’ has coexisted with ‘little traditions’ (Redfield 1956), the oral character of the Taino culture on the one hand and their rapid extermination under Spanish colonial rule on the other make a reconstitution of the indigenous techniques of cultivation and their influences on actual tobacco-growing techniques particularly difficult.<sup>79</sup> Waves of migration from Andalusia and the Canary Islands from the first century of colonization onwards encouraged the cultivation of tobacco and brought new techniques and vernacular agronomical knowledge to Cuba (Llanos Company 1983; Rivero Muñiz 1964). One example of a possible transmission of indigenous knowledge about tobacco cultivation to the first growers of tobacco brought by the Spanish from the Canary Islands was given to me in an interview I had with Dr Santos Israel Bustio Dios, Professor at the University of Pinar del Río in the agronomy of tobacco. He said that the first technical concept learnt by the white colonists from the indigenous population regarding the cultivation of tobacco was that:

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<sup>79</sup> Cuban cigar marketing practices have been incorporating representations of the Taino indigenous culture as ways of reinforcing the authenticity and uniqueness of Cuban cigars as well as a re-enchantment (in Weberian terms) of the commercial and consumption practices involved in Cuban cigars.

*El agua le chupa la miel al tabaco* (the water sucks the honey of tobacco), that is, when the season is rainy, the tobacco is of lower quality [...] Today, the peasants use another word. When the year is rainy, they say that tobacco is straw-like (*pajizo*). That is, it [tobacco] is straw (*paja*), it doesn't have nicotine, because one of the factors influencing the quantity of nicotine is the humidity in the soil. Therefore, this knowledge was transmitted from generation to generation, the form has changed but not the content, which remains the same.<sup>80</sup>

He could not remember the source of this reference and I could not find it in the historical literature on Cuban tobacco, but it was the only case when a possible transmission of indigenous knowledge in tobacco-growing was mentioned.

However, in the first century of colonization the Spanish hybridized tobacco varieties found in Cuba with varieties brought from the American continent. Scientific experiments in tobacco-breeding intensified at the beginning of the 20th century with the establishment of experimental agronomical centres in Santiago de las Vegas (1904) and San Juan y Martínez (1937). One could therefore suggest that the character of knowledge about tobacco-growing is hybrid, incorporating both knowledge and practices locally developed and transmitted in practice and agronomical scientific information and assistance.

Agronomical techniques and practices are embedded in larger cultural and socio-political processes and need to be understood through the prism of the cultural values and ideas that permeate them (Gudeman 1986; Haudricourt 1962). Economic anthropologists have systematically explored the cultural assumptions of non-Western economic models. According to Steve Gudeman, one of the most active representatives of this cultural understanding of economic processes, '[s]ecuring a livelihood, meaning the domain of material "production," "distribution" and "consumption", is culturally modeled in all societies' (Gudeman 1986: 37). These models are, in Gudeman's view, built around 'primal' or 'focal' metaphors, which are 'the dominant idiom for constituting and expressing events, and have an organizing force for a broad

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<sup>80</sup> Interview with Dr Santos Israel Bustio Dios in Pinar del Río, October 2008.

range of behavior' (Gudeman 1986: 40). In the model of tobacco-growing in San Luis, the focal metaphor was that of care (*cuidar*). Tobacco work was perceived in terms of intense caring for each individual plant in order to obtain the best, most exquisite quality. This metaphor of care was also formulated in terms of caressing: '*pasarle la mano*' (touching it with the hand), similarly to caressing a woman. 'The more you caress the tobacco, the better it gets,' I heard growers talking about their care of tobacco cultivation. The importance of the careful manipulation of tobacco was reinforced by the often mentioned 'golden' number of a hundred different operations a tobacco leaf has to undergo before it ends up in a cigar. Most of these operations were executed by tobacco-growers, who had learnt to judge the general condition of tobacco plants and the quality of the leaves through the sensory experience of their everyday contact with tobacco leaves, a knowledge not easily translatable into semantic or discursive knowledge.

In many conversations I had with growers, tobacco was conceived as being actively 'asking' ('*te pide*') or 'telling' ('*te dice*') when it needed water or when the moment of harvesting arrived. Likewise, fertilizing tobacco was considered analogous to feeding a child.

Fernando Ortiz masterfully captured this idiom of caring when he wrote in Counterpoint:

There lies, in synthesis, the main secret of the exquisiteness or the premium quality of Cuban tobacco: in the attentive care (*esmero*) to each plant given by poor families, with continuous and meticulous attention in the small farm (*pequeña vega*). The glory of Cuban cigar is due above all to the virtues of its mother, that is the *vega* (tobacco farm). The main secret of Cuban tobacco is in that peculiar and virtuous complex of plant, land, family, poverty, craftsmanship and tradition that in Cuba we call *la vega*. The supremacy of Cuban cigar is, first, to be 'well-born'; and then in being 'well bred', by the constant individual and manual technical treatment. (Ortiz 2002 [1940]: 710, my translation)<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> 'Ahí está, en síntesis, el principal secreto de la exquisitez o "primera clase" del tabaco cubano: en el cuidadoso esmero a cada mata, dado por familias pobres, con atención continuada y prolja en la pequeña vega. La gloria del tabaco habano se debe ante todo a las virtudes de su madre, que es la *vega*. El primer secreto del tabaco habano está en ese peculiarísimo y virtuoso complejo de planta, tierra, familia, pobreza, artesanía y tradición que

In writing that Cuban tobacco is ‘well-bred’ (*bien criado*) and ‘well-born’ (*bien nacido*), Ortiz is noting the mixture of ideal natural conditions (soil, climate), which are given, and the human contribution conceived as ‘care’ (*esmero*), that explains the unique qualities of Cuban cigars.

There were also situations when manhood or sexual virility was expressed in comparison with green tobacco. ‘One needs to enjoy life, while one is still equal in strength to the green tobacco in the field,’ I was warned by none too young farmers when they talked about women.

When considering the whole range of crops grown in San Luis, I heard peasants talking in terms of caring only in relation to tobacco. For other plants they used general terms for tasks to be performed (e.g. ‘sembrar’, ‘coger’, ‘triar’, ‘echar abono’) and they talked about yields and quantities of the products rather than qualities. This difference between tobacco and other crops was also the consequence of different practices and classifications of soil types. More precisely, tobacco lands were known as ‘tierra ligera’ (light soil) or ‘tierras/vegas de primera’ (first-class soils/farms), referring to the sandy-clay or sandy type of soils most favourable for tobacco cultivation. On the contrary, the soils for other crops like rice or vegetables were known as ‘tierra gorda’ (heavy soils), being alluvial. Governmental restrictions on planting other crops on lands reserved for tobacco cultivation only reinforced the distinction between tobacco and other crops. The particularity of tobacco in terms of attentive supervision and knowledge is reinforced by the task of air-curing, after tobacco is harvested, which is incumbent on the growers. No other plant in Cuba has to go through such a meticulous process of chemical transformation involving oxidation and fermenting.

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*en Cuba llamamos la vega. La supremacía del habano está primero en ser “bien nacido”; y luego en ser “bien criado”, por la constante individualidad y manualidad de todo su trato técnico.*’ This fragment belongs to the *Contrapunteo* edition published in 2002 in the prestigious collection *Letras Hispánicas* of the Cátedra publishing house, the most complete edition prepared by Enrico Mario Santí. This edition is based on the second, revised and enlarged Cuban edition of the *Contrapunteo*, published in 1963, revised again for the 2002 edition based on Ortiz’s own annotated and corrected copy. The incomplete English translation of *Counterpoint* was based on the first Cuban edition (1940).

The interaction with agronomic technicians was organized within the cooperatives. Before the revolution there was hardly any interaction with agronomists, in spite of the existence of two agronomical experimental institutes in San Antonio de los Baños and San Juan y Martínez. After 1959, with the growing number of trained agronomists, more and more growers frequently interacted with the scientific personnel. Moreover, there were technical brochures printed for producers so that they could find out about the norms of cultivation, the various illnesses of tobacco, and the ways to combat them. Nevertheless, I never witnessed or heard about any particular producer using the book or referring to it in their productive activities. I asked Eugenio and other cultivators about the importance of such recommendations and their collaborations with agronomical specialists.

Eugenio, like most experienced growers, considered that one could not cultivate tobacco according to the book, since the real conditions in the field were not uniform, nor were the tobacco plants all the same. One plant was not equal to another and in practice the perfect conditions for cultivation were never met. ‘The book is truth’ (*El libro es la verdad*), he told me, but ‘you need to have all that what is needed in time’. My observations of the issues producers talked about among themselves and with the cooperative administrations support their point that the main concerns were the shortage of or delays in obtaining the needed inputs (fertilizers, implements), pesticides, or petrol for irrigation pumps. They sought technical advice most frequently about instructions for new pesticides the technicians recommended against various diseases or pests.

The idiom of care for tobacco has implications for the conceptions about work among tobacco-growers, which I will explicitly address in the next section. Here suffice it to say that the necessity for farmers to daily tend to tobacco alongside workers was congruous with the idea that the owner (*el dueño*) of the farm needed to be directly involved in growing tobacco in order to obtain the best crop, in contrast to the less efficient state farms or the collective farms under governmental control or, as it was put to me by some growers, under Fidel’s rule, an ‘owner’ living in Havana, unable to oversee the work.

## **7. Ideas about work and social distinction among tobacco-growers**

Based on the above discussion of the social organization, tasks, cultural metaphors, and gendered division of tobacco-growing, I would like to analyse the conceptions about work among tobacco-growers (male) and how these understandings of work related to the way they perceived their place among the larger socio-political transformations in Cuba. My perspective is consonant with recent approaches in the anthropology of work, which go beyond Marxist approaches in terms of the mode of production towards conceiving work as the cultural production of self-identity (Ulin 2002, 2009) and value (Harris 2007). It is not accidental that the object of some of these analyses of work are labour-intensive skilled activities such as artisanal work (Herzfeld 2004) or wine-growing (Ulin 1996, 2002), an area largely left unexplored by more influential research on capitalist or socialist industrial work (Burawoy 1979, 1985; Ong 1987). The difference between tobacco production and other forms of work like artisanal or industrial work is that in the first case we have a process of growing, while in the second it is one of making: ‘The cultivator does not “make” his crops, any more than he “grows” his tool. He does, of course, “make” fields or gardens, establishing thereby the preconditions for the growth of cultivated plants, but again, that energy is transferred neither to the soil nor to the crop.’ (Ingold 1980: 309)

Producing tobacco is enabling the growth of tobacco plants in the best conditions, a process which is conceptualized by Cuban growers as a work of caring (*cuidar*). We could say that by *growing* the best tobacco through the *work* of caring, the growers *make* their own reputation and social standing in their communities.



Fig. 19. Showing the quality of one's tobacco

The specificity of tobacco-growing – labour-intensive carefully carried-out operations – resulting in producing premium tobacco fostered a sense of pride and self-respect among the tobacco-growers I knew. This sense of distinction was also strengthened by the persistence of the model of tobacco-growing in the private sector in Cuba, in spite of the collectivization policy in the 1970s and 1980s. With the economic crisis in the 1990s, the government not only stopped the collectivization policy, but adopted a series of material incentives and better prices for the private tobacco sector.

Receiving better payments for their crops, tobacco-growers were sometimes the target of envious remarks and criticism from state employees or from wage labourers employed in tobacco-growing. The latter considered that they should be paid more. When I asked producers about these comments, they defended themselves by using one, two, or all of the following arguments. First, they invoked the complexity of supervising tobacco-growing, which required knowledge, hard work, and constantly living under the pressure of obtaining the best tobacco. Second, they mentioned the risks involved in tobacco-growing: pests, diseases, and weather contingencies, which could

affect, sometimes catastrophically, the tobacco crop, as in 1979–80 when blue mould fungus epidemics destroyed more than 80 percent of the tobacco harvest. Third, the growers argued that they were toilers themselves, working alongside their workers, in contrast to other people employing ways to make money more easily in the informal economy, trade, or cultivating other less labour-intensive crops than tobacco.

Another distinction that was made among tobacco-growers was in relation to experience and the number of years in the trade. In the 1993–4 agriculture reforms, individuals who had previously been working in the state sector (either for the state tobacco company or state farms) received land for tobacco cultivation. But these were considered '*los nuevos*' (the new ones) by those who had been in tobacco-growing all their lives and kept the vegas within their families. The reputation of tobacco-growers was built on hard work and the quality of their crops. Experienced growers were sought for advice by newer ones. Nevertheless, among more experienced growers there was a sense of competition and none would recognize others as producing a better tobacco.

Both tobacco-growers and agricultural labourers saw themselves as distinct from state employees or those employed in the administrative jobs in the cooperatives. The contrast was expressed most crudely in the following way: real work versus fake work, i.e. paperwork and bureaucratic meetings. This difference could be visualized in the dress code of a cooperative's administrative personnel: they wore sunglasses and were smartly dressed, in comparison with peasants and labourers in plain working clothes. This difference should not be seen necessarily as a generational one, but rather one of different aspirations and ways of life. More precisely, brothers raised in the same family could have different trajectories. This was the case of the president of the cooperative, who lived in the *pueblo* and did not like working the land, while his brother produced tobacco, rice, and beans in the same cooperative.

It was in contrast with the state farms and the CPAs' inefficient production model that growers defended their way of growing tobacco. In an interview with Eugenio about the failed collectivization of the 1970s and 1980s, he articulated a compelling criticism of state farms and CPAs. He went back to the establishment of the state tobacco farms (*granjas*) in the 1960s in shade-grown tobacco. These farms started to run deficits from one year to the next, until the government decided to dismantle them by giving land in usufruct to be cultivated by individual producers. Before that, the change of payment from a fixed wage to one based on targets did not help, as workers rushed to do more in a shorter time, to make more money, but without paying attention to the quality of the work. Eugenio said that the problem was:

[t]he owner (*dueño*) of all these farms was the man [Fidel]. He was in Havana. He was not coming there, to be together with the people (*estar allí pegado junto a la gente*). You have to be together with the workers [...], fighting (*fajarte junto con la gente*) together with the people to get what you can. Tobacco is always a thing of care (*una cosa de cuidado*): you have to take care of it since you sow it.

He admitted that the state agricultural model might work for sugar-cane, but clearly it was not suitable for tobacco-growing. Moreover, his defence of a mode of tobacco cultivation based on care (*cuidar*) included also a conception of work relationships based on the farm owner's continuous presence and attention and his guidance of the workers. By a metonymic personification of power, Fidel Castro was, for Eugenio, the absent owner of tobacco state farms who could not be present and guide the workers to carry out their tasks in the best possible way. With an absent owner, state managers were careless and were not interested in doing quality work.

There were, however, some convergent points between tobacco-growers' conceptions about work and the official discourse about the importance of production, agricultural work, and the reduction of non-productive sectors and inefficiency in the state sector. This was one of the main ideological themes of Raúl Castro's presidency. Certainly, this emphasis on production is the core idiom and the organizational principle of a socialist economy. At the same time, the Cuban agricultural sector of the 2000s fully

displayed the economic and ideological contradictions of the Special Period. First, the state agricultural sector had almost collapsed. Most of the state-owned agricultural land was not cultivated. The government acknowledged this and adopted a law in 2008 allowing people to lease idle state land and make it productive again in order to increase food production and reduce food imports. However, major difficulties remained unsolved, such as the dire lack of an agricultural labour force.

'Young people don't want to work on the land any more' was a widespread leitmotif that came up endlessly in my conversations with my informants. I could easily see that this was not what Herzfeld (2016: 139) called structural nostalgia, a discourse about a lost unspoiled past, but something I could easily grasp by observing who was working the land. Most were people over 40, with many owners of tobacco farms over 60 and older. People advanced more explanations to clarify this situation. The most common was that this was the consequence of the success of the educational policies of the revolution. Young people studied and aspired to better careers than being agricultural labourers or farmers. Even among those trained as agronomists, many were not working in agriculture. The difficulty of agricultural work in general and, particularly tobacco-growing, was another reason advanced to explain young people avoiding working on the land. Some compared growing tobacco with the discipline of working in a factory, with the difference that in tobacco cultivation one could not miss a day since it could jeopardize the quality of the entire crop. Moreover, there were available alternative ways of making a living in trade, tourism or counting on remittances, when one had relatives abroad, instead of toiling the land.

What was looming behind this situation was the spectre of idleness (*vagancia*) and its moral corrupting effects on people's characters, a long-term obsession in Cuban culture since the colonial period (Saco 1974 [1831]). After 1959, idleness became a moral and political fault to be corrected through various education and work campaigns. It was instantiated in the Law of Social Dangerousness, by which those considered a social threat were to be re-educated, including by use of repressive means. The existence of this law was

common knowledge in Cuba, including for peasants like Eugenio, who was not part of any political organization. I was discussing with him what could be done to make people return to work on the land. He said the only most effective way was a more repressive way, by applying this law and forcing those without employment, not willing to work or living off informal trade to join the labour force in the countryside. He added this was quite controversial because of criticism of the human rights situation in Cuba, which made the government cautious about employing harsher measures, as in the 1960s. Actually, detainees (*presos*) were employed to work in tobacco-growing. Those convicted of lighter offences were allocated to producers who needed labour (the producers paid the cooperative a small contribution, which was a third of the normal wage). This was an alternative to indoor detention and a way of reintegrating wrongdoers into society. Employing detainees was not general, but I knew a couple of producers who employed one or two convicted workers every year and had been satisfied overall with them. They had their worries about theft, but they did not have any incident to complain about. When I brought up the topic of employing detainees, most producers were reluctant, for it was believed that detainees would make unmotivated workers, so they would not necessarily produce quality work like somebody paid a full wage. Eugenio had never been in such dire necessity of workers that he would need to employ detainees. He told me that if he had to work with them, he would pay them extra from his pocket in order to encourage them to work well: ‘If the state gives me one or two detainees, I would tell them: “Forget what the state charge me for your work. I will pay you something to work. Your problem (*lío*) is with the state, not with me.”’ He added that the detainees could not produce good-quality work since they had a grudge against the state, so they would be unmotivated.

Producers generally shared the same scepticism about the benefits of voluntary work in tobacco-growing. Voluntary working brigades had been sporadically participating in harvesting tobacco. Moreover, pupils in the Escuelas al Campo programmes were also distributed each year to various producers to help with the harvest. There was no *escuela al campo* in the Almendares cooperative and producers I discussed it with were reluctant to let

inexperienced and unruly teenagers harvesting tobacco leaves. They so much feared the damage to the tobacco and the difficulty of training inexperienced workers in such a short time so that one agronomist told me that the worst pest for tobacco was *el trabajo voluntario*.

The future of agriculture in Cuba and in particular the question of the labour shortage was a leitmotif in my conversations with Eugenio. Once he referred to the differences between agricultural work in capitalism and in socialism:

Eugenio: There [in capitalist countries], one is more controlled. If a person does not go to work, the boss will change him for another. Not here. One can be absent from work and nothing happens. Here if your worker doesn't come, you cannot do anything, because you need him another day. Here we had capitalism too, when workers were in excess. In that period, you had to borrow money on credit and, if you couldn't pay, they took your land or your animals. In those times, you had to pay everything back.

Mariano: But if things will continue like this, what will happen in 50 years?

Eugenio: I would say that in 5 years, not 50, there will be no one to work the land. Cuba is an agricultural country and if there is not agricultural production, then the economy is not working. The state wanted to help people study and gave them a profession. And these people don't want to come back to work the land, because this work is tough. If I could have other work, I would do it, but I cannot. And now the state will put the people to work. Have you listened to Raúl [Castro] the other day talking about work? If you don't have any employment, they will come and find you and ask you about your means of existence. And if you cannot justify them, then off to the field (*pa' campo*)! All these people who are intermediaries selling tomatoes for 2 pesos a pound. And they make the same or more money than you, the producer of those tomatoes. Working the land is tough, fighting 8 hours in the furrow (*fajarte en el surco*). I am the owner of the land, but I tell you that working the land is not paid sufficiently with 30 [pesos/a day], or with 50, or with 100. And these people who studied and tell you according to the technological book that you have to plant this or that, they know nothing, all these papers are rubbish (*una mierda*), what is important is the experience.

This was an exceptional outburst from Eugenio during a casual discussion we had one evening in mid-January 2009. The tobacco zafra was well on the way in spite of the difficulties in the aftermath of the devastating

hurricanes of 2008. He reiterated important issues he had previously commented upon: the mobilization of labour in socialism, his grudge against the intermediaries, and the difficulty of work in agriculture. The revolution and socialism in Cuba had got rid of the hard constraints of the market and of the excess of labour on offer. Moreover, people got a chance to study and move out of agriculture. However, the harsh realities of the economic crisis of the Special Period had showed the limits of an economic development based on industrial development and the exchange of sugar-cane for oil. Agriculture, in Eugenio's vision, was the basis of the Cuban economy. The importance of agriculture was also making headlines in the official press and was being emphasized in official discourse. The rise of food prices in 2008 and the hurricanes' destructive impacts on the agricultural production and infrastructure made agricultural production a national priority. Eugenio felt vindicated by this recent turn of policies, even though he was sceptical it could reverse the decades-long youth disaffection with agricultural work, since other more remunerative economic strategies had been developed during the Special Period: *negocios* (business), remittances, or informal economic practices.

A more contentious point raised by growers in relation to their work was the question of ownership and recognition of the quality of Cuba's emblematic product. Felipe, another member of the Almendares cooperative, once said to me that his tobacco was used for the manufacture of cigars sold as brands of Cubatabaco, not his own. He said that 'it is like we were working in a state farm' (*'nosotros somos como si fuera a trabajar en una granja'*). He argued that his tobacco was paid a very small fraction in comparison with the big profits the government made from cigar-exporting. Moreover, in order to keep the tobacco production, he spent from his personal savings before he could get the money from the state after the sale of the harvest. He reinforced the point by using the analogy of the producer and the slave, a very powerful one in the Cuban context: 'Here they say that before (*antes*) the peasants were

slaves, now we are maroons, runaway slaves.<sup>82</sup> This aspect of getting a better share and more recognition for a product that is exported for hard currency and is celebrated worldwide will be addressed in the next chapter.

## 8. Concluding remarks

In this chapter I have presented the main tasks and the social organization of tobacco-growing in a cooperative of individual producers in San Luis. I have illustrated how tobacco-growing is organized and run on a particular farm throughout the calendar year. I further analysed the distinctive aspects pertaining to knowledge, cultural ideas about tobacco-growing, the gendered division of labour, and conceptions about work among tobacco-growers, all contributing to a local model of growing tobacco. This model is centred on the idea of caring (*cuidar*) for tobacco plants as the organizing principle of carrying out the technical tasks at the required stages in the development of plants and with attention not to damage the leaves. This had implications for the way tobacco-growers conceived work and labour relationships. Good-quality work resulting in premium tobacco fostered a sense of pride and distinction among tobacco-growers. At the same time, the everyday presence of the owner of the farm and his continuous guidance of the workers were considered essential for obtaining the best crops.

The specificities of tobacco-growing were compared with the state farms and collective farms (CPAs) and their shortcomings. This comparison was constantly made by the growers themselves. The uncultivated or badly cared-for land parcels of the CPAs showed the failure of the collectivist model of agriculture. This made many independent tobacco-growers feel justified in their resistance to join the collective farms in the 1980s and confirmed their local model of growing tobacco, based on private land ownership and autonomy in managing the farms. Despite their criticism of collectivized farms, however, tobacco-growers claimed more state support through better payment

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<sup>82</sup> ‘Aquí se dice que antes los campesinos eran esclavos, ahora somos cimarrones, esclavos pero sueltos.’

for crops and better provisioning with fertilizers, fuel, and fungicides. Such claims were stimulated by the widespread perception among tobacco-growers that their hard-worked premium tobacco was at the source of the fame and of the economic benefits the Cuban state obtained from exporting cigars.

The local model of tobacco-growing based on smallholdings outlived the statist and collectivist drive of the 1970s and 1980s in agriculture because it was better suited for the skilled, labour-intensive mode of tobacco production. Tobacco-growers domesticated the top-down agrarian policy of that period by keeping to their way of farming and by providing the best crops. In a paradoxical way, the small individual producers of tobacco were the closest incarnation of the ideal conscientious workers that the socialist state, against all efforts, could not form in state agriculture. However, recognizing this at the governmental level would mean to acknowledge that past policies have failed, and that the superiority of state ownership and socialist management has been disproved in agriculture. After Raúl Castro formally assumed the presidency of Cuba in February 2008, he made an increase in agricultural production one of his priorities.<sup>83</sup> People like Eugenio, who had toiled on the land all their lives felt vindicated by the recent governmental recognition of the importance of the peasant sector and their hard work, defined as essential for the survival of the Revolution. One of the obstacles for reforming agriculture in Cuba is the chronic lack of a labour force, a result of various factors including the Revolution's educational policies, which offered a way out of farm work for many born in the country. Moreover, various economic opportunities in the informal economy, remittances, and migration bring different challenges to the agricultural sector in Cuba. Eugenio and other growers, based on their past experiences of failed state policies for agriculture, knew that it would take much more effort, material incentives, and state support to convince those who had not experienced the rhythm and constraints of tobacco work to return to the land.

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<sup>83</sup> In Chapter 4 I will discuss this change of policy, whose origin was contemporary with my fieldwork period when Raúl Castro took over the government. This has to do with insufficient food production, Cuba being in the situation to import more than 70 percent of its food supplies, an important part of which comes from the United States.

### **Chapter 3. The politics of tobacco value: the sale of tobacco harvest, cigar brands, and the discretionary power of the state**

'Tobacco selling day is the worst day of the year,' Eugenio told me one afternoon at the end of July 2008, while we were standing outside on the porch of his house. We were talking about his tobacco crop which he had sold that morning. 'On the other hand, it could be the best day,' I replied, alluding to the good evaluation he had received for his harvest. He laughed complacently, but he came back to a point he had previously made about the total uncertainty of the results of one's labour until the selling of the harvest. In spite of his record of past harvests being consistently very good, for which he was recognized as a very good grower by other members of the cooperative, he had been very anxious that day. He woke up with pain in his stomach after a night with little sleep.

The reason for the anxiety was the new buying procedure the state company had introduced that year. It was referred to as *el sorteo* (the draw) by growers, since the main procedure of establishing the value of the harvest was to draw a random sample out of the total packs of tobacco. State officials argued that the new procedure was more accurate and a simpler way of establishing the price of the harvest and, in terms of the theory of probability, they were right. However, this change provoked much anxiety among producers, who were not ready to let hazard determine the price for a year's harvest. 'What if the sample happens to contain the worst of the tobacco?' people asked me when we talked about it. In this case one could lose the work of one year as a result of bad luck. Most of those I spoke to preferred to go back to the procedure of previous years, when state buyers visited tobacco barns to buy the harvests. These buyers asked growers for samples of tobacco that was in stacks (*pillones*), in order to establish the quality of tobacco and

the corresponding price. Once the price was calculated, the producers transported their tobacco to the classifying centres to be weighed.

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In this chapter, I focus on the politics of value (Appadurai 1986a) around tobacco by looking at the key moment in the growers' productive cycle: the sale of tobacco to the state. This is the event that defines the value of the harvest. Growers operate in conditions of state monopoly, being at the discretionary power of the state company. Therefore the value of the crop is not established by market competition, but through exchange with the state company. I will show that even in such conditions of fixed prices and lack of competition growers had enough space to manoeuvre in order to achieve the most favourable price for their crops. The price producers received from the state company was not necessarily the outcome of a simple application of objective evaluative procedures, but rather the outcome of a highly dynamic interaction between producers and state bureaucrats that extended beyond the actual moment of sale. Based on observations of actual sales of tobacco, I will shed light on various tactics (Certeau 1988) or 'weapons of the weak' (Scott 1985) that peasants employ for taming the state procedures of achieving an objective and impartial evaluation of their crops. In the second part of the chapter, I will analyse a special case of enhancing the value of Cuban tobacco through promoting a new brand of Cuban cigars, Vegas Robaina, named after the famous tobacco-grower Alejandro Robaina (1919–2010), an inhabitant of San Luis. The iconic figure of Cuban cigars, Robaina's exceptional case underlines the paradoxical position of tobacco-growers in the larger symbolic and political economy of Cuban cigars: they are the indispensable source of raw material for a state-produced luxury commodity but, at the same time, they are largely anonymous and benefit little from the aura of Cuban cigars (Benjamin 2008 [1935]). The singularity of Robaina has less to do with his exceptional status as a tobacco-grower, but more with the discretionary power of the state to use a representative peasant figure in order to re-infuse authenticity into the marketing strategies of Cuban cigars.

## 1. The politics of (tobacco) value

Appadurai's (1986b) influential edited volume on commodities exchange has contributed to a shift in the analysis of (economic) value beyond the classical Marxist labour theory of value; instead of focusing on production, it was proposed to focus on exchange and the circulation of things.<sup>84</sup> This has two important consequences: the classical opposition between gifts and commodities was overcome since the ontological status (commodity versus gifts) of things varies with the cultural understandings of the exchange and its temporality (Bourdieu 1977: 4–9). Second, the value of things is unstable, depending on the embedding regimes or shared standards of value and, most important, of the politics of value.<sup>85</sup> This may hardly seem revolutionary, but it was, I think, there to counteract an entrenched tendency in the economic anthropology of the 1970s to view phenomena through Marxist spectacles. Such a doctrinaire analysis might view a moment like the sale of tobacco as one in which peasants are alienated from the product of their labour by a monopolistic regime. Alienation, however, is so inevitable a result of almost all semi-specialized labour systems, whatever their political complexion with

<sup>84</sup> Appadurai's collection anticipated a renewed anthropological interest in value(s), beyond the sub-domain of economic anthropology. Louis Dumont (1980, 1982) developed his own structuralist project of comparing systems of 'ideas-and-values' conceived as configurations of hierarchically organized value-ideas (beliefs or principles defining a culture), e.g. India defined by holism as a paramount value, while individualism defines the Western world. Dumont's work inspires some recent models of anthropological analyses of value (Robbins 2013). From a different intellectual tradition, David Graeber (2001) proposed a general anthropological theory of value by linking Marxism (value as a product of human labour) and structuralism (value as a meaningful difference in a system of social relations) with a theory of action, which defines values as 'the way people represent the importance of their own actions to themselves' (2001: 45). For Graeber, 'value is the way the importance of our own labor [...] becomes real to us being realized [...] in some socially recognized form, a form that is both material and symbolic' (Graeber 2013: 225). Money is the most common form to express the value of labour as wage, but there are other ways to objectify labour in material terms (gold, heirlooms, or other objects), tokens of honour (diplomas, prizes, etc), human activity (a ritual or a performance), or symbolic forms (honour, prestige, fame). In the case of tobacco-growing, I contend that we need to look at both labour and exchange in order to understand how value is created.

<sup>85</sup> Appadurai stresses that 'politics [...] is what links value and exchange in the social life of commodities' (Appadurai 1986a: 57). More precisely, the politics of value is '[t]he constant tension between the existing frameworks (of price, bargaining, and so forth) and the tendency of commodities to breach these frameworks. This tension itself has its source in the fact that not all parties share the same interests in any specific regime of value, nor are the interests of any two parties in a given exchange identical' (1986a: 57).

respect to the organization of the polity, that it can hardly capture everything that is going on. Or rather, it is too expansive a concept to always be analytically useful. I would not completely dismiss the idea of alienation since it was one of the idioms through which some growers interpreted their situation as being obliged to sell their harvest to the state according to prices they had no power to influence.

Appadurai's suggestion of focusing on the movements of commodities and on tensions between existing regimes of value and the divergent interests of parties involved in the exchange is particularly useful for a commodity like tobacco. Its sale is not a simple transaction by which the producer receives a certain price based on a multiplication of the price per mass unit by the total mass of the harvest. The sale is a rather complex process of qualification, by which the mass of the tobacco leaves is evaluated, classified into various classes by experienced grading personnel, weighed, and valued based on categories of price and a plan of production.<sup>86</sup> The sale is therefore a complex event, uniting people, instruments, and standards. Naturally this process lends a certain cachet to the grower, upon which he may trade, thereby connecting product, personal worth, and value in a compact. Thus, the tobacco sale is not only about valuation, meaning the procedures adopted and administered in order to evaluate the monetary value of the harvest, but also about positioning, establishing the reputation, fame, or prestige of the producers in the local community of growers. Once the tobacco harvest is sold, the tobacco leaves go through other processes of classification, selection, and modification in the process of cigar-manufacturing. What I am concentrating upon here is on what happens in this transition from a regime of value to another, from the production side to the state side, and how the establishing of the price is the

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<sup>86</sup> I use the word 'qualification' in the slightly specialized sense of Callon, Méadel, and Rabeharisoa as 'processes through which qualities [of goods] are attributed, stabilized, objectified and arranged' (2002: 199). This new economic sociological theory built on various theoretical sources in order to see economic goods as 'bundles of characteristics', which need to be defined, classified, compared, and singularized, and these processes can intervene at any moment in their biography – production, circulation, or consumption.

result of negotiations and struggles on the part of producers to get the most for their harvest.

Roy Dilley's (2004) work with Senegalese craftsmen is comparatively instructive for our situation as it reveals how the economic value of artefacts is produced at the interface of various regimes of value. His analysis of local notions of a 'just price' goes beyond a strict economic calculus of the production costs and the profit to include cultural ideas of fairness in relation to the social position of the producers as well as the difference of status between producer-sellers (Africans) and the buyers (European tourists). In contrast to Dilley's ethnographic case, the politics of value that defines the regime of value of the tobacco leaves is mainly defined by the state company.

## **2. Tobacco sale before and after 1959**

*En el capitalismo* (in capitalism) or *antes* (before) – as ordinary Cubans refer to the period before 1959 – tobacco production was part of an economy controlled mostly by foreign capital. The production of cigars was private and the manufacturers bought their tobacco directly from producers or from intermediaries with classifying centres. These intermediaries operating classifying centres were mostly Spanish. Stubbs's invaluable research of the Cuban tobacco industry before 1959 pays attention in particular to the relations between growers on the one hand and traders and big land-owners on the other (1985: 53–6). Middlemen – through credit relations and sometimes through dodgy buying practices – made producers accept prices which were largely decided by these intermediaries. Stubbs cites an article published in 1935 by Manuel Fabian Quesada, a tobacco trader, exposing the tensions between growers and buyers, including the threat of physical violence during the bargaining process:

The methods used for buying the leaf from the vegas can be defined as gangster-like (...) I do not exaggerate. Decent persons were eliminated from the business. Trade practices sowed the seeds of revenge in the countryside. And it has been known for the buyer to go off with a few well-delivered blows from an uncompromising grower. (published in *Carteles*, 27 October 1935, cited in Stubbs 1985: 56)

However, this more extreme situation could also have been caused by the economic depression of those years. The relations between buyers and growers functioned generally in a way largely similar to patron-client relationships. Eugenio remembered that his father sold his tobacco to a Spanish trader in the 1940s and 1950s. The trader was also the owner of the sorting centre of the *barrio* in which the *vega* of his father was located. The process of buying was pretty straightforward. The buyer asked for samples of leaves from tobacco stacks to examine the colour and texture of the leaves. Moreover, he used a typical procedure for verifying the tobacco's quality, combustion, and aroma by rolling several leaves into a cigar and smoking it. *El español* (the Spaniard) buying the tobacco from Eugenio's father lived in Havana and had a local administrator at the sorting centre.

