

Money and the Morality of Commensuration: Currencies of Poverty in Post-Soviet Cuba

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Abstract

Based on ethnographic research in Havana over the past two decades, the article examines how Cubans' experience of poverty ('need') is linked to the encroaching dollarization of the Cuban economy. Dollars, I argue, are not just the emblem of a new moral disorder but also its main catalyst, inasmuch as they expand the realm of 'need', as defined by a socialist paradigm of consumption rooted in the era before the introduction of the dollar, by stripping it of its (socialist) moral essence through acts of quantitative commensuration. Underlying this account of Cubans' experience of poverty since the end of the Soviet era, then, is an argument about the catalytic power of the money-form itself in processes of moral transformation.

Keywords: Commensuration, Cuba, Dual Currency, Money, Morality, Poverty, Socialism

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Introduction

One can think of anthropological literature on money as an empirical rumination on the classical idea that money's power turns on its dual nature as both means and measure of exchange. With reference to this idea, one finds in the literature a series of bifurcations that transfigure the analytical possibilities that this duality permits by multiplying them—a perfect example of what Marilyn Strathern (2011: 87) has called the exercise of “binary license”, anthropologists’ penchant for deploying “the power of the forking pathway: the moment a relation is created through divergence”. The duality of money as means and money as measure is played out in varied empirical contexts through further distinctions that fork the pathway of money in different analytical registers: use and exchange; quality and quantity; concrete and abstract; embedded and disembedded; long-term and short-term; state and market. Even when they do more than just retell Karl Polanyi’s (1944; Maurer 2006) story of the “great transformation”, anthropologists’ contributions to the understanding of money typically use ethnographic materials to sift through the analytical possibilities that these multiplying dualities allow. Well-known examples include: measurement minus commensuration, where money only acts as a measure in restricted spheres of exchange (Bohannan 1959); short-term acquisition versus long-term social reproduction, where money acts morally to embed rather than disembed economic concerns (Bloch and Parry 1989); quantification as more than just measurement, where money’s quantifying properties act as a register for memory (Hart 2001) or an index of people’s hidden capacities for action (Graeber 2001).

Much could be made of the elective affinity between the binary license of anthropological thinking and the peculiarly prominent dualities of money; the analogy between monetary exchange and symbolic expression is an old one (e.g. Rotman 1987). My focus, however, is how the possibilities for thought that money’s dual character engenders come together for people on

the ground—binary license as an indigenous practice. With ethnographic reference to the dual currency system that emerged after the end of the Soviet era in Cuba, my aim is to show that the duality of the money-form itself, on which the duality of currencies in Cuba turns, has played a catalytic role in people’s experience of economic transformations of the post-Soviet era. In particular, I focus on people’s pervasive sense of poverty and moral crisis as they shifted from the moral order of socialist distribution, at its height before 1990 and associated with the Cuban peso (the ‘national currency’—*moneda nacional*), to new form of mercantilism associated with the introduction of the US dollar as legal tender on the island in 1993 that was then followed by the dollar’s replacement in 2004 by the so-called “convertible peso” or “CUC”—a currency issued by the government and pegged to the US dollar. People often still refer to CUCs as “dollars”, and I will follow them in doing so.

As we shall see, the ailing state of the socialist moral economy (still run on pesos) in the last few decades is thrown into sharp relief by the ever-encroaching dollar economy, typified by supermarkets and shopping-malls that have mushroomed around Havana since the mid-1990s, as well as various forms of private enterprise that have developed in more recent years, with the controlled retreat of the state from certain parts of the economy under Raul Castro’s leadership since 2006. More than just an emblem of these moral-economic shifts, however, the dollar has acted also as a prime catalyst for them, by virtue of certain manners of *commensuration* facilitated by how the money form has been deployed. Acts of (quantitative) commensuration that money makes possible as an abstract means of measurement, I will suggest, are integral to the (qualitative) moral discrepancies people experience in their struggle to make ends (including moral ends) meet amidst the everyday dualism of peso versus dollar.