In the first half of the 20th century most of the tobacco in San Luis was produced by sharecroppers (*partidarios*) who normally had to pay 30 percent of the harvest to the owner of the land, while also additionally having to cover labour costs. The owner of the land advanced credit for the production, in general with interest of 8 percent per year (Nelson 1950: 132; Ibarra 1998: 81). New legislation was introduced in the 1950s in order to regulate tobacco production by restricting the area to be cultivated and establishing a minimum price to be paid to the producer. It was a general practice among most producers to buy their daily provisions from the grocery shop (*el bodeguero*) on credit. After selling the harvest, the credit repaid with interest. The importance of credit relations for the functioning of Cuban agriculture was revealed during the enactment of the first Agricultural Reform in 1959. Juan Martínez Alier has shown that the issue of credit (or, rather, lack of it) was often as important for producers as the redistribution of land (Martínez Alier & Martínez Alier 1972: 153–7). Moreover, many producers were bound to sell their tobacco to the owner of the grading centre in the neighbourhood, as he often employed members of their families (especially women) several months of the year. This finds an echo in Eugenio's life story. There were eight siblings and the family farm could not provide enough for everyone. When there was no work in the fields, both their parents worked in the grading centre in the *barrio*, the mother grading tobacco and the father bundling tobacco leaves

(*manojar tabaco*). Later on, Eugenio himself and his three sisters had spells of work experience there. In San Luis the most pre-eminent producers used to sell their harvest to the most important cigar manufacturers from Havana, such as Partagás, H. Upmann, Por Larrañaga and others. Cuban Land and Leaf, a Cuban outlet of the powerful American Tobacco Company, had 800 ha of tobacco land in the neighbouring municipality of San Juan y Martínez and some on the territory of San Luis, employing over 1,500 people and planting over 10 million tobacco plants per year. The harvested tobacco was exported to the United States for cigar production (Pacheco & Rodríguez 1971).

After 1959, the state became the unique buyer of tobacco from producers, even though most of tobacco leaf production remained predominantly in the hands of individual producers who owned their land. Cooperatives were created for providing them with fertilizers, seedlings, technical advice, and credit. The economic crisis of the 1990s provoked by the cessation of the Soviet aid in 1991 made the functioning of the cooperatives and state farms more difficult. With the influx of foreign capital as a result of the venture between Cubatabaco and the French-Spanish company Altadis in 1994, tobacco production became one of the best-paid crops in Cuba. The incentive payments to producers in convertible pesos for meeting predetermined criteria of quality and quantity was a particular stimulant for the improvement of output.

After this short historical presentation of the sale of the tobacco harvest in the municipality I studied, I turn now to a more ethnographic account of the sale process as it was enacted during my fieldwork. I construct my case on my observation of two harvest sales, that of Eugenio and another producer from the same cooperative.

### **3. The tobacco harvest sale in 2008**

The sale of the tobacco was late in 2008. The *zafadura* was delayed for most producers because the air was not humid enough to handle dried tobacco. In previous years the sale had started already at the end of May, but in 2008 most

producers did not start selling before the beginning of July. People feared that delaying the sale of tobacco meant delayed payment. It might also cause a loss in value: after being kept for too long in the drying barn, tobacco starts fermenting and consequently loses some mass.

Eugenio finally finished his *zafadura* in mid-July and tried to have his sale appointment as soon as possible. Official technical requirements from the state company stipulated that tobacco had to remain a minimum of 40 days on stacks (*pillones*) for its first phase of curing. Each cooperative had technicians responsible for assisting and supervising the producers during the harvest period. They also set up appointments for each producer's sale, in coordination with the administrators of the grading centres. It was not easy to get an appointment since the grading centres were quite busy during harvest days. The appointed buyer for each cooperative was the person in charge of programming the individual sales. A week after he had finished his *zafadura*, Eugenio managed to make an appointment to sell his tobacco, and he brought half of his harvest to the sorting centre on the day. When he arrived, the administrator of the sorting centre was quite surprised and reluctant to let him sell his tobacco. 'Why did you bring your tobacco today?' she asked him. He answered that he had used the cooperative tractor, which was available that day. That was just an invented excuse, since he had already known from the buyer some days in advance about the day of the appointment. The administrator told Eugenio that she knew he had only recently finished his *zafadura*, and that his tobacco needed to stay inside the tobacco barn longer. He laughed at her remark and replied that she was not aware about how much tobacco had already been sold by people who finished the *zafadura* after him. The administrator was intrigued by what Eugenio said, but did not say any more. She allowed him to sell the tobacco he had brought that day. Following the administrator's remonstration, Eugenio decided only to sell the tobacco that had stayed longer in the fermenting stacks and wait to sell the rest of the harvest. However, the technician from his cooperative, who was also the buyer in charge of his harvest, told Eugenio that he should not postpone any longer and bring the rest of his tobacco the following Monday, since the administrator would be off at a meeting. Therefore, they could finalize the selling process in

the shortest possible way without encountering more opposition or more interference from the administrator.



Fig. 20. Packs of tobacco before the sale

The following Monday, another sale was also scheduled besides that of Eugenio. Ricardo, one of Eugenio's nephews and a producer from the same cooperative, also brought his tobacco to be evaluated. He and Eugenio brought the packs of tobacco with the trailer and tractor of the cooperative. Eugenio had with him another of his nephews, Jesús, an engineer with a degree in tobacco agronomy. He needed Jesús to keep an eye on the person in charge of weighing the tobacco. This reflected Eugenio's anxiety about being cheated during weighing. For example, before the weighing started, he checked the accuracy of the balance by weighing himself. He told me that he weighed himself at home early in the morning to have a reference for assessing accuracy of the grading centre's balance.



Fig. 21. Evaluating the quality of tobacco leaves during the sale

The draw for picking the random sample was made before unloading the packs of tobacco. The accountant of the sorting centre wrote down the number of packs for each category of leaves and then wrote numbers on little pieces of paper, folded them and asked Eugenio to pick one. The drawing was repeated for each category of leaf, *libre pie*, *centro fino*, *centro gordo*, and *corona*. The unloading and weighing of packs only started afterwards. I noticed, though, that the packs did not have numbers on them. After the first pack of tobacco was weighted, the number from the drawn piece of paper was painted with black paint on the package. After that, the pack was opened and all the bundles of tobacco arranged in a corner of the building on some boards of wood. The buyer's assistant picked three bundles to serve as the tobacco sample. Six women classified the sampling tobacco leaf by leaf into two categories (*compone* or *no compone*, 'up to the standard' or 'not up to the standard' of the corresponding class). This operation lasted about 10 minutes as the employees went through the bundles speedily and efficiently, opening them and checking each leaf's shape, looking for stains, holes or other damage. Those damaged (*tabaco afectado*) were put aside. The sorted leaves ended up on the table of the buyer. There were two piles. When the sorting

was finished, the person in charge weighed each of the piles and using a table of categories and percentages calculated the proportion of tobacco in each category and the price to be paid for each category. The operation was repeated for each of the categories of leaves. The affected tobacco was also calculated. Actually, this was very important for determining the overall value of the harvest, since the more tobacco was classified as affected, the more it brought down the total price of the crop.

The sale finished with Eugenio signing the sales contract. The price was not yet calculated; only the quantity and the quality of various leaf categories had been written down. In the days after, the accountant calculated the total price and took the contract to the bank. The payment of the harvest was made after the cooperative's accountant had subtracted the credits the bank had advanced during the year for the payment of workers and other implements to Eugenio.



Fig. 22. Tobacco leaves separated after evaluation: not up to the standard (left), up to the standard (right)

I remained to witness the next sale of the day, which was the harvest of Ricardo and his associate Fernando, his ex-father-in-law. For the latter, the

sale was particularly emotionally significant, since it was his last harvest. He was about to retire from tobacco-growing, having decided to grow other crops like tomatoes or peppers, which demanded less work and were less vulnerable to disease than tobacco. Their tobacco had suffered significantly that year because of black shank, a fungus attacking the roots of tobacco and causing the plant to dry up. Understandably, they were quite worried about fulfilling the production plan and getting the *divisa* (the payment in convertible pesos as an incentive for fulfilling the production plan). They were lucky, nevertheless, since Ricardo's son, Joaquín, was helping the buyer that day. Even so, I could sense a difference in the way the buyer treated Eugenio and Ricardo. For instance, when Ricardo was unloading his packs, some of them opened while being moved around, spreading bundles of tobacco on the floor. The employees of the grading centre reprimanded Ricardo, and the receptionist asked him to fasten all the packs again. The difference in the quality of the packing between Ricardo and Eugenio's tobacco was obvious, and this seemed to confirm the generally shared opinion that Ricardo did things hastily and not always properly, in spite of being a hard-working person. The buyer joined in mocking Ricardo, too. I had the impression, that she exaggerated in order to overshadow the fact that Ricardo's son was her assistant, and that he was directly involved in the buying procedure.

There was also quite a lot of joking and teasing during the selling process, sometimes with a sexual content. By Cuban general standards of interaction, this was not abnormal, even more so in a rural context where discussions with sexual innuendoes among co-workers or associates were frequent. Ricardo seemed to be the favourite target of the women around. While Eugenio sold his tobacco he was spared, but when I took photos of him together with the buyer, a woman jokingly shouted at me that I should not show this picture to Eugenio's wife, which provoked general laughter.

Beyond this sexual talk, which often happened between men and women during harvest time, it is worth pointing out the general gendered division of labour in place during the sales. Producers were unanimously men, and women almost exclusively the personnel for grading tobacco and the

paperwork. The sale event made visible to me some generational, gender, and racial divisions. The six female employees involved in grading the tobacco were over 60 years old or approaching that age. Arguably, they were selected for being the most experienced. I visited the rest of the grading centre and I noticed only one girl in her early 20s working that morning. Talking to some women, I was told that the young woman was the only one starting to learn and willing to join the labour force in that tobacco grading centre. The accountant was a *mulata* (mulatto woman) in her 50s, and the buyer was a black woman in her 40s (the people in the cooperative referred to her as *la negra*, the black, but this was not necessarily a racist remark<sup>87</sup>). Both benefited from the educational policies of socialist Cuba and had acceded to positions of responsibility. The buyer had been trained as an agronomical technician and had already been buying tobacco for 10 years. After finishing her training, she had worked for two years in tobacco production and subsequently went to a grading centre to be trained in buying tobacco. In contrast, most producers were white, older, and generally less well educated than the technical female force.

After the end of the sale, I walked back to the *barrio* with Joaquín, his grandfather and his father; I asked Joaquín about the selling process and I told him my impression that the sampling procedure was just for show. He confirmed to me that there was a draw, but that the tobacco sample was picked up from the better parts, so as not to damage Eugenio's or Ricardo's chances. This was possible because he was on very good terms with the buyer and this helped, he told me. According to him, the buyer of the cooperative was the person who had most influence on the sale of the harvest, and he reinforced his point by using a somewhat violent metaphor: '*La compradora es la que te mete el cuchillo y te lo saca*' ('The buyer's the person that stabs you in the

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<sup>87</sup> In Cuba there is a whole panoply of phenotypic categories that are used in everyday life and even have nicknames '*mulato*', '*prieto*', '*moreno*', '*blanco*', '*jabao*', etc. It would be simplistic to draw the conclusion that because these terms denote skin complexion, the persons using them are racist. I do not want, however, to deny the existence of racism in contemporary Cuba, in spite of the egalitarian ideology and policies. For a recent discussion about racism in Cuba, see Esteban Morales Domínguez (2007), Mark Sawyer (2006), and Alejandro De la Fuente (2001).

back'). One had to be on good terms with the buyer. He mentioned cases when producers got angry during the selling process, contesting the evaluation of the crop and arguing with the buyer, but at the end the vociferous producers ended up losing more by challenging the buyers openly. On the contrary, being on good terms with the buyer helped one to get a more beneficial sale since, as had been the case in the morning, the sample would be chosen from the better tobacco. He did not say the buyers were corrupt, but he put it as being on good terms and as an exchange of favours, 'She helps me during this sale today; I help her during another sale.'

#### **4. The discussion with Eugenio after the sale**

During my interview with Eugenio after the sale I tried to make him talk about his relationship with the buyer and how she had helped him during the sale. He gave me a ready-made, 'correct' vision about the selling, i.e. that it had been a totally legal process and that friendship or collusion with the buyer could not help at that level. After some minutes of recording, I turned off the recorder and told him about the deceptive sampling of packs and bundles. He became apologetic and defensive. He acknowledged the fact that there was not a real draw, but a pretence of a draw. He justified this as a way of defending himself from the risk of getting a less favourable sale. According to him, *el sorteo* (the draw) was a system designed up there, but down here the working people had to work to improve it. The procedure was put in place to prevent cheating, but even with this new lottery, as it were, cheating was still possible. A person had to protect his labour and try hard to get the best price for the harvest. He defended the producers' position, saying that they were the backbone of the whole tobacco industry and that millions of people lived off tobacco in Cuba. As a producer, you had to get the best price for the harvest. 'If you sell beans,' he told me, 'you put the best on the top and the worst on the bottom to get the better price.' He continued, 'If I have a harvest of 6000 *cujes*, and I have 500 bad *cujes*, then I try to cheat (*hacer trampa*) in order to sell the bad tobacco as good.' '*El afectado te mata.*' ('The affected tobacco kills you') And finally he insisted that the state got the best of the tobacco anyway, because of its high

value for export. According to him, the state employees did the same thing in the grading centres, putting the best tobacco on the top, and when foreign buyers came, the employees presented the sample from the best tobacco.

He reiterated the importance of tobacco for the Cuban economy by providing many Cubans ('millones') a living. He used the metaphor of the leak (*el salidero*) to illustrate his point. '*Tanto salidero, tanta gente pegada a la compra de tabaco*' ('So many leaks, so many people around the sale of tobacco'). The employees of the grading centres only earned a salary. They did not own the tobacco, so they just wanted to quickly finish the tobacco buying and their working day. Nevertheless, Eugenio emphasized that one should be on good terms with everyone, not to make enemies or to antagonize people from the state enterprise or from the sorting centres. '*Tienes que estar metido en este mundo*' ('You have to be involved in this world'), he said to me.

He told me how he had always maintained good relations with the buyers of tobacco that passed through his cooperative. Only once had he had a more difficult sale. It had been a few years before. A new buyer (a woman, again) came to the cooperative and she came to his tobacco barn to buy part of the tobacco harvest. It was *tripa*, the lesser-quality tobacco. The buyer was particularly meticulous and demanding, asking for samples from different parts of the tobacco stack, especially from the bottom, where the worse-quality tobacco was put. He complied, but decided he was not going to sell the rest of the harvest to the same woman, because of her very strict method of buying tobacco. He did not say anything about it to anyone and never voiced any criticism against the buyer. Instead, he managed to avoid her, switching to another buyer he was on better terms with in order to sell the rest of the harvest. Incidentally, the next year, he found out why that woman had been so exacting during the buying process. During the visit to inspect Eugenio's tobacco, the buyer was accompanied by a man, to whom Eugenio did not pay particular attention. Eugenio imagined that he must have had an issue to discuss with the buyer, since he was the son of another producer from the same cooperative. Eugenio subsequently found out that the man was an inspector for the state enterprise and this explained why the buyer was so

exacting checking Eugenio's tobacco. Once he understood this, he had nothing against this particular technician buying again his tobacco. Moreover, he made her a gift (a pack of diapers) when she gave birth to a girl.<sup>88</sup> This was the only time Eugenio mentioned that he had made gifts to a buyer, but I suspect it was not an isolated case. I did not ask him if he also made gifts to the current buyer, because I imagined he would be offended after his initial reaction. Anyway, if that were the case, he would not admit it easily. I knew, however, from other producers that they made gifts to buyers and some even paid them small amounts of money for keeping good relationships with them. I am reluctant to speak about this as an instance of corruption. Neither Eugenio nor other producers spoke about these gifts as being examples of corruption. Their view was that one had to maintain good relations with everyone, especially people in the grading centre and from the tobacco state enterprise. This is similar to what Alena Ledeneva has called an economy of favours or *blat* in the Soviet Union, where *blat* means 'an exchange of "favours of access" in conditions of shortage and a state system of privileges' (Ledeneva 1998: 37). She distinguishes these exchanges from corruption or bribery. In Cuba different terms were used to talk about the same practices as *blat*, for example, *sociolismo* from *socio* meaning associate.<sup>89</sup>

Eugenio also talked about the state company's employees (*la gente de la empresa*) and their ways of making extra money. Like other growers, Eugenio made a major distinction between those earning a salary from the

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<sup>88</sup> The way he expressed this is worth stressing because it reveals that he needed another person to buy this gift (probably his wife or one of his daughters). '*Cuando cobré la divisa, mandé a comprar un estuche de culeros de esos que traen en la chopin*' ('When I was paid the *divisa* I sent someone to buy a package of diapers they have in the *chopin*'). I could hardly imagine Eugenio or other Cuban men I knew buying diapers, since there is a strong *machismo* ideology, especially among the older generation. As most imported goods, diapers (usually made in Italy) were sold in the hard currency peso shops (popularly called *chopin*', from the English *shopping*). A package (depending on the size) was worth 12–5 CUC, which was the equivalent of 80–100 percent of the Cuban average salary. This gift was a considerable one in Cuba (the woman was very happy when she received it, Eugenio told me) in contrast to Western Europe or the United States where such a gift would be considered inappropriate (at least among middle and upper social classes).

<sup>89</sup> Other expressions in Cuban Spanish are *tener palanca* (to have highly placed friends), or *tener padrino* (having a godfather).

state and those working for themselves. The first, given the state of Cuban economy, could not make ends meet with their salaries only. They had to earn additional money. How? One common way, according to Eugenio's interpretation, was by cheating through the weighing of tobacco. He said to me that if people working in the enterprise took a pound from him, another pound from another producer, and so on, that would eventually amount to something. This could be transformed into money or gifts, since the managers of the grading centre could either add some tobacco to other producers' loads or use the extra quantities as a trade-off between grading centres and tobacco factories. I do not have detailed information about these arrangements, since I did not work inside grading centres or with people from the administration of the tobacco enterprise. It is hard, though, to see how the extra quantities created through cheating could be transformed into money by the personnel directly in charge of weighing. Nevertheless, one could easily imagine how having this sort of surplus would be more useful for managers of grading centres in a state socialist economy, since it would allow them space to play with the numbers in the production plan, similar to managers hoarding material in the state firms of socialist Romania (Verdery 1996: 20–23).

For tobacco-growers like Eugenio, the world of the grading centres was one of *marañas* (swindling or cheating). A recurrent criticism was directed by producers at the grading centres' management. This issue concerned the essential operation of grading tobacco into different classes or categories, corresponding to different components of the cigar and to different brands (*vitolas*). These different categories of leaf had different monetary values. One way of extracting extra value for the managers was, according to producers' views, to play with classification procedures. Some leaves could be classified in an inferior class (and paid less for to the producers) during the sale, and afterwards reclassified in a superior category while tobacco was graded inside the centres. This is not exactly the same operation as creating value for tobacco through the sorting, classifying, packing, and fermenting practices, all done in the grading centres. It is the practice of playing between different categories of tobacco that constituted the trick. This created a general scepticism about the procedures of the tobacco sale. Producers knew how the

grading centres operated, since many of them had worked in one at some point or had relatives or friends working in this sector. Through these personal ties or experience, one could get a sense about how one's own or other people's tobacco was evaluated and classified.

Nevertheless, Eugenio was keen to make the distinction between the government (up there) and the people working in the state enterprise. It was not the government that made people cheat or try to get something extra on top of their salaries. Eugenio's comment was typical of his vision of politics in Cuba. His elder brother had fought in the underground movement of Fidel against the dictator Batista. His family's living standards were at their worst before the revolution. While feeling a deep attachment and respect for Fidel, Eugenio had kept himself out of any kind of formal involvement with state political organizations. Moreover, he had his critical opinions and scepticism concerning some state policies (he mentioned agriculture). However, he had never voiced criticism of the good intentions and dedication that Fidel had showed for the lot of ordinary Cubans and indeed of the revolution. In Eugenio's grasp of political power, the pure, doubtless good intentions and actions of Fidel were deformed by the numerous illegal arrangements of state managers and employees down the chain of command. Eugenio added, '*Está es la política*' ('That's politics!'), a statement ambiguous enough to accommodate the conundrum of Cuban society and economy, between the idealist positive ideals of the revolution (carried out by Fidel) and the constraints of everyday life.

In his account of the sale, Eugenio made an important point that was also recurrent in conversations I had with other producers. It was the question of the importance of tobacco for the Cuban economy as an important source of hard currency. 'A Cuban cigar costs so much abroad and in the shops for tourists in Havana,' Eugenio told me. 'The government makes so much money from the selling of tobacco.' Those working (in the field) (*la gente trabajadora*) are entitled to get the most in the sale of the crop, he added. Without being a Marxist, Eugenio here presented (like many other producers) a vision resembling a simplified version of the Marxist labour theory of value, affirming

the entitlement of the producers to get more of the profits the state made out of cigar sales.

At the beginning of September 2008, Eugenio received the payment for his harvest. He was content with the price he got for the harvest (58,000 pesos and 1,620 CUCs).<sup>90</sup> Deducting the 10,000 pesos he put from his own money into the costs of the harvest, he made a profit of 48,000 pesos and 1,620 CUCs, making an equivalent of 88,500 pesos (7,375 pesos a month). As a comparison, the average salary of an evaluator of tobacco quality, an employee of the state tobacco enterprise, was 371 pesos and 20 CUCs a month. A bodyguard working in the tourist sector earned 300 pesos and 20 CUCs a month. A bank employee had a salary of 575 pesos and 14 CUCs. A specialist doctor in the Pinar del Río hospital earned 570 pesos. An agricultural worker, like those employed by Eugenio, could make around 700 pesos a month. Eugenio was one of the best producers in the Almendares cooperative and he had a consistent record of good harvests, managing to fulfil the plan and get the bonus in convertible pesos. Most of the cooperative's members managed to achieve their plan and touch the bonus package.

Obtaining good harvests over the years enhanced one's reputation, and this was very important for the way state buyers and other employees treated a grower during the sale. Moreover, at the beginning of the 1990s the state tobacco company established a series of awards called *Hombre Habano* for various categories, such as the best grower, the best cigar maker, the best cigar promoter and so on. These are awarded during the annual international cigar festival in Havana. A winner of one of these awards and the most famous Cuban tobacco-grower was an inhabitant of San Luis, Alejandro Robaina.

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<sup>90</sup> That would be the equivalent of 4,300 convertible pesos or 4,730 USD (for an exchange rate of 1 CUC=1.1 USD).

### **5. Enhancing tobacco value through branding: Alejandro Robaina**

On 19 April 2010 *The New York Times* published a rare obituary for a Cuban peasant, Alejandro Robaina, who had died two days before at the age of 91.<sup>91</sup> The article mentioned the basic facts about his life: born in 1919 into a family with a long tradition in tobacco-growing going back to 1845, he was the owner of a 40-acre tobacco plantation called La Piña, in the Cuchillas de Barbacoa area of the municipality of San Luis. His skills and experience in growing the finest tobacco for cigar wrappers earned him praise and prizes from the Cuban government. He became the unofficial ambassador of Cuban cigars all over the world, travelling mostly to European countries to promote them. He also was the owner of a unique distinction: in 1997 his name was given to a new brand of cigars, Vegas Robaina, becoming the only Cuban grower to have a brand of cigar named after him. The obituary throws a shadow of a doubt about how much of Robaina's own tobacco is actually present in the 3 million Vegas Robaina cigars produced each year. The issue of the brand, the article reports was not a main concern for the producer, more interested in producing high-quality tobacco: 'Mr. Robaina discreetly sidestepped questions about his namesake product. At times he seemed mystified by it. But he remained confident about his leaves' (Grimes 2010).

Robaina was a cult figure among cigar smokers around the world at the time of his death. In the late 1990s and 2000s, his farm in Pinar del Río was highly recommended in all major international tourist guides. Almost every day his farm was visited by dozens of tourists, sometimes brought by coaches from Havana. His fame also benefited many individuals making a living by guiding tourists from the main road to his farm or selling fake Vegas Robaina cigars to mystified tourists.

All articles and obituaries written before and after his death stressed both his charisma and skills in growing tobacco as important factors in explaining his fame. But one must ask how it is possible that a modest tobacco-grower could achieve such fame in a country where the official discourse

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<sup>91</sup> William Grimes, 'Alejandro Robaina, Grower for Top Cuban Cigars, Dies at 91', *The New York Times*, 19 April 2010.

emphasizes that all individual achievements are mostly due to the revolution and where equality is a strong ideological principle. Moreover, his fame and the tourists' attention contrasted with the rest of the tobacco-growers of the region, including many excellent farmers. We need to understand the social and political conditions that made possible the emergence of the Robaina myth. His personal qualities are important, but are not sufficient to explain the emergence of such a phenomenon. His case is even more interesting, since he never played lip service to the official discourse. On the contrary, many articles underline his apolitical stance or his restraint from making any kind of political commentary. Moreover, he never hid the fact that he was a practising Catholic and that he was critical of the cooperative movement in Cuba.

Let me present my own impressions about Alejandro Robaina since I met him twice. The first time was in July 2007 during my pre-field trip to Cuba. I was attending an international conference, Habana-Habanos, on the subject of Cuban tobacco from a multidisciplinary perspective. The conference programme included a trip to the experimental agronomical station of San Juan y Martinez, devoted to tobacco-growing. The visit included a meeting with the station staff, agronomical engineers and a small group of the region's best tobacco-growers, including Robaina. The star of the meeting, he was shy and reserved in his interactions with the audience. Rather short in stature, looking younger than his age, his melancholic eyes gave one the impression that he had the power to look into his interlocutor's mind. His face and hands displayed wrinkles like dried tobacco leaves. In his retiring manner, he kindly accepted being photographed with the participants and signed autographs. He was extremely complimentary to women, who seemed enchanted by him. The other growers were very affectionate and respectful to him. However, he was not very different from them in his manner, way of talking, and appearance. He was just another peasant.

I met him a second time during a visit to his house on a Sunday afternoon at the beginning of February 2009. I was introduced to him by one of his grandsons, Mario, a good acquaintance of mine. Mario had promised me to arrange this visit, but we had postponed it several times due to his

grandfather's continuously deteriorating health. Doctors advised fewer visits and more rest. At the time it was not known that he was suffering from lung cancer (or the family actually decided not to disclose the diagnosis to outsiders). Alejandro received us that afternoon after finishing his Sunday lunch in the company of the priest of San Luis and a bishop from Italy. He was publicly known as a practicing Catholic so I had brought him a book about the *Virgin of Caridad*, the saint patron of Cuba, a manuscript by Fernando Ortiz published later (Ortiz 2008). He appreciated the gift and pointed to the big ceiba tree that was in the front of the house portal, telling me that he had there an altar of Our Lady of the Snows (*la Virgen de la Nieve*), who is venerated as the protector of the tobacco-growers. We went to sit on the porch of the house and I was invited to smoke a cigar produced on his farm, seemingly part of the hospitality ritual. Alejandro told me that they rolled around 100 cigars every day at the farm for household consumption, his workers and visitors. I found this astonishing for two reasons. First, this meant that he hired a person to roll tobacco on the farm, something quite unusual compared with other farms. Cigar-rolling is the monopoly of the state and no producer can roll cigars on such a scale out of his own tobacco. Second, this indicated the importance of the flow of visitors to the farm. Alejandro had already given up smoking by the time of our visit, at the repeated insistence of doctors and family, a habit he acquired when he was ten years old.



Fig. 23. Image of *Nuestra Señora de las Nieves*, Patroness of Tobacco-growers, Church of San Luis

He seemed to be tired by his socializing over lunch, but answered some of my questions about his farm. He said that the prospects for the harvest of 2009 seemed extremely promising. His knowledge of the impact of the weather on tobacco-growing was extensive and one could hardly doubt his predictions. I asked him about the quality of the land, and about the quantity of tobacco he was producing. He produced mostly shade-grown tobacco (160,000 plants) and a bit of sun-grown tobacco (20,000 plants) for what seemed to be his own cigar production. At this point I asked him about a topic that was a larger issue of debate in the world of Cuban tobacco, i.e. the difference between sun- and shade-grown tobacco and its importance for Cuban cigars. Sun-grown tobacco is a filler tobacco that goes inside the cigar and determines the strength and the aroma, while the shade-grown tobacco makes the wrapper that gives the form and, ultimately, the appearance of the cigar. He agreed that the cigar's strength and aroma were provided by sun-grown tobacco. He evaluated, nevertheless, the value of the wrapper, a single leaf made from shade-grown

tobacco, as around 10 percent of the total value of a cigar. Another topic I was keen to discuss with him was the question of the continuity of tobacco-growing in relation to young people's lack of motivation to work the land and continue the tradition. He said that this is a real difficulty and he pointed out Mario, one of his grandsons who had decided to study and become an engineer instead of following in the steps of his father in tobacco-growing. Robaina had only two sons, the older who decided to stay on the farm and work with him, the younger who went on to study and moved to Havana. Unfortunately, his older son died of a heart attack in the 1990s. However, Hirochi, the son of his Havana-based son Carlos, decided to move in with his grandfather in the early 2000s in order to learn the secrets of the trade. Alejandro seemed pleased with the way Hirochi was learning how to cultivate the plant, and he even admitted that due to his illness he let his grandson manage the crop that year. However, he hoped that once his health improved he could get back in charge of the farm.

Once all the other guests had left, we moved from the porch of the house, which faced the tobacco fields, to the *ranchón*, a newly constructed big covered terrace that could accommodate numerous guests or host receptions. It resembled many terraces of hotels and restaurants that had mushroomed all around Cuba as a result of tourism, built in a neo-traditional way, with the roof covered by palm leaves, like ancient tobacco-curing barns. The place had a bar, a big wooden table at the centre, other smaller tables, and quite a few rocking chairs. There we sat with 58-year-old Carlos, Alejandro's second son, and his 33-year-old grandson Hirochi. Other friends of the family were around. Alejandro, Mario, Carlos, and I sat round the table and talked about tobacco. Alejandro described various new techniques they had introduced in order to improve the quality of the crop. He looked tired so I decided not to ask too many questions. At some point, Carlos left the table to greet some people who had just arrived by car. He came shortly afterwards to tell us that two Mexican women with their Cuban guide wanted to see Alejandro. He had told them that on Sunday there was no visiting of the farm, but they insisted, so he came to ask his father if he wanted to see them for just a few minutes. He agreed, and he accepted being photographed with the two women, thrilled to meet the legend of Cuban tobacco. He also seemed quite pleased by their presence

and the conversation with them. Nevertheless, after 15 minutes or so, the tourists left to have a short visit of the farm, guided by Carlos, and Alejandro retired to have a rest.

Mario and I remained for a while to have some beer and play dominoes with Hirochi and one of his friends. Looking around me, I could have imagined being on the terrace of a hotel, a slight surreal feeling provoked by the contrast with the tobacco fields and the neighbouring simple wooden houses. This accommodation was designed for receiving tourists and visitors, socializing and cigar tasting. After Carlos had seen off the visitors, he joined us, and I asked him about the visits at the farm. He said that they had so many tourists coming every day that sometimes it was quite disturbing. As a response to the growing influx of visitors, they had built the terrace and some rooms where people could be fed and received. Since his father had fallen ill, he had spent more time at the farm, receiving tourists and helping with things, but otherwise he lived in Havana where he was managing one of the biggest cigar shops in the capital.<sup>92</sup> He boasted about his job in what he said was the best cigar shop in Cuba. Due to his position and the contacts he had made among visitors to his father, he had come to know many important people from abroad. He had so many friends, including some very rich people. Shortly before leaving, Carlos showed Mario and me his Rolex watch, saying that it was a gift from a friend. He added, ‘The world of cigars is a world of millionaires and there you cannot look like nobody. A Robaina has to preserve the name. When I go to a reception everybody looks at how you are dressed. I have an Omega watch too.’

However, after the visit I felt that Carlos might have had a point, even though I found his boasting and showing off not particularly pleasant. While fame seemed to be a natural condition for Carlos, for his father it was not always easy to handle. In an interview for Cuban television, he said that the most difficult thing for him (a ‘sacrifice’ as he put it) was to wear jacket and tie

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<sup>92</sup> *Casa del Habano*, this is the generic name for state-managed cigar shops around Cuba. Habanos SA, the joint venture between Cubatabaco and British Tobacco Co., grants licences to run *Casas del Habano* abroad.

for the events and ceremonies he had to attend or during important visits and TV interviews he gave at his farm.<sup>93</sup> Moreover, although he was a very sociable person, the flow of tourists and visitors had sometimes put a strain on his life. He confessed in the same interview that sometimes he had to hide from visitors. James Suckling, editor of the *Cigar Aficionado* review and a close friend of Alejandro, wrote that seeing the crowd at the gate of Robaina's farm reminded him of a rock concert crowd. One could see, however, how fame, with its benefits and challenges was more easily handled by Carlos and Hirochi who seemed to adapt more rapidly to the new conditions.

At this point, I would like to explore some significant moments in Robaina's life, which are crucial for understanding how he became such a famous figure. Even though I did not do a life history interview with him, I could reconstruct these significant moments from the rich published material about his life, including numerous interviews he gave for the Cuban and international press. I also got insights, opinions, and puns about Robaina from Cubans in the tobacco world – tobacco-growers, state employees, connoisseurs. I use these insights about Robaina and his family as a counterpoint to the published material. When I reconstruct the order of these moments, I second Bourdieu's warning against biographical illusion (Bourdieu 1986). One should be aware of the tendency of considering one's biography as a unidirectional trajectory made of significant events and downplaying the unpredictable, untimely moments of one's life. If, according to the French theorist, everyone tends to be the ideologist of his/her own life, the analyst should rather corroborate autobiographies and life histories from other testimonies. I take a selection of significant moments from Robaina's life (as they are presented in articles and interviews with him) and I contextualize them against the background of Cuba's social and political transformations.

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<sup>93</sup> Interview in Spanish, at [http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xcepto\\_alejandro-robaina-fornes-mejor-prod\\_news](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xcepto_alejandro-robaina-fornes-mejor-prod_news) (last accessed 12 January 2010).



Fig. 24. Cigar box dedicated to Alejandro Robaina for his 83<sup>rd</sup> birthday (Alejandro Robaina collection)

A first significant aspect of Robaina's biography is his longevity. Born in 1919 (only 18 years after Cuba's formal independence), he was a 40-year-old accomplished tobacco-grower at the victory of the Revolution. Later on, chance let Robaina get out of the common lot of tobacco-growers. In 1980, an epidemic provoked by the blue mould fungus (*Peronospora tabacina*) almost completely destroyed that year's tobacco harvest all over Cuba. People in San Luis still remember that catastrophic year, when the majority of them lost their crops to the effect of the fungus. Only a few producers were able to save something from their crops. Robaina was one of them, managing to save his crop almost entirely. This singular accomplishment, which he attributed to his knowledge of growing tobacco, triggered the interest of the state agronomists from the experimental station in the near municipality of San Juan y Martinez, and as a consequence, they started to provide Robaina with new varieties of tobacco for testing their properties. In this way, he became an important expert for state bureaucrats and technicians in charge of tobacco production. He met Fidel in the 1980s, when the government trying to revive the cooperative movement, but he declined his invitation to join a cooperative and become its

president. This is a point he made explicitly in different interviews, saying that for him tobacco was a plant for family farming, not state-run agriculture. Eventually, with the economic crisis of the early 1990s, the government changed its policy on cooperative formation and leased state land for tobacco production to individual producers in order to keep it productive.