In the conclusion, I shall draw out some of the implications of my own license to extend indigenous binaries into anthropological ones (peso:dollar :: before:now :: quality:quantity ::

evaluation:commensuration) for the kind of “qualitative mathematics” the editors of this Special Issue offer for consideration. From the outset, however, a proviso is in order regarding the ethnographic materials on which this argument is based. Readers familiar with the recent trajectory of Cuban society will rightly wonder whether it is feasible to treat the period since 1990 indiscriminately under such blunt headings as ‘post-Soviet’ or ‘the age of the dollar’, without entering into more fine-grained distinctions that would pinpoint important shifts that occurred in this time. For example, my central idea that people’s moral evaluations of the times of the dollar have been routed through memories of a socialist past must, if at all, hold in a different sense today, twenty-five years after the end of the Soviet era, than it did in the 1990s when memories of times ‘before’ were still relatively fresh. As for people’s experience of poverty, this too could not but be very different at, say, the nadir of the post-Soviet crisis in 1993–1994 and in recent years when a large proportion of the Cuban population enjoys stable dollar remittances from abroad and/or a sizable local income from tourism, state-sanctioned private enterprise, or other sources of income now accepted or tolerated as part of the socio-economic infrastructure. Since my main interest is in the contrasting moral effects of the form money takes in economic regimes involving pesos and dollars respectively, I heed this caution about historical shifts by focusing my ethnographic account primarily on the first decade after the legalization of the dollar, when the socialist peso-economy before 1990 was still within recent memory and the era of Raul Castro’s market-oriented reforms of the late 2000s and 2010s had not yet begun. My material is drawn largely from fieldwork in Havana in 1998–2000 and shorter subsequent visits every one or two years until the mid-2000s. However, having continued to visit the island regularly—including in 2013, some months before Raul Castro announced his aspiration to do away with the post-Soviet anomaly of a dual currency, an aspiration yet to be fulfilled—I suggest that this analysis continues to be relevant, if only as a context for understanding more recent developments. After all, the

dualism of peso-based state socialism and a dollar-based mercantilism is still in place, even as the latter's encroachment on the former is felt to be ineluctable as never before (Gordy 2006). In line with my focus on the aftermath of the introduction of the dollar in 1993, I begin by summarizing radical economic and social transformations that Cuba underwent in the early 1990s after the demise of the Soviet bloc and the onset of the period that Fidel Castro, with his gift for euphemism, called 'Special'.

The Haves and the Have Nots: The Special Period and its Aftermath

It is generally uncontroversial in the literature that the momentous achievements of the Revolution in Cuba (including guaranteed subsistence, housing, health-care, and education for all citizens) were made possible on Soviet backs. Partly in reaction to a bellicose U.S. trade embargo, Fidel Castro's economic policy was from an early stage founded on two pillars: export primarily of sugar and nickel to the Soviet Union and COMECON countries on trade terms that were extremely advantageous relative to the world market; and ruble debt-financing from the USSR that allowed Cuba to run persistent balance-of-payment deficits. Both of these pillars were shattered between 1989 and 1991. First the COMECON countries and then the USSR itself canceled deals with Cuba one-by-one, and began to demand debt payments in hard currency. Thus Cuba was thrown into deep economic crisis; by 1992, an estimated 70% of the country's purchasing power had been lost (Eckstein 1994).

The regime reacted to the crisis by instituting drastic austerity measures on the one hand, and relentlessly pursuing hard currency on the other. As a result of cuts on all forms of energy use in the early 1990s, as well as curtailments of the labor force, agricultural and industrial outputs plummeted. This had an immediate impact on the population since many goods and services that were previously provided at affordable prices by the State became increasingly difficult to

procure, or, in many cases, disappeared altogether. During my fieldwork in the late 1990s, people's most urgent complaints related to the rationing system, which throughout the Revolution had formed the back-bone of house-hold consumption. While 'before' the crisis families could live adequately off goods provided on rations-books (*la libreta*), 'now' rations tend to last only for 10 days each month.

On the other hand, cut-backs were accompanied by reforms that would have been unimaginable a few years earlier. In the early 1990s, on the slogan 'Capital yes, capitalism no', the regime courted hard currency by opening up to foreign investors (not least in the tourist sector which has soared throughout the 1990s and 2000s) and by tapping into dollars already circulating inside Cuba illegally. In 1993, the government decriminalized possession of dollars, thus incorporating a significant slice of the black market which was rife at the time. With Fort Knox-like security measures, more and more state shops opened, selling goods in dollars. When I arrived in 1998, a vast array of products (including essentials like cooking oil and detergent) were only available in dollar-shops, or as Cubans call them, *la chopin*, from the American 'shopping'. This situation persists today (Brotherton 2008; Ritter and Rowe 2002).

So Cuba has had a two-tier economy since 1993. There are those who are lucky or clever enough to possess dollars. Depending on the quantity at their disposal, these people are able to live relatively comfortably, and in some cases may even be able to afford luxuries such as a car or color TV. Then there are those who must make do with pesos. In the late 1990s, the average worker earned less than 200 pesos a month (less than \$10), an entirely inadequate figure when one liter of vegetable oil costs \$2.20. During my time in Havana, practically everyone I met would either supplement or replace salary payments through some form of illegal activity. A laboratory assistant rented a room in her flat by the hour to couples; a truck driver bred poultry in

his yard; an intellectual dreamed of becoming a porter in a big hotel. The most prized commodity among this large and dispossessed segment of Cuban society is *el dolar* itself. During fieldwork I became accustomed to hearing the same sociological observation from different informants and in a variety of contexts. “In Cuba today we have two classes: those who have dollars, and those who don’t. It wasn’t like that *antes*”—i.e. before the Special Period (González Gutiérrez 1998). It is hard to miss the bitterness in these words, a bitterness which is all the more poignant for speaking of a socialist society whose *raison d’être* has been equality through abolition of class.

Nevertheless, a striking feature of the bitterness with which Cubans view their economic predicament in this period is that it has been largely shared by those who have some dollars as well as those who do not. In the late 1990s and early 2000s this distinction was just as likely to be downplayed by statements such as “Cuba is a country of poor people” or “No-one is well off here”. An extract from a conversation with a forty-year-old musician, who, speaking to me in 2001, was earning his dollars by giving percussion lessons to tourists, is typical.

In the times of the ‘fat cows’, in the ‘70s and ‘80s, my salary was low; 280 pesos for a recent graduate. [But] there was ample work, and this was money then. A room in Havana Libre, one of the most expensive [hotels] cost 39 pesos. Today even a *posada*¹ costs more. ... Entrance to nightclubs like Jonnie was free; one could have fun for 5 or 10 pesos. At Cia, a commercial outlet, they sold meat. ... A pound of pork was 4.50 pesos. At this moment it costs 25 pesos. ... I have had two gigs since ‘96, and they still haven’t paid me for one of them.

The point is not that dollarization has allowed those lucky enough to possess dollars to rise to a level of prosperity which was previously unattainable. Rather, for the majority of people, with the

sharp rise in retail prices and the decrease of goods available on the rationing system, a standard of living which was taken for granted before the crisis of the 1990s is now felt to be barely sustainable, even for most of those who do receive some dollars. Although the nostalgic image that some of my interlocutors presented of the times of the “fat cows” ‘before’ is not always entirely accurate (particularly given the substantial scarcity of a variety of goods during the 1970s and 1980s), even those who fared much better than others in the bifurcated economy of the 1990s and 2000s, compared ‘now’ unfavourably with ‘before’. ‘Before’ almost everyone earned little, but that was enough. ‘Now’ some earn much more than others, but only very few have enough.

People also make clear that dollarization has raised the stakes in terms of what ‘enough’ might constitute. The ever-mushrooming dollar stores do not sell only cooking-oil and detergent. They offer a whole array of consumer goods, from Knorr soups and Dolmio sauces to Nike trainers, Chanel perfume, and other items often worth several hundreds of dollars each. What I found particularly striking during fieldwork in the 1990s and 2000s was that people would tend to be closely acquainted with prices of products which were entirely beyond their own means. Dollar stores (not least larger, centrally located American-style complexes) were chock-a-block with people window-shopping, spending hours inspecting the goods and very often coming out as light as they had walked in. When asked about these visits, friends would sometimes provide vague explanations referring to sums of money they were expecting some time in the future (a promised remittance from abroad or an impending deal). More often, people would use cheaper goods as alibis: “No, I just went in because I heard they were selling some decent crockery in the ‘Everything for \$1’ section”; or, “I was checking to see if they were selling liver today, and then I just had a look around.”