In 1997 Habanos SA introduced a new cigar brand, Vegas Robaina (with five different *vitolas* or sizes), in order to pay homage to the best producer of cigar wrappers in Cuba in many years. It was the first time in post-1959 Cuba that a cigar had been named after a living Cuban. Only interviews with the Habanos management could throw light on why they had decided to make a new brand and name it after Robaina. Since I did not have access to those in charge at that time, I could only speculate why they might have decided to do so. In the 1990s there was a revival of cigar-smoking worldwide, and Habanos SA were interested in tapping into this new consumer trend. Generally, the creation of new brands is an important strategy of marketing and value production in an economy of singularities (Karpik 2010; Bevan & Wengrow 2010). While most Cuban cigar brands were inherited from the pre-revolutionary period (Hoyo de Monterrey and Romeo y Julieta among others), Cohiba was the only post-1959 (produced since 1962) Cuban brand which acquired international fame. In the late 1990s, Habanos SA started a renewal of cigar branding. In addition to the Robaina brand, other two brands were created and named after two important cities in Cuba, San Cristobal de la Habana and Trinidad (not accidentally these cities had received the status of a UNESCO World Heritage site). Robaina was a perfect instantiation of the long tradition in tobacco-growing in one of the most famous tobacco regions in the world. He was a senior figure, a man who embodied the best of old and new Cuba: excellence, attachment to the land, continuity of tradition and the simplicity of the hard-working producer. His apolitical stance and his Catholicism were assets rather than liabilities. In the 1990s, religious freedom became a new policy of the Cuban government, and his refraining from speaking about politics was an advantage in relation to the social composition and political views of most cigar-smokers, who came from the upper middle classes in Europe and the United States, and were usually white businessmen.

Imagine the incongruity of a committed revolutionary ambassador of Cuban cigars preaching Communism in the meetings of millionaires in Madrid, London or Paris. Robaina became Don (Lord in Spanish) Alejandro Robaina, presented at many fairs and other events as the icon of Cuban cigars. Habanos SA named the double Corona size of Vegas Robaina cigars 'Don Alejandro', a strategy which had a double symbolic effect. On the one hand, the brand came to symbolize excellence, seniority, distinction, and nobility. On the other, by giving the most prestigious of the Robaina cigar sizes the name of an individual, it clearly established an indexical relationship between the brand and Alejandro Robaina, singling him out from all the Robainas working in tobacco-growing. Don Alejandro had been without doubt made the founder and the backbone of the brand.



Fig. 25. Papal blessing for Alejandro Robaina from Pope Benedict XVI (Alejandro Robaina collection)

Fig. 26. Vegas Robaina labels and bands (from Alejandro Robaina collection)

There is a political background to the promotion of a brand like Robaina that has to do with the antagonism between Cuban exile and revolutionary Cuba. As I have mentioned elsewhere in this thesis, most owners of cigar brands and cigar-producers and important tobacco-growers went into exile as a result of the revolutionary agricultural reforms and nationalization of business

in Cuba. Stubbs has written with insight about their role in setting up the production of high-quality cigars in the Dominican Republic, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Florida (Stubbs 2007). Most of these tobacco-producers (families such as the Placencias, Padron, and Oliva) started producing their cigars under their own names, in this way controlling the whole commodity chain from the agricultural end to the distribution end. They have promoted their brands as instantiations of their long tradition of tobacco-growing, skills, and their hard workmanship. The Robaina brand could be seen as an answer to these new brands of cigars produced by Cubans in exile. In 2002 Correos de Cuba printed a stamp with Alejandro Robaina's image with the following text: 'In the shadow of the massif of San Luis, the ancestral experience of Robainas preserves all the rituals of the crop that assures their harvests the exclusive flavour of the good cigar.'<sup>94</sup> The brand Robaina could claim symbolic superiority over the brands produced by exiled Cuban competitors, since it indexes its qualities to what is considered the best soil for cigar tobacco in the world.

The Robaina phenomenon should also be seen in the context of the global upsurge of interest in Cuban popular culture, especially music, which peaked at the end of the 1990s. The emblematic case is the global success of the Buena Vista Social Club. The music album released in 1997 and its film sequel made by Wim Wenders in 1999 marked a worldwide resurgence of interest in Cuban popular music and raised humble and relatively unknown musicians such as Compay Segundo, Ibrahim Ferrer, and Eliades Ochoa, among others, to world fame. Segundo is particularly relevant for my point. Born in 1907, he achieved a certain popularity as part of various groups until 1955. From that date, he worked as a cigar-roller in the H. Upmann factory in Havana until his retirement in 1970.<sup>95</sup> He was involved subsequently in various

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<sup>94</sup> 'A la sombra del macizo de San Luis, la experiencia ancestral de los Robaina conservan todos los rituales del cultivo que dotan a sus cosechas con el exclusivo sabor del buen puro.'

<sup>95</sup> Hirochi Robaina had started his professional career in Havana as a cigar-roller before coming to live on his grandfather's farm. He said in various interviews that he had got Compay Segundo's desk in the H. Upmann factory. This is an interesting coincidence, that potentially enhances the legend of Robaina brand (in Bourdieu's terminology it can be seen as an appropriation of symbolic capital).

musical groups, but without much popular success, before Ry Cooder's project helped him achieve world star status. Segundo was also a big promoter of Cuban cigars: in public, when not singing, he was always holding a cigar in his hand or in his mouth.

Wim Wenders' film 'Buena Vista Social Club' provided an image of Cuba that was nostalgic, and at the same time represented the extraordinary vitality of musicians of an age closer to retirement than to the start of their careers. They play *son* music (traditional music originally from eastern Cuba), popular before the revolution, but different from the post-1959 genres (*nueva trova*, *timba*, or *reguetón*). Their international success puzzled many Cubans and some critical voices rose against a rather anachronistic vision of Cuba. However, the vintage character of their music fit rather well with the general representations of Cuba from the 1990s: a dystopian place where time seemed to have stopped when seen against the larger worldwide changes in the aftermath of the end of the bipolar world. The emergence of Robaina dovetails with this larger picture of Cuba, shared by outsiders and tourists and, to a large extent, promoted by the revolutionary government as a strategy of attracting tourism. After all, the majority of buyers of Vegas Robaina cigars are from the fortunate European or North American upper-middle classes and not Cubans themselves.

### **5.1. The Vegas Robaina cigars versus Robaina farm cigars**

The economics and the juridical aspect of the brand are important issues. Cuba being (still) a socialist country, it does not recognize privately owned brands nor does it accept individuals making profits out of brands.<sup>96</sup> Therefore, Habanos SA is the owner of the Vegas Robaina brand and retains all the benefits of the brand. Alejandro himself and other people stated that the

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<sup>96</sup> I refer here to economic brands. For cultural products such as music and arts, there is surely a different regime, in which individual intellectual rights started to be legally protected in the post-Perestroika period. For an illuminating analysis, especially the analysis of the international legal dispute over the use of photographs by Alberto Korda of Che Guevara, see Hernandez-Reguant (2004).

Robaina family did not receive any payment for the use of their name. It is important to recall that Vegas Robaina has become a brand that applies not only to cigars, but also to cigar accessories, drinks, and art works. There are also Vegas Robaina club fans all over the world who use and identify themselves by the image of Alejandro Robaina. What is not always clear to these fans is the fact that the Vegas Robaina cigars are not made out of the tobacco produced by the Robaina family, with the exception – and this is still a debatable issue – of the wrapper. In order to understand this, one has to grasp the scale of the Robaina farm. They produce mostly wrapper tobacco, not sun-grown tobacco that goes inside the cigar and gives it its flavour. Moreover, the wrapper they produce cannot provide for the 3 million Vegas Robaina cigars that are produced every year. So Vegas Robaina cigars contain mostly or entirely leaves produced by other growers than the Robaina family. This is a sort of public secret in San Luis and among connoisseurs of cigar-making.

The latter have not been always enthusiastic about the quality of the Vegas Robaina cigars. James Suckling, who covered the making of Cuban cigars for almost 20 years for *Cigar Aficionado*, speaks about the ‘Vegas Robaina conundrum’:<sup>97</sup> How is it possible that the best producer of cigar wrappers in the world has cigars carrying his name that display a mediocre wrapper and do not taste great? He writes:

To this day, no one, not even the tobacco man himself, has been able to explain to me the poor quality of the Vegas Robaina wrapper. The newer Vegas Robaina cigars look a bit better than the ones produced for the launch in 1997, but they still don't look like what I have seen drying in Robaina's curing barns at his plantation, *Finca El Pina in Chuchillas de Barbacoa*. Perhaps this is why the brand has not been a success in the marketplace. (Suckling 2001)

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<sup>97</sup> James Suckling, ‘Cigar Diary: The Vegas Robaina Conundrum’, *Cigar Aficionado*, January–February 2001, available online at <http://www.cigaraficionado.com/webfeatures/show/id/7039> (last accessed 21 March 2011).

Suckling asked Alejandro Robaina for an answer, but the famous grower was not able to clarify this issue. Instead, Alejandro offered him a cigar that it was made of 100 percent Robaina tobacco:

He doesn't seem very upset when I tell him that I don't think much about the Vegas Robaina cigar brand. He doesn't really seem to know why the wrappers on the brand have been of such poor quality. 'All I can say is the cigar you are smoking is from my plantation', he says, holding out a duplicate of the one he gave me a few minutes earlier. 'The wrapper, the binder and the filler, all come from my plantation. And it's a great cigar'. (Suckling 2001)

In 2008, in an article posted after a three-day visit to the Robaina farm, Suckling presented a double Corona cigar produced by the Robaina family called El Padrino (The Godfather) and praises it as one of the best cigars he had ever smoked. He wonders 'Why spend a million dollars on Behikes? Unfortunately, the Robainas' cigars are not for sale.'<sup>98</sup> These cigars could only be smoked at the farm. He explains that they are made of a small reserve of tobacco (50 lb) that each producer can keep for his own consumption out of the harvest they have to sell to the state.

Many producers kept small quantities of their own tobacco to make cigars for their own consumption or to give as gifts. Much more tobacco, however, to a scale hard to quantify since it was an illegal activity, severely punished by the state, went into the informal economy to produce fake cigars. These replicas of state-owned brands were produced in San Luis, but most of the illegal cigar-making was concentrated in Havana, where buyers among tourists could more easily be found. In San Luis the amateur guides waiting for tourists' cars at the fork of the main road and the country road towards the farm of the Robainas, tried to sell imitations of Vegas Robaina cigars to the visitors. Either Suckling was not aware or he was hiding the fact that the cigars produced by Robaina needed a bigger quantity of tobacco leaves than what producers were normally allowed to keep for themselves. As I mentioned earlier, Alejandro told me that they rolled 100 cigars a day for tourists and farm

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<sup>98</sup> James Suckling, 'Day 5. Smoking Fumas', blog entry, posted 8 February 2008, at <http://www.cigaraficionado.com/blogs/show/id/175> (last accessed 21 March 2011).

workers. I would think that the exquisite El Padrino cigars are not counted among these rather average cigars. So the quantity of cigars produced on the farm must be higher than what an ordinary grower was allowed to keep for his own consumption. Moreover, cigar-manufacturing is the monopoly of the state in revolutionary Cuba, so that the cigar rolling on the Robaina farm was an exceptional case, most probably tolerated by the government.



Fig. 27. Rolling cigars in San Luis

The terrace bar and some guest accommodation had just been finished at the time of my visit in February 2009. The Robaina farm was looking functionally like a tourist place, including guided tours of the farm in order to explain the process of tobacco production, cigar-rolling, and cigar-tasting. I did not visit them as a tourist, so I do not know the costs of various services, but I heard people were charged a couple of convertible pesos only to visit the farm. The other services (eating, coffee, drinks, and lodging) were obviously charged for, but I do not have precise information. In spite of the fact that the Robaina family did not receive any royalties from the state for the use of the name as a brand, they built on the fame of Alejandro Robaina and started to think of the future. Tourists came to the gate of their farm in dozens, an economic potential

that needed to be tapped. Unfortunately, I do not have extensive ethnographic material on the whole economy of the Robaina farm, but it seemed to function as a real family enterprise, involving not only Carlos and Hirochi, but also other close relatives and neighbours.

The only question is if, in Weberian terms, the charisma of the old Alejandro can be routinized and preserved within the family. The case of the Robaina brand could be compared with the situation described by Pierre Bourdieu and Yvette Delsaut concerning the difficulties of haute couture houses in surviving the death of their founders (Bourdieu & Delsaut 1975). Since the creator is the only one credited with the quasi-magical power to transform the objects into valuable objects by his/her signature (an operation of symbolic transubstantiation), how could the successors make a name for themselves while working for the already established brand? Bourdieu and Delsaut observe that, if they do not succumb after the death of their founder, most of the couture houses survive by dividing the functions of the indivisible founder (manager, creator, promoter). Those 'responsible for creation' (uniting both the delegation and charisma of creation) as they are called in the milieu, are confronted with an antithetic pressure: ensure the survival of the founder's name, and in the same way make a name for themselves in a world that prizes creativity. It would be interesting to explore the similarities and differences of the world of fashion and that of tobacco production. There is at least one aspect that differentiates the two cases: if the world of French fashion is fully functioning in a capitalist world, the growing of tobacco and cigar making in Cuba is still carried out in an economy in which the state has the monopoly of cigar-producing and it is the owner of the cigar brands. The creation of the Robaina brand is an exceptional case in the world of Cuban cigars, but as such it shows the paradox of personalization through brands in a context of a state-owned and -managed cigar industry. Robaina became a star of Cuban cigar growers, a cultural icon of Cuba, like the stars of the Buenavista Social Club. At the same time, ordinary growers like Eugenio struggled to achieve the best value for their harvest at the moment its sale. Their tobacco became raw material at the disposal of the state enterprise used for manufacturing various prestigious cigar brands. On the contrary, the existence of the Robaina brand

has created the possibility of connecting the producer directly with the brand's international consumers.

When I was in San Luis, I asked people what they thought would be the future of tobacco-growing on Robaina's farm once Alejandro passed away. In general, there was scepticism about the capacity of his grandson to continue the high-quality work of his grandfather. People felt respect towards Robaina and a recognition for the fame he brought to the municipality. There was, however, less tolerance towards his son Carlos, considered by many to be unreliable and profit-interested, and Hirochi, considered arrogant. Some mocked the latter's passion for karaoke singing. People reminded me that they were city people from the capital. Carlos left his family house, went to study, and eventually made his life in the capital. He had never worked in the fields. Alejandro, his older brother, remained on the farm to help his father and become the heir of the farm. He died prematurely of a heart attack, but people remembered him with affection as a modest and hard-working person on very good terms with everyone. The return of Carlos and Hirochi to the farm was seen by people as interest-driven, to take advantage of the fame of the family patriarch, and to be in charge of his heritage after his death. Robainas were aware that Hirochi<sup>99</sup> was not going to be easily welcomed into the world of tobacco-growers. The dominant view among growers was that one needed to be born and raised in the countryside, in order to make it as a successful tobacco-grower. In his last interviews, Alejandro insisted on the fact that Hirochi was in charge of the harvest, under his guidance, and that he had fast learnt the secrets of the trade. He also stressed that his grandson had initially started his professional life as a cigar- roller, so he knew all the processes and secrets of the making of cigars.

There is one important point to make about Alejandro himself. People in San Luis were and are very proud of having him as one of theirs, but at the

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<sup>99</sup> After a visit to Japan, Carlos chose Hirochi as a name for his son. Nevertheless, an intellectual from San Luis told me that his non-Cuban name could be a liability to the grandson's capacity of representing Cuban tobacco abroad. A Japanese first name could hardly be associated with one of the most representative Cuban products.

same time they do not necessarily see him as the best tobacco-producer in San Luis, not to say in the world. This could be attributed, to a large extent, to the competitive spirit that exists among producers. Growers were ready to mention names of producers that grew better tobacco than Robaina's, but without achieving the same fame. The success of Robaina was often seen as a mixture of chance (the miraculous harvest during the 1980 blue mould epidemics) and his quick adaptation to various state tobacco-growing policies and technological change, such as the movement towards more shade-grown tobacco and experiment with different varieties of tobacco. Not many producers were willing to risk a year's harvest with a new variety that would prove to be a failed experiment at the end of the year, but Alejandro took on that risk.

Probably one of the most interesting remarks about Robaina's fame was shared with me by Guillermo, a Cuban photographer knowledgeable about the Cuban tobacco world: 'He was chosen to be famous by the state. Obviously, he is charismatic, but there are other growers that are as charismatic as Robaina. For example Lin Paz, awarded with the Hombre Habano Prize for the best producer in 2006. Nevertheless, he doesn't smoke. Robaina likes smoking cigars.'<sup>100</sup> This opinion is interesting for two reasons: first it points to the fact that a cigar ambassador carrying the image of a Cuban brand was supposed to be an aficionado of cigars. Actually, very few tobacco-growers I knew smoked at all. This puzzled many cigar-smokers, who were amazed how non-smokers could grow such high-quality tobacco. Second, the observation about Robaina being a choice made by the state reveals the discretionary power of the state to name, delegate, and create a brand name and a world-famous personality.

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<sup>100</sup> The fact that the best-known tobacco-grower died of lung cancer must be embarrassing news for cigar-smoking reviews or the Habanos SA. Actually, on the latter's website, the death of Alejandro Robaina was announced as being the 'result of a long illness', without specifying the disease (<http://www.habanos.com/article.aspx?aid=398>, last accessed 18 January 2011). Very few newspapers (published by the exile Cuban-American community) actually revealed the nature of his illness, see <http://elpoderdemiami.com/2010/04/18/ultimo-adios-para-el-legionario-veguero-cubano-alejandro-robaina/> (last accessed 18 January 2011).

## **6. Concluding remarks**

In this chapter I have presented two contrasting cases of how the politics of value around tobacco have been at play in Cuba in the last few years. Eugenio's case illustrates the situation of Cuban tobacco-growers in general, who have been operating in a socialist economy where the state has monopoly power over the commercialization of tobacco products. Robaina's case, on the contrary, more hybrid, closer to the way artists now operate in Cuba (Hernández-Reguant 2004). By becoming a brand name, the Robaina family have been operating partly in a regime of value of global capitalism, being able to benefit from their fame and popularity among cigar consumers and international tourists.

The state monopoly of tobacco (organized as Tabacuba for the agricultural sector and Habanos SA for the production and distribution of cigars) is articulated with a sector of peasant agriculture (operating with family and hired labour) providing more than 90 percent of the tobacco for premium cigars. Even if the tobacco-growing sector is better remunerated than other agricultural activities in Cuba, tobacco-growers receive only a small fraction of the total value of the profits from the sale of Cuban cigars. This point was repeatedly made to me by many tobacco-growers in our conversations. However, several producers willingly recognized that they were not suffering from the negative effects of market fluctuations or from abusive buying practices as had been the case before 1959.

However, the introduction in 2008 of a more elaborate sampling procedure for the sale of tobacco provoked great anxieties among producers who were not willing to risk the value of their crop with a draw. What was seen as a more accurate method to determine the value of a crop based on objective, scientifically based, standardized procedures, was seen as threatening by most producers ('What if they got the sample from the worst tobacco?'). There is definitely more to explore on local notions of contingency and (good or bad) luck (*mala o buena suerte*), since these inform the apprehensive attitude of the producers towards the sampling by draw. I will discuss this more in Chapter 5 in relation to cockfighting and gambling among

tobacco-growers. Here it is important to underline that the idea of deciding the value of a year's tobacco crop on a randomized sample was hard to accept for producers, who had put so much work and care in growing their tobacco.<sup>101</sup> Eugenio, like other producers I surmise, managed to get around this objectivist procedure through his personal connections with the state-employees who were in charge of buying the harvested tobacco. These relations had been maintained over the years and were based on good rapport and small gifts made to the state employees. I have proposed to see these relations in terms of exchange of favours (Ledeneva 1998) and not corruption, a polyvalent concept that often sustains normative judgments and is inattentive to the complexity of local social contexts (Muir and Gupta 2018). I see tobacco-growers' maintenance of relations with state bureaucrats as part of the domestication of the revolutionary state – tactics through which farmers managed to overpass or diminish the effect of certain state policies. The tactics employed in the process of tobacco sale were ways of taming the uncertainty and tension characteristic of this crucial moment in which a crop was evaluated and its price established. Since the tobacco crop's quality was a product of the constant caring for plants and of the struggle to cope with contingencies (weather, sanitary conditions, labour shortages) throughout the year, it is understandable why the producers were anxious to obtain a fair price for their work. The price was important for them, even if the array of rewards for good work encompassed also peer-recognition, diplomas, prizes or, as in the case of Alejandro Robaina, celebrity.

I would like to close with a suggestion for another possible way to interpret the anxieties about the sampling procedure. I think the sampling procedure emphasizes the arbitrary appropriation of value by the state that comes from the nature of the tobacco monopoly. On their part, growers tried to tame this arbitrariness and get more value for their tobacco during the sale. Once sold, tobacco leaves belonged to the state, supporting a whole industry and derivative commercial and cultural events. The glamour and economic

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<sup>101</sup> I believe that this kind of attitude is not restricted to tobacco-growers. How many academics, for instance, would willingly accept being evaluated for a grant or an appointment on the basis of one or two publications randomly selected from their CVs?

benefits brought by exporting Cuban cigars did not redound upon those who grew the leaf, to which proposition Alejandro Robaina's case stands as an exception. His trajectory and fame reminded other producers of what they did not have, but could have, if all the magic and resourcefulness of tobacco would come down to them. In spite of his charisma, people know that his fame, his career, could not have been achieved without the initiative, support, and promotion by the state company and the political leadership. I leave open for further discussion the question of how necessary a figure he was, and whether, had he not existed, it would have been necessary to invent him.

## **Chapter 4. Food production: household subsistence, revolutionary sacrifice, and revolutionary changes**

In the afternoon of 24 July 2008 members of the Almendares cooperative were invited to meet the cooperative management team at their meeting hall. Outside the hall stood a small cement bust of the national hero José Martí, and behind it, a small cement wall on which were painted the flag and coat of arms of Cuba with the names of the cooperative's founders. Rain had washed away most of the inscription under the bust, a famous slogan of the hero, '*Ser cultos es el único modo de ser libres*' ('Being educated is the only way to be free'). The meeting had already started when Eugenio and I arrived on foot from his tobacco barn where he and his working team had been packing tobacco, preparing it for the sale. Inside the hall, the president and administrator of the cooperative sat together with two officials from ANAP around a table facing 30 or so cooperative members sitting on wooden benches. The moment we entered, one of the officials was explaining issues about the payment of tobacco. One producer intervened by asking the official how much he should get paid judging from the quantity of tobacco sold and the classification he got. Others asked when they were going to be paid, indicating a widespread concern about possible delays. After one official stated that the state was making all possible efforts to pay the money on time, the president of the cooperative took the floor. He began by saying that during a recent meeting of the municipality's party committee a proposition had been adopted about the voluntary and temporary relinquishment of rice and beans quotas distributed on the ration card by those producing rice and beans. This was meant to help the government in a difficult time of high food prices on the international market. He further added that there were precedents in the past when producers offered to give up their own quotas, knowing the government to be in difficulties. The official immediately intervened on the same theme, saying

that the state had to use vital resources in order to provide food for institutions that could not produce it, like schools and hospitals, and that the Cuban peasantry should play a very important role in the country's future. He added that Cuba was going through a crucial moment of debates and consultations in preparation for the Sixth Congress of the Communist Party planned for the following year.<sup>102</sup> Then the president intervened again asking which producers were willing to renounce their quotas and for how many months. Some of them, less than half of the participants, raised their hands, including Eugenio. They were willing to relinquish their quotas for either two or three months. I asked Eugenio if he was really ready to give up his rice and bean quota, to which he replied: 'This is for those from the [state] company to see that I volunteer. I'm going to give up for a month or two.'

While the president was writing down the names of the volunteers, the same ANAP official spoke again. He said that it was not easy for him to face producers and ask them to make an effort, knowing that many promises made in the past by bureaucrats had not been kept. Not many of his colleagues from the ANAP leadership were willing to come to speak to peasants. But he asserted he was not of those people who make empty promises. At that point, a cooperative member stood up and asked the state bureaucrat: 'I'm a bit stupid, I'm not very well prepared, but I would like to understand something. Since the state has to pay 67 dollars to import one quintal of rice, why would it not pay half to have it produced here? Now the state pays only 5 pesos the pound.'<sup>103</sup> The official was not taken aback by the question. He replied, 'I know that everyone thinks about his own interests. It is easier being on the other side as producers than me here answering questions. I cannot answer this question, but if a person makes an arrangement with the state procurement agency (*Acopio*) for a certain price, he should respect it, and give the quantity

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<sup>102</sup> The 6th Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba finally took place in April 2011, after a period of debates and consultations on the Draft Guidelines of the Economic and Social Policy of the Party and the Revolution. One of the proposed measures was the end of the rationing system in Cuba, but this measure was not adopted in the Congress. The ration book (*la libreta*) is still part of Cubans' everyday lives.

<sup>103</sup> The price per quintal the state procurement agency (*Acopio*) paid was 500 pesos, the equivalent of 20 CUC, three times less than the international market's price at that moment.

of rice he contracted.' A senior member of the cooperative intervened by stating that the price paid by the government was fine, but producers needed more *recursos* (resources) for the harvest, such as petroleum, fertilizers, and herbicides. The bureaucrat acquiesced and added that the state was making all efforts to help producers, in spite of the high prices of oil and fertilizers on the international market.

At the end of the meeting, I asked Eugenio again about the voluntary handover of the food ration card (*libreta*). He said he did it to look good in front of the representatives from the state company. He added he was going to give up his quota, not that of the whole family, alluding to the predictable resistance of his family to giving up their quotas. 'I'm a revolutionary', commented Eugenio laughing. 'Ask Margarita if she is going to give up the *libreta*, to see if she is revolutionary, too,' Eugenio jokingly anticipated his wife's resistance. Another producer said to me that he could not refrain from volunteering since he had a thresher about which everybody knew, including the cooperative's leadership. Since threshing rice and beans was paid for with parts of the harvest, he obtained significant quantities of rice and beans. He felt obliged to take part in the voluntary action.

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In this chapter, I explore the political and social significance of food production in San Luis, especially staple products like rice and beans. Food production and provisioning has been an everyday fight for Cubans, especially since the dire economic crisis at the beginning of the 1990s. Various ethnographies of contemporary Cuba (Garth 2009, 2013; Pertierra 2009a) have already addressed the struggle to overcome food shortages in urban areas. However, food production and consumption in rural areas have been little studied, with some recent exceptions (Wilson 2009a, 2012), in spite of the ideological and economic importance of food production.



Fig. 28. Land preparation for maize cultivation

Food production, distribution, and consumption in revolutionary Cuba have been embedded in various spheres of circulation (state, market, and inter-household) and also in different moral economical frameworks (Wilson 2009a, 2009b, 2012). The extensive existing literature on the anthropology of food has documented across cultures how food is not only about nutrition, but also about people's normative and moral evaluations of sufficiency and 'good' food (Caldwell 2009; Counihan 1999; Mintz 1996b; Mintz & Du Bois 2002). Food's vital role is therefore not only about survival and the reproduction of life, but it is also central to the definition and the expression of central political and moral values of a particular society. This is equally valid for revolutionary Cuba, where food production and consumption have been an important source of metaphors and values for political independence (Dawdy 2002).

At the time of my fieldwork, food production was officially presented as an issue of 'maximal national security'.<sup>104</sup> The revolutionary slogan '*Patria o*

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<sup>104</sup> 'La producción de alimentos debe constituir una tarea principal para los dirigentes del Partido, que es preciso estén conscientes de que en el presente y hasta donde es posible vislumbrar el futuro, es un asunto de máxima seguridad nacional' ('Food production should

*Muerte*' was deployed to a more mundane domain of activities like agriculture, and the production of food was another frontline for the revolution's defence. However, in spite of the official campaign to increase agricultural productivity, the tone of the official discourse in both the national media and the language of the local bureaucrats, was different from the fervour of collective mobilization for food production in the 1960s.<sup>105</sup> In 2008–09, the focus was on raising the quantity and productivity of food from individual producers and bringing more idle land back into production. Because of the 2008 food price inflation on the international market, the Cuban government, which depended heavily on food imports, was concerned about the rising costs of feeding the population.

In the first part of the chapter, I analyse the international and national economic contexts of the year 2008 in order to understand the significance of the initiative of the campaign for the voluntary renunciation of food quotas. In the second part, I examine the place of food in a local economy dominated by tobacco production. Overall, the production of food was important for providing families with sufficient quantities in order to maintain the ideal of the self-sufficiency of the household, thus complementing the meagre state food provisions. Not all of the population of the municipality was able to produce food; however, locally produced food was available for those unable to produce it, through markets, relatives, or informal ties. In the third and last section of the chapter, I point out the symbolic associations between food and the Cuban Revolution, exploring the way food was evoked as a way to remember and gloss over the transformations that took place in people's lives

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be one important task for the Party's leaders who are aware that, now and in the foreseeable future, this is a question of maximal national security'), Raúl Castro, 28 April 2008, Discourse for the Fifth Meeting of the Central Committee, at <http://www.granma.cubaweb.cu/secciones/pleno-ccpcc/pleno01.html> (last accessed 14 May 2010).

<sup>105</sup> In 1968 the Cordón de la Habana (Greenbelt of Havana) initiative was launched, a large-scale project of transforming 10,000 ha around the capital into productive agricultural land, especially by planting fruit trees, coffee, and pigeon peas. Work brigades from Havana were deployed in the countryside to plant trees and construct houses for agricultural workers. The project failed to produce the planned output and was abandoned (Scarpaci et al. 2002: 140–1).

after 1959. Talking about food was a way to understand how people thought about larger social and political processes and gave an insight into the differentiated (gendered and generational) experience of the Cuban Revolution.

### **1. Food and the survival of the Revolution**

Law no. 1015 of 12 March 1962 published the *Libreta de Abastecimiento* (Supplies booklet (or ration book) with the objective of guaranteeing an equal distribution of food and basic items to the whole population. It was introduced as a provisional solution to a problem of food supply due to disruptions in food production after the 1959 agricultural reform, the US embargo, and the increase of the population's purchasing power. The quantities of the products on the ration card have varied during its half-century of existence, but they have never entirely covered the necessities of food of the population.<sup>106</sup>

Besides the *libreta*, Cubans had access to state-run and independent markets for agricultural products and to informal street vendors. The crisis at the beginning of the 1990s had provoked food shortages, since agricultural production was disrupted because of the lack of fertilizers, oil, and technology, which had previously been easily available through economic exchanges with socialist sister-countries. In spite of successful experiments in urban agriculture (Premat 2009) and an improvement in food production, Cuba was heavily dependent on imports to meet its food necessities (up to 70 percent in 2008). The trade embargo on Cuba imposed by the United States has been also a considerable factor militating against economic recovery. However, in

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<sup>106</sup> For 2008 the ration book provided the following quantities per adult every month: rice 7 lb (3.17 kg), beans 1 lb, refined sugar 3 lb, dark sugar 1 lb, 10 eggs, 15 lb of potatoes, 1 litre of milk every day (for children under 7), ¼ litre cooking oil, and 4 ounces (115 grams) of coffee. The milk was replaced by soy milk yoghurt due to the difficulties of milk production and the high cost of powdered milk on the international market. Toothpaste and soap were also included on the *libreta* (no longer available in 2013). There were additional products for individuals on diets recommended by doctors (for example, beef for heart disease patients). Fish was also on the *libreta* for people more than 60 years old. Tobacco (cigar or cigarette) was also rationed and only those born before 1963 could claim their 25 cigars/month or four packets of cigarettes.

the aftermath of the disastrous hurricane Isidore in 2002, the US president George W. Bush allowed the embargo on food to be relaxed, as humanitarian help to Cuba. Since then food exports from the United States to Cuba have been on the rise. However, dependence on food imports proved to be very expensive with the rise of food prices on international markets in 2007–08.

In mid-May 2008, I heard worrying rumours about an upcoming shortage of rice on the state market in the city of Pinar del Río. Acquaintances told me that people were queuing to buy rice there, and a limit of 5 lb per person had been introduced as a result of the increased demand. In the previous weeks, both the state television and the press had been circulating interventions by members of the Central Committee glossing over the alarming increase in international food prices, especially of rice. People speculated that this could result in a shortage of rice on the state markets and price inflation on the independent and black markets. In conversations, the spectre of the worst moments of the Special Period was detectable, as people were recalling how difficult it had been to feed one's family in the 1990s. The situation had been much better since the beginning of the 2000s, as the independent and state markets were offering rice, vegetables, meat, and eggs without any major disruption.

The rumours were persistent, but to my big surprise a week later I fell upon a whole-page article in *Juventud Rebelde*, titled 'The golden grain of Cuban cuisine' and devoted to rice production.<sup>107</sup> The article started by citing an email received by the newspaper about rumours circulating in Pinar del Río about the imminent shortage of rice and the possibility of replacing it with flour on the ration card. The article continued by noting similar rumours in central and eastern part of Cuba. In Bayamo, a city in the eastern part of Cuba, a market administrator testified to the journalist about the high increase in the quantity of rice sold in the previous days, to the point that he had had to limit it

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<sup>107</sup> 'El grano de oro de la mesa cubana', *Juventud Rebelde*, 30 May 2008. The fact that an official newspaper was so quickly addressing what was becoming a rumour circulating in various parts of Cuba tells us a lot about the potentially serious consequences of a panic about rice shortage.

up to 10 lb of rice per person. Nevertheless, this measure had little success since people returned to queue several times. The article further reported the news transmitted by Cuban TV when the president of the state company Alimport, responsible for the import of food, had assured his audience that Cuba had enough rice for the whole year of 2008 and a firm agreement with Vietnam committing the necessary rice for subsequent years. The second half of the article presented an interview with the director of the Rice Research Institute, detailing the challenges of rice production in Cuba and the plan to recover productive capacity in order to replace rice imports. Besides the overall message of ‘Do not worry, we are working to provide for the people’s needs’, the article presented interesting facts. First, it stated that the average productivity per ha in Cuba was much below average international productivity, even though the interviewed official boasted that they had obtained comparable results in experimental situations, when all the labour and required inputs were available. Second, it openly acknowledged that the rise in production in the small-scale non-state sector was the contributing factor to rice’s improved availability in Cuba in the last 10 years.

The international 2008 inflation of food prices became an issue of concern for the Cuban government because of its dependence on food imports. In particular, the sixfold price increase of rice on the international market in only a few months became a major preoccupation for Cuba, the seventh largest consumer of rice per head worldwide.<sup>108</sup> Ideologically, the crisis was a perfect example of the excesses of global capitalism, a point that Cuban officials and mass media could hardly miss underlining, especially by broadcasting news about food riots in Haiti, Africa, and Asia. Internally, the price inflation put a strain on the government, which had to draw more on its hard currency reserves to keep up the level of imports. The official answer was a consistent ideological campaign focusing on the substitution of food imports

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<sup>108</sup> Anne-Marie Garcia, ‘Cuban state radio warns against hoarding rice’, *Associated Press*, 7 May 2010, at <http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5hqBRx6W3f9EdXJbZPBMYID6oDwbgD9FI66S00> (consulted 11 May 2010). In 2007 Cuba consumed 700,000 tons of rice and internal production was 150,000 tons.

through raising internal agricultural production.<sup>109</sup> Raúl Castro declared production of food ‘an issue of national security’ and asked for sacrifice and dedication in producing more food. After his formal election as president of Cuba in February 2008, Raúl Castro made agriculture a main focus of his reforms, adopting a more pragmatic governing style, different from the very ideological orientation of his older brother.

The government’s campaign for increasing food production echoed in the countryside. Even if San Luis’s main product was tobacco, I heard in public gatherings (political rallies, commemorations, and cooperatives’ meetings) how officials explicitly addressed the crucial importance of food production, especially rice and beans.