Indignation at this state of affairs was so widespread as to seem universal. Whether state employees or unemployed house-wives, resourceful black-marketers or barflies without a peso to

spare, well-to-do white academics with rooms to rent for foreigners or street-wise black hustlers, *habaneros* invariably expressed frustration terms about a predicament which dictates that salaries still get paid in Cuban pesos—the rationing system is severely restricted—while more and more goods become available only for dollars. The fed up tone in which Gisel (not her real name), a black single mother in her late 30s with no close family abroad, spoke to me about her employment prospects is typical.

No, I've had all sorts of jobs. With my technical school degree I worked [up until 1994] in gastronomy, in a military unit, the post-office... At that time it was worth it ..., one could live off it. But things have been tough for some time now, and I stopped that. ... In '96 I started selling flowers to tourists in the Old City, and that was good, but we kept getting caught and fined. That's when I started cleaning and cooking in the tourist hostel for \$1 a day. It wasn't much but at least it's dollars. That's what we here call 'la lucha' [the struggle]. ... Why work for the State, if everything that I need is in dollars? In what country in the world have you heard of such a system? ... Apart from the rice and a few more things, everything I need –meat, grease, detergent, things for the house, clothes, all that—I have to look for in *la chopin* [the dollar shops] or on the street [in the black market]. ... It isn't easy ... [*no es fácil* ...]

Necesidad

Gisel's opposition between her “needs” and her “struggle” (*lucha*) to procure the dollars required to meet them is a theme one encounters wherever one turns in Havana of the Special Period. Listening to *habaneros* talk about their current “poverty” or “need” (the term used is *necesidad*, which amalgamates the two connotations²), one gets an image of a people suspended in a kind of

economic no-man's land, between a half-disintegrated socialist system of State provision, and a world of capitalist plenty which is nevertheless practically beyond reach, the world of *el dolar* and *la chopin* (cf Lemon 1990). This image sunk in for me early on in fieldwork during one of many English lessons that I gave to a group of young 'folklore' dancers in Centro Habana. A couple of months into our informal course, I had decided to vent my frustration at the haphazard attendance of my pupils by means of a pep-talk:

Learning English is probably the best investment you can make right now. Isn't your dream to travel abroad? How do you think you'll get by? Even now at the hotel [a 3-star establishment where they were performing for tourists], don't you think you'd get more from the foreigners if you could communicate properly with them?

The class looked stung. One of the lead dancers, who had arrived an hour late, exhausted and thirsty from the street and holding a framed oil painting of dubious charm, derided my attitude gently:

Teacher, look! Maybe one day we'll travel, probably to Haiti [laughter], but the problems and *la necesidad* are here. Do you think that with one show a week things are resolved? No, I need to be on the street every single day, trying to think of ways to scrape together two or three *fula* [slang for dollars] for my needs. Today I came late because I was in the struggle (*estaba en la lucha*), walking the street since 8 o'clock under the sun, queuing for busses in all parts, trying to find someone to charge for this painting. Here it is. Do you want it? [laughter]. No? It isn't easy...

I suggest that there is considerable ethnographic mileage in the concept of *la necesidad*. The first point is that the everyday deployment of *necesidad* by *habaneros* connotes a distinctively *qualitative* assessment of their current poverty. *La necesidad* is constantly invoked by *habaneros* in running commentary about difficulties they face in their struggle to procure the dollars that they

need. What is particularly interesting is the frequency with which they connect the condition of *necesidad* with a notion that has become ubiquitous at all levels of Cuban society (including the State media), namely that the Special Period and its aftermath has been one of “moral crisis” or a “crisis of values” (Martín, Perera and Díaz 1996: 96–97; Berg 2004, 2005; Gropas 2007; cf Pérez-Rolo et al 1998). Nearly every index of moral crisis that *habaneros* lament—prostitution and hustling; break up of couples but also marriages of expedience; migration to Havana and emigration to the U.S.; corruption; theft; high prices in the black market; or alcoholism—is commonly explained as an inevitable, if regrettable, consequence of *la necesidad que hay* (the poverty that there is). For example, when I compared in cliché terms the re-emergence of prostitution in the 1990s with times before the Revolution, a male friend of mine reproached me: “Nobody likes it. But [prostitutes] know that foreigners will ogle at them (*las vacilan*) anyway, and much better to ‘bake the bread’ [slang expression for hustling dollars]. There’s a kid to be fed at home in the countryside, and no need to tell you about the need that exists.” That these allusions are made in the vocabulary of *difficulty* (“it isn’t easy”, “you’ve got to struggle”) demonstrates that more than just a background condition, *la necesidad* has been experienced as something that *exerts* itself. Just like conversations about everyday events are punctuated with stoical evocations of difficulty, the domain of everyday events itself is experienced as being encroached by difficulties that need to be struggled against (Pertierra 2011). To the extent that *habaneros* tend synoptically to gloss this predicament in reified form (by a singular noun), it makes sense to think of it as something like a *force*. In this sense, the concept of *necesidad* is to the social environment of contemporary Cuba, what heat is to the natural environment, or perhaps what fate is to the spiritual order (Elliot, forthcoming).