## **2. Growing food crops in tobacco-growing areas**

Even though for an outsider in San Luis the land might seem equally productive and fit for any crop, peasants distinguished between various types of land and their corresponding qualities. The main distinction was between *tierra fina* and *tierra gorda*, the first used for tobacco and the second for other crops, especially rice, sweet potatoes, cassava, taro, plantains, and vegetables. The soils with good drainage (usually on a slope), of a lighter, sandy, or gravelled character were excellent for tobacco. The clay soils, with bad drainage, were mostly used for rice, vegetables, and tubers. Nevertheless, beans and maize did particularly well in land used for tobacco cultivation. The practice of growing beans at the beginning of the dry season on tobacco land was widespread but criticized by agronomists, because it reduced the fertility of the soil and consequently affected the quality of tobacco. Producers were aware of this, but they also needed to produce beans for their own consumption, a practice the cooperative administrators and state agronomists came to tolerate. For example, bean production was integrated into the official production plan of

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<sup>109</sup> This was not a new concern for the Cuban revolutionary leadership. Taking into account the importance of the commercial exchanges between Cuba and the United States before the revolution, the end of commercial relations between the two had driven the Cuban government into focusing on internal production and socialist trade relationships.

the Almendares cooperative (and in many others), provided those producing beans sold part of the production to the state procurement agency. Maize was regularly grown after the end of the tobacco harvest from April to July and parts of it were also sold to the state procurement agency.

It was strictly forbidden to use the tobacco soil for other crops like tomatoes, potatoes, and peppers, all part of the *Solanaceae* family, because of the high risk of disease transmission from one culture to another. The cooperative administration was strict about it, and growers carefully avoided planting these crops on land allocated for tobacco. Rice and tobacco did not compete for the same kind of land, since rice needed flat, clay land that could retain water for a long time. The rice-growing technique was based on transplanting rice seedlings in flooded paddies at the beginning of July, coinciding with the arrival of the wet season. Nevertheless, since rain was generally not sufficient, irrigation was essential for obtaining a good crop. This meant an increase of production costs, besides the costs of fertilizers.

Given the fact that not all the cooperative's members owned land suitable for rice or vegetable production, some of them had to find other arrangements in order to produce the necessary provisions for their households. In the following section, I illustrate how Eugenio managed to produce rice and beans by way of sharecropping. His case is revealing for what it shows about all economic, social, and climatic complexities around the production of food for self-consumption.

## **2.1. Food production through sharecropping: a case study**

Eugenio's family did not cultivate rice before the revolution, since it was available at the local stores. In that period of capitalist agriculture, rice was produced on large fields using modern technology and a considerable quantity was imported from the United States. As rice became more expensive and difficult to find after 1959, Eugenio and his father started to grow rice for their own consumption. However, suitable land was not available and they tried to

remove *marabú* from a piece of land.<sup>110</sup> They had to put in so much effort to clear out the tenacious *marabú* and stop it growing back every year that they had eventually given up making that land productive.

Because he owned only land for tobacco, Eugenio had to make arrangements to access land to grow his food. In revolutionary Cuba it is illegal to lease private land, since the agricultural reforms stipulated that the land belongs to those who work it. Nevertheless, in practice there were various ways to access and work land owned by other people, including leasing, which had to be done in a discreet manner since it was punished with fines. Another possibility was sharecropping, which was not illegal, but neither was it regulated by law. It was part of the informal economy, but there were certain established rules, for example, *a la tercera* (a third part of the yield to the owner of the land) or *a la mitad* (half of the harvest to the owner).

Since Eugenio did not have *tierra gorda*, he had to rely on sharecropping in order to produce his rice. As in the previous 10 years before my fieldwork, he was using the land of one of his neighbours, Orlando, who owned a piece of *tierra gorda* (11 *cordeles* or 0.44 ha)<sup>111</sup> and an irrigation machine. The agreement between them was that Eugenio was going to use the land and give a part of the crop to Orlando as payment for the use of land. The field was divided among three persons: Eugenio, Luis, his younger brother, and one of Eugenio's workers. The main agreement was between Eugenio and Orlando, Eugenio therefore assuming the overall costs for the land use. However, the costs and the labour for rice cultivation were managed separately by Eugenio, his brother, and his worker.

At the end of the first week of December 2008, Eugenio mobilized three of his workers and additional peoples to thresh his rice. He chose to do it on a

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<sup>110</sup> *Dichrostachys nutans* or *marabú* is a shrub of South African origin, introduced in Cuba in the last third of the 19th century. It has spread over a considerable extent of the fertile land, becoming a major concern for farmers and the government. It is very hard to eradicate it and bring the infested land back into production. In everyday use, *marabú* takes on metaphorical meaning in public discourse, standing for invasive, parasitic, or hard-to-fight habits and social practices.

<sup>111</sup> A *cordel* is a Cuban agricultural measure equal to 400 square meters.

Saturday, so as not to overlap with the busy days of the week in the tobacco field. He needed as many people as he could bring in so that he could finish it in the short time the threshing machine was available to him. Three experienced workers, who were also present during the threshing, had cut the rice in the previous days. Emilio, the state official boyfriend of Eugenio's younger daughter, used his free Saturday to help, too. He was helping Eugenio to bag the rice by emptying the thresher's grain tank. Everyone else was collecting rice stalks and pitching them into the thresher, that was operated by a tractor engine with a thundering noise. The straws were blown away in a cloud of dust that stuck to the perspiring faces, necks, and arms. Operations and coordination between workers were carried out without much verbal exchange, only by shouting from time to time to get through the noise of the engine. I noticed that Eugenio was not in a good mood. He hurried people up and made no jokes, as he usually did on harvest days. I gradually figured out from the exchanges the reason for his bad mood. The yield was bad, almost 50 percent less than the previous year. The cause was the big hurricanes, which had passed not far from San Luis that summer. But there was another reason to his frustration. He was getting increasingly impatient with Orlando's inquisitiveness and his counting numbers of rice sacks.



Fig. 29. Harvesting rice

After threshing, Eugenio paid 1,350 pesos in cash to the three workers who had cut the rice and helped with threshing, with shiny new banknotes of 50 pesos. For the threshing itself, he paid, as is customary, a tenth of the total quantity of rice. Threshing was a very lucrative activity and owners of threshers could make considerable profits by selling the rice they received as payment. The thresher Eugenio hired belonged to a tobacco-grower who employed two people, a driver and an operator, to carry out the threshing. Each of them was paid in nature with one-fifth of the total threshing payment. In the period of the rice and bean harvests, they could thresh up to 300 sacks a day. Later on, when his workers were putting sacks of rice on the cart, which was pulled by oxen, I asked Eugenio more about the costs of the yield. He gave me the following balance of costs and the quantity of rice.

Table 7. Monetary costs of Eugenio's rice harvest

Transplanting rice	1,300 pesos
Harvesting	1,350 pesos
6 sacks of fertiliser	300 pesos
Gasoline for irrigating engine	700 pesos
<b>Total monetary costs</b>	<b>3,650 pesos (163 USD)</b>

Table 8 shows the harvested rice and the non-monetary costs.

Table 8. Non-monetary costs of Eugenio's rice harvest

Payment of land	13 sacks
Payment for water irrigation	5 sacks
Threshing	5 sacks
Own rice	29 sacks
<b>Total rice yield</b>	<b>52 sacks</b>

At that time, the price of a sack of paddy rice was 100 pesos on the black market, which meant that the value of his share of the harvest was 2,900 pesos, a bit less than the money he had put into the rice harvest, not counting his own labour. '*El arroz salió comprado*' ('The rice ended up like being bought'), he bitterly concluded. First, he came to the disappointing conclusion

that the cost of producing the rice ended up being almost the same as if he had bought the rice at the market. It was the frustration of somebody whose labour had not paid off since the costs of the harvest were significant and the return meagre. Furthermore, the reason for his impatience with Orlando was that the latter got his rice, without doing any work, just as a payment for the use of the land and water. It was one more illustration of what many saw as Orlando's main character traits, his acquisitiveness and stinginess, a target of many jokes and comments among people who knew him. However, it is important to emphasize that Eugenio helped his brother and one of his workers to have their rice cultivated. He financed the costs for land and irrigation, I remarked to him. He accepted my point by noting that he had to help since he had the monetary resources to cover the costs of the harvest. It was, of course, evident that he did not ask for monetary compensation from the two. He had the responsibility of helping people close to him, people who were also working for him, on whom he could count and from whom he could ask dedication in working the land.

For the 2008–09 harvest, Eugenio grew his beans on the land of the neighbouring farm of 80-year-old Evarista. Eugenio was on very good terms with her and her deceased husband. Moreover, they were related, since the daughter of Evarista had been married to one of Eugenio's brothers. Evarista had a very good tobacco farm, but her 60-year-old son, unlike his hardworking father, was unreliable and known for his drinking. Eugenio and other producers used parcels from Evarista's land based on informal arrangements. Eugenio grew beans there, which he shared with his brother and Evarista. Nevertheless, Eugenio told me that there was no clear agreement between him and Evarista, as in other sharecropping arrangements, *a la tercera*, one third, or *a la mitad*, one half. He harvested 22 sacks of beans, out of which 4 quintals were for the state procurement agency (*Acopio*), and the rest was split equally between him and Evarista.

Eugenio sharecropped his rice and beans, but the nature of his relationship with the land-owners was different. He produced and shared his rice, based on a more formal understanding with Orlando. But he and Evarista

had a closer relationship of good neighbourhood and affinity, without a clear formal agreement at the beginning. However, this relationship was not without perils, since Evarista's son could claim his right to use the land.

Eugenio's case is relevant to understanding the situations of other tobacco-growers. He had 3.84 ha of land classified as *tierra fina*, excellent for tobacco-growing. But he also produced his rice and beans through sharecropping, and for this he had to rely on his labour team and also on his kindred and good neighbour relations. This case shows that sharecropping was embedded in a web of relationships of kinship, the neighbourhood, and labour. Nevertheless, when more formal arrangements (like that between Eugenio and Orlando) were put into place, tensions among shareholders could appear, especially when the harvest was not good enough. The above cases are illustrations of crops produced mainly for self-consumption and partly for the state, even though small quantities of these crops could be sold for money. In the following section, I analyse cases of producers who grew only food crops, focusing on their relationships with state bureaucrats.

## **2.2. Food production and interactions with state employees**

For many peasants, producing food looked an easier way to make money than tobacco, since the demand for food was always high and the government had raised the prices of product acquisition in recent years. More entrepreneurial producers took advantage of less labour-intensive crops and, very important, less vulnerable to disease and weather contingencies than tobacco. Even though tobacco's price was the highest among agricultural products, it involved a series of risks that could result in serious financial losses. Moreover, tobacco needed a considerable labour force in a context of increasingly labour shortage and costs.

'This is my last tobacco harvest,' Juan repeatedly told me in the spring of 2008. A 60-year-old tobacco-producer, he had moved to San Luis in the 1960s from Guane (at the western extremity of the island) and started to grow tobacco. A father of six, he worked hard to provide for his family, not only

producing tobacco, but also occasionally working for other people as a labourer. In 2008 he grew tobacco with his ex-son-in-law on land they had leased from the state in 1993. Nevertheless, by 2008 Juan had had enough of tobacco and decided to switch to tomato and pepper cultivation, crops with shorter cycles of growth and less labour-intensive than tobacco. He and his wife could live comfortably on the money sent by their oldest son Juanito, who had illegally escaped to the United States three years before. Nevertheless, Juan could not imagine himself not working. Tomato-growing was less demanding and a secure source of cash that he could invest in raising roosters for cockfighting, his biggest passion. With a friend as an associate, he set off in October 2008 to work on land provided by another tobacco-grower, Eusebio. It was a sharecrop agreement, with Juan and his associate paying for the land use with the monetary value of a third of the harvest, while providing the work and the costs for the crop. Juan's decision to produce tomatoes proved to be an inspired one. The weather from November 2008 to March 2009 were excellent for vegetables: dry and cool conditions, with few rainy days. That year the tomato harvest was the best in more than 10 years in the whole of Cuba, but particularly in the west, and was popularly called the *tomatazo* (tomato glut). The state paid a good price and there were no restrictions on acquisitions by the state procurement agency. Growers also sold tomatoes and other vegetables to intermediaries, who supplied the urban markets. At the same time, the unexpected boom in tomato production tested what many considered to be an inefficient state organization. Lack of transportation and storage resulted in a significant proportion of the harvest rotting in the fields. People complained of the lack of boxes to put the harvested tomatoes in. It was another proof of the incompetence and carelessness of bureaucrats, who wasted the fruits of labour in a situation when the country needed more food, as Raúl Castro had recently demanded.

Juan was happy with his harvest's profit. He remained with 25,000 pesos after the sale of tomatoes (20,000 pesos paid by the state and 5,000 pesos from middlemen). He paid Eusebio a third of the sum, and the rest he split equally with his associate. This was less than the profits from his last

tobacco harvest, but he was content with his gain after three months of little investment and much less work than for tobacco.

Arturo was a bigger food-producer. In 1993, he was granted 10 ha by the state free of charge and he started to cultivate vegetables and rice. Even if he had grown up in a family of tobacco-growers, he did not like producing tobacco. His farm was situated in a *barrio* of San Luis with fertile land less suitable for tobacco, but excellent for food crops. He had a steady employee with him and occasionally hired workers during harvest days for various crops which he alternated: beans, rice, tomatoes, pumpkins, peppers, and onions. He was a member of a CCS so he could use its tractors and agricultural machinery for his work. He complained, like others, about delays in receiving implements for his harvests, difficulties with fertilizers, and gasoline. However, he was grateful to the state for having granted him the land free of charge and acknowledged the efforts the government put into increasing food production.

He sold most of his production to the state and considered the acquisition prices beneficial to producers, even though he acknowledged the slowness and bureaucratic problems of the state procurement agency (*Acopio*). For Arturo the main problem of the *Acopio* employees was that they earned a salary (*ganar un sueldo*) that could not provide for their needs; hence they had to turn to wrongdoing in order to make a living. Some were minor ones, like picking and stealing small quantities of the best produce for their own consumption. Other practices like cheating with the product weighing were more prejudicial to producers. This was a recurrent problem, so growers always needed to be on their guard not to be cheated. One strategy was collusion with the *pesador* (the person in charge of the weighing) in order to be sure that he would not cheat. Arturo explained to me what happened with his harvest of tomatoes in the autumn of 2007, when he estimated he had been cheated by 200 lb of tomatoes, amounting to 800 pesos (32 CUCs). He sold his tomato harvest in three instalments, each time receiving a copy of the balance. When he went with his receipts to finalize the payments, there was a difference of 200 lb between what he had and the records of the *Acopio* employee. He took the *pesador* to one side and said to him:

The tomatoes are 40 pesos per quintal, and the pumpkins are 40 pesos per quintal. I have sown pumpkins. 20 quintals of tomatoes are missing here. The price is the same. You are mistaken. However, if you add a bit of oil to fire, the flame goes up, but if you throw a bucket of water on it, it puts it out. I have no interest in them firing you, no interest. What I would get out of it? Nothing. But 20 quintals of tomatoes are missing here. The money I lost I need you to give back to me. I have the right to [...] this missing part, you are going to add it next time, when I bring the pumpkins in, so you will add the missing part [from the tomatoes] to the pumpkins.

Tomatoes and pumpkins had the same acquisition price so the missing quantity in tomatoes could be added to pumpkins. But, as was often the case in economic affairs, one winning translated into someone else's loss. Arturo suggested to the employee that the extra quantity of pumpkins should be taken off the harvest of the neighbouring CPA. I asked Arturo if the CPA's members did not defend their interests. He answered that they trusted the state procurement agency and they did not bother to check the accuracy of the sale, which sounded a bit disingenuous or naïve to me. The *Acopio* employee acknowledged the cheating and agreed to correct it according to Arturo's proposal. Moreover, he appreciated the fact that the latter did not put in a formal complaint to his superiors, and they became friends, and he further facilitated Arturo's access to various resources (fertilizers, carburant, insecticides, etc) that his organization distributed to producers.

These cases illustrate how food production was an alternative to the more labour-intensive and state-dependent tobacco production. Although food production was also integrated into the cooperative system and required interaction with state officials, it allowed producers various possibilities of acquiring cash through sales to intermediaries and peasant market transactions as well as better food provisioning for their households.

### **3. Food provisioning, households' gender roles, and socialist entitlements**

My fieldwork experience confirmed previous ethnographies (Rosendahl 1997b; Pertierra 2009a) on the strong gendered division of labour inside the

house in Cuba, like in most of the Hispanic Caribbean and Latin America, with women being associated with domestic activities such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for children, while men's main responsibility was to be breadwinners. Nevertheless, we should not assume that – as the local ideologies of gender distinctions often claim – these distinctions are given and unchangeable; instead, we need to enquire how gender is constructed in the actual process of social life (Collier & Yanagisako 1987; Goddard 2000; Pine 2000). In Cuba, the traditional ideologies of *machismo* and *marianismo* came under criticism by an egalitarian socialist ideology aiming at promoting equality between man and woman both in professional and domestic domains. Anna Pertierra's (2008, 2009a) detailed ethnography in Santiago de Cuba is particularly revealing in showing that in spite of the fact that women have achieved significant professional and social mobility in the socialist period, the burden of domestic labour and provisioning has still been on their shoulders and increasing during the economic difficulties of the Special Period.<sup>112</sup>

One difference between urban and rural Cuba was that in the latter food could be and was produced by a large number of rural households. While urban Cuba depended on state distribution and the official and black markets for food acquisition, rural Cubans could produce significant quantities of food. My experience was that most households having access to land relied in various degrees on food they produced. Working the land was almost exclusively a masculine task and male labour was partly devoted to produce food for family subsistence. Official statistics on employment, sex, and age structure of the municipality's population show that women made up 43.6 percent of the total labour force, but they were overrepresented in certain occupational categories such as technicians and administration and underrepresented in manual labour jobs (see Chapter 2). This was consistent with my observations and informants' reports about women having benefited

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<sup>112</sup> This does not mean that men in San Luis did not cook at all. In 1993, the state legalized private licences for some services, including catering. In the *pueblo*, there were some *kioskos*, family-run small kiosks, offering drinks, snacks, and some even lunch. I knew the male manager of one of them, who was also the cook. This entrepreneur woke up every morning at 6 a.m. to prepare food and open early in the morning. He considered cooking as work, a source of money. He never cooked at home, the cooking domain of his wife and his mother-in-law.

from educational and employment policies that enabled them to move into state jobs.

I will focus on Eugenio's household to show how subsistence activities and state distribution contributed to providing for his family's food needs. Eugenio's household was composed of his wife and him, their two daughters, and two grandchildren, a 15-year-old boy and a 9-year-old girl. Both daughters were separated from the fathers of their children. The *libreta* of the house had five people on it since Eugenio's was located at the address of his parental house, which he had inherited, together with the farm. His younger brother, Luis, and his wife lived in the parental house. Apart from the 35 lb of rice allocated through state rationing, they consumed an additional minimum 60 lb of rice monthly, adding up to a total of approximately 100 lb of rice per month.<sup>113</sup>

Eugenio's main drive for growing food crops was to sustain *la casa* (house) and provide for his family. He mostly liked to grow tobacco, but he had to grow other crops for self-consumption, since buying the necessary food for the house would have been a considerable expenditure for the household income, composed of the payment for the tobacco crop, pension benefits, and the salaries of the daughters. The contribution from tobacco was by far the most important. The principle of household food management was to spend as little cash as possible. This was achieved by growing food, especially staple crops such as rice and beans, as I have presented, but also by raising a number of pigs that were slaughtered to provide meat for home consumption. Other necessary vegetables or starchy roots (*viandas*) were obtained from other producers or relatives or bought at the market. The produce was consumed inside the house and when reserves were available they were bartered or given as gifts to relatives, but never sold for cash. I asked Eugenio about the expenses (*gastos*) inside the house and he said he never kept a

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<sup>113</sup> According to media reports, the annual average rice consumption in Cuba in 2008 was 70 kg (154 lb) per head, while the annual consumption in Eugenio's household per head was approximately 200 lb, based on his gross calculations. However, visitors, workers, and kin occasionally ate in Eugenio's house.

balance between what was actually consumed and how much money was spent. However, he gave me an overall picture of the food consumption and other expenses of the house and their monetary value:

Eugenio: I told you a little while ago. If you grow tobacco, you gets the money from the sale of tobacco. If you have to buy what you consume in the house at the market, you spend it all. Possibly what you get [from the tobacco sale] is not enough to maintain the house.

Mariano: Then one has to grow other things. And raise pigs.

Eugenio: Sure. That's what I'm telling you. Right now I'll show you. I will give you an example. In my case, we consume 12 quintals of rice every year. At 4 pesos each pound, you have 4,800 pesos. There you have 5,000 pesos for rice. Now, as for beans, you consume 4 quintals a year that you have to buy at 5 pesos a pound. There you have 2,000 pesos more. But those three pigs, two of which I've already slaughtered and one remaining, if you add the price they make, what they are worth alive is not less than 7,000 pesos. [...] And you haven't yet finished with the house [expenses]. Now you have to struggle to buy garlic at its market price and onion, and the *malanga* you need to eat. [...] And tomatoes and the little piece of meat when you have finished your own pig meat and the electricity. Every month you pay for the electricity 70 or so, 80 pesos, which makes 1,000 pesos of electricity a year. When you write down everything with a pencil, there is no tobacco harvest to cover the expenses of the house. (Interview with Eugenio, October 2008)

There are a number of observations to make about this conversation. First, Eugenio's household was run with limited monetary expenses, similar to other peasant economies in Europe or Latin America (Gudeman 1978, 2001; Gudeman & Rivera 1990). Whenever possible, monetary spending was avoided through self-provisioning or bartering agricultural products. Raising pigs with leftover food or with maize produced on the farm was an economical alternative to buying meat at the market. Cash expenditure was made only when it could not be avoided: utilities for the house, food not produced or already consumed in the house. The main cash flow of the household came from the sale of tobacco, and this money needed to be saved and partly used for the farm's expenses. Second, this conversation reveals the considerable value of the food consumed in Eugenio's house. This is not only in terms of quantities for a staple food like rice (2.8 times more rice was consumed in Eugenio's house than the average annual rice consumption per head in Cuba),

but also in terms of quality and variety. Meat was eaten every day, at least at lunch, and there was a wide variety of fruits and vegetables from the farm, such as avocados, mangos, or mamey sapote. Food was cooked every day, with different menus for lunch and dinner, and in sufficient quantities to cover not only the household's consumption but also that of visitors and, occasionally, farm workers.

Eugenio's daughters kept their salaries for their own and their children's expenses. Both were state employees, the older working as an administrator of a bodega and the younger working for the Federation of Cuban Women, with their combined salaries being around 600 pesos per month. As Eugenio suggested, their salaries were hardly sufficient to buy a pair of shoes. While not contributing with income for food, his daughters and his wife Marguerita contributed with labour to prepare food inside the house and also for cleaning. Moreover, they searched and queued for state provisions (*los mandados*) from the state *bodega* and for whatever was available in state shops in the *pueblo*. On his part, Eugenio was quite dismissive of queuing:

I do not queue; you know what it means to queue for bread or a bit of ground beef that I even do not eat? I do not queue; for this I have connections. If crackers are coming [into shops], I do not queue, I tell the woman at the store to keep a packet for me, and I go to pick it up later.

His attitude was an instantiation of the general attitude among men of dismissing queuing and shopping at the *bodega* as women's activities, but also of his privileged situation of having three women in the house, who could do the provisioning. At the same time, when food had to be bought at the informal markets (especially pork), Eugenio did buy it, but used his personal connections to avoid queuing. Moreover, he had the control over the cash coming from the tobacco harvest, giving Marguerita cash to make the necessary payments for the house.

In the days following the 24 July cooperative meeting, I several times noticed Eugenio teasing his wife about the *libreta*, reminding her that he had volunteered to renounce his quota and that she should also be considering

giving up hers as a proof of her revolutionary commitment.<sup>114</sup> He also pointed out that one of his wife's relatives was a famous local underground member of the 26 July Movement who had taken arms against Batista's dictatorship so that she could be up to the revolutionary commitment of her family.<sup>115</sup> Marguerita answered that she considered herself part of the people (*pueblo*) and as such she was entitled to what Fidel gave her: 'I'm part of the people and I take everything Fidel gives me.' Later on, after they slaughtered one of their pigs at the beginning of August, he again teased his wife about giving up the cooking oil in the *libreta*, since they had got two boxes of lard.

Leaving aside the playful and teasing aspect of their exchanges, which was partly meant to entertain the anthropologist, there was something important behind Marguerita's answer: the idea that renouncing *libreta* quotas could be seen as a loss of entitlements and belonging to a moral community that is defined by socialist distribution. Anthropologists working in other socialist contexts (Fehérváry 2009; Humphrey 1995; Verdery 1996) have amply documented the political significance and constitutive role of socialist distribution. Katherine Verdery, in particular, writes about the paternalism of the socialist state distribution as the party-state acting as a benevolent father fulfilling people's needs (Verdery 1996: 63–4). She focuses more on how consumption in the socialist economies became a site of resistance to the state's designs.<sup>116</sup> However, as Kristina Fehérváry rightly points out, focusing only on shortages and resistance might make one miss the larger picture of

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<sup>114</sup> Ration books are issued for each house, but there are only a few cases where the ownership of the house or tenancy, the family composition, and actual residence perfectly coincide. In Eugenio's case, his *libreta* was registered in his parents' house, which he had inherited with the farm. Eugenio's younger brother and his wife lived in what was formerly their parental house. Eugenio lived with Marguerita, their two daughters and grandchildren in a house which Marguerita had inherited from her foster-parents.

<sup>115</sup> Eugenio's oldest brother had also been part of the 26 July Movement and was arrested and tortured by Batista's police.

<sup>116</sup> Amelia R. Weinreb's recent ethnography deals with the role of consumption as a site of resistance in Cuba, although from the perspective of 'unsatisfied' consumer-citizens, part of an 'emerging middle-class' in Cuba (Weinreb 2009). Other ethnographies of post-Soviet Cuba have identified consumption as a site of new practices of social differentiation, but also of an assertion of a revolutionary ethos (Holbraad 2004b; Perttierra 2006, 2009a).

the importance of socialist consumption and distribution as forming political subjectivities under state socialism.

Similarly, I propose to see the *libreta* distribution as a way of enacting a sort of citizenship and belonging to a moral community. Having a *libreta* is what defines one as part of the socialist nation (no foreign resident can have it) and, together with the membership of the CDR, it is what defines the actual residence of each Cuban since all changes of address must be registered with the Oficina de Control para la Distribución de los Abastecimientos (Office of Control for the Distribution of Supplies, OFICODA), which is in charge of rationing. This significance has not been lost on those criticizing the Cuban government, saying that the *libreta* has been an effective way of controlling the population.

There is another aspect behind the idea of the renunciation of ration quotas, which is the idea of solidarity and sacrifice. As I described at the beginning of the chapter, the demand for volunteering to give up the quotas was framed as an expression of solidarity with the government in a difficult financial period caused by international food price inflation. Therefore, the *libreta* stands not only for entitlements, but also for a reciprocal bond between citizens and the state, whereby citizens may reciprocate by renouncing benefits because of their capacity to produce certain goods that are in demand. This aspect was not lost on the cooperative members during the meeting, in spite of the fact that some producers volunteered in order to show off their good intentions, an instance of what Alexei Yurchak calls the performative aspect of discourse in socialism (Yurchak 2006). One participant told me afterwards that he understood the financial burden for the government of buying expensive rice on the international market in order to provide it at subsidized prices. He used a proverb ‘One hand washes the other and both wash the face’, to depict the need for solidarity with the government.

Eugenio’s motives for complying with the political demand to give up quotas did not fit with what I knew about him. He was deeply attached to the Revolution and to Fidel. He was critical of policies like the collectivization drive

in the 1970s and 1980s and of the growth of the bureaucratic apparatus, but he had never questioned the righteousness of the Revolution. Why then did he say he volunteered pro forma? Maybe it was because of the form of the demand, i.e. it came from above, it had been initiated by the party, which made him acknowledge that he felt compelled to volunteer. Or the fact that the president of the cooperative knew that he grew rice and beans, and was not only dependent on the ration book. He also anticipated Marguerita's refusal to give up, so he volunteered only individually. But most probably, state quotas of rice and beans represented a safe net and important source of food for situations when their own harvest might turn out to be insufficient for covering his family's needs.

Marguerita's refusal to give up the *libreta* should be placed in the larger context of the growing concern about the rumoured end of the ration book in Cuba at the time. This was thought to be part of the efforts to cut government expenditure, part of the more pragmatic turn in the Cuban leadership style after Raúl Castro formally assumed the leadership in February 2008.<sup>117</sup> One of the measures he adopted was the change of the retirement age from 60 to 65 years old for men and from 55 to 60 for women. Many Cubans I knew criticized the measure in private. This criticism indicated a moral economy (see Wilson 2009b, 2012) nurtured by revolutionary economic and social policies, which Raúl Castro's government had to deal with when social entitlements were reduced in order to reduce government spending.

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<sup>117</sup> However, this refocusing on the reduction of inefficiencies should not have been seen as a new aspect of Cuban leadership due to Raúl's accession to power. Fidel himself had forcefully stated: 'The *libreta* must disappear! The one who works will receive more!' He announced the end of the universal entitlements since they also benefited middlemen, profit-seekers, and those living on remittances. He argued for an improvement of state distribution for those working and producing. It was during the famous discourse in the amphitheater of the University of Havana in 2005 in front of students and the party's main officials. During this five-hour long discourse, Fidel blasted against the waste in the Cuban economy, pleaded for the closure of the sugar industry, and introduced new energy-saving measures.

#### **4. Food and revolutionary changes**

I showed that state distribution is not only a considerable source of food for households, but it also has moral and political implications that go beyond most of the discussions of Cuban food security (Deere 1993). The growing body of the anthropology of food literature has amply documented across cultures the idea that food is not only about nutrition, but also about how people conceptualize sufficiency and ‘good’ food (Caldwell 2009; Counihan 1999; Mintz 1996b; Mintz & Du Bois 2002). Moreover, as David Sutton argues, ‘[t]he ability of food to both generate subjective commentary and encode powerful meanings’ (Sutton 2001: 6) makes it an important research topic for understanding the interaction between subjectivity and socio-political changes. More specifically, in this section, I present two conversations about food that reveal important insights about the political relevance of food for Cubans.

On Christmas Eve (*Noche Buena*) in 2008, the 80-year-old Evarista told me that ‘the young don’t know what food is’ in a discussion about the preparations for the celebration. I was sitting with her in the main room of her house, as many times before. Her daughter Yolanda prepared coffee, as she usually did when I came by. We were joined by her grandson, a recent agronomy graduate, who was newly employed in a tobacco cooperative as an agronomic technician. He mentioned what he had had for lunch that day in the canteen of the cooperative. He joked about his meagre lunch of pasta with a bit of boiled *calabaza* (pumpkin), a meal that he considered to be a farce for people working in the fields for long hours.<sup>118</sup> Evarista cheered up and laughed as she listened to her grandson ironically describing the meal. Nevertheless, her mood became bitter and sadder as she described the preparations of food for Christmas in the past. ‘If the old people could be resurrected, they would

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<sup>118</sup> I once ate in this canteen and the menu was composed of rice, with a dubious-looking omelette (the red colour of which I assumed to be due to the tomato juice added to eggs) and a tomato salad that was not seasoned and had started to ferment. The price of the meal was symbolic: 0.5 pesos. It was hard to figure out the inventiveness of the administrators of the canteen in providing a meal for such a ridiculously cheap price, unless state subsidies were used. The canteen was inside the barracks of a *batallón de trabajo* (labour battalion), consisting of men coming from other parts of the region during the tobacco harvest as wage-labourers. They had their common dormitories in a big room adjacent to the canteen.

ask to die again,' she told me while discussing the difficulties with food. She continued, 'The good nights are the same as the bad nights,' making a word play with Christmas Eve (*Noche Buena*). She told me how she used to celebrate Christmas Eve as a girl and later as a married woman. She described in lavish detail the preparation of the roasted pig and *ajíaco* (a Cuban stew) and homemade sweets with *avellanas* (hazelnut), and various *turrones* (typical Christmas sweets). She pointed out that the shops were full of food and goods, and that everyone could buy and eat meat, the poor, *picadillo* (ground beef), and those more affluent *bistec* (beef steak). After the victory of the Revolution, she and her husband never imagined that things would get so difficult. Some relatives and friends chose exile for a better life, but her husband never wanted to leave. One of his cousins, who had left immediately after 1959, repeatedly invited them to join him and his family in the United States. Evarista remembered her husband used to say, 'I'd rather eat a sweet potato here than a *bistec* in the north.' However, she continued, 'We never thought that we were going to get into this [situation].' She pointed out that nowadays people ended up eating *ñame* (a type of yam), whereas in the past it was used to feed pigs. She told me that she would never eat it and she grimaced only to reinforce her sense of disgust. Coffee, the immensely cherished and indispensable lubricant of Cuban sociability, was always in short supply during socialism, whereas, before 1959, Evarista remembered, it was freshly roasted and ground in *bodegas*. She recollects how she used to prepare a big pot of coffee every morning before the farm workers started their day that was kept hot to be served all day long. Nowadays, in order to serve coffee one has to look for coffee sold sporadically on the black market at double the price of the *bodega*'s price, and, at the end of each month, you occasionally had to admit to having run out of coffee.

Certainly, a good deal of the bitterness in Evarista's tone was due to the suffering provoked by the varicose veins in both her legs. One could also say that her perspective was coloured by her (past) social belonging to the middle stratum of tobacco-growers, who could make a good living by working their farms. Moreover, the death of her husband in 2000 was a blow to their economic situation, since the son was a notorious drunk, dilapidating the

patrimony of the farm and pushing the family into economic difficulties. Nevertheless, her account echoed those of many others about the diversity and richness of food before the revolution and the food scarcity and difficult distribution after 1959, which got only worse during the Special Period.

Food constitutes an important pool of symbols and a major idiom for people to talk about the past (Sutton 2001) and articulate their sense of temporality and social change (Hodges 2007). Especially in Cuba, discussions about food revealed different perceptions of the revolutionary process and its impact on everyday life. As might be expected, generational differences were played out in remembering and talking about food, but there was a common pattern built on a before and after type of contrasting memories of everyday life and food. The major contrast was before and after 1959, with those over 60 years old remembering their lives before Fidel's victory and evaluating the impact of the Revolution. For those born after 1959, who came of age before the fall of the Communist Bloc in 1989, the beginning of the Special Period (1991–2) was presented as a watershed between the 'good life' or 'vacas gordas' ('fat cows' in the words of one of my interviewees, using a biblical reference) of the Soviet-sponsored economy and the difficult life of 'vacas flacas' (skinny cows) of the last 20 years.

The two ruptures were widely invoked to make sense of one's life. At the beginning of the year 2009, just after the 50th anniversary of the revolution, I was talking to Nilda about the 50 years of the Revolution and how her life changed throughout this period. She started the discussion by mentioning two difficult periods in her life, one before 1959 and another the Special Period. Up to the age of 21 when she got married, she lived with her parents, owners of a little farm. Her parents had to take care of their eight children, but they were also in charge of three other children that one of her father's brothers had failed to take responsibility for. Besides growing tobacco, both parents had to work in a classifying centre. The most difficult time was *el tiempo muerto* (dead time), the period between two agricultural cycles, when economic activity slowed down, with no remunerative activities available. Food could be bought in *bodegas*, but her cash-strapped parents had to take products on credit from

the owner of the shop with the promise to pay with the harvest. Electricity was a dream that became reality only after 1959. She evaluated her life after she got married as being regular (*regular*), coinciding with the period of giving birth and raising her two children. She worked intermittently sewing tobacco and doing pedicure and manicure at home. The second difficult period in the life of her family coincided with the Special Period, especially the first years. She told me how in 1992–3, a period when rice was scarce and expensive, she queued for hours at the gates of a pre-eminent tobacco-grower who had a mill for de-husking rice, in order to be able to buy several pounds from the rice the clients had left the owner of the mill as payment.