Pesos and the Socialist Morality of Incommensuration

At this point the question arises as to why current circumstances should be represented in these particular terms. Furthermore, why should they be thus represented by so many people, even when for some the situation is less dire than it is for others? A clue to the answer lies in the diachronic depth of the comparison between the ‘now’ of *necesidad* and better times ‘before’. The concept of *necesidad* itself becomes doubly interesting in this context. As we have seen, what made ‘before’ an object of nostalgia for *habaneros* is the fact that in those times State provision guaranteed a relative equity between wages and prices: “everyone had enough”. Effectively, what *habaneros* longed for corresponds directly to the second half of the socialist principle of remuneration: from each according to his ability, to each according to his need. Or, to use a familiar Cuban word in the plural: *según sus necesidades*. As is well documented in the political scientific literature, this principle formed a central plank of the Cuban State’s policy when it came to regulating consumption for its citizens (Collins and Benjamin 1985). The crucial point is that under the auspices of JUCEPLAN (the Central Planning Board which was set up already in 1960), consumption was organised by the State in a way intended to reflect a moral hierarchy of ‘needs’, according to which the most ‘basic’ needs were clearly demarcated as rights to free or subsidized housing, healthcare, food and education (Brundenius 1984; Pérez-López 1995; White 1987). Concurrently, State planners made sure that wages in most economic sectors and the prices of over a million goods and services (whether on or off the rationing system) remained fixed from the early 1960s until well into the Special period (Pérez-López 1989, 1995: 44–60).

The institution of stable and equitable price/wage ratios was from the start heralded by the Revolutionary government in moral terms, as a strategy for redistributing wealth to cover state-designated ‘basic needs’ of the population (cf Roca 1993: 99). The moral dimension of State provision was elaborated within a general discourse on the altruistic moral foundations of

socialism advanced most vocally by Ché Guevarra in the early 1960s. Central to Guevarra's vision was the idea that a combination of education and economic arrangements based on moral incentives would help to forge a 'New Man' (*hombre nuevo*) in Cuba (Pérez-Rolo et al 1998; Holbraad 2014). In this picture, discourses of choice, entertainment, leisure, etc., which have as in Cuba tend to be associated with 'capitalism' or the West, tend to be excluded as bourgeois indulgence. As Antoni Kapcia (2009) has shown, this contrast between Cuban socialist altruism and Western capitalist indulgence has continued to be a prime reference-point in Cuban state policy and public discourse through the years since the Special Period, including current reforms under Raul Castro.

It is important for my argument to pause here to consider a peculiar implication that the State's role as moral (and then practical) regulator of consumption has for the spending of money. In this connection it is useful to invoke an abstract point that I have developed elsewhere (Holbraad 2005), that relates to the dual aspect of money as a transcendental measure of value on the one hand, and an integrated object of consumption on the other (cf Strathern 1992; Maurer 2005). It is something of an intellectual reflex—perhaps conditioned by Marx (1990: 97) or Simmel ([1907] 1978: 120)—to distinguish money from other valuables with reference to its abstract character. What makes money so special, one tends to assume, is that its digital denomination as a numbers allows it to occupy a transcendental position with respect to other valuables, to stand behind them, providing a quantitative scale for their commensuration. The digital character of money as a measure of value allows it to be implicated in modal 'as if' scenarios, whereby a given sum of money is imagined as being potentially convertible into all the different things that it can buy (see Schmidt; Ross, this volume).