Arturo, the producer I introduced earlier in the chapter, dismissed people criticizing the achievements of the Revolution. Despite the difficulties, including food shortages, one had to remain loyal to the process, he told me. He illustrated his point with a *décima*, a peasant genre of sung poetry:

El Buen Revolucionario,  
Cuando no tenga Manteca,  
Se come la yuca seca,  
Y no hace comentario.<sup>119</sup>

This referred to the preferred Cuban way of eating *yuca* (cassava), boiled and seasoned with hot *mojo* sauce (fried garlic, oil, and lime juice). He added that he enjoyed challenging people who were critical of the government by saying to them he liked *malanga*, a metaphor for revolutionary Cuba, including food difficulties. This was similar to what Evarista's husband had told her about his preference for eating a *boniato* (sweet potato) in Cuba to a beefsteak in Miami. This symbolic association between life in independent and revolutionary Cuba and *viandas* (roots, tubers, and plantains) goes back to the 19th century with the emergence of a national Cuban cuisine (*comida criolla*) in contrast to the colonial Spanish cuisine (Dawdy 2002). Indeed, meat seemed to be associated with abundance and capitalism, in both the past and the present. It was considered an indispensable ingredient for a good meal in everyday life

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<sup>119</sup> The good revolutionary/when he doesn't have lard (fat)/he eats the yucca dry/and makes no commentary.

as well as for celebratory ritual meals such as those marking Christmas and New Year's Eve.

At the end of December 2008, all Cuban households received an unexpected item as part of the rations for that month, half a pound of minced beef for each person. It had been years since Cubans had received beef on the ration book. In San Luis, people were commenting that this was 'the gift from [Hugo] Chávez' to Cubans on the eve of the 50th anniversary of the Revolution. Others were speculating that the beef had been sent by President Lula of Brazil.<sup>120</sup> Beef was and still is a highly valued and a rare commodity in Cuba, due to the political restriction on bovines. Only the state may slaughter cows and oxen and any infringement by those trafficking in beef is severely punished with prison. However, the insignificant quantity of the meat distributed was derided by most people and considered insufficient to celebrate properly the beginning of the New Year, not to mention the 50 years of the Revolution. Many people had instead prepared their own New Year's Eve dinner: the *lechón asado* (roasted pig) with rice and beans *congrí* style, accompanied by *yuca* and other tubers. Some of the people I knew had raised and slaughtered their own pig for the event and could invite relatives and friends to the celebrations. Others joined together and shared the cost of buying a pig for the celebration. However, for people with fewer means of subsistence or without access to remittances (Evarista's household for example), the rationed beef was the only way to enrich their New Year's Eve tables.

## 5. Concluding remarks

At the end of the rice harvest in December 2008, I asked Eugenio what was the follow-up to the campaign to give up rice and beans. He told me that in the aftermath of the three hurricanes in the autumn of 2008 the government

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<sup>120</sup> It was telling that the source of the meat was thought to be outside Cuba since various people commented that it was hard to imagine how beef could have been produced in Cuba. As one informant told me, 'Before 1959, Cuba had 6 million people and almost 6 million heads of cattle, whereas today, there are 12 million Cubans and 3 million heads of cattle.'

stopped the initiative and even decided to add a pound of rice to the *libreta* as a consequence of the difficulties after the hurricanes. He presumed that the initiative would be renewed once food provisions improved. Nevertheless, in the beginning of 2009, the discussion about the *libreta* changed completely since the government proposed gradually eliminating the ration book for the whole population, invoking the financial burden it represented for the state budget. However, as I have shown with the campaign for the voluntary renunciation of the rice and beans quotas, the proposed disappearance of the *libreta* will certainly intensify the debates of Cubans about the nature of their socialism, the role of the state, and solidarity based on an equalitarian ideology.<sup>121</sup> Any reform of cancelling the *libreta* should take into consideration that it is not only a question of food provisioning, but also a moral entitlement and a form of social citizenship that cannot be easily discarded without a larger discussion and negotiations regarding social rights in Cuba. Central to the revolutionary cosmology, the idiom of solidarity and sacrifice has been appropriated by many ordinary Cubans. To do away with the ration card provisions would mean to erase the reciprocity bond between the people and the Revolution, thus sapping one of the core principles of the revolutionary project.

As long as state distribution and not the market remains the overall organizing principle of the economy, and as long as food shortages remain an everyday reality, with or without the *libreta*, food production and consumption will continue to be central to how Cubans experience revolutionary policies and social changes. In this chapter I have shown how food production is central to the reproduction of households and to the perpetuation of inter-household sharecropping arrangements in San Luis. Producing food and growing tobacco are complementary activities that make the local livelihood model.

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<sup>121</sup> The gradual scrapping of the ration card was one of the measures adopted at the Sixth Congress of the Cuban Communist Party in April 2011. However, this measure was criticized by many Cubans, especially older people, who hung on to the *libreta* as a source of food provisioning. The government has kept the provisioning through ration card up to the present, eliminating only some items like potatoes, chickpeas, and sugar.

## **Chapter 5. Cock-breeding and cockfighting as forms of male sociability in San Luis**

In October 2008, I visited Gabriel, a 65-year-old retired agronomical technician, at his house in Pinar del Río. Born into a tobacco-growing family in San Luis, he had been working as a technician for the State Tobacco Enterprise in San Luis and the whole Pinar del Río region. He was considered one of the most experienced tobacco specialists in the whole province. One hour into our conversation about tobacco-growing and his life history, he read a *décima*<sup>122</sup> to me that he had composed in the late 1970s and sent to his daughter and son, who were studying in the Soviet Union at the time. The *décima* told the story of a *guajiro* who had a *giro* cock<sup>123</sup> and went to the cockpit after he had been paid for his tobacco harvest. His cock was paired against an *indio* cock belonging to a *guardia rural* (rural gendarme), but it could not win. The *giro* cock ran away into the fields and the peasant looked for him the whole night long, before he found him at dawn in the company of several hens. Angry and exhausted, the peasant intended to kill the cock, but one of the hens spoke to him pleading with him to spare the cock. The peasant gave up, realizing the injustice and violence of the cockfight and accepted the benefits of peace. The *décima* ended with a clearer political message, criticizing US imperialist interventions in Vietnam and praising the peace brought by the Cuban Revolution. Gabriel's *décima* was an allegorical representation of the peaceful and harmonious life under the Revolution, whereas cockfighting stood for the violence and corruption of the old regime. While I enjoyed Gabriel's skill of rhyme and metaphor, I had to tell him that cockfighting was still a popular

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<sup>122</sup> *Décima* is a ten-line sung poetry form, originating in 16th-century Spain, but very popular in Cuba and considered a peasant oral genre.

<sup>123</sup> *Giro* and *indio* denote types of roosters distinguished by the colour of their plumage (see below).

pastime after 50 years of revolutionary rule. Gabriel's son, listening to our conversation, intervened to say that the meaning of cockfighting was different now from the pre-revolutionary times, since the social support of the revolution made cockfighting less of a liability and major risk for the participants.

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In this chapter, I explore cock-breeding and cockfighting as social practices of masculine sociability and solidarity among men of various generations in the countryside. At the same time, cockfighting is also a domain of the competitive, agonistic expression of prestige and masculine pride. While being a domain of leisure, breeding and fighting roosters presupposes work and money. At the border of illegality, but a vital aspect of defining Cuban maleness, cockfighting stays in a paradoxical relationship to the Cuban revolutionary cosmology. It maintains a rich semantic repertoire for the fighting spirit and bravery, not unlike the trope of the fight in revolutionary cosmological discourse. I will show that this symbolic association of cockfighting with the revolutionary fighting ethos has played a role in facilitating cockfighting in public places and ceremonies, reframed as traditional cultural practices of the Cuban nation.

## **1. Theoretical opening**

Clifford Geertz's classical essay on Balinese cockfighting imposed an interpretative model on a cultural practice that has had correspondences all over the world. His ingenuous reading of the Balinese case is an illustration of his interpretative model of anthropological research: culture is a symbolic, meaningful universe, and cultural practices are texts that condense these meanings. For Geertz, cockfighting fulfils no function or ritual; instead, it is a text, a 'work of art', providing the Balinese with an interpretation of their own society. Geertz explicitly compares Balinese cockfighting with poetry and dramas in the West in their similar role as formative and interpretative cultural practices:

Enacted and re-enacted, so far without end, the cockfight enables the Balinese, as, read and reread, *Macbeth* enables us, to see a dimension of his own subjectivity [...] Yet, because – in another of those paradoxes, along with painted feelings and unconsequenced acts, which haunt aesthetics – that subjectivity does not properly exist until it is thus organized, art forms generate and regenerate the very subjectivity they pretend only to display [...] In the cockfight, then, the Balinese forms and discovers his temperament and his society's temper at the same time. (Geertz 1973a: 450–1)

Geertz's essay has been criticized for its assumption that culture is a collection of texts, its lack of enough evidence to sustain its interpretative claims (Crapanzano 1986: 68–75; Jacobson 1991: 48–54; Roseberry 1982) and its failure to deal with socio-political conditions of cultural performance (Guggenheim 1994). For Geertz cockfighting represents also a dramatization of status and prestige in a hierarchical society. Through his analysis of the two main types of bets (central and side wagering), he goes beyond a utilitarian or economic reading of betting, revealing its social and cultural constraints.

Scott Guggenheim (1994), working in the Philippines, amended Geertz's analysis of the significance of cockfighting. While he identifies remarkable similarities between Filipino and Balinese cockfighting, he brings a concern for political and socio-economic differentiations to his analysis. Contrary to Geertz's contention that cockfights provide a way of understanding the social structure, Guggenheim finds that the Filipino one provides a distorted folk theory of society that legitimizes the elite power. Using Maurice Bloch's analysis of the traditional function of ritual, he sees cockfighting as providing a legitimizing message to the political hierarchies in place. It is not a ritual of 'anti-structure' in Victor Turner's (1974) sense. Cockfighting is very much controlled by the elites and increasingly regularized by the state. Moreover, the dominant interpretation sustained by the cockfights is oblivious to many aspects of social reality, such as the role of women in economy and politics as well as the sources of prestige for the elites. While as a symbolic system 'cockfighting successfully couples individual self-identity and self-esteem, social and political loyalties, and even aesthetic satisfaction to an elegant and exciting event', Guggenheim contends that this ritual structure cannot determine alone the dominant interpretation of the event: 'people's life

experiences outside of the ritual structure are also important' (Guggenheim 1994: 169).

My take on the subject of cockfighting is closer to Guggenheim's sensibility to the political and social conditions of rituals and games than to the culturalist and the cognitive reading provided by Geertz. I approach the engagement of Cuban men with roosters as an important domain of their lives, defining their social position and place within peer groups, besides their work or political identities. The role of male peer groups in Caribbean societies has been given an important treatment in the anthropological literature (Wilson 1969, 1973, 1995; Eriksen 1990; Miller 1994). Peter Wilson's path-breaking study of the island of Providencia revealed the dualistic character of social life, alongside gender differences, expressed in a dialectics between respectability and reputation. The former corresponded to values and expectations modelled on Euro-American colonial upper and middle classes' standards of living, ways of speaking, and life style. The church and the school were the two most important institutions for preserving these values with women as their main carriers through their role in household reproduction. The latter, reputation, corresponded to a counterculture to the dominant values of respectability and thrived in masculine peer groups built on egalitarianism and competitive search for recognition from peers based on virility, loquacity, and various skills. Loyalty to each other and mutual trust bonded the members of such groups to one another. While it has been criticized for proposing a rather rigid gender segregation between the two spheres of values (Besson 2002), Wilson's model has remained an influential way of understanding masculinity in Caribbean societies.

I will contend that raising and fighting cocks corresponds to a domain of reputation among men in San Luis, different from the respectability of revolutionary value orientation. However, there was no easy way to reconcile the two domains throughout most of the revolutionary period, since the revolutionary government persecuted cockfighting because of the gambling involved. Nevertheless, the practice of cockfighting has survived state repression in the early decades of the revolutionary period and since the

beginning of the Special Period had known a certain revival, in spite of its illegality.

Formally, cockfighting shares traits with rituals and games, but it cannot be reduced to one category or the other. Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966: 32) makes the distinction between games and rituals or, more specifically, between the disjunctive effect of games (creating differences between individual players, where originally there was formal equality) and the conjunctive effect of rituals (bringing into a relationship parties unequal at the start of it). Thus, according to him, games engender asymmetry out of symmetry, whereas rituals bring asymmetrical domains into a relationship (not necessarily making them equal or equivalent). Cockfights could be seen as generating asymmetries as well as solidarities and celebration.



Fig. 30. Cockfighting

Another discussion relevant to the understanding of Cuban cockfighting and its implicit logic is Holbraad's ingenuous comparison between gambling in the popular and illegal lottery (*bolita*) and Ifá divination as cultural practices of predicting future events (Holbraad 2010). The lottery gambling is based on a

number of symbolisms and significant coincidences in everyday life (*cábulas*). These *cábulas* are not reasons for betting in a strong sense as grounded options based on cosmological or causal reasoning, but relevant coincidences. Therefore, according to Holbraad, betting is a-rational. On the contrary, 'in divination ... myths serve to provide reasons for things by apportioning the imponderabilia of everyday life to the systemic matrix of 256 *signos*' (Holbraad 2010: 79), based on the knowledge of the initiated diviners of the cult. Wagering in cockfighting is distinct from lottery playing and divination, since it is determined not by cosmological or significant coincidences of everyday life, but by social factors (alliance, friendship, loyalty to locality, prestige, etc) and the capacity to evaluate the quality of the roosters and of the dynamics of the fight.

I argue that the reasons for wagering in cockfighting, at least in the central bet (*coima*), are social in the sense that the solidarity with and belonging to a group or locality as well as friendship or alliance persuade a man to put his money on a particular cock or stop someone from betting against a particular cock belonging to his in-group (Geertz 1973a; Guggenheim 1994). However, notions of luck (*suerte*) play an important role in evaluating skills, abilities, and performances in order to bet on a victorious cock. This notion of *suerte* is an individual quality and seems to be a characteristic a person is born with.

Cockfighting and cock-breeding are homosocial spaces in Cuba, comprising thousands of peer groups organized around *gallerías* (rooster-houses) involved in organizing cockfights all over the island. These spaces and events for masculine socialization and interaction create solidarities and reputations among participants (Wilson 1969, 1973). At the same time, their position in relation to political power and official institutions resembles the place of masculine practices of socialization and contestation analysed by Herzfeld (1985) in Crete. Cockfighting, like sheep stealing in Crete, are cultural practices marked as illegal, but which also indicate masculine self-images of independence and autonomy, which are essentialized by the statist nationalist ideology as independence and fighting spirit. They belong to the sphere of

cultural intimacy, which refers to ‘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’ (Herzfeld 2005: 3). Cockfighting in Cuba is a perfect illustration of what Herzfeld calls *disemias*, ‘the formal or coded tension between official self-presentation and what goes on in the privacy of collective introspection’ (Herzfeld 2005: 14). I will illustrate how this tension is creatively displayed locally by local cultural bureaucrats by presenting cockfighting as part of Cuban culture, thus enabling local cock-breeders to invest central public places and take pride in their passion.

## **2. Cockfighting in illegal cockpits**

It was a couple of months before I first attended cockfights in Eugenio’s company. It was at a *valla* (cockpit) near the city of Pinar del Río. I knew that Eugenio and other people from San Luis used to take their cocks to this cockpit every Sunday. On a Sunday in March 2008, I walked alone from the city and I had to ask three different people how to find the cockpit. It was beyond the outskirts of the city, hidden in a small forest, near the dumping area. From the main road heading to the dump, I had to turn right and walk along a path for 100 m until the shouts of people and the crowing of cocks assured me that I was going in the right direction. The cockpit had been constructed in a small clearing. A circular area with a diameter of approximately 20 m was fenced with tarpaulin sheets fixed on wooden poles. Above the cockpit, larger tarpaulin sheets, stretched between trees, projected shadow on to the arena, which was surrounded by wooden benches. But hardly anyone was sitting, since people were standing on the benches to be able to follow the cockfight over the heads and shoulders of other spectators, shouting encouragements and calls for bets left and right. At the entrance two people stopped me and ask me to pay 50 pesos. ‘They take me for a tourist,’ I thought, so I quickly said that I was looking for a friend from San Luis. They asked me the name of the friend and one went inside to emerge a few minutes later in the company of Eugenio, who was a bit surprised to see me there. He told the entrance guys

'He is with us,' and wanted to pay the entrance fee, but I hastily complied with what I finally understood to be a general requirement for Cubans and foreigners alike. Once inside, I could see that the cockpit accommodated around 200 people, which represented a profit for the owner of the cockpit.<sup>124</sup>



Fig. 31. Two *indio* cocks fighting in an illegal cockpit

The fights in the cockpits I visited during my fieldwork usually started in the afternoon and lasted till sunset, provided there were enough matching cocks. Food and drinks were sold outside the cockpits, and other games were played, such as *karaka*, the infamous shell in which a small rubber ball was hidden under three bottle caps, the player betting on guessing under which

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<sup>124</sup> As I became more familiar with cockfighting, I found out that not everyone paid for entrance. For example, the breeders did not pay; on the contrary, they received some cash (a couple of hundred pesos) from the 'owner' of the *valla* (cockpit) as a payment for bringing the cocks in for a show. I put 'owners' in inverted commas, since all *vallas* in Cuba were illegal, except those belonging to the state. It was a highly risky business but, according to my informants' accounts, the people managing the cockpits often benefited from the protection of the local police or Seguridad officers. Most probably a part of the profit made by the operators of the *vallas* was used to pay bribes. I found from my informants that the profit of running a cockpit could be around 12,000 pesos a month (out of which bribes needed to be paid). In 2008–09, in the city of Pinar del Río there were two big illegal cockpits, each operated by owners who according to hearsay, had been previously convicted for theft.

cap the small ball was to be found. The ambiance was festive, and bigger cockpits had a feel similar to carnivals.

Usually, people started to arrive before mid-day and, having first weighted the cocks, they found a spot with shadow to keep fresh their roosters. Very important, the main task shortly after arrival was to find information about the other cocks and the strengths and weaknesses of possible matching cocks. There were two main criteria for matching roosters for a fight: they should be more or less of the same weight and of the same experience. However, like most rules, these conditions were the ideal that had to be adjusted to reality, since it was hard to satisfy both criteria perfectly. If the weights were not equivalent, this might be compensated for by a difference in fighting experience: for example, setting an experienced cock of a lighter weight against a heavier *pollo* (young cock) without fighting experience. Information was crucial for obtaining a favourable match against a weaker adversary, so persons from each group would circulate among different groups to ask questions, eavesdrop on conversations and exchange tips with friends about the qualities and the experience of the cocks. Of course, deception was also a strategy to fool a potential adversary and downplay the strength of one's own cocks. However, the manoeuvring space for deception was limited to people who attended the same cockpits every Sunday, because people got to know the cocks and remember previous fights in which they had triumphed. Moreover, the prestige of the cock-raiser was also at issue, since too much downplaying of the cocks' qualities was counter-productive to one's self-presentation as a good cock-raiser.

Once the matching of the cocks was agreed, the central betting or *coima* was negotiated. The amount in the central betting was highly variable, depending on the number of people pooling money for betting, their available cash, the number of cocks scheduled to fight, their strengths and the time of day. I heard stories about fights in Havana with central bets of 3,000 CUC, but in the countryside the sums were usually 100–400 CUC. Nevertheless, these were considerable amounts for Cuba if one takes into account that the average monthly salary was the equivalent of 14 CUC. Once the fight was over, the

money was quickly collected and paid to the winning party. In the case of victory it was customary for the owner of the cock to keep 10 percent of the win money.

After the cocks were matched and the fighting order announced, cock-owners had to prepare for the spurring. A fast spurring could be done in 10–15 minutes, but an experienced person could devote twice that time in order to avoid unpleasant surprises during the fight, for example, the loss of a spur, which could be fatal for the cock. What was expected from the spurring person was skill and good spurs. Cubans used different types of spurs 2.5–3 cm long, but they were against the use of metal ones (*navajas*), which were regularly employed in most Latin American countries. Their use was generally considered to be too cruel for the birds because of the damage they could do to the cocks and the fact that they shortened the fights and implicitly reduced the beauty of the show.

In Cuba the spurs used were fabricated out of plastic, turtle shell (*concha de carey*), goats' or ox horns or – traditionally – out of cocks' natural spurs (these are called *zapatones*).<sup>125</sup> These were fabricated by some cock-raisers, after selecting natural spurs that were left to over-grow then hardened and shaped through boiling, curving, polishing, and sharpening. There was another special type of spur which used the beak of a bird (*Ardea alba*, *garzón* in Spanish or great egret). There was a widespread belief among cockfighters that cocks with such spurs could make their opponents lose control over their movements.

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<sup>125</sup> Certain cocks were selected for making spurs. Their spurs were left to overgrow, while they received a special diet to strengthen their spurs. After they reached a length of 4–5 cm, the spurs were trimmed, wrapped in latex, and then boiled in order to shrink them. After that, they were curved by submerging them in hot oil. The base of the spur (*copa* in Spanish) was then enlarged using a round chisel. Excellent spurs were being brought to Cuba from the Dominican Republic at the time of my fieldwork.



Fig. 32. Spurring

The spurring of the cock goes like this. One person holds the body of the bird, and another does the spurring. First, an elastic cord is tightly wrapped around the legs just above and below the spur in order to prevent bleeding. Next, the base of the natural spur of the cock is cleaned and flattened using a knife (an operation done with special care in order to avoid bleeding). The next step is to wrap the legs of the cocks round their natural spurs with sticking plaster. Then, using a special resin melted with a cigarette lighter, the fighting spurs are pegged to the cock's natural spurs. Then the last operation is to wind sewing thread around the spur and the leg very fast in order to fasten the spurs. After that, resin is added in order to fix the spurs even better. Well-fixed spurs are essential for the outcome of the fight, since a lost spur or a spur fixed at a wrong angle could severely handicap it and ultimately result in its defeat. There was a lot of apprehension about poisoned spurs, thus the ritualistic gesture before the fight of cock-handlers sucking the spurs of their cocks as a sign of their good faith.

The outcome of a cockfight is the victory of one of the cocks or a draw (*tablas*). The defeat of a cock is declared when he runs away, avoiding the confrontation or, as in most cases, he is seriously wounded or dead. Draws are declared when there is no clear winner after a long fight, usually taking

more than 20 minutes. There is an official rule in the state cockpits establishing the maximum duration for a fight of 20 minutes, but in the illegal cockpits fights are not stopped at this point.

### **3. Being a *gallero* (cock-breeder): roosters, work, and fun in homosocial spaces**

In this section I present the schedule and the different tasks ordinarily carried out in a *gallería* (rooster-house) in Cuba. I visited a dozen *gallerías* (in San Luis, and also in Mantua and Havana), but I became most familiar with the activities of one particular *gallería* in San Luis, run by Javier, a young barber. The main tasks and activities were all almost the same in the *gallerías* I visited, but understandably each cock-raiser had his own trade secrets and special recipes for the treatment of illnesses, wounds, parasites, and for a diet to raise strong cocks. Raising and training cocks entailed a strict schedule of tasks similar to the training of the best athletes, – as people often told me.

#### **3.1. Classifications of roosters**

There are various ways to classify roosters. One basic distinction is between the local Cuban variety called *gallos finos criollos* (fine roosters) and the foreign breeds *pavo*, *español*, *argentinos* or *cruzado*. The first are of a smaller size, having thin thighs, a narrow belly and long tails. Their style of attack is through flying. The second are larger cocks, with stronger thighs and large breasts. They fight through thrusting and striking with their beaks, not jumping or flying like the fine roosters. However, due to the difference in physical strength and size between the two varieties, cockfighters try to avoid having fights between a fine rooster and a Spanish one.

The second most important classificatory principle is the dominant colour of the plumage. Accordingly, roosters are classified into *indio* (red and black), *cenizo* (grey and brown), *jabao* (light brown and white), *canelo* (white and brown), *blanco* (white), *gallina*, *giro* (yellow and black), and *pinto* (black

and white). When two cocks of similar plumage are fighting, another criterion is used to distinguish them, the colour of their legs (red or white, *pati rojo* or *pati blanco*).



Fig. 33. A *giro* type of cock (in the front) and two *indio* cocks in the background

The distinction between the *criollos/finos* and Spanish/Argentine roosters is coextensive with the distinction between rural and urban Cuba. In San Luis, there is a strong preference for the *criollo* variety, while in Havana most of the *gallerías* are breeding the stronger variety of the Argentine/Spanish cocks. The issue of maintaining the purity of the Cuban cock breed was brought to me by Javier. He told me that it was the state who introduced the *pavo* type of cock in Cuba, apparently from southeast Asia, and these cocks rapidly started to interbreed with the local ones. Officials got worried about the possibility of losing the local cock breeds, said Javier, and they started protecting the local variety. It is for this reason, he continued, that the *pavo/argentino* type of cocks was not accepted in the state cockpits. Nevertheless, they consisted of the majority of fighting cocks in Havana.

Breeders of cocks generally shared the idea that raising cocks in the fields or countryside made the birds stronger than those raised indoors or in

the city. Cock aficionados from San Luis recalled how they used to let mother hens and their chicks roam freely on land around their farms, but with the rise in the theft of animals during the Special Period, they had to keep them inside courtyards and patios. Several of them had arrangements with cock-breeders in Mantua, an isolated municipality 90 km west of San Luis, where hens and cockerels could be left in open fields without the fear that they would be stolen.<sup>126</sup> Cockerels and hens from Mantua travelled to San Luis and even to Havana in the networks of breeders.

Cock-breeding is a complex process, but there are certain principles of vernacular genetics. Thus, regarding the plumage colour, cock-breeders have the idea that the female inherits the plumage of the father, while the male chicken inherits the colour of the mother. It is telling that this popular understanding of the genetic transmission of the traits of bird was also present when people discussed the human phenotype. Once, when two *galleros* were talking about the daughter of a white common friend with a *mulata*, they said that the girl's skin colour was lighter, closer to her father, since 'the female goes after the father' ('*la hembra tira al padre*'). And when a cock-breeder from Havana explained why he preferred to breed and train Argentine cocks he said they were more resistant and stronger than the Cuban/*criollo* type, comparing them with 'the Blacks who are stronger than the Whites'.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> I accompanied cock-breeders from San Luis on a visit to Mantua in December 2008. The occasion was a birthday celebration of a local breeder who had bred cocks for his friends from San Luis for years. I was impressed by the number of *gallerias* in Mantua, which local breeders presented as '*la mata de los gallos*' (the grove of cocks). The price of a young cockerel of fine breed in Mantua was 150–500 pesos.

<sup>127</sup> This cock-breeder had 90 cocks in his *gallería*, the majority being the Argentine type. He kept a couple of the *criollo* type because they reminded him of his childhood in the countryside, when he became passionate about breeding and training roosters. He said that an excellent Argentine type of rooster could cost up to 13,000 pesos.

### 3.2. An ordinary day in a *gallería*

Javier, 31 years old, was one of the better-known *galleros* from San Luis.<sup>128</sup> His *gallería* was situated in his uncle's back courtyard, who lived in the *pueblo*. He was also a barber and he had his shop in the porch of his uncle's house. It was the most practical arrangement, since he could devote any spare time from his work to his cocks. He had 35 cocks in his charge, out of which 15 were his personally, the rest belonging to his *socios* (partners and friends), who entrusted him with the care of their cocks. He had a part-time employee, Miguel, a young mulatto, who came for a few hours every day to help with routine jobs such as feeding the cocks, cleaning the cages, taking the birds out to put them out in the sun, and, last but not least, training them. For Javier an ordinary working day started at 7 a.m. in the morning. He went to his uncle's house to take the cocks from their cages to expose them to the morning sun before it became too hot, for approximately one hour or so. During this time, he and Miguel cleaned the cages, an essential task in order to maintain healthy exemplars, free of parasites and other diseases. After that, the cocks were returned to their cages to rest until lunch time, when they received their main meal of the day. The diet varied, but the basis of it was maize, taro, plantains, eggs and, importantly, the liver or heart of pigs, cows, or goats, as a significant protein input.

There was a precise schedule with entries for each cock specifying the time and the type of training it received: *voltear* (turn over), *topar* (fighting), *coger* (running), etc. It also included the weighing of each cock every week. The training aimed at both developing the physical resistance of the cock, mainly by making it run round the training pit, as well as its fighting skills, especially the attack with spurs. For this, an older cock called *mona* was used as a sparring partner for the trainees to practise their attacking skills (*el tiro*). During the training sessions the spurs of the cocks were covered by special rubber cups in order to prevent wounds. After each training session the cocks were cleaned with a special solution made of alcohol and different medicinal

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<sup>128</sup> It was impossible to get an accurate number of the number of fowl breeders in San Luis. In the *barrio* where I spent most of my time, there were eight *gallerías*.

plants in order to remove any blood stains and prevent any infection. In late afternoon, the cocks received their second meal, the *merienda*, which was usually composed of *malanga* (eddoes) with egg yolk or, more rarely, minced pig liver or heart. They also received another exposure into the late afternoon sun.



Fig. 34. A *gallería* (rooster-house) in San Luis

Javier's centre of interest the whole day was his cocks, including while he was with his clients – many being his friends – as conversations in the barbershop drew often on the themes of cockfighting and cock-raising. The weekend was also devoted to his roosters. On Saturdays he worked only in the morning, he reserved the rest of the day for training the cocks and preparing specimens for cockfighting the following day. Usually more people dropped by to see the cocks, plus preparing for the cockfighting and dealing with the practicalities of the next day's travel to the cockpit. In the cockfighting season 2007–08, San Luis lacked a cockpit, so local cockfighters had to travel to the city of Pinar del Río, Viñales, or Herradura, which needed more expense and connections in order to arrange (*resolver*) the transport of men and cocks.

The transport of cocks had to be done with discretion because of the illegality of cockfighting outside state cockpits, so mainstream transport (private taxis or public buses) was usually avoided. There was a sense of adventure on these Sundays of cockfighting, a domain of male activities (though not excluding some women for company). In the following section, I will present a journey to a cockpit undertaken by some people from San Luis, with their cocks, in order to convey the sense of celebration, risks, satisfactions and loss experienced on these days.

### 3.3. The *fiesta* in San Cayetano

Here I describe what was considered the high point of the cockfighting season in Pinar del Río region, the *fiesta* in San Cayetano, a municipality in the northern part of the province. With the local carnival, cockfighters and aficionados from the province but also from Havana city brought their roosters to what was considered one of the biggest cockfighting events of the year. However, the cockfighting took place on the edge of San Cayetano, away from the *pueblo* and its celebrations and the police presence. As it will become clear from the extensive excerpts from my fieldnotes for that day, participants feared that the police would impede the organization of the cockfights.

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*I've been hearing about the **fiestas** of San Cayetano with its cockfighting for more than a week from Javier and his friends. They've been planning to go and they've said I should join them since the cockfights are great over there. There is an uncertainty about the organization of the cockfights because of the harsh manner with which the government and the police have been cracking down on a series of illegalities after the two big hurricanes in August and September. There is a rumour that this year the chief of the police from Viñales does not want to allow cockfighting. Yesterday, 7.12, I visited Javier to ask him about their final decision about going or not to San Cayetano. Javier told me that he had spoken to somebody from San Cayetano who informed him that the cockfights are finally going to be organized and who believed that the*

*rumour about cancelling the fights in S.C. had been spread by other owners of vallas in the region of Pinar in order to have excellent cocks coming to fight at their cockpits next Sunday at the opening of the season. So finally the only uncertainty remains about the transport. Javier does not know yet if Gustavo's truck is available to be rented or not. We had started a discussion about making spurs, when Javier was called to the police station by his policeman friend. He returned half an hour later saying that the cockfights in San Cayetano are taking place as his friend, the policeman, called one of his colleagues in Viñales to ask him about the cockfights. Javier told me, laughing, how weird he felt being in the police station, listening to a phone conversation his policeman friend was having with a colleague of his about cockfighting. He also met Gustavo who told him that he could drive the group to San Cayetano.*

*This morning, at 8 a.m., I've come to Ricardo's house (our starting point), a friend of Javier, and also a gallero. Everyone was there, in total 16 persons, including three women who accompany their boyfriends. We left around 9, having with us 6 cocks, 4 brought by Javier and two by Ricardo. The general mood was excellent, with a lot of joking and teasing, as well as a general excitement about the cockfights to come. Especially Paul was very witty and self-mocking, having a hangover after an evening of fiestas. Just when we were about to leave the city of Pinar in the direction of Viñales, a policeman on a motorcycle came up behind the truck. 'Hay aguacate!' ('There is avocado!'), said Javier, alluding to the colour of the uniform. Later on, another police-car was getting closer to the truck, and somebody said, 'Hay agua!' ('There is water!'). We were stopped by the police before arriving at Viñales, apparently for speeding. Gustavo was fined, but everyone felt relieved since there were no questions about the cocks. The upbeat mood revived almost immediately and jokes were made including about two of us who suffered from car-sickness due to the curves of the road before arriving at Viñales. We arrived in San Cayetano, with the carnival in full action. We parked the truck on the side of the road, towards the northern end of the pueblo, and walked to the centre in order to take the pulse of the street. A lot of people in the street, loud music played in many places, the popular reggaeton. Many shacks with food, lechon asado, beer from the barrel and quite a few policemen ('Como hay*

*industrialistas!' commented somebody from the group). We asked where the cockpit was and we got the instructions how to get there. After 40 minutes or so in the pueblo, we drove about 3 km northward, and then we took a countryside road, alongside a finca. The cockfight was in a small forest, in a clearing. We arrived around 11.30, and the fights had not started yet. There were already around 300–400 persons maintaining a celebratory atmosphere, fuelled by beer and rum, which were sold with sandwiches with bacon. People were playing different hazard games. We went to find an appropriate place with shade to rest the cocks. The cocks were weighed and Javier and Roberto started to look for potential adversaries for their fowls. The first fight took place around 12.15. As the seats on the wooden benches around the pit were sold out, we had to stand in order to find an angle to watch the fights. Quite a few people decided to have the best view, by climbing one of the trees around the pit. I did the same and took the best pictures from the top. The first fight lasted only five minutes, one of the cocks being mortally wounded. Around 1.30 p.m. the first cock from San Luis fought with a local one. This fight lasted less than 10 minutes, Roberto's indio cock was wounded in one of the veins of the throat, and bled copiously until he died after a few minutes. The second fight of a San Luis cock (a cenizo type) was a defeat too, surprisingly since our cock was the favourite, but the adversary managed to administer a mortal blow. The mood of our group started to become grimmer, but big hopes were reserved for the best of the lot, a giro cock of Javier's, with a year's experience in fighting and three fights won in the past. The adversary was a young cock (indio type) from Pinar del Río. The bets were making our cock the winner. The central coima was of 1,000 monedas (equivalent to 5000 pesos or 20 CUC). Javier spurred the cock while Pedro was holding it, but he was noticeably nervous about the fight. By then he had already lost 1,000 pesos, but he put 1,000 pesos (1/5 of it) in the central bet, hoping to make up for the earlier loss. Javier chided him a couple of times, telling him to keep calm, not to make the cock nervous too. Pedro took the cock to the pit, holding it and caressing it its back. He told me twice that the cock was going to win since it was better than all the others from San Luis. At the beginning of the fight, the bets were confirming the status of favourite: 'Voy 100 monedas al giro!' ('I bet 100 coins on the giro!'), 'Voy 20 a*

6 al giro!' ('I go 20 against 6 for the giro!'). The rooster was fighting well, jumping and relentlessly attacking with the spurs, but his adversary was responding accordingly. After five or six minutes' fighting, the giro cock's throat started to bleed, and his jumps became less frequent than at the beginning. The atmosphere became more electric and the bets started to be called against our cock. It quickly became obvious that the wound in the throat was too serious and that the fight was lost. Our rooster was keeping its head low, not being able to avoid the spurs of the other fowl. The fight was lost, and Javier entered the pit to pick up the cock. He checked the wound and said that the cock was going to die. This third defeat changed the mood of our group since there was considerable loss in the bets. There was no more matching for the three other cocks, but those still with money went to bet on the other cockfights in order to recover some of their losses. Those without money for betting hung around, drinking, socializing, and trying to get over the losses. The sense of humour was not in short supply, as everyone laughed when one of us made a self-derisory remark pointing to the three dead cocks, lying on the ground: 'Look, this is the cemetery of San Luis!' After 5 p.m. the fights stopped, but people were hanging around, chatting and drinking. Word spread around that there were talks about organizing a last fight between a local cock and one from Pinar, which proved to be true. Everyone went to watch the last fight between the local giro type cock and an indio cock from the city of Pinar. This was the last occasion to prove one's luck with a winning bet. At the end the local cock triumphed, and this made Leonardo, from our group, happy since he won 2,000 pesos out of betting in this last fight.