While drawing attention to an important aspect of money, I have argued, this view obscures another one, namely the temporally bound moments when money is actually deployed:

the moment of its consumption in a particular purchase (see also Graeber 2001: 91–116). When I sit here gazing at my pound, I may get carried away and start thinking that it could buy me two KitKats, one lottery ticket, or \$1.65, or whatever. But when I decide to spend that pound, the ‘as if’ scenarios that quantitative calculation allows for must recede (cf Schmidt, this volume). My pound, at that moment, is important not because it *can* buy anything which has that price, but because it *will* buy me something in particular. The moment of consumption, then, eclipses the purview of possible worlds with a concrete exchange, and thus immanently strips money of its transcendental character. With possible worlds eclipsed, one is left with just two entities: a handful of money and what it is buying. So at the moment of expenditure, money is not deployed as a digital criterion of value, but is rather integrated as a temporal entity in its own right by the one-to-one gravity that the entity being purchased exerts on it.

With this distinction in mind, one discerns a significant paradox in the socialist paradigm of consumption outlined above. As we saw, a central feature of Cuban socialism has been an ideological fusion of moral ends and rational means, the latter term referring in the first instance to monetary *ratios* planned and instituted by the State. Thus State planning is premised precisely on the quantitative aspect of money, insofar as peso scales allow planning agencies to commensurate plural ‘needs’ with corresponding ‘goods’, and subsequently to organize them hierarchically within the context of an ethos of consumption-for-need while also considering practical exigencies of production and supply. But the paradox is that insofar as the arcane calculations of the planners remain occult at the point of delivery (viz. the local State outlets where citizens purchase goods), the long-term stability of quantitative ratios relating wages to prices and the prices of different goods to each other, tends to render the currency of measurement itself (i.e. pesos) arthritic. The more the State takes on the burden of monetary calculation, the more it tends to divest it of consumers. In their hands, the role of money as a catalyst for commensuration is severely

restricted inasmuch as their scope for choice tends to disappear within planning processes. The whole point of planning is to *regulate* consumption. From consumers' point of view, pesos are not endlessly translatable into all the things they could buy. Rather, wages are qualitatively "earmarked" (Zelizer 1993), since they are bestowed on citizens as preordained vehicles for the satisfaction of preordained needs.

This situation has two implications for the conceptualisation of money and prices under socialism. First, wage/price fixing by State planners presents consumers with a paradigm of consumption that tends to eclipse its own quantitative premise, whereby quantitative ratios are deemed as permanent indexes of covalent moral attributes of people and things. In other words, the very arthritic character of wages and prices renders them more like intrinsic qualities of goods and labor (indicating something like a moral 'size'), than as extrinsic, and hence variable, price tags. The second, related, point has to do specifically with money. Insofar as planning on behalf of consumers involves earmarking their wages for purposes of consumption-for-need, the currency for consumption (viz. pesos) becomes less of a current, so to speak. In this context, pesos are perhaps best thought of as tokens which are valuable to consumers mainly insofar as they facilitate transactions within the planned confines of what del Aguila, after E.P. Thompson, called the "moral economy" of the state sector (1984: 89; Thompson 1993). Indeed, this analysis fits well with Fidel Castro's repeated claims at the height of the Revolution in the late 1960s that in the long run money might be abolished altogether. A newspaper article from that time explains this idea:

Since we were small we were taught to ask 'how much have you got? How much are you worth?' Then we learned that money was unnecessary ... already in Cuba those six letters (*dinero*) mean less. The new generation does not believe in all the old myths about money. (*Granma* article quoted in Thomas 1971: 671).

Whether demonetised communism was ever seriously on the cards for Cuba is a moot question. What is certain is that circulation of dollars (illegally from the mid-1980s, then with State endorsement after 1993, and then in the form of CUCs in recent years) shattered any such aspirations. Indeed, as I now propose to show, the experience of *necesidad* as a growing and near-pervasive force during this period can be understood with reference to transformations that have taken place in the field of consumption following the partial (but encroaching) dollarization of the economy.

Dollars and the Moral Crises of Commensuration

While hardly offering this as an argument from linguistic determinism, we may begin with the obvious connection between socialist rhetoric about satisfaction of ‘basic needs’, and *habaneros’* use of the same term, *necesidad*, to describe their current predicament of poverty. Added to *habaneros’* explicit comparisons between ‘now’ and ‘before’, this terminological association constitutes a solid premise for interpreting current experience in light of the erosion of the socialist paradigm of consumption. Thus, dollarization and the new paradigm of consumption that it supports ought not to be related only externally to the ‘moral crisis’ of the 1990s and 2000s as cause to effect, but should be seen also as an integral part of *habaneros’* experience of the crisis.