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Our return trip took much longer than in the morning. We stopped at several bars to drink and buy drinks to share in the back of the truck. We were loud, teasing and firing jokes at each other, self-mockery and bravado both colouring the accounts of the day as well as the anticipation of future cockfights. Many of the conversations were about how much one won or lost in the cockfights, the bravery of the cocks amidst *mala suerte* (bad luck). The outcome of a fight did not depend entirely on the athletic qualities of the cocks, but also on

chance, good or bad luck, which could take the form of a loss of a spur during the fight, or the cock receiving a mortal strike from the adversary, even though he was winning the fight.

There was one particular incident when we arrived in San Luis concerning the body of the dead *giro* cock. The bodies of the dead cocks were usually not eaten by the breeders; instead they were sold or given away. Roberto had sold his two dead cocks to a man in San Cayetano for 20 pesos. Javier took the cock corpse with him, but he had to dispose of the corpse on arrival in San Luis. He tried to convince any of the participants to take it, but nobody wanted to take the dead cock. He was particularly insistent about not wanting to leave the dead body in the street, since this would give a bad image to cockfighters. I asked cockfighters about this reluctance to eat the cocks that had died in the fight, as is the custom in other parts of the world. The rationalizations usually fell into two categories: the ‘bad taste’ (inedible because of the way it died, so it cannot taste well) and the affective one (‘I could not eat this cock, I raised it myself, took care of it every day’). There seems to be a taboo interdiction at work here, but one that is not codified, but rather loose (Douglas 2001 [1966]; Valeri 2000), forbidding the raiser of the cock to eat its body.

The *fiesta* at San Cayetano was one of the high points of the cockfighting season in Pinar del Río, and it included cockfighters from Havana who were interested in measuring the quality of their cocks against the local ones. Equally important, such events were opportunities for the exchange between *galleros* of information, counselling, artefacts (spurs for example), and, most important, cocks. This transactional dimension aside, going to such events reinforced and extended the masculine networks beyond work relationships into the domain of play and celebration. Money played an important role, circulating from the domain of production or trade to that of friendship, play, and risk (Parry & Bloch 1989; Holbraad 2004). I deal in the following section in more depth with questions of money, luck, and solidarity in cockfighting.

#### **4. Money, *suerte* (luck or fortune) and peer solidarity in cockfighting**

Money was essential for buying food, medicine, cocks, spurs, and other things in order to maintain a *gallería*. Moreover, without money one could hardly enjoy going to cockfights, since one would need enough money to pay the entrance fee and place some bets, not to mention pay for transportation and buy some food and drink. Likewise there were important costs involved in raising cocks, without including profits from the sale of cocks or winning fights. The generally shared idea among cockfight aficionados and *galleros* was that there was no economic rationality behind cock-breeding and cockfighting. ‘If a person thinks he can win money with the cocks then he does not know anything about cocks,’ was one of the most often heard comments from Cuban aficionados about cockfighting. It was a rather costly passion that could be sustained only with hard work<sup>129</sup> (every day in the *gallería* cleaning, feeding, curing, and training the cocks) and money for food, medicine, younger cocks, etc. Partners of a *galleria* participated not only financially in the costs of the *gallería*. For example, three of Javier’s *socios* were producing food, so they regularly brought maize and *malanga* for the cocks. Javier’s father, a tobacco-producer, also grew maize and *boniato* (sweet potatoes), which were feeding his son’s cocks.

Betting in cockfighting is part of a gambling universe in Cuba, alongside the popular illegal lottery *bolita* (Holbraad 2010) and other types of *juegos* (games). This is attributed to what is a general self-perception among Cubans, their propensity to gamble, a habit which the Revolution wanted to abolish. The *bolita* was also popular among rural Cubans, not only in Havana. A member of the cooperative I worked with was the banker of the lottery and he went each

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<sup>129</sup> It is relevant to point out the similarity between some tasks in cock-raising and cleaning and cooking inside the house, an almost exclusively feminine domain in Cuba. I cannot remember having ever seen a Cuban man cleaning or helping with house cleaning. On the contrary, I did observe often how diligently men cleaned the cocks’ cages, washed and fed them. Likewise, women did not intervene in cock-raising, a domain exclusively masculine. These two domains could create frictions, such as in the following incident I noticed. One late afternoon, Javier was cooking the food for the cocks in his aunt’s kitchen, aunt using the only gas stove available. His aunt, hurrying to prepare lunch for the family, chided him for delaying the family’s lunch by saying to him that ‘for you the roosters are more important than us’.

late afternoon to pick up the bets people wagered, usually based on *cábulas*<sup>130</sup> or significant coincidences of the day (Holbraad 2010: 71-75). Cock-breeders were critical of people who bet in excess, without restraint, and many stories circulated about people who had obsessively bet money (in the lottery) to lose considerable amounts of money in the hope of considerable gains.

The question of betting and luck in cockfighting was an important one among aficionados, but there was no general consensus of what made a person lucky in betting. One evening, while sharing a bottle of rum among friends discussing cockfighting, Javier made a demand of me, ‘*Yo quiero que en la tesis, tu trates de la suerte. Que es la suerte?*’ (‘In your thesis I would like you to deal with the question of luck or fortune. What is luck or fortune?’). I could not give an answer to Javier’s question about luck, but he kept talking about it. ‘Why do I, out of 40 roosters, have only 18 winners, while another person with 15 roosters in his *gallería*, has 12 winners? This is because I am less lucky than other people.’ This was something that intrigued Javier and it had not escaped the attention of his friends and associates. Eugenio, whose roosters were in Javier’s *gallería*, had told me that Javier had not had much luck cockfighting in the last few seasons, but he preferred to have his cocks cared for by Javier because he was a scrupulous, very devoted cock-breeder and trainer. Javier continued, ‘In cockfighting, some have luck, others don’t. Eugenio, for example, has luck (*suerte*).’ In the heat of the discussion and the warming effect of the rum, I conjectured, ‘Maybe this has something to do with one’s personality, one’s charisma, one’s magic (*magía*).’ Javier replied, ‘Don’t tell me about magic or sorcery or the other world. Everything pertains to this world (*Todo es de este mundo*).’ Javier’s agnosticism was in line with his scepticism about sorcery beliefs and his acknowledgement of the agency of men and cocks in influencing the outcome of a fight. Beyond training cocks, men could influence the outcome of a fight through setting up a favourable match, and

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<sup>130</sup> *Cábula* is the variant used in San Luis – like in Havana, as reported by Holbraad (2010: 88) – of the standard Spanish word *cábala*, coming from the Hebrew word *qabbālāh* (meaning tradition), originally meaning a set of mystical teachings in Judaism transmitted as oral tradition from Moses to the rabbis. In Spanish, the word stands in everyday use for conjecture, supposition, or superstitious reasoning for guessing something.

through cheating or match fixing.<sup>131</sup> But if a fight was clean and the cocks were perfectly matched, then the fowls alone determined the outcome of the fight. But here the unpredictability of the fight was something hard to read because even a cock which fought better and dominated the fight could be defeated through a mortal, desperate strike of its opponent.

Javier's complain about his lack of fortune might also have been an exaggeration, since from my observation of the cockfighting season 2008–09 he had won half of the fights with his cocks. However, he had lost on several occasions when his cocks were the favourites, and I suspect this had given substance to the idea that he was not fortunate in cockfighting. However, this did not prevent his associates and friends putting money on the cocks he raised, especially in the fights against cocks from other municipalities. Similar to the logic of the deep play in Balinese cockfighting, aficionados felt bound to bet on cocks coming from the same municipality as opposed to cocks from another municipality. Refraining to do so (even by putting a small amount in the central bet) would have been seen as a sign of disloyalty to the peer group or of dissension between individuals.

I witnessed such a situation when discussions about betting on cocks made visible rivalry and frictions between men from San Luis. Carlos, 34 years old, returned in January 2009 to his native place San Luis from Nicaragua, where he had been working in tobacco trading for a year. Before leaving Cuba, he had been working as an intermediary of agricultural products and had raised pigs. Returning to San Luis on holiday, he behaved like a successful entrepreneur: a rented car in Havana, expensive clothes, conspicuous celebrations with friends and family. One Sunday, he came to a cockpit in

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<sup>131</sup> In the moral code of the cockfighters, match fixing was the highest sin and brought ultimate dishonour and shame for those caught cheating. My interviewees explained to me how difficult it was to prove that a match had been arranged since in the illegal cockpits there was no possibility of analysing blood samples of the cocks in order to detect illegal substances. Only state cockpits had veterinary laboratories, where the blood of the cocks was analysed in search of illegal substances. The suspicion of match fixing was greater when the owner of the cocks was of dubious reputation or when the central bets were unusually high. Talking to cockfight aficionados, they believed that Havana's cockpits frequently hosted arranged matches.

Herradura, where other cockfighters from San Luis brought their cocks. Javier was among them, with two of his cocks fighting. In the first fight, Javier's cock was the favourite, but lost against a cock from Pinar del Río. Carlos, who had come to the cockpit in his rented car, not like all others from San Luis in an old Chevrolet truck, also put money on Javier's cock. After the defeat, he made negative remarks about the quality of Javier's cock. Later on, Javier fought his second cock. This time Carlos sent word through one of his friends that he was not putting money on it. However, this time the cock prevailed to the great joy of Javier and his supporters. Andi, one of them, bet 3,500 pesos (divided between the central bet and side betting), and was thrilled by the victory. He commented loudly after the win, 'This is money I make working in the field, not like others doing business, alluding to Carlos. The latter's refusal to bet on the second cock was commented on negatively in the following few days and was seen as a sign of arrogance and disloyalty to a peer group Carlos had belonged to while he was living in San Luis.

Betting was an essential component of cockfighting, both for its disjunctive effects (creating winners and losers), but also for expressing solidarities between groups of men. These were, however, the main reasons for the state's persecution of illegal cockfighting. The state cockpits' version of cockfighting excluded betting, and this was the reason why they were not popular with cockfighters. There were, nevertheless, other instances of bringing cockfighting into the public space which formed an important aspect of Cuban popular culture, such as those described in the following section.

## **5. Cockfighting enters the public domain: celebrating Cuban culture in San Luis**

Everaldo, a 62-year-old tobacco-grower and cockfight aficionado, explained to me how the revolutionary government's repressive approach towards cockfighting had eased starting with the Special Period. He said to me during a conversation:

cockfighting is a tradition. And this they [the government] could not change. Now there is less repression, but there was a time when one had to run away from the police into the bush (*en el monte*). Now they leave you in peace. Near los Palacios there is a cockpit close to the highway. One day, policemen stopped us, but when they saw the cocks they did not even check our documents. They wished us good luck (*suerte*).

A sign of this more tolerant approach to cockfighting was the growing presence of roosters in the public space as part of various celebrations of Cuban national culture and traditions. At the local museum in San Luis, I attended two events organized by and for aficionados of cocks. Both were the initiative of a member of the museum staff, a man a passionate cockfighter himself. The first one was in August 2008 during the nationwide week-long celebration of Cuban culture. In San Luis, various local institutions were involved in organizing events, celebrations, roundtables, and exhibitions of artistic and cultural events. The municipality's museum organized various events, among which one on '*La décima, el domino y los gallos finos*' ('The *décima*, the domino and the fine cocks'), three important practices in the Cuban popular culture.<sup>132</sup>

Different cock-raisers from the municipality brought one or two of their best younger cocks, with no experience of a real fight. Because of the summer heat, the cockfighting season usually started in October and lasted until May the following year. The museum event started around 9 a.m., with participants bringing their birds and tying them to some ropes in the entrance of the museum, situated in the centre of the *pueblo*, right across from the headquarters of the Cuban Communist Party. It was quite an unusual sight and atmosphere, with 20 or so roosters, cock-a-doodle-doing as if the museum had become a *gallería*. A visitor would have quickly understood that the main *raison d'être* of the event was the display of the beauty and fighting spirit of the cocks from San Luis and not the *décima* or the dominoes, as one of the

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<sup>132</sup> The event was organized on 17 August 2008, a Sunday, the day of the week when cockfights were usually held. Moreover, as one friend told me, it could have not been a better day of the week, since the fact that the official offices were closed was propitious and reduced the risk of possible intervention or criticism from the state officials.

organizers intimated to me: 'We set up a table with a domino game in order to be covered, but the main attraction are the cocks.'



Fig. 35. Roosters in the local museum's porch, San Luis

Indeed, only some kids were playing dominoes, but even they moved eventually outside to where the cocks were displayed and where the jury was inspecting the cocks and deliberating to whom to award the prizes. The jury was composed of four members, one being the organizer from the museum, two *galleros*, and the fourth member was an old fighter of the 26 July Movement in the municipality. He was also a passionate cockfighter (he did not have a *gallería*, but one of his nephews operated one of the finest *gallerías* in the municipality), and his revolutionary credentials constituted a protection for the organization of the event.

A reference to official culture was visible on the wooden award plaques for the prizes. These were small boards of poker-worked wood displaying a cock, a domino set and a guitar, and most importantly, a quote by José Martí, the Apostle of the Nation: '*Pelear es una manera de triunfar. No hay más vencidos que los que lo son por sí propios*' ('Fighting is a way of triumphing. There are no more losers than those who are losers by themselves').

The worst defeats are those we inflict on ourselves'). This way of using the idiom of fighting, a very rich semantic and pragmatic field that stretches from the official national discourse to everyday life, as in *la lucha* or *la luchita* (the struggle for survival), helped to legitimize the presence of the cocks in the public, state-controlled space. The connection between cockfights and José Martí was something that was mentioned to me by several people on several occasions, including the granddaughter of Eugenio, who showed me the page from her handbook of Spanish language containing a text by José Martí about his childhood passion for the cocks. The text is a letter he wrote to his mother when he was eight years old, telling her about a cock he had received as a gift and how his father planned to have the cock prepared for the cockfights.<sup>133</sup>

José Martí, the cock aficionado, was a prestigious reference to certify the legitimate attachment of Cubans to cockfighting, but other revolutionary figures (socialists) were invoked by cockfighters as examples of passionate followers of the game. Among them, Raúl Castro and General Guillermo García Frías were the highest in the leadership of the Revolution. I remember one instance in particular when one tobacco-producer provoked amazement in a woman technician when he told her that Raúl was crazy for cockfighting. She could not believe that the president of the country (it was in March 2008, after power passed from Fidel to his younger brother) himself was participating in what was perceived as a forbidden practice.

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<sup>133</sup> José Martí, 'Carta a la madre, Hánabana, Octubre 23 de 1862', *Manual de Español*.



Fig. 36. Winner of the first prize in the competition '*La Décima, el Domino y los Gallos Finos*', San Luis

Certainly, beyond these rhetorical strategies, which one could judge more or less persuasive, there is an institutional connection between cockfighting and the socialist state. The story is that in 1972, Celia Sanchez, Fidel Castro's right hand, was worrying about the real possibility of the extinction of the Cuban *criollo* type of cocks, and so proposed to create a state farm which would be in charge of the preservation of this genetic heritage. A state farm was therefore established, called Alcona, on the outskirts of Havana City. This enterprise, supervised by General García Frías, specialized in cock-raising, the selection of the best exemplars, and the export of cocks, particularly to countries in Latin America. In the mid-1980s, the state established state cockpits in all provinces and provided licences for cock-breeders (*criadores de gallos*), but all these activities were strictly regulated. All cockfights had to be in the state cockpits, no betting or drinking was allowed

and the cocks had to be of pure Cuban breed. These were the conditions that made most Cuban cockfighters avoid the state cockpits, since for them a cockfight was inconceivable without betting and alcohol. Nevertheless, having a card as attested cock-breeder could offer – as I witnessed several times – a protection against police controls, especially on the road, when a person could pull out his *gallero* card and explain that the cocks were travelling to the state cockpit and not to an illegal cockpit (as was the case). One of the covers of this card has printed a quotation from Fidel: ‘*Somos como los Gallos Finos, y los Gallos Finos no vuelan la Valla, no abandonan el combate hasta el final, no somos de la estirpe de los que se rinden*’ (‘We are like the fine roosters and the fine roosters do not fly from the cockpit, they do not abandon the fight until the end, we are not of the stock of those who surrender’).<sup>134</sup> Here the same idioms of struggle and bravery officially frame cockfighting in the national and revolutionary culture.

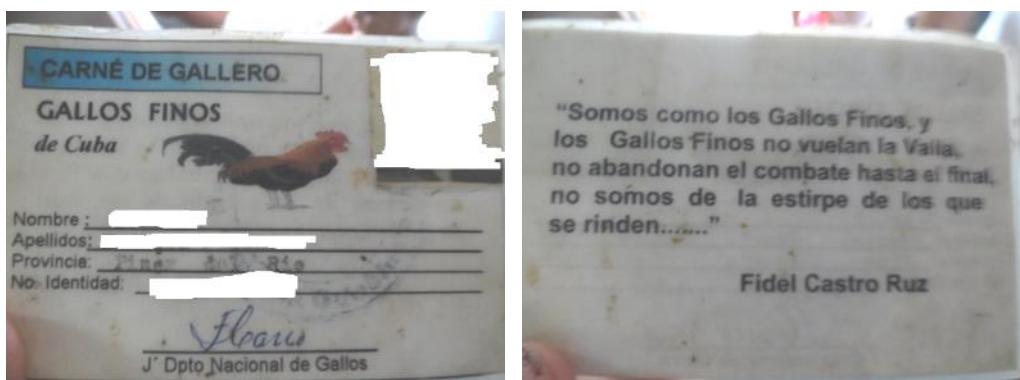


Fig. 37. *Gallero* membership card

After the winners were announced and received their awards, everyone moved inside the museum where the back courtyard became the centre of activities. A small cockpit was improvised in one of the corners of the courtyard by arranging chairs in a circle, fencing the pit with cheesecloth (which is used for growing the *tabaco tapado*) and covering the ground with sawdust. The cocks were prepared to fight by shrouding their natural spurs with rubber

<sup>134</sup> This citation is taken from a speech of Fidel Castro in December 1991 in front of the National Assembly of Popular Power: see <http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/disursos/1991/esp/f271291e.html> (last accessed 17 December 2013).

covers in order to avoid damage to the adversary. Seven fights took place in front of a demanding audience made up of experienced cock-breeders and aficionados of all ages, including children. When the trial fights ended (no rooster was wounded), two real fights were organized. For these, roosters were spurred and bets were made in a discreet manner, not to draw attention from the outside. This time, there were real winners and dead roosters.

There was a sense of excitement and celebration during the cockfights in the courtyard of the museum, but people were aware they were on public, state-controlled space and publicly visible. Betting had to be done in a discreet way and there was no alcohol allowed on the premises of the museum. Some older cockfight aficionados did not attend the cockfight celebration in the museum, their justification being the past repressive harsh manner with which the local authorities punished them for breeding and fighting cocks by confiscating roosters and heavy fines. For them, the museum's courtyard was not as safe a place as the cockpits in the bush or forest. However, due to pulling the right strings with the local police, cockfight aficionados from San Luis managed at last to have their own pit only two months after the museum's celebration in the autumn of 2008. It was not centrally situated, as in pre-revolutionary times, but had to be hidden in a forest at some 3 km from the *pueblo*. It was nevertheless progress, since local breeders could put their roosters to test and fight more easily, without having to spend money on transport to travel to more distant cockpits.

## **6. Concluding remarks**

In this chapter, I have analysed cock-breeding and cockfighting as key social practices of male sociability. Through these practices, male reputation and solidarity are made and maintained, similar to other male peer arenas in the Caribbean (Wilson 1969). Cock-raising and cockfighting are several centuries old in Cuba, going back most probably to the early colonial times. Despite being outlawed after 1959, they persisted especially in the countryside and returned to the cities during the Special Period. In Cuba, cockfighting belongs

to the sphere of cultural intimacy – those aspects of cultural identity that confirm insiders in their common sociality, but which can be a source of external embarrassment (Herzfeld 2005). Similarly to sheep-stealing in Crete (Herzfeld 1985), cockfighting is formative of masculine self-images of independence and bravery, traits which are essentialised by the revolutionary discourse as signs of a fighting spirit. Through its rich symbolism of bravery and fighting spirit, cockfighting connects everyday masculine sociality to the symbolism and rhetoric of the revolutionary struggle.

As a consequence of certain officials' concerns that the Cuban rooster breed may face extinction, in the 1980s the revolutionary government officialised a gambling-free version of cockfighting. The government allowed the existence of licenced cock breeders, set-up state farms specialised in cock-breeding and organized state cock-pits. In my presentation I showed how breeders in San Luis were able – with the protection of older cockfight aficionados who had an irreproachable revolutionary background – to celebrate their passion openly, as part of Cuban culture, on the premises of the local museum. This included some betting, albeit in a discreet manner. Despite the relaxation of the official persecution of illegal cockfighting in the last twenty years, breeders were still cautious about state repression due to the betting involved. As it will be clear in the next and last ethnographic chapter, Cubans knew that, in spite of the new lenience towards some illegalities, the revolutionary government could at any time reverse its policy.

## **Chapter 6. Lines of force of the revolutionary cosmology: moral debates, illegalities, and criticism of the revolutionary state in San Luis**

Cuban revolutionary cosmology conveys a vision of Cubans as living in the most equitable society in the world, for which they feel compelled to be loyal and grateful towards Fidel and the Revolution. In contrast, in my fieldwork I encountered on a daily basis examples of acts of disloyalty, contestation, criticism, and illegal actions that contradicted this vision. Official discourses, state media, and state campaigns explained such acts as the consequence of a lack of revolutionary consciousness and/or of the permanent aggression by the more powerful neighbour from the north. In the introduction, I have discussed how such acts are interpreted as a result of the economic crisis and of the estrangement felt by many Cubans towards the Revolution (Guerra 2007) or as an instance of self-equivocation (Holbraad 2014a), whereby criticism of the Revolution does not contradict allegiance/loyalty to it. In this chapter, I look at such acts as part of the larger process of domesticating the Revolution. They produce moral debates, frictions, tensions between Cubans – even within families – about the Revolution and its policies. Acts illustrative of disloyalty, criticism, illegality emerge at the margins of the revolutionary cosmology and test its principles and values. By doing so, they contribute to the domestication of the Revolution. I will discuss two cases more extensively, one of a dissident, and the other of a resident of San Luis who had illegally emigrated to the United States and was detained by Cuban authorities on his return home at the beginning of 2009. The presentation and analyses of these cases will be preceded by a discussion of more widespread and mundane forms of illegal acts which were part of everyday life. Based on these materials, I want to explore the moral evaluations and debates resulting from these acts of contestation and illegality and how these reflected Cubans' evaluations of various revolutionary policies.

## **1. The lines of force of the Cuban revolutionary cosmology**

This chapter is built on the assumption that rather than analysing the central symbolic and normative principles of the revolutionary cosmology and the institutions in charge of its reproduction, it is equally productive to look at cases where the cosmology is contested or problematized. By taking this approach, I will emphasize lines of fracture and moral contestation between individuals, which often point to significant generational differences. These moral debates (around questions of what is good and just in everyday actions) are also political since they link up with the values, representations, and practices defined by the revolutionary project.

My approach is consonant with ethnographic explorations of the ‘margins of the state’ (Das & Poole 2004), conceived not in spatial terms (centre–periphery), but in terms of legibility and illegibility and discipline and control over bodies:

Margins are not simply peripheral spaces. Sometimes, as in the case of the borders of a nation’s states, they determine what lies inside and what lies outside. Other times, as in the case of checkpoints, they run through the political body of the state. Borders and checkpoints, as we saw, are spaces in which sovereignty, as the right over life and death, is experienced in the mode of potentiality – thus creating affects of panic and a sense of danger even if ‘nothing happens’. (Das & Poole 2004: 19)

Perhaps lines of force (an analogy with the structure of the magnetic field) might be a better metaphor for the way state revolutionary power runs through the body politic, crisscrossing community, family, and personal relationships. These lines of force operate by creating semantic categories referring to categories of people considered suspect, counter-revolutionary, or criminal. These categories have, nevertheless, real consequences as people who are labelled as such risk being fined, penalized, harassed, convicted or expelled by state authorities. It is especially in relation to these categories of Cubans that the exclusionary dimension of the revolutionary project is most evident. However, one must not fall into the trap of romanticizing the people’s resistance against state oppression (cf. Abu-Lughod 1990), something that has been exemplified by the literature on dissidence in the East European

Communist bloc (Havel 1987) and by anthropological literature on peasant and other forms of resistance (Scott 1985, 1990). However, my take is not Foucauldian per se ('power produces resistance and vice versa', a perspective shared by Lila Abu-Lughod, for example), but one in which I am more attuned to look at how contestation, criticism, and questioning the revolutionary framework produce moral ambiguities, antagonism towards and/or restatements of allegiance to the revolutionary project. This is consonant with recent ethnographies of illegal economic practices and their moralities (Roitman 2006; Bocarejo 2018). Thus, Diana Bocarejo (2018) shows how Colombian peasants' involvement in legal and illegal economic practices produces ethical deliberations, judgments, and disputes that are critical both of the state and of the para-military mafias.

This chapter is structured in three sections, each dedicated to a situation of questioning and contesting the official revolutionary discourse. I open the chapter with the case of *merolicos*, a vernacular term referring to middlemen, usually used in a derogatory manner.<sup>135</sup> These are individuals perceived as acting against the revolutionary principle of the superiority of productive labour over trade and informal activities. My case deals with people who buy agricultural products in order to trade them on marketplaces or in various informal and illegal arrangements. Further, I analyse the case of a dissident, a person who openly criticized the revolutionary government. This is not an exhaustive analysis of a network of activists, nor of the government's strategies to deal with these groups. My focus rather is local as I look at how a person's openly critical stance towards the government affects relationships with close relatives and friends. My goal is to understand how a person decides to become a dissident and which survival strategies are at hand for such a person when acting against official revolutionary laws. Last, I look at a case of a person who, after illegally escaping from Cuba, returned back home and was arrested for some days. Since I did not have the chance to meet him, the presentation of his case is based on testimonies of his relatives, friends, and

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<sup>135</sup> The term *merolico* started to circulate in Cuba at the beginning of the 1980s and it was a borrowing from a Mexican telenovela *Gotita de Gente* (Marquez Linares 2000). Another term used for middlemen in San Luis is *mercachifle*.

acquaintances. However, the reactions of people to this arrest brought into the open concerns about the risks those wishing to flee Cuba have to face and the difficulties their relatives go through in such situations. All these cases point to problems of larger societal and ideological relevance for Cuban society: trade or self-employment versus work in agriculture, dissidence or contestation versus loyalty to the Revolution, and staying in Cuba versus emigration. My intention is to show how these phenomena result in occasions when the revolutionary discourse is debated, reflected on, criticised by people in their everyday livelihood practices.

## **2. The everyday illegality and revolutionary criticism of *merolicos* (middlemen)**

Life in contemporary Cuba would be impossible without millions of illegal acts, most of them part of the informal economy.<sup>136</sup> Every day, ordinary Cubans break the laws of the revolutionary state through everyday acts such as taking an illegal taxi to go to work, buying goods stolen from the state, or more serious things like buying or trafficking beef meat or using satellite dishes to access American TV channels. Cubans sometimes refer to their Revolution as *Robolución* (from the Spanish *robo* for theft) and explain that their life is *la lucha* (fight) for survival (Bloch 2006; Pertierra 2009a). In the countryside, many activities are illegal, but at the same time essential for the local economy: trading in stolen fertilizers, insecticides, fuel, and agricultural products without a selling licence. Other illegal practices, such as gambling, stigmatized by Fidel as typical of the capitalistic period, are highly popular.

I tried at various times to persuade Cubans to talk about the apparent contradictions and paradoxes of their everyday lives, among them widespread illegality. Jorge, a 72-year-old inhabitant of Pinar del Río, was one of the most

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<sup>136</sup> When I talk about illegality, I mean acts that break state laws or run counter to official rules. However, many such acts are perceived by ordinary Cubans as licit or morally just and legitimate, thus differing from the official point of view. For example, the illegal selling of agricultural produce without licence is seen as legitimate by many Cubans since this helps them acquire licit products otherwise difficult to find on the official market.

thoughtful interviewees I had, educated and very about Cuban and international history. Moreover, his affluent, bourgeois background, his choice to remain in Cuba after 1959 (due to a combination of factors such as his support for the emancipatory revolutionary project and personal loyalty to his family in Cuba) helped me to understand a different experience of life under the Revolution than those of peasants or rural workers. In a conversation we had in September 2008 about the differences between life before and after 1959, I asked him about the significance of stealing in Cuba. He said:

Before (*Antes*), if a person was caught stealing in his workplace, he was fired. Now, everybody steals. It is our way of life. We call it *inventar*, looking for the way to make a living [...]

Mariano: Isn't it contrary to revolutionary ethics? The Revolution wanted to fight corruption and the theft of public money from the period before the revolution.

Jorge: Up to a certain point, it is the same, but it is not the same (*Hasta un cierto punto es lo mismo, pero no es igual*). A senator of the Republic had to spend 50,000 pesos to get elected. His salary was 400 pesos. Generally, a senator was usually a trader or a businessman who made profits afterwards with various contracts from which he could benefit due to his position as a senator. Now, everything is a question of surviving, stealing because one has to live. This is not seen as something wrong (*algo malo*). I know a carpenter, a decent and educated person. One of his sons works in the hospital as a nurse. And this son steals parts of the hospital beds, which are used by his father for making tables for TV and video sets. I've recently seen two metallic chairs in his house that had belonged to the hospital where a new surgery room had been opened. I didn't ask him from where he got them, but I realized how he got them. They are decent people (*gente decente*) whom you can let into your house and they will not steal from you. The same with the surveillance personnel of the shops, who take things they have to guard, those working in the hospital, who take an electric bulb if he needs it and so on [...]

Mariano: How this could be stopped? In China, for example, people are sentenced to death for serious cases of corruption.

Jorge: Think about it, here they would have to shoot everyone. But Raúl [Castro], who I think is a better administrator than Fidel, said that people should not be worried, since nobody will ask them where they got the things. What is going to be controlled is the source of distribution of the goods. For example, now it is much more difficult to buy gasoline unofficially (*por fuera*), because there is more control and less distribution for the state units (*organismos*). This is not sufficient even

for them. And so on, for other things. Here nobody will ask how you have obtained goods, since everyone is involved (*todo el mundo está involucrado*).

Stealing of public goods and using state equipment for private use are a widespread practice in other socialist countries, too, so Cuba is no exception (Sampson 1985, 1987; Wedel 1986). However, Jorge did not consider this widespread petty illegality to be similar to the corruption that existed before the Revolution. Then, politics was corrupted and a parliamentary position brought clear material benefits and pay-offs. After 1959 and particularly during the Special Period, using or stealing from state property was considered a survival strategy, because of the inadequacies of the state distribution system. Moreover, this is not considered as immoral as stealing something from private property. Revolutionary morality was not considered to be exactly the same as people's morality (the street, neighbours, family, peers, etc) since in spite of breaking revolutionary laws, one could still be considered a decent person (*gente decente*) by neighbours or friends.

Stealing private property was a bigger concern in San Luis, especially regarding animals, mainly pigs, but also cows. People complained that as meat became a valuable commodity especially with the difficulties of the Special Period, it was no longer safe to leave pigs and cows freely wandering in the countryside. Also, people were generally reluctant to rely on the police to resolve these cases or find the guilty people. First, the police was perceived as not very efficient at finding the thieves. Second, even if the guilty were found, they were either fined (and the fines were paid to the state) or convicted for a year or two (the case of repeat offenders). The victims of theft were either not compensated for their loss or received very little.<sup>137</sup> In general, once people had evidence about thieves and they were known in the community, they sought to reach a deal to recover part or all of the loss.

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<sup>137</sup> The perception of the insignificance of the compensation for the stolen animals could also be explained by the valuation of the stolen animals at official state acquisition prices and the valuation at the secondary economy's prices.

Starting in 1961, when Fidel announced the socialist turn of the Revolution, the government's control of the whole economy expanded beyond the key sector of sugar-cane production or larger businesses already under its control. In 1968, in a so-called revolutionary offensive, the government took control of the rest of the privately-owned businesses and declared all trading and profit-making activities to be illegal and anti-socialist. Guerra shows that many of these entrepreneurs were of humble social origins and many of them had been able to set up their businesses due to early revolutionary reforms. However, even if the majority of them were Fidelistas, they were still targeted in a campaign of the moral cleansing and radicalization of the Revolution (Guerra 2012: 293-304). Fidel himself railed against small traders and owners of *timbiriches* (food and drink stands):

In general, are we going to create socialism or are we going to create *timbiriches*? ... Gentlemen! A Revolution was not made here to establish the right to trade! That Revolution was made in 1789; it was the time of the bourgeois Revolution ... When will they finally understand that this is a Revolution of the socialists, that this is a Revolution of the Communists? (Fidel Castro, speech, 13 March 1968, cited in Guerra 2012: 301)

This revolutionary offensive in 1968 prepared the ground for the nationwide mobilization for the *Zafra de los diez millones* (10 million tons of sugar-cane harvest) in 1970, but served also as a precedent for later revolutionary campaigns such as the Rectificacion de los Errores (Rectification of Errors) of the late 1980s against entrepreneurs and profit-seeking activities.

In 1980, the state authorized the opening of markets for independent agricultural producers in order to overcome the shortage of agricultural products. Producers and intermediaries of food products (the *merolicos*) seized this opportunity and earned considerable profits. This was not approved of by the authorities, and the dissolution of the free peasant markets was decided during the congress of the cooperative movements in 1986. The *merolicos* were the target of harsh criticism, and the control and confiscation of products and property. Fidel Castro himself vilified them by pointing that 'a new category of persons was created; they were simply lured by the money. It

seemed that a new banner has been raised in our society: “Get rich! Get rich anyway you can! Be a street peddler, sell things at higher prices, and steal!”<sup>138</sup>

Geraldo, an 80-year-old tobacco-producer from San Luis, made a lot of money in the 1980s on the open markets. On his 13-ha *finca* he produced mainly tobacco but also various vegetables and rice. When I met him in 2008, he worked his land every day alongside his workers. In the 1980s, he produced rice, beans, and bananas. Using his small old Chevrolet 1957 truck, he transported his products to open markets in the neighbouring municipality of San Juan y Martinez and the town of Pinar del Río. ‘I was feeding all San Juan y Martinez for four years,’ he told me proudly. ‘I was earning a lot of money, I could build my house. Have you seen my house?’ ‘Of course,’ I answered. One could hardly not notice his modern brick-made big house with a large terrace, contrasting with the many wooden houses of the *barrio*. Geraldo continued:

I was selling for two thousand, three thousand pesos every day. There were days I earned up to five thousand. And one day Fidel said that those who were selling on the open markets were getting rich. They made lists of people to be investigated. In our municipality 13 people were on the list. I narrowly avoided the confiscation of the land (*a mi por poco me intervinieron*). Finally, they seized the property of only one individual. Nevertheless, they confiscated 200 quintals [equivalent to 9,071 kg] of rice and bananas from me.

In the aftermath of the closing of the open markets, a bureaucrat from the Ministry of Agriculture met farmers from San Luis and wanted to find out what their views were about this. Gerardo reluctantly gave in to the insistence of the bureaucrat on a free exchange of views and said that the measure would prove to be a failure since peasants would stop producing the same quantity of food they had produced while using the opportunity to sell on the open market. However, Geraldo did not perceive himself as a *merolico*, because he sold his own harvest. Other people, including some more critical of Geraldo’s drive to always earn more, did not consider him to be a *merolico* either, as they

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<sup>138</sup> Fidel Castro, speech at the Closing Acts of the Seventh Congress of the Farmers, at <http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/castro/db/1987/19870517-2.html> (last accessed 19 November 2015).

readily acknowledged that Geraldo worked his own land instead of buying products from others to sell at the markets.

The criticism of middlemen and profit-seeking practices has been a fundamental ideological principle of the Revolution. In spite of more pragmatic movements towards allowing privately operated service activities (*cuentas propistas*) in the 1990s to ease economic difficulties, trade or profit were still considered contrary to socialist revolutionary values during the period of my fieldwork.<sup>139</sup> The formal election of Raúl Castro in 2008 brought hopes among Cubans of a more pragmatic economic policy, but the campaign against middlemen in the aftermath of the 2008 hurricanes illustrated the latter's ambiguous, contested, and precarious position in Cuban society .

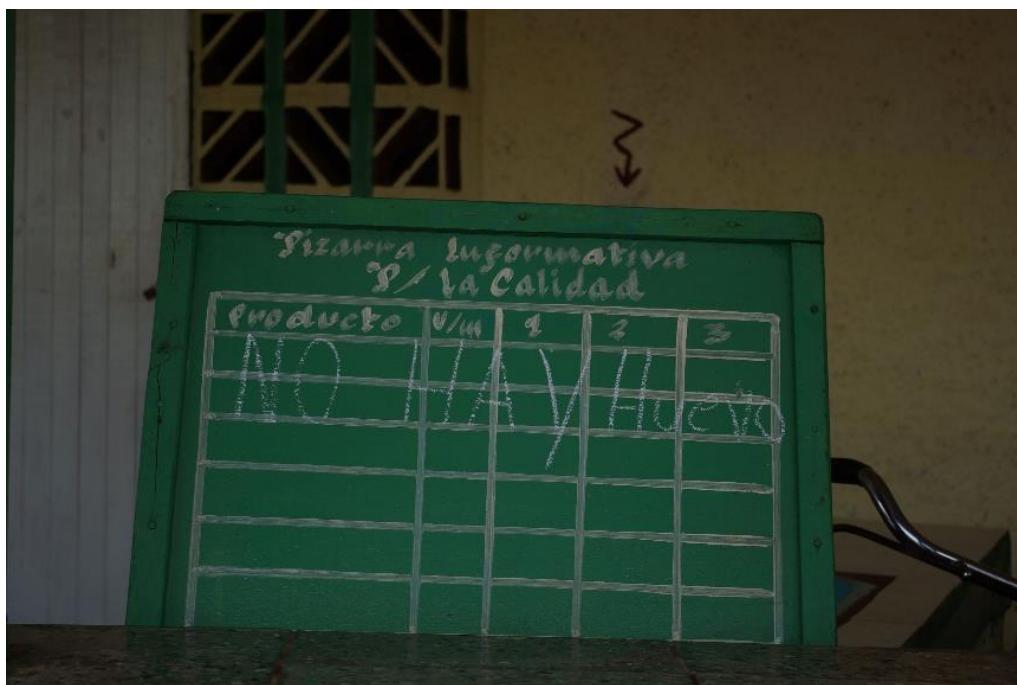


Fig. 38. Sign on the state market in Pinar del Río: 'No hay huevos' ('There are no eggs')

<sup>139</sup> In October 2010, the government extended the scope of legal self-employment to 178 activities, the most significant legal opening for private entrepreneurship since the 1993 legalizing of some self-employment (*cuenta propia*) activities. In December 2011 and September 2013 new laws created a system of microcredits for self-employed workers and enlarged the number of legal private activities to 201 (Gonzalez-Corzo & Justo 2017). However, in December 2017 new regulations for Cuba's private sector were announced in a comprehensive review of market reforms aimed at controlling wealth, tax evasion, and other illegalities. The government suspended the issue of new licences for cooperatives and other private-sector activities (Frank 2017).

In September and October 2008, the debates about middlemen were resurrected after hurricanes Gustav and Ike had caused huge damage, especially to housing and agriculture. The government tried to prevent speculation in food prices. This translated into harsh measures to crack down on intermediaries in the trade of agricultural products with high fines and confiscation of the merchandise and the means of transport. Both in San Luis and in Pinar del Río, rumours started to spread about fines, confiscations, and arrests of people involved or suspected of being involved in the black market. Many people became anxious since many of their vital supplies came from the black market or they had been involved in informal economic transactions. An official statement in the Pinar del Río local newspaper published sanctions on 'authors of illicit activities' throughout the province. Among them, there was the case of a man caught trying to sell two bottles of rum and sentenced to one year of the deprivation of liberty, replaced by correctional work without internment.<sup>140</sup> This was seen by friends as an exaggerated punishment for something that only days before was the widespread and tolerated practice of reselling products from state shops. The official newspaper *Granma* published an official communiqué on its first page entitled 'Information to our people', which stressed the unity and spirit of sacrifice of the people after the two hurricanes, but also stigmatized those who 'hoard and speculate with products stolen or bought in disproportionate quantities from commerce'.<sup>141</sup> This was an indication that the sentencing of the person in Pinar del Río was not a local decision, but one taken at the centre to harshly punish all illegal trafficking.

In San Luis, I witnessed several public discussions concerning the strict measures of cracking down on the activities of the middlemen. State agricultural functionaries held meetings with cooperative members in order to dissuade them from selling their products to intermediaries and urged them to sell to the state instead. At the same time, they were strongly encouraged to produce more food in order to contribute to the improvement of the food situation after the two hurricanes and to substitute for food imports. The

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<sup>140</sup> 'Sanciones severas para autores de actividades ilícitas', *Guerrillero*, 10 October 2008.

<sup>141</sup> *Granma*, 29 September 2008.

debates about informal activities became louder in the community, with pro and contra positions taken about the government's actions. Eugenio found that state actions to crack down on all intermediary activities in order to maintain the prices stable were justified. This was generally in tune with his vision that middlemen get prosperous on the back of the producers, who did the real work of tilling the land day after day. He was also critical of the husband of his niece, a manager of a small snack bar, because of his illegal selling of *tamales* (a boiled dish of corn-based dough wrapped in corn husks) and pork meat on the street. On the contrary, younger people were more critical of the state's actions against intermediaries. The kitchen of Antonio's snack bar was often filled with his friends, who came to chat, exchange news about baseball and cockfighting, and talk *negocios* (business). One of them was Ricardo, a young tobacco-producer, who complained to me that the government imagined that the intermediaries did not work, instead only did business and got rich easily. He disagreed with this: intermediaries worked too, as they had to travel in order to find goods and further take risks with the police while transporting and selling these goods in markets in Havana or other cities. He, as a producer, could not go and sell his tomatoes or peppers, for lack of time and means of transportation. Also, the prices the intermediaries were offering to the producers were higher than those offered by the state procurement agency in charge of the acquisition of agricultural products.

Among those affected by the harsh governmental measures against middlemen was the Rubiera family. The 71-year-old father was a pensioner having previously been employed as a buyer of tobacco by the state company. He had two sons, aged 43 and 39, and they worked their *finca*, together producing tomatoes, peppers, onions, rice, and beans. They showed initiative and had innovative ideas in using technology for improving harvests and increasing productivity. They had a tractor and a truck; they also sold their products at the *pueblo* market. Other producers in the cooperative perceived them as business-oriented, since, besides producing their own vegetables, the Rubieras bought vegetables from other producers in order to sell them at the markets in Pinar del Río and Havana. They were in an ambiguous position between producers and *merolicos*. After the hurricanes, they stopped selling

at the market as the state froze the prices of food products. The Rubieras mentioned the harsh controls and the risks involved in taking their products to Pinar and Havana, which could result in having the load and the truck confiscated. They chose to wait till the repressive measures in place after the hurricanes would be abolished.

The term *merolico* has an offensive connotation, and one had to be careful using it. In the second week of January 2009 I went to Javier, my friend I introduced in Chapter 5, for a haircut. He had got his licence as a *barbero* (hairdresser), one of the 200 small jobs that there were authorized by the state at the beginning of the 1990s. He used the porch of one of his uncles' houses as his workplace. Clients waiting for their turn sat on a bench and some chairs and, except for the lunch break, there were always three or four persons waiting and chatting to Javier. On this particular day, there were four friends of his, discussing the latest news in the *pueblo*. One of them raised pigs (around 100 heads), having a contract with the state to sell them. In previous years he had bought root vegetables (taro and cassava) from producers and he had sold them at the *pueblo* market. 'So you were how is it called, a *merolico*?' I asked him. He was a bit annoyed and replied, '*Merolico*, I was, but Fidel is also a *merolico*, a middleman who buys from abroad and sells to us.'<sup>142</sup> Hearing our exchange, Javier immediately intervened in his characteristic ironic and witty way, by asking his friend, 'Do you know whom are you talking to? Maybe he is from the police,' he said, referring to me. He then burst into laughter when he saw his friend's face going red.

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<sup>142</sup> 'Fidel es también un merolico, un intermediario que compra afuera y nos vende a nosotros.'



Fig. 39. Raising pigs for selling to the state

Arturo, the producer of rice and vegetables I introduced in Chapter 4, told me about a discussion he had had with a *merolico* (he used the synonym *mecachifle*). One day when he was harvesting tomatoes, three men came and asked him if he could sell them 30 boxes of tomatoes. He answered that the tomatoes were for the *Acopio* (the state procurement agency) and he added that 'I don't like to sell to *mecachifles*.' One of them asked Arturo the meaning of the word *mecachifle*. 'They are those like you who live out of the sweat of the producer, buying from one and selling at double the price, earning the same as me who spent the time preparing the land, planting, harvesting. I'm selling to Acopio, and in this way I'm sure that people are going to eat my tomatoes'. One of the *mecachifles* asked again, 'Who are the people?' and Arturo replied, 'The people are the doctor who cures my child and the dentist who treats my teeth.' He continued, 'Look, I don't want to talk about politics (*hablar politica*). Come another day with 30–40 empty boxes and I'll fill them.' I asked him if he didn't think that these men could have been state inspectors checking if he would have sold his tomatoes to intermediaries. He answered that he had envisaged that possibility, but he had papers proving he had already fulfilled his selling allocation to the state.

Many people in San Luis I talked to believed that the offensive against *merolicos* would only be a temporary storm, after which life would go back to normal arrangements and small illegalities. Their experience with past campaigns, especially the one in the 1980s against free peasant markets, had taught them that the government had to relax some measures since they proved inefficient in improving the distribution of goods, especially food products. Some also thought that this repressive turn was a trademark of Raúl Castro's presidency, a leader accustomed to a military career and experienced in imposing discipline. People's anticipations were confirmed a couple of months later. At the beginning of 2009, four months after the hurricanes, there was a sense of relaxation, especially in Havana, but also in the countryside, as more agricultural products were available as a result of exceptional weather conditions for agriculture and material incentives for increasing the food production after the hurricanes of 2008.

In this section I have discussed practices more or less illegal or situated in a grey area of legality in all parts of the informal economy in Cuba. Most are instances of everyday struggles to make do or *luchar*, some are examples of a more entrepreneurial spirit stimulated by demands not sufficiently satisfied by the state economy. The rest of the chapter deals with different cases of violation of state legislation and authority, acts of open criticism of the government, and illegal migration, all of which are heavily penalized in Cuba.

### **3. Debating and challenging the benefits of the Revolution: being a dissident in Cuba**

'Do you know what "*tiempo muerto*" (the dead season) means?' Victor asked me, just after he had had one of his turns at dominoes. This was in May 2008 and, as usual in the evenings, we were playing dominoes outside, on the patio. Besides me, there were Victor and his wife Natalia, who were my hosts, and Alejandro, the husband of his older niece, living just next door. I answered in the affirmative, mentioning the period of three-month inactivity between two sugar-cane harvests in pre-revolutionary Cuba, when workers were

unemployed. This was the period when rural Cuba was under the domination of sugar-cane production. He replied, ‘You know nothing, it was more than five months,’ typically in the emphatic manner that often preceded his long arguments:

I experienced the dead season (*tiempo muerto*), it was not only in sugar-cane [production], but also in tobacco production. Here in San Luis many families were suffering from hunger at that time. Mine too. We were experiencing hunger because there was no work between *zafras* (harvest), no money to buy food, even though the shops were full (*había de todo*).

Immediately Alejandro intervened, ‘Don’t talk nonsense (*no hables mierda*)!’ and he continued, ‘I know people that experience hunger now.’ He added, visibly moved, ‘My father was against Batista and against Fidel, I know from him how it was before, how people lived when one could buy 1 lb of beef for 20 cents.’<sup>143</sup> Victor replied, ‘Now everyone can invent (*inventar*) and manage to live and find food.’ The exchange became so heated that I felt a bit embarrassed, even though I had previously experienced this very animated Cuban way of arguing. Victor (born in 1944), a pensioner, had previously worked for the state as a supervisor of tobacco production on a state farm. In 2008–09, he worked with his horse and cart providing services to clients for the transport of agricultural products or animals. Natalia, his wife (born in 1943), had only worked for a short time as *ensartadora* before getting married, then she remained at home to take care of children and the house. Both came from poor families. Victor’s father had provided transport services with mules and had been a cock-trainer for fights. Natalia’s parents were poor peasants, struggling to feed their eight children. Although she did not take part in the debate, she confirmed later that her childhood had been difficult, living in a wooden house in the countryside (*en el campo*), without electricity. Her father worked his tobacco *vega* and also in the sorting centre in the *barrio* in order to pay back debts accumulated with the grocer (*el bodeguero*) throughout the year. Her family’s standard of living had improved only after the revolution, as

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<sup>143</sup> ‘Mi padre estuvo contra Batista y contra Fidel, yo se como se vivía antes y como se vive ahora. Antes uno podía comprar la libra de picadillo de res a 20 centavos.’

there was more support for small producers and more employment and social welfare for the rural population.

This was not the only debate about the benefits of the Revolution I witnessed between them. In fact, in the first days after my arrival in San Luis, I was warned by Natalia that Alejandro was a problem person (*Ten cuidado que Alejandro es problemático*). Alejandro was also present when Natalia said it. He had just told us a joke about a Cuban dying and going to paradise. In heaven, everything was quiet and there was no entertainment, so this fellow got bored. In search of more excitement, the Cuban asked God to let him visit hell. With God's permission he went to hell, with its gates made of gold. Inside, there were huge swimming pools full of champagne where beautiful naked women were swimming and sunbathing. He had a fabulous time in their company, but after returning reluctantly to paradise, he implored God to let him go back to hell. His wish was granted, but when he arrived in hell again, he found the place full of devils torturing the condemned sinners for eternity. Puzzled, he turned to the devil next to him: 'But this wasn't what I saw last time!' The devil answered, 'It's one thing is to come as a tourist; another to be a resident.' Alejandro criticized the false impressions most tourists had of Cuba after spending 10 days on a beach, without seeing what real life was like for ordinary Cubans. I came gradually to discover that Alejandro was a person who openly criticized the government and Fidel Castro.

Alejandro, 41 years old, was originally from Camagüey, central Cuba. He had studied economics and administration sciences and worked for almost 20 years in state administration. In 2004 he had started to get involved in dissident activities in order to denounce the violation of human rights and became a member of the network of independent libraries.<sup>144</sup> The activities were organized as meetings in houses of various activists, commemorating

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<sup>144</sup> The independent network of libraries was founded in 1996 in the province of Las Tunas by the economist Berta del Carmen Mexidor Vázquez as an alternative source of information (books and magazines) to the state libraries. The network has been extended throughout Cuba, even though its activists are under surveillance and harassment from State Security. The initiator of the network went into exile in 2001, but the activities of the libraries continue in Cuba: see <http://www.cubanet.org/ref/dis/101499.htm> (last accessed 1 December 2013).

various important dates in Cuban history (28 January, the birth of José Martí) or international ones (10 December, the adoption by the UN of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights). The group of activists to which Alejandro belonged was relatively small (10–12 members) and they also edited a small electronic newsletter. Alejandro explained to me that they avoided organizing public actions in order to prevent giving the state a pretext for their incarceration.<sup>145</sup> Instead, they met regularly in houses belonging to members of the network. Alejandro and his wife were also moderately religious people, going to church for the main religious celebrations such as Easter and Christmas. While they acknowledged that the Cuban government's policy towards religious people became more tolerant during the Special Period, they remembered the persecution of religious people in the early decades of the revolutionary period.

As a consequence of his dissident activities he lost his job as economist in an artisan ceramic state workshop. His wife had worked also as an economist in a state shop and she was kicked out of her job too. They decided to apply for the refugee programme of the United States Interests Section in Havana. To be eligible for the programme you had to be a former political prisoner, human rights activist, a member of a persecuted religious minority or a close relative of someone belonging to these categories. Meanwhile, Alejandro and his wife, Aleida, decided to move from Camagüey to her birth place (San Luis) in order to take care of her ill father. After her father died in 2006, they remained in San Luis as a way of escaping from the continuous surveillance and harassment from the State Security personnel in Camagüey.<sup>146</sup> Alejandro worked for some months with a relative of his wife in agriculture, but he eventually gave up since he considered that it was not worth working so hard for so little money. Tongue in cheek, he once told me that

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<sup>145</sup> On 18 March 2003, 75 civil rights activists were arrested in Cuba and condemned to harsh penalties from 6 to 28 years of prison. They were condemned under Special Law 88, entitled Law for the Protection of the National Independence and Economy of Cuba, for activities labelled as counter-revolutionary or subversive.

<sup>146</sup> Alejandro told me that he had been detained by Security Services more than 15 times (not longer than one or two days each time), while his wife had been detained three times, one time for four days.

agricultural labour was not what the state had educated him for. He and his wife made a living by various activities in the informal economy, such as trafficking lobsters from the coast to Viñales or cheese from the cattle-raising region of Camagüey to San Luis. He also worked sporadically as a taxi driver for tourists in Havana.

Since the application for the US visa was taking too long, in 2008 they decided to emigrate illegally by sea, in speed boats operating between western Cuba and Mexico. From Mexico they would have crossed the Mexican-US border, where they could have officially asked for political asylum. In the 2000s, this became the main route to the United States for Cubans since the risks of being caught and returned to Cuba are fewer than taking the northern route to Florida. On average, the cost per person was around US\$10,000, which had to be paid in advance. Only some Cubans with relatives in the States willing and able to pay the money, could afford this. Alejandro had relatives in New York who were willing to pay for him and his wife to escape from Cuba. On the day chosen for the trip, they went on different routes to the coast, which was 25 km away. Aleida was caught by the police as she was waiting for the meeting with the rest of the group. Alejandro could have taken the boat, but chose to remain to find his wife. She was arrested for four days, but released as the security officers could not prove that Alejandro had been involved. This was a frightening experience for both of them, so they decided to wait for the legal resolution of their application for the status of refugees and never try the illegal exit again.

In spite of his very affable manners, his intelligence, humour and willingness to help, Alejandro was somehow marginal in the community. He did not go out much, his daily contacts being restricted to his wife's relatives and visitors and two neighbouring families. His critical attitude to the government and Fidel was known by relatives and friends and was generally disapproved of. They did not avoid him; on the contrary, people were willing to engage with him. Alejandro was, in spite of his marginal position, an interesting person with whom one could have a good conversation. Politics was not always the main topic of discussion, but often politics came to be a part of the

discussion, in conversations about agriculture, baseball, transport, or food in Cuba.

He was also a source of information due to his access to the United States Interests Section and other embassies as part of the dissident networks, which maintained contact with the diplomatic world. Also, contacts with foreigners, tourists or human rights activists made him a much more knowledgeable person about the outside world than many Cubans. Through his connections, he had received a laptop as a gift. This was a useful resource for friends and relatives, since they could use it to write homework, reports for university or state institutions, burn CDs and DVDs, exchange music, movies, and play games.<sup>147</sup> Alejandro could share downloaded videos of Cuban baseball players in the US Major League or articles about baseball games. A few people also asked him for advice about the procedures for applying for visas at the United States Interests Section.

In the autumn of 2008, Alejandro followed the US presidential elections with great interest. His favourite was the Republican candidate John McCain because of the Republicans' harsh stance towards the Cuban government. Obama's victory worried him since the latter had argued for a new approach towards Cuba, based on a more consensual rather than confrontational stance. Alejandro was concerned that this might also change the US visa policy for Cubans. In January 2009, while rumours about Fidel's health possibly worsening were circulating, Alejandro confessed to me that even though he wanted to see the end of Fidel's socialist regime, he still preferred Fidel alive, at least until he could leave Cuba. In case of a radical change of regime, he reckoned his chances of emigrating legally would diminish since

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<sup>147</sup> In April 2008 the Cuban government legalized the selling of PCs, laptops, and DVD players in the convertible pesos shops. However, the prices were well beyond the buying power of most Cubans, and only those benefiting from remittances or from profits in the informal economy could afford them. DVD players could also be brought by relatives, visitors or Cubans working abroad, so many Cubans already had access to DVD players in 2008. This changed significantly the way people consumed media and movies, since they depended less on state television. Some of these materials had anti-revolutionary content, but it has so far been hard to assess their impact on the way Cubans perceive the revolutionary state (Pertierra 2009b).

the United States might revise its migration policy towards the Cubans.<sup>148</sup> He was determined to emigrate since he confessed to me that even if there were a regime change in Cuba, he was sceptical about the possibilities of having good living standards in Cuba in comparison with the United States. Our discussions about the post-socialist changes in eastern Europe (of which he was better informed than most Cubans I knew) just reinforced his scepticism about a rapid improvement of the standards of living in a post-revolutionary Cuba.

Alejandro had a half-brother living in Camagüey who worked in a restaurant and was a member of the Communist Party. They got on well together and his brother tried to help him whenever he could with money or the transport of cheese. Alejandro did not judge his brother's political opinions; he understood that this was the way things worked if one wanted to avoid difficulties in one's professional career in Cuba. He himself had to silence his criticism of the government for much of his life. Alejandro hoped that politics would not break the bonds of blood, even though he felt that he shared more common ideas with other activists and even with foreigners who supported the work of the dissidents than with his family. He had a daughter from a first marriage, 21 years old, who gave birth in February 2009. She and her husband were also on the refugee list, waiting for the official decision on their exit from Cuba.

I witnessed another incident between Alejandro and Natalia that showed the political divisions within their family. It all started with a trifle, half-mocking, half-serious comment of Alejandro about how backward the *pueblo*

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<sup>148</sup> The Cuban Adjustment Act, adopted on 2 November 1966, entitled Cubans entering the territory of the United States to apply for permanent residence. It was amended in 1996 when the US government adopted the wet feet/dry feet policy, meaning that only those Cubans who managed to land on US territory could be admitted, and those intercepted at sea by the US Coast Guard would be returned to Cuba. The Cuban government considered this law as a part of the economic war waged against Cuba and repeatedly asked for it to be abolished. In January 2017, President Obama, in a gesture of normalizing relations with the Cuban government, repealed the US policy of granting automatic residency to all Cubans arriving on US territory. In hindsight, Alejandro's apprehension about a change of treatment of Cubans under Obama's presidency was justified, although this happened only at the end of his second term as president.

of San Luis was, which ended with the exclamation, ‘God help me to get out of here!’ Natalia answered, ‘Alejandro, I wish you to go where you want to go, and I know that you want it so much, but I wish also that you will never regret that decision and feel like coming back here.’ Alejandro looked offended and replied, ‘Even if I am worse than here, I will not come back. Why does your son live in Spain for the last 10 years and doesn’t come back?’ Natalia didn’t answer, remained silent and looked very sad. Alejandro knew he had touched a painful spot, since Natalia sorely missed her son, who had been living in Spain for almost 10 years. He visited his family once a year, with his daughter, to the immense joy of his family. His parents were proud of his accomplishment as a musician in Spain, but at the same time would have liked to have him closer. This was a rare incident between Alejandro and Natalia, but a telling one about political differences among close relatives. She told me later that her son left for Spain in order to make a better life, but he never criticized the Revolution, being proud of his country. One needed time and familiarity with ordinary Cubans in order to understand how political dividing lines existed inside families, behind the rhetoric of family unity and the importance of kin solidarity in Cuban society. This factionalism, however, was not a new phenomenon due to the Special Period, but rather one which the economic difficulties of the 1990s and 2000s had made more acute. The Cuban Revolution had encouraged factionalism in many Cuban families since 1959, between those supporting and those rejecting the Revolution, often resulting in separation or distance between relatives through emigration (Pedraza 2007).

In another socialist context, Alexei Yurchak analyses the response of the Soviet people to state ideology in his theory of a performative shift in socialist ideology since Stalin’s period (Yurchak 2006). He draws on John Austin’s distinction between constative and performative statements or between statements which can be evaluated as true or false and statements that cannot be classified as such but rather should be seen as performative statements (e.g. ‘I promise I’ll come’, ‘I declare you husband and wife’) (Austin 1962). Yurchak argues that most Soviet people stopped paying attention to the content of ideology, becoming instead interested only in performing the

political rituals in order to achieve other objectives, mainly making space for a normal life in a totalitarian state. The only persons who still literally read the ideological discourse were (from opposite perspectives) the activists and the dissidents. Yurchak's classification of ideological stances in a socialist state does not explain how one could become a dissident after being a 'normal' person. How does one become a dissident? In 2004 Alejandro started denouncing various human rights abuses with friends and relatives. He mentioned his father, who suffered political persecution because of openly criticizing Fidel's turn to communism in 1961. Also, Alejandro's decision to apply for the refugee programme also had a performative effect, adding to his initial critical stance towards the government. He had to provide evidence to the US officials of his human rights activism, so he continued organizing and participating in dissident activities. His pragmatic goal was to emigrate, together with his family, but to achieve the 'exit', he had to make his 'voice' heard (cf. Hirschman 1970, 1993).

However, this does not mean that his performance was dissimulation. He was consistent in his criticism not only in the public space or in the company of foreigners, but also in intimate spaces and with relatives, which provoked tension and debates between him and other family members. Like in the debate about the dead season, these moments brought into open opposite and exclusionary visions of the past, both claiming to be true. His criticism of the Cuban government extended to other domains, such as sport (mainly baseball), which he considered to be propaganda for the regime. During the 2008 Olympic Games, he consistently and vocally supported teams like Japan, the United States, and South Korea when they played against Cuba's baseball team, to the annoyance of his friends and relatives.

Alejandro's stance about the official discourse in Cuba was often about pointing to the existing discrepancies between the emancipatory discourse of the Revolution and the reality of everyday life of Cubans. But he would not consider himself a counter-revolutionary nor praise the position of anti-Castro Cuban-American groups. Actually, when he had to face security officers he used the posture of consentful dissent, by putting forward the argument that

Cuba had signed the Human Rights UN Convention, so he was acting within that legal framework (Straughn 2005). This argument was similar to that employed by dissident groups in eastern European bloc after their governments had signed the Helsinki Accords of 1975, which explicitly acknowledged the respect of basic human rights.

The Cuban government portrayed the so-called dissident groups as counter-revolutionary and mercenary groups recruited and maintained with financial and logistic support from the United States and Europe. Even the label 'dissident' is used in inverted commas in the public discourse as a way of denouncing the imported, artificial, and fake character of these opposition networks and voices. In 2003, two journalists published a book of interviews with Seguridad agents who had infiltrated dissident groups throughout the 1990s and early 2000s (Báez & Elizalde 2003). The intended effect was double: first, to show the efficiency of the Seguridad apparatus in defending the Revolution and second, to discourage and create suspicion among dissident groups themselves about the identity and commitment of their members. Also, the topic of 'dissident' was discussed periodically in the official media (newspapers and TV), sometimes by showing surveillance video and voice recordings of dissidents in order to show evidence of their contacts, affiliation, and support from individuals, groups, and institutions based in the United States. For Alejandro this was another proof of what he perceived as a totalitarian regime which cynically used surveillance and repression to contain criticism and initiatives for change.

In February 2011 Alejandro, his wife, and her sister together with his daughter, her husband, and their one-year old daughter received their visas and flight tickets and could leave for the United States. They currently live in Iowa, adjusting to their new country of residence, but seemingly happy with their lives there. They have been keeping in contact with relatives and friends back in Cuba, but they know that there is no return to Cuba, at least as long as the current political regime is in place. Other Cubans living in the United States returned, even if for short visits, to honour family obligations, but this could prove to be a risky endeavour like in the case discussed below.

#### **4. Legal risks and moral debates around the arrest of a dutiful father**

Alejandro had tried both legal and illegal ways to make it out of Cuba. He succeeded the second time, using a US programme to receive Cuban refugees into the United States. Many other Cubans try to get out of the country illegally by sea. In spite of the proximity of the two countries (177 km), the sea travel on rafts or improvised boats can be extremely dangerous due to the Gulf Stream and sharks. Moreover, the US patrols would send back anyone caught at sea to Cuba, since the only way to be entitled to legal residence is to reach land. In the late 2000s, Mexico has become the main route for the illegal migration of Cubans to the United States, as Yucatan is only 242 km from the western part of Cuba.<sup>149</sup> Due to its geographical position and its sparsely inhabited, wild maritime coast, San Luis has been one of the municipalities where frequent illegal exit trips are made. During the period of my fieldwork, I often heard about attempts and escapes of the inhabitants of San Luis, too. Knowing the terrain, being a local could be a real advantage, especially for avoiding the patrols. If caught, people were interrogated by the police and depending on their involvement (guide, organizer of a group, etc) and past record in illegal exit attempts, they were released with a fine or sentenced to up to 15 years in prison. Understandably, I could not get quantitative data about the number of Sanluiséños escaping every year to the United States, but I knew relatives of people who attempted or succeeded in escaping by sea to the United States. Most were young (in their 20s or early 30s), male and usually they succeeded in getting out of Cuba only on a second or a third attempt.

This was also what happened with Raúl, the 32-year-old son of a tobacco-grower who belonged to the Almendares cooperative. It was on his third attempt in 2007 when he managed to get to Tampa, through Mexico, where he was received by the family of one of his maternal aunts. His aunt paid US\$10,000 to the smugglers to get Raúl to the United States. Previous to his departure, he had worked as a butcher, but seeing no future in Cuba,

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<sup>149</sup> A newspaper article from 2008 reported the number of Cubans reaching the United States through Mexico at a little over 11,000 a year. The same year, Mexico and Cuba signed an agreement in order to regularize this flux of illegal migration (Ellingwood 2008).

wanted to live a better life. In spite of the fact that he was caught twice by Cuban patrols, he did not abandon his plan to migrate to the United States. He wrote messages to his brother and parents on the back of photos he sent his parents. One of them to his brother declared:

This photo is for my brother X, who will hopefully soon enjoy the same happiness and priceless freedom. I am sending it with much fondness. Even though we've always quarrelled, I've realized with brothers that the more they quarrel, the more they love each other. Give my regards to all my friends, who you know love me and, also, to the fucking informers (*perros chivatos*) who do not care about me, but thank God, I am now enjoying what I wanted.

His mother explained to me that Raúl's first two attempts to leave Cuba failed because informers from his circle had information. However, in spite of being detained by the police and of the warnings against attempting to escape again, Raúl tried a third time, which proved to be successful. Had he failed one more time, it would have been most probably a prison sentence waiting for him, as happened to others.

I will now provide the case of a man who left his country illegally in 2006 on a raft and returned in February 2008 to San Luis to visit his parents and sisters and also to organize the important ritual of *Quince* for his oldest daughter, a child from his first marriage.<sup>150</sup> I knew Juanito's family as his father, Juan, was one of the tobacco-growers I knew best. Juan came from Consolación and married in San Luis and settled down there in the 1960s. Juanito was the oldest of five siblings and worked with his father in the fields for much of his life before migrating illegally to the United States. Once there, Juanito organized the escape of his wife and six-year-old son who had remained in Cuba, by the same route: they were taken by high-speed boat to Mexico and then on to the United States. His parents were proud of Juanito's economic situation in the United States. After only two years he was able to bring his wife and child to the United States and could send remittances of

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<sup>150</sup> The *Quince*, *Quinceañera*, or *la fiesta de los quince*, is the celebration of girls' 15th birthday in most of Latin America and the Caribbean. In Cuba it is highly popular and increasingly becoming a ritual entailing conspicuous consumption (Härkönen 2011, 2016: 89–105).

\$100–300 a month to his family. On 17 December 2008, the feast of St Lazarus, the family prepared *una velada* (party) in honour of the most celebrated saint in popular Cuban Catholicism. This party was organized with money sent by Juanito and many relatives, friends and neighbours were invited. The family built a sanctuary for St Lazarus inside the house. People could deposit money and offerings, kneeling and making promises to the saint. A professional cameraman was also invited to record the event and a DVD with the recorded images was sent to Juanito. At midnight, the music stopped and his father, his sister, and two of his closest friends transmitted their thanks and their wish to be reunited with Juanito soon. In fact, the family was expecting his imminent visit, but no date had been set.

In the second week of February, I was told that Juanito had just arrived from the United States and was going to celebrate the *quince* of his daughter the following weekend. His arrival in Cuba puzzled some of his friends since they wondered how he could enter Cuba before the expiry of the three-year ban on returning for those who had left the country illegally. Speculations were made about an illegal entrance or about possible problems he might have in the United States which had forced him to come back to Cuba. The fiesta of *quince* was celebrated in Consolación, where Juanito's daughter was living with her mother. The next day, news spread quickly to San Luis about Juanito's arrest on his way from Consolación to San Luis after the party was over. It was around 2 a.m. when the police stopped the car and arrested him. He was taken to Pinar del Río to the DTI (Technical Department of Investigations), where he was detained. Speculations ran high, since his arrest came as a confirmation of previous suspicions about the legality of his return to Cuba. 'How could he enter the country? Why did the authorities let him enter the country at the airport?' were questions everybody tried to find an answer to. Some mentioned previous cases of Cubans flying back to Cuba from the United States and being denied entry visas in the country. 'Did Juanito enter illegally by sea?' 'Does he work for the Secret Services and the arrest was just a smoke screen?' were other more far-fetched questions being asked.