So what is it about consumption that renders ‘now’ a period of moral crisis? The straightforward answer is that the moral core of the socialist paradigm, namely planning for fair wage/price ratios, has been severely undermined throughout the post-Soviet period, first by a volatile black market in dollars, followed, since 1993, by encroaching dollarization of substantial parts of the official economy, which laid foundations also for recent overtly market-oriented reforms. As the exorbitant price of cooking-oil shows, in the realm of the State-sponsored supermarkets (let alone that of “the street”—*la calle*), there is no evidence of an equitable co-

regulation of incomes and prices. Admittedly, there have been appeals to social justice in the government's rationale for instituting glitzy dollar supermarkets and bars, since price mark-ups are presented as an attempt to skim dollars off the minority of the population that have access to them, in order keep the (peso) sector of State provision going for the benefit of those who do not. However, in practice such redistribution is a sham. People's needs are not covered in the peso sector, so everyone is willy-nilly led to the dollar supermarkets—even those whose pockets are empty. The absence of a significant ethos of equity in the dollar sector is confirmed by the fact that the dollar shops are being set up under the aegis of previously unheard of 'Anonymous Societies'. Although these organizations are ultimately answerable to the State, they are not subject to centralized planning (Eckstein 1994: 69–71; Brotherton 2008).

Thus, this moral crisis is verily inscribed on the cityscape of consumption in Havana today. The government's media propaganda and slogans about Cuba's socialist heroism in the face of a global neo-liberal orthodoxy, are operationalized inasmuch as the system of State provision is still upheld. But the ailing state of that system is thrown into sharp relief by the ever expanding dollar sector, with its slick air-conditioned supermarkets, shopping-malls, and bars. The diachronic coordinates of *habaneros'* sense of moral crisis—the contrast between a now and a before that is now more than two decades in the past—are sustained, even today, in a chronotopic fashion (Bakhtin 1981: 84). The no-man's-land cityscape of *necesidad* is a chronotope of the conflict between the past (typified by State provision) and the present (one of struggle for dollars), since the time before, when everyone had little but enough, is contained *within* the now, albeit negatively, as a decaying remnant. Turn a corner from *la chopin* and what you find is a queue at a State outlet selling affordable Chinese rice on the rationing system. Look out of the window of the dollar cafeteria and you see a neighborhood clinic where local residents would receive excellent treatment for free, if there were medicine. The past is ever present, if only as evidence of its

relative demise. In other words, the contrast between now and before in *habaneros'* parlance is only ambiguously diachronic, inasmuch as it is also synchronically inscribed in the form of a bifurcated economy: dollar versus peso.

The peculiarly qualitative shift that the concept of *necesidad* has undergone during this period also intimates a more subtle transformation, which may lie at the heart of *habaneros'* sense of moral crisis. On the one hand, the notion of *necesidad* has undergone a double semantic shift: one of negation, the other of expansion. Negation describes the fact that whereas ‘before’ *necesidades* (plural) predicated certain moral goods, ‘now’ *necesidad* (singular) has come to refer to the privation of goods in general. Expansion refers to the shift from using *necesidad* to refer to a limited set of preordained goods, to reifying it in its own right as something akin to a force which permeates all aspects of living.

A similar double shift has occurred in the pragmatics (as opposed to the semantics) of consumption, which relates to dollars in particular. Negation, in this context, is relevant inasmuch as what was planned in the peso economy of before, is not so in the new order of the dollar. But the crux of the argument has to do with extension. Socialist planning, as we saw, involves as a crucial element the earmarking of pesos as vehicles for the satisfaction of preordained basic needs. In this sense, socialist provision is premised on a curtailment of the sphere of monetary transactions, insofar as pesos are meant to mirror needs they acquire a token-like quality for consumers. Conversely, because the new dollar sector is *not* subject to similar planning constraints, both demand (instantiated in the spending of dollars) and supply (new goods) are apparently allowed to proliferate in all directions. The role of the dollar itself is as crucial to this process as that of the peso was to the socialist paradigm. It is precisely the unbridled capacity of money to engage consumers in ‘as if’ scenarios, whereby money is translated in the abstract into all the different goods it ‘could’ buy, that dollars put into operation in the Cuban context. Having

been placed outside the remit of planning agencies, the dollar comes into its own as a transcendental scale of value which indexes its own potential to commensurate. ‘In dollars everything has a price,’ *habaneros* have learned to say in the past couple of decades, echoing their ‘capitalist’ neighbors from the North. The compulsive window-shopping that so many *habaneros* seem to engage in during this period could perhaps be interpreted as a quantity-fetish. The fact that most window-shoppers cannot afford the vast majority of what they see does not prevent them from partaking in the fantasy of commensuration that *la chopin* itself intends, if nothing else, by means of its attractive rows of price tags.