Javier, the barber, told me that Juanito did not have an innocent past: 'He is my buddy (*socio*) but he was stealing horses to butcher and sell the meat.' He had been sentenced to a year in jail for this crime while still in Cuba. Another friend told me that Juanito had also been involved in a theft of beans from his harvest some years before he had left for the United States. The police might prove again that he was involved in this theft. Others speculated that the unpaid fines he had accumulated before leaving the United States for his various offences could have been the reason for the arrest.<sup>151</sup> But the most serious crime for which he could have been arrested was organizing the illegal escape of his wife and child to the United States. For Cuban authorities this was considered a crime of human trafficking and was usually punished with a sentence of 15–20 years' prison. One of Juanito's nephews (a son of one of his sisters) had been already convicted in December 2007, since he was caught guiding a group for illegal exit from the southern coast of the municipality. It was speculated that the police could link Juanito with the nephew's crime. Rumours were circulating fast, and the issue of Juanito's arrest became the main topic of discussion in the *barrio*. Juanito's family was not told the reasons for his arrest and they claimed that he had entered the country legally. One of his sisters explained to me that one of the reasons for his arrest might have been the *envidia* (the envy) some people from the *barrio* felt towards Juanito for his successful life abroad. One particular person was suspected by the family as the cause of the denunciation, a retired Seguridad officer. They were angry with him, perceiving him as envious and revengeful for the fact that he could not prevent the illegal exit of Juanito's wife and child. People reported that one of Juanito's sisters had publicly commented on this former officer, making menacing and offensive remarks to him and complaining that he had destroyed their family. Some people judged her behaviour as inappropriate, not only for the apparently vulgar offensive remarks, but also because it could have aggravated Juanito's cause,

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<sup>151</sup> As somebody told me, '*Al estado no le puedes deber algo si te vas*' ('You cannot have debts to the state if you want to leave').

especially since there was no clear evidence for that person's involvement in Juanito's arrest.<sup>152</sup>

One possible explanation of Juanito's arrest seemed more plausible. Some linked his arrest with the sentencing of his nephew, 23 years old, caught at the end of 2007 while trying to leave Cuba illegally. He was severely convicted with a 15-year prison sentence. since the authorities thought he was the organizer of the escape group. Some assumed that the Seguridad had all the evidence proving his uncle's involvement in assisting this illegal exit. At the trial, Seguridad had apparently produced evidence based on recorded telephone conversations between Juanito and his nephew. This was reinforced by the general assumption that Seguridad had a very efficient system of informants. Pablo, a 58-year-old tobacco-producer, told me that 'one in three Cubans is a *chivato* (an informant) so they [La Seguridad] know everything.' When I said that this statement seemed an exaggeration, he mentioned a case he knew about personally:

The son of a very good friend was organizing an illegal exit with some other people. They planned to steal a boat and they hid oil for the boat engine. One day a good friend of my friend, an officer of Seguridad, came to his house and told my friend, 'Call your son because I want to tell him something.' My friend's son came and the officer told him that they knew he was organizing an illegal exit (*la salida ilegal*). When the young man denied it, the officer told him, 'Look, on this particular day, at the bus stop, you were discussing where to hide the combustible with your partners (*socios*). We know, because we have people working for us in your group.'

Finally, the youngster abandoned the plans of escaping to the United States. More important, what mattered was not necessarily the efficiency of the Seguridad, but the widespread belief in its efficiency and omniscience. This belief is fundamental to the revolutionary cosmology and the successes of

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<sup>152</sup> It is interesting how much the accusations of *chivatería* (informing/reporting, from *chivo* for 'informant', in slang) resemble accusations of witchcraft, a more classical locus of anthropological research. Likewise, Pamela J. Stewart and Andrew Strathern argue that the secret files of the East German Stasi could be seen as a 'kind of sorcery practiced by citizens against one another and by Stasi against all of the East German citizenry' (Strathern & Stewart 2004: 39).

combating and de-masking counter-revolutionary activities and illegal actions were periodically reiterated by the authorities and the state mass media.<sup>153</sup>

In San Luis (and indeed the rest of Cuba) the word *chivato* was a derogatory and offensive term, mostly used in gossiping and rumours and only seldom used in direct confrontation with a person suspected of acts of *chivatería* (informing). The danger of being spied on and denounced was a permanent one and reasons to be cautious were many, since one could easily commit illegal actions in everyday life. Envy in competitive relationships was seen as the source of *chivatería*; as someone once put it to me: 'Here in Cuba everyone is a family, until there is a *chivato*. When you give your words to somebody (literally when you give your tongue to someone) and he denounces you, then there is no more family. When somebody informs on you, it is to stop you progressing.'<sup>154</sup> Envy is seen as a permanent threat that can undermine kin and friendship solidarities.

After 72 hours of detention, Juanito was released and given three hours to get to the airport and return to the United States. The reason for his detention was, according to his relatives, the fact that he had returned to Cuba earlier than the required interval of three years, the unofficial ban period for those illegally leaving the country. The case of Juanito's arrest is interesting for several reasons. First, it shows the restrictions a Cuban who has left his country has to face if he wants to return to visit and help his relations. This is particularly relevant when state temporary restrictions (the three-year ban) clash with important family rituals and kin obligations such as the celebration of the *quince*. However, these restrictions are not only on the Cuban side, but also on the US side since the Bush administration introduced travel and remittance restrictions for Cuban-Americans to Cuba in 2001 as a sanction

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<sup>153</sup> Eastern European state socialist secret police organizations have recently been analysed by Katherine Verdery (2014) for Romania and Andreas Glaeser (2011) for the German Democratic Republic. This kind of research has been made possible by accessing the archives of the former secret police services and by interviewing former officers and informants of these organizations.

<sup>154</sup> 'Aquí en Cuba todos somos familia, hasta que haya un *chivato*. Cuando das tu lengua a uno y te chivatea, entonces no hay más familia. Cuando uno te chivatea es para no dejarte progresar.'

and form of pressure on Havana government to accept democratic reforms. Nevertheless, it was clear that the restrictions punished the population, already suffering from the economic crisis, rather than the political establishment. These measures were unpopular among the majority of Cuban-Americans who had to pay extra or transit through a third country in order to travel to Cuba more often than the law permitted. The first measure Obama's administration took was to soften the travel and remittance restrictions. Second, Juanito's case is an illustration of a conflict of moralities. On the one hand, friends and relatives could understand and sympathize with Juanito, who came to perform his duty as a father towards his daughter and his family. On the other hand, people understood that he took a risk and that the authorities had legitimate reasons to detain him, at least because of his own illegal escape besides that of his wife and son. Moreover, his delinquent record made people suspect his moral integrity. One could say that the official decision to release and expel him was a good solution for everyone: he could return back to the United States to his wife and child and could send back remittances to his parents in San Luis. At the same time, the authorities avoided antagonizing people and provoking a diplomatic exchange with the United States regarding this case.

## **5. Concluding remarks**

The extended cases I have presented deal with individuals entering into conflict with state authorities. Alejandro consciously opposed and criticized the revolutionary state, while Juanito had breached the law on various occasions before committing the more serious crime of illegally escaping from Cuba. Their actions were commented on and evaluated by family, neighbours, friends, and other people. These moral evaluations were also indicative of how the revolutionary cosmology was refracted in everyday social life by symbolically marking those who contested its principles and achievements. Even if it has been the hegemonic political framework, the revolutionary cosmology is not the only meaningful set of principles for social action. Kin solidarity has been an important value that has often entered into conflict with the revolutionary principles and/or policies. While there is no incompatibility in

principle between the Revolution and life-cycle rituals in Cuba, families with relatives abroad (especially those who had illegally left) respecting the life-cycle rituals and kin obligations could conflict with the state authorities. Moreover, by leaving the country illegally one became a traitor to the Revolution. Every year thousands of Cubans attempt to cross the sea in search of a better life and the American dream. Separated by sea and inter-state antagonism, Cubans abroad have tried to maintain kin relationships through remittances and visits, and often through helping other kin members to get out of Cuba.

Politics also entered the domain of domestic relations. Alejandro's political opposition affected in turn his relationships with his family. They tolerated his stance, probably not knowing the extent of his dissident activities. However, there were instances of clear debate and confrontation between him and his family. His and his wife's liminal status, waiting for the interview and the selection process for the US refugee programme, made them feel vulnerable. They were inside Cuba, under the surveillance of the Seguridad. They also took a public stance against the revolutionary project. This ambiguity put a strain on kin relationships, but without questioning the solidarity and the help that bound them to their family. On the other hand, through his dissident activities, as Alejandro put it to me, he entered into relationships of *hermandad* (brotherhood) with other persons sharing their criticism of the Revolution

The *merolico* debate pertains to the informal economy, rather than politics (Alejandro's case) or kinship relationships (Juanito's case). The revolutionary criticism of the middlemen has been an important principle of the Revolution, especially since the revolutionary offensive against individualism and desire for enrichment in 1968. This campaign has been periodically activated, usually after critical situations like the devastations provoked by the hurricanes of 2008. The generation who grew older with the revolution has learnt the lesson. As Geraldo put it once to me, 'Cuba is a country where a person cannot show he has money. Now, when my grandson bought a modern Fiat I told him to be careful.' Nevertheless, as the old saying states, 'experience is what you get by not having it when you need it', it is probably something the younger generations of Cubans will have to find out by themselves.

## **Conclusion**

Weaving into a coherent tapestry all the threads contained in the previous chapters has become a harder task because of the events that have unfolded in Cuba since the time of my fieldwork. In the last couple of years, Cuba has been in the news due to significant events that might indicate major transformations and a change in the nature of Cuban–US relations. Two recent events have epitomized this: Obama’s historic visit to Cuba in March 2016 and Fidel Castro’s death in November the same year. Following a summary discussion of the main points of my dissertation, I will comment on recent events and the possible changes in Cuba.

This thesis contributes to a growing body of ethnographic literature on the late socialist Cuban period (1991 to the present). Many aspects of Cuban society have been explored by other anthropologists: the thriving Afro-Cuban religious scene, the cultural sphere and artistic performances, urban markets and economic informality, consumer practices, rural food production, and others. Most of these ethnographies, however, concentrate on urban life, especially in Havana, while very little has been researched in rural Cuba. Taking inspiration from Ortiz’s seminal oeuvre, I have researched everyday work and economic practices, household negotiations, masculine sociability, practices of contesting and circumventing state policies in a community of tobacco-growing in the Pinar del Río region. Lying at the intersection of political and economic anthropology, my work shows how a local economic model around tobacco-growing is shaped by and domesticates the universalist (socialist) economic and political model of the Cuban Revolution. I have studied the articulations between local social experience and state policies, which are not relations of simple opposition or antagonism, but ones of dynamic contrasts and relations of mediation played in everyday life. In a

nutshell, the local economic model of tobacco is labour-intensive, structured by an attention to plants (conceptualized locally as caring for the plants, or *cuidar*), distinction, particularism, and economic or household self-sufficiency. The universalist revolutionary cosmology puts forward a logic of equality, sacrifice, objective quantification, and state planning. In everyday life, this universalist model gets domesticated by people's actions, understandings, and moral evaluations.

### **1. Domesticating the Revolution or the counterpoint between the universal and the local**

In the introduction I set forth my theoretical approach and presented the methodological challenges I faced. In order to interpret the political realities of Cuba, I used the concept of political cosmology, a holistic vision legitimizing the revolutionary state and informing the ways of exerting political power and organizing Cuban society. The analytical pedigree of this notion combines works of a more classical orientation in political anthropology, in particular the anthropology of the (nation-)state (Herzfeld 2005; Kapferer 1988) and the comparative study of cosmology (Douglas 1966, 1970; Tambiah 1985) with anthropological works on Cuba (Rosendahl 1997a; Gropas 2007; Holbraad 2014a). The revolutionary cosmology should not be taken as an accurate depiction of reality, nor dismissed as simply being ideology, but rather considered under the double aspect of providing a 'model of reality' (a conception of the world) and a model *for* reality (a charter for political action and mobilization) (Geertz 1973b: 93–5). It is a political project based on a totalizing and universalizing vision, fusing the state and the Cuban people, and offering a counterproject to the liberal democratic one (Holbraad 2014a). While some of its symbolic resources go back to the independence wars, much of the cosmological making of the Revolution originated during the armed struggle against Batista and was further developed in the first years after the 1959 revolutionary victory. These years of intense debates and radical change have created the 'foundational paradigm of moral justice and spiritual redemption' (Guerra 2012: 289) of the Revolution. Both the popular,

effervescent participation to the Revolution and the counter-revolutionary attempts to reverse the sense of political change, have contributed to making the Revolution a life-changing event for all Cubans and reinforcing the official narrative of the Revolution. Guerra's (2012: 33–4) relevant metaphor of the revolutionary palimpsest captures the multiple personal and public interpretations of the Revolution overlapping into the same (discursive, material, and social) space, creating erasures, opacity, silences, and conflicting memories and experiences.

While Holbraad's (2014a) interpretation of the ontological presupposition of the Cuban Revolution offers an astute interpretation of the paradox of simultaneous adherence and criticism towards the Revolution ('the revolutionary equivocation'), it remains too close to the official statements of the Revolution, is immune to historicity, and denies the possibility of re-founding or re-emergence of the political inside Cuba. He holds that the first question which needs to be raised by an analyst in relation to the Cuban Revolution is ontological, to clarify 'the ways and senses in which the Revolution itself, as a distinctive political form, dictates *its own terms of engagement*' (Holbraad 2014a: 8, emphasis in the original). As an elementary political form, revolutionary politics is built on self-sacrifice and the dissolution of the distinction between the state and the people. Not to take this as the starting premise in analysing revolutionary Cuba is, according to Holbraad, the methodological weakness of meta-liberalism or analytical liberalism, i.e. assuming a starting position of separating the people and the state. Holbraad's interpretation of the Revolution, even if he introduces the various voices of ordinary Cubans, remains at the level of abstract, universalist, self-contained revolutionary principles.

While personally keeping a basic humanist liberal view – in the sense of holding to the possibility of distinguishing between the state and the people and not surrendering entirely to the revolutionary state's 'own terms of engagement' (Holbraad 2014a: 8) – I did my best to understand the individual voices and experiences of tobacco-growers, their ways of doing and their terms of engagement in perpetuating a local model of livelihood. This model

preceded the Revolution and most probably will survive any other political shifts in Cuba's future. It is the great lesson of Ortiz's *Counterpoint* to show the endurance of this local model of the economy throughout centuries, in spite of colonial, national, or revolutionary forms of control. Tobacco and sugar-cane and their various commodified forms have managed to disrupt any attempt by the powers that be to completely control and domesticate them.

In my ethnography, I chose the local as my point of departure, not the universalist revolutionary discourse, and I aimed to reveal how central policies and political values were domesticated at the local level. All local practices of adjusting to, adapting to, coping with, modifying, resisting or reluctantly implementing policies, measures, and political directions adopted by the central leadership of the Revolution may be seen as domesticating the Revolution, a process observed by anthropologists in other socialist contexts (Creed 1998) or in high modernist, authoritarian regimes like Turkey (Hann 1990, 1995). An alternative way to describe how universalist revolutionary ideas and policies engage the local and the contextual is the term 'friction' used by Tsing (2005). I have tested the limits and frictions such a vision of the social political produces through the study of the local model of the tobacco economy. The Agrarian Reforms (1959 and 1963) did not change the mostly household-based and private character of tobacco production, since most tobacco farms had less than 67 ha of land, the upper limit for private property. This allowed a cultivation model based on labour-intensive small farming around the valuable crops of tobacco to continue. However, amid the over-reaching predominance of tobacco, staple food production was also important for self-consumption or for sale at peasant markets.

Similar to the relation between sugar and tobacco presented by Ortiz, the relation between the local model of livelihood based on tobacco-growing and revolutionary cosmo-politics is of a counterpoint type: not one of simple opposition, but one that is more dialectic. Herzfeld (1987, 2005) has shown how Greek – and, more generally, any national culture – is characterized by a productive tension and dialectics between official and vernacular cultural forms. This binarism or disemia between the official discourse and everyday

practices is socially productive and is reproduced through the circulation and borrowing of symbols, images, and cultural forms between the two poles of social life (Herzfeld 1987: 133). To a large extent, this is what is at stake in the case of the idiom of sacrifice analysed in Chapter 4 or in the symbolism of *la lucha*, the revolutionary struggle, and also the struggle of everyday life to make do. By analysing food provisioning in San Luis I showed how local values, state actions, and revolutionary principles are playing out in a vital domain of local social life. Food can be produced for self-consumption or for selling at the (official or informal) markets and to the state. In terms of value orientation, self-sufficiency in terms of food provision is an important ideal organizing most household economies in San Luis. This entails ensuring not only that the necessary quantities for household consumption are available, but also that the quality of food consumed inside the house is acceptable. Therefore, in spite of the predominance of tobacco in the local economy, food production is an essential part of household economies, comprising rice and beans as staple food, *viandas* (root crops and plantains), and meat from pigs or other animals raised on the farms. There is a hierarchy of needs in relation to food: household self-provisioning, the most important, and providing for the larger family or extended kin. Surpluses are either stored or sold to the state, at independent markets or to middlemen. The government's drive to increase agricultural productivity has made food production a strategic activity for the government, aiming at diminishing food imports. However, this is a moot aspect in the relationship between state bureaucrats and producers: increasing food production and food quotas to sell to the state means walking a fine line between increasing acquisition prices and tougher measures to crack down on selling to middlemen, where producers get better money for their crops. A growing number of producers have been moving into producing more food for cash and more would be willing to do so, but the government does not allow land for tobacco to be used for food production, nor is it willing to see a decline in tobacco production. The official demand addressed to farmers to renounce their share of rice distributed on the ration card and to produce more food is not readily and univocally accepted as a form of sacrifice for the Revolution by farmers and their families. What sacrifice means differs from one producer to

another and even members of the same family interpret sacrifice for the Revolution in different ways. The ration books, inadequate as they are, define the symbolic borders of the community of people entitled to the benefits of the Revolution. Few would willingly give up their entitlements to the goods distributed by the state while still living in Cuba. This is because state distribution is a component of social citizenship that cannot be discarded without a broader discussion and without negotiations regarding social rights in the country.

## **2. Tobacco-growing and value creation in contemporary Cuba**

In Chapter 1, I presented Pinar del Río as a region specializing in tobacco production from colonial times to the present. I have shown how a sense of regional identity was built around the figure of the *guajiro*, the hardworking, independent tobacco-grower. As one of the most underdeveloped regions in Cuba, Pinar del Río was the target of various emblematic revolutionary projects and policies aiming at improving living conditions in the countryside. In spite of the centralist logic of the Cuban state which overlooks regional differences, I documented how Pinar's regional particularity and the corresponding sense of belonging are alive and strong. This attachment was evident in the critical comments made by locals about the government's reform of 2010, which changed the administrative boundaries of the region. This reform will undo the effects of the earlier revolutionary policies of economic diversification beyond tobacco production; actually the new territorial division reinforced the dependence of the provincial economy on tobacco production. A tourist economy based on tobacco-growing is slowly developing, as I analysed in Chapter 3 in connection with Robaina, but this is still a strategic economic sector over which the state keeps almost total control.

Since the 1990s, the tobacco economy has grown in importance as a source of hard currency and has had horizontal effects on tourism and employment inside Cuba. One could say that Ortiz's counterpoint of the 1940s has reversed the position of the two commodities: at present, tobacco is more

important economically and symbolically than sugar, a change that has happened in less than 20 years. With the irreversible decline of the Cuban sugar industry, badly hit by the economic crisis of the 1990s and the declining world market prices, the government enacted a major reorganization of the sugar industry and closed half of the sugar-cane processing centres in 2002.<sup>155</sup> Tobacco's situation in Cuba is comparable with the specialist cooperatives in socialist Hungary, where producers could continue farming in their traditional way because of their high-value and labour-intensive crops, such as grapes (Hann 1980). Cuban tobacco-growers were left with individual property rights and their family-run farms, in contrast with the rest of agriculture where there was a commitment to collectivized farms at least until the end of the 1980s. If the policy in the 1980s was for a gradual and irreversible transition towards state farms and cooperatives with collective forms of ownership and labour, this was reversed by the economic crisis ignited by the end of the favourable sugar-for-oil exchange with the Soviet Union. The local tobacco model of production has managed to survive throughout the revolutionary period and even become an example for reforming Cuban agriculture in the present.

Tobacco production benefited from measures to raise productivity in the 1990s, such as credit and harvest payments both in national and in convertible pesos. Producers of exceptional tobacco harvests were rewarded with additional incentive payments in convertible pesos and awarded prestigious state prizes such as Hombre Habano. These measures were accompanied by

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<sup>155</sup> To get a sense of the scale and significance of this change of fortune in sugar production in Cuba, it is worth juxtaposing the much -cited phrase *Sin azúcar no hay país* ('Without sugar, there is no country') attributed to the lawyer and politician Raimundo Cabrera (1852–1923) with a 2005 declaration of Fidel Castro: '*El azúcar no volverá jamás a este país, pertenece al tiempo de la esclavitud*' ('Sugar will never return to this country, it belongs to the period of slavery') (Castro, cited in Funes Monzote 2005: 42). These statements should instead be read, using J. L. Austin's (1962) speech act theory, as performative statements and not as matter-of-fact true or false assertions. They epitomize two opposing ideological principles, for and against the hegemony of sugar in Cuban history. Fidel's statement is, considering the economic importance of sugar in revolutionary Cuba, a distortion or misrecognition of reality, if not a slap in the face of millions of Cubans mobilized in the 10-million tons harvest of 1970 and 100,000 workers in the sugar industry who lost their jobs from one day to the next in 2002. Recently, under Raúl, there have been timid attempts to reopen and retechnologize some of the processing centres closed in 2002.

various evaluation procedures for tobacco during the buying of the harvest from producers. In Chapter 3, I looked into the micro-politics of value around tobacco by focusing on the sale of tobacco to the state by individual producers and on processes in brand-making in relation to the case of Alejandro Robaina. Both are situations in which the government appropriates value from the work and experience of tobacco farmers. I contrasted the two cases, one involving ordinary producers struggling to obtain the best value for their harvest and the other the case of the making of a name-brand, Alejandro Robaina. In the first, producers try to tame and turn to their advantage procedures for evaluating the value of their crops through personal connections with buyers and other technicians belonging to the state company. This is an instance of domesticating the state regulations regarding the buying of harvested tobacco. These relationships look, sometimes, suspiciously similar to bribing. I have advanced the explanation that they should be seen more like relations of *blat* or personal connections, similar to those analysed by Ledeneva (1998) in the Soviet Union. These personal connections help producers to maximize the value of their crops and attenuate the losses of bad years through a more favourable evaluation of the harvest. My ethnography shows as fictitious the representations of economic exchanges of tobacco leaves based on free competition in a market economy, like in pre-1959 Cuba, or based only on state-fixed prices established by state bureaucrats after objective evaluations of tobacco's value. Before 1959 there was no completely free tobacco market, even though there was limited competition and private manufacturing. Most relationships between producers and buyers of tobacco were defined by previous social relationships of credit, indebtedness and often were of a patron-client type. In socialist Cuba, state functionaries are in charge of applying objective evaluative procedures, but personal relations are also part of it. Ethnographic research was needed to understand these complex relationships that bring together the making of the tobacco and the creation of its value, hence its politics of value. Micro-political processes and negotiation define the economic value of the crop and the social reputation of the producers.

Even in a (partially mended) socialist economy like Cuba's, there are practices of brand-making, some of which I analysed in the case of the late Alejandro Robaina. This case illustrates the dynamics at play between the state's monopolistic power over cigar-manufacturing and the global consumer demand for branded products. By creating and promoting Robaina cigars, the state company uses the name of an experienced producer by indexing the origin and the value of this cigar brand to this highly respected producer and to a particular area in San Luis. While this is a widespread practice in the value enhancement of terroir products around the world (Barham 2003; Trubek 2008), in Robaina's case this was a form of state branding, by which the state uses the image of a local producer. However, the economic and social effects of the Robaina brand are not completely controlled by the state. First and foremost, the Robaina family benefits from the fame of the patriarch: their farm is a tourist destination, with important economic benefits, including from the sale of their own cigars. Second, tourism brings economic benefits to the local community, not least via the (illegal) sale of local cigars to foreigners. The Robaina case study adds to the growing anthropological literature on branding in (post)-socialist contexts (Fehérváry 2009; Manning 2009; Vann 2006), enriching previous analyses of state socialist economies.

### **3. Generational and gender differences in times of economic changes**

Current social and economic transformations taking place in Cuba remain within the overarching frame of the Revolution – and its socialist character – in spite of the increasing opening-up to small, private enterprises with Raúl Castro's reforms in 2010. However, the ideals of social equality and redistribution, central to the socialist model, have received a serious blow in the last 20 years, with growing economic inequalities and social differentiation. In my study of San Luis, I documented two main lines of differentiation within the community: differences among generations and gender imbalances.

The generational divide between those who were born before 1959 and those born in the 1960s and 1970s springs from their different life experiences and expectations. Those born in the 1940s and the early 1950s remember the inequalities characteristic of Cuba before 1959. They lived through the deep transformations of the countryside in the first ten years of the Revolution and experienced an improvement in their living standards. In addition to being beneficiaries of these measures, many of them were actors involved in the revolutionary process, some in the underground fight against Batista and many more after 1959 in various revolutionary programmes.

Younger Sanluiseños, especially those born in the 1970s and 1980s, experienced the economic crisis after the end of the Soviet Union at a formative age and understandably feel much less moral obligation towards the government. In order to make do, they seek better gains from informal economic activities than jobs in the public sector. I analyse in Chapter 6 the predicaments and motivation of some younger people who have no hesitation in looking for more profit as they turn a deaf ear to the official criticism of lucrative gain from informal economic activities. Others, more courageous or more desperate, attempt to leave Cuba, and if some official ways (through marriage or family reunification) are not open to them, they take illegal migration routes by sea and, via Mexico, to the United States; these emigrants cannot return to Cuba for three years. Sending remittances is less perilous and a much-needed help for families in Cuba. In Chapter 6 I described the case of Juanito, who escaped to the United States, helped his parents who remained in Cuba and had to come back to fulfil his ritual duties for his oldest daughter who had remained in Cuba. His arrest for a couple of days by the authorities led to intense debates among his relatives, friends, and neighbours of his parents, who drew moral boundaries inside the community and encouraged grievances about the officials' actions.

Regarding gender imbalances, in spite of the revolutionary ideal and policies of gender equality, local social life is still imbued with a patriarchal ethos and *machismo* (Melhuus & Stølen 1996). This is not to deny that there have been certain advances, for instance the increased participation of women

in salaried jobs (including in rural areas), many of a specialized, technical type, and changes in access to childcare, abortion, and easy divorce laws after 1959. Locally, the perpetuation of the patriarchal culture is largely attributable to the persistence of tobacco cultivation and of the gendered division of labour, which I discussed in Chapter 2. Physical work is the domain of men in the field, while women are exclusively employed in the *ensarte* phase and the selection and classification work of the sorting centres. Women also occupy positions of technical expertise in the cooperatives and the tobacco company. At home, women are exclusively in charge of domestic work and bringing up children and, as such, they cook and manage the food supplies. As shown in Chapter 4, women may be more attached to the idea of the state's food rations, while men consider the *libreta* as insignificant, emphasizing instead their own capacities for providing and independence from state distribution.

These gender differences, however, go beyond the domain of work or domestic relationships, pointing towards something that is reminiscent of a hierarchical, dualistic model of gender differences corresponding to the reputation/respectability dialectics advanced by Peter Wilson in his ethnography of Providencia (Wilson 1969, 1973, 1995). His model shows the importance of arenas and forms of exclusive male sociability, where reputation is made and unmade among peers. In Chapter 5, I discussed the practices of raising and fighting cocks as arenas for masculine sociability and reputation. Similar to the crew model of sociability described by Wilson, Cuban men practise solidarity and search reputation in these leisure activities. In spite of its competitive aspect, cockfighting brings together Cuban men of different generations and fosters bonds between them in sharing their passion, knowledge, and resources in perpetuating this practice, which was outlawed under revolutionary rule. This revolutionary interdiction has not put an end to it, as cockfighting has continued in the countryside and has returned to the cities fairly recently. Sometimes, as I witnessed in San Luis, cockfighting could be reintegrated into the local public space and officially sanctioned as a cultural practice in local celebrations of Cuban peasant culture in a form purified of its corrupting (in revolutionary discourse) aspect of betting, thus becoming respectable with regard to official norms. Thus, in another instance of

domesticating the Revolution, a local state institution like the municipal museum in San Luis mediated between the vibrant local groups interested in cockfighting and official institutions in order to allow the public enjoyment of this popular pastime, important to men of all generations.

#### **4. Questions about the near future**

During my fieldwork I experienced significant events in recent Cuban history: the formal accession of Raúl Castro to the highest office in 2008, after Fidel's decision not to stand for president again, and the 50th anniversary of the Cuban Revolution. When talking about these events, my Cuban interviewees voiced concerns and hopes, but without a clear sense of a change or a vision for the future. More pragmatism and less revolutionary idealism was what many Cubans hoped for from the change of leadership in 2008. These expectations of reforms in the economy were answered, to some degree, by the measures Raúl Castro enacted in Cuba starting in 2008 and made official during the Sixth Congress of the PCC as Lineamientos, or new lines of action in the economy. This included, among others, the distribution of state lands to individual producers, opening access to small private business (*cuentapropistas*), and reducing the number of state employees.

In agriculture, the most significant measure was the Decree-Law 159, adopted in 2008, authorizing the leasing of uncultivated state land to individual producers with the overall purpose of increasing the productivity of agriculture. At the time, farmers expressed reservations concerning the effects of this measure in improving the productivity of agriculture as long as granting the land was not accompanied by other measures of facilitating access to credit, fertilizers, and technology for those courageous and diligent enough to make land infested with *marabú* productive again. Recent evaluations of the effects of these new agricultural policies have found only slight changes in productivity. For some Cuban experts (Nova Gonzalez 2013) there are still too many bureaucratic hurdles, checks, and limits to be addressed in order for private agriculture to become a vibrant sector of the economy. This is due

mainly to the built-in principle of the superiority of state property and planning over private ownership and management, a principle that remains unchanged in economic policies. Moreover, more complex measures would be needed in order to stop the decline of agriculture, including encouraging labour migration from cities to the countryside or change in employment from state jobs to agricultural ones. These prospective changes would entail a substantive shift in the conception of development and the economy and also in the style of governing, which would go against many of the Revolution's cherished ideas. Whether this will be done through top-down or more consensual policies remains to be seen.

Talking about the future of Cuba is understandably the most difficult and trickier aspect to address here and slippery territory for an anthropologist. I will, nevertheless, advance some ideas based more on my understanding of the horizon of expectations of Cubans I met than on various experts' and outsiders' ideas about where Cuba should be heading. I would reiterate the importance of acknowledging generational differences among Cubans regarding expectations for the future. In 2008–09, people expected a more pragmatic shift in the orientation of the style of governing, hoping for more openings for private initiative in the economy, by getting rid of the bureaucratic prohibitions. In my conversations, I heard very few Cubans expressing more explicit political expectations such as opening up the political system or the end of the one-party regime. One person was Alejandro, the dissident I wrote about in Chapter 6; others were intellectuals in Havana, better informed and more politically conscious than most Cubans I knew. But I do not remember any discussion I had with other Cubans that put forward a more articulate prospect for Cuba's future beyond Raúl Castro. While Cubans (including those I personally got to know) must have tried to imagine the fate of their country beyond Fidel's or Raúl's time in power, such contemplations remained unknown to me.

The Cuban leadership has clearly learnt to navigate turbulent times since 1989, trying to find support and resources without giving in to any of the demands for opening up the political system. The experience of China and Vietnam in combining a one-party system with a market economy could serve

as a scenario which might be considered by the Cuban leaders. But the proximity between and common history shared by Cuba and the United States means that the direction of transformations in Cuba is closely tied to the relations between the two countries, and most important, between American-Cubans and Cubans on the island. Cuban tobacco would certainly benefit from the lifting of the trade embargo: the glamour and attraction of Cuban tobacco in the United States has continued in spite of the embargo. Moreover, a growing influx of US tourists in Cuba could help the tobacco-growing regions with their picturesque landscapes and the experience of the ‘authenticity’ of rural life (Simoni 2012).

I am very sympathetic towards a line of interpretation which proposes a view of exceptionalism (Hoffman & Whitehead 2007) for the experience of the Cuban political regime in comparison with other socialist countries. One also has to allow for a specific transformation of the classical socialist economic model under Raúl Castro, which will not necessarily take a Chinese or Vietnamese path. However, the horizon of social transformations in Cuba, in the light of Raúl Castro’s reforms and taking into account what happened in other socialist contexts such as Hungary (Szelenyi 1988) or China, is not very wide. Therefore, Raúl Castro’s turn towards market socialism should be analysed in its specificities but with an eye towards other post-socialist experiences. Perhaps now, more than ever before, the comparison of Cuba with the eastern European (post)-socialist societies and the Asian socialist experience of China and Vietnam is a much-needed step for understanding current social-economic and political transformations in Cuba.

The political changes in Cuba are hard to predict for the moment and it is not my intention to join the carousel of experts on Cuba scenarios. I would just indicate that, taking inspiration from anthropological analyses of strong states built on revolutionary projects and strong social engineering programmes, the ideological impact of the Revolution will be significant in the years to come. It is what happened in Turkey with the Kemalist revolution which shaped Turkey’s politics for almost a century (Hann 1990; Hann & Bellér-Hann 2000) or with post-socialist Russia where Stalin’s legacy still has

support among many Russians and political elites (Sherlock 2007). Likewise, what I called revolutionary cosmology could still inspire and politically mobilize a significant number of Cubans in the years to come, even in a post-Raúl period. Hardliners of a ‘21<sup>st</sup> century *Fidelismo*’ (Rojas 2016) could be political actors in a highly contested political field, opposed to similar hardliners of exiled Cubans from the United States and to a new entrepreneurial and military elite resulting from the old revolutionary nomenclature. Seen in this light, a scenario of national reconciliation like in post-apartheid South Africa would be the best possible path for Cuba in the case of the demise of the political monopoly of the Communist Party. The alternatives to such a scenario could be quite divisive, conflictual and potentially very violent, with Cubans fighting each other, depending on their pro- or anti-revolutionary stance. Moreover, the increasingly unpredictable internal and international US politics under Donald Trump should be taken into account, in addition to the mobilization of the Cuban-American community, when assessing the trajectory of future political transformations in Cuba. Trump’s recent restrictive redefinition of Obama’s new open policies towards Cuba is a reminder that in the US-Cuban relationship the pendulum between normalization and tension has not stopped moving.

I have argued for restraint in conjecturing upon the future and the exceptional character of the Cuban case. However, we should not discard the extraordinary potential of the political to erupt into social life (Spencer 1997), so we need to make the advice of Jonathan Spencer to ‘open ourselves to the empirical unpredictability of it [the political] all’ (Spencer 1997: 9) our own. Even though I have hardly touched on the institutional aspect of politics in Cuba, which is traditionally the object of political scientists, I would not ignore the fact that the issue of political representation in Cuba could become important after the retirement of Raúl Castro and the election of Miguel Díaz-Canel as President of Cuba in April 2018. With the gradual disappearance of the historic generation who made the Revolution, the issue of political representation and dissent might erupt into the too neat and disciplined party politics in Cuba.

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