But this brings us back to the connection with *necesidad*, since dollars and need are intimately connected in Cuba by the very fact that the incessant expansion of the dollar-sector during the 1990s and 2000s has been experienced as an *encroachment* on the traditional socialist site for the satisfaction of *necesidades*, namely the peso sector. As my friends complained time and again, “everything we need is in dollars”. However, very few people in Havana during my fieldwork (and still today) would see themselves as having enough to satisfy their needs. Even the minority of *habaneros* who enjoy a large and stable enough dollar income to buy at the supermarkets all those goods that at earlier periods would have been provided at a low price by the State, have reason to complain inasmuch as the influx of so-called capitalist imagery has helped raise the goal-posts of need. One’s reflexes towards viewing dollars and markets as catalysts for the phantasmagoria of desire should therefore be resisted in the Cuban case (cf Simmel 1978: 66). For most *habaneros*, dollars and *la chopin* furnish a new arena for an old and drearily familiar pursuit, namely the satisfaction of one’s needs. Only now satisfaction is no longer guaranteed by the State in any recognizable way, but has rather become increasingly a matter of personal struggle—*lucha*—against the odds.

Conceptions of *necesidad* as a force, then, are a function of the transposition of needs out of the realm of the peso and into an expanding dollar-sector that renders their satisfaction partial and difficult. In the first move (viz. out of the peso) needs are disembedded from the moral order of socialism, not least because they are dissociated from what was previously fixed upon them as an integral part, namely the peso price. In the second move (viz. into the dollar) needs become fluid like the dollar, the catalyst of their satisfaction—real or imagined. Since the new dollar sector now constitutes the paramount arena for the satisfaction of needs conceived as basic, the fluidity that dollar commensuration lends to that arena is inflected on the concept of *necesidad* itself. In this sense, window-shopping with empty pockets and *habaneros'* constant preoccupation with the dollar prices of goods that they cannot afford may be interpreted as almost *ur*-dispositions towards the growing dollar order. In the absence of ‘enough’ money, *necesidades* (rather than desires) are kept as the *protagonists* of the ‘as if’ scenarios of calculation that dollarization engenders. What makes the dollar so powerful is its transcendental position that allows it to act as a catalyst for commensurating such unsatisfied needs with a multiple, and potentially endless, series of goods. Like negative *mana* (Holbraad 2007), *necesidad* comes to be imagined as permeating all aspects of living, precisely because all aspects of living have a (dollar) price. If in the socialist paradigm pesos were made to mirror needs, the new mercantilism of Cuba since the early 1990s has rendered need—*necesidad*, the experience of poverty—as a shadow of the dollar itself.

Conclusion

One could sum up the argument of this article with reference to my opening comments about the binary license that is characteristic of anthropological writings on money. The focus of my argument has been primarily on indigenous binaries which, as I have sought to show, are a

function of the experience of a bifurcated economy in which two currencies deploying different aspects of the money-form have set the coordinates for what people themselves feel is a predicament of poverty. The proliferation and mutual interference of binaries has been very much part of this experience, starting from the duality of the currencies themselves (viz. peso versus dollars), and extending to a series of further dualities that come together for people in their own understanding of their situation—before and now, basic needs and *necesidad*, rations book and *la chopin*, or socialism and mercantilism.

The upshot of my account of Cuban people's experience of their shifting positions amidst these binary conjunctures is an argument about the catalytic power of money itself in processes of moral transformation. At this point indigenous binaries have split themselves into analytical ones, and in that sense the present article is yet another iteration of the binary license of the anthropology of money. On the back of indigenous dualities, I have sought to build an argument made of further ones. Iterating the classical distinction between money as means and money as measure, I sought to configure with the ethnography further distinctions, between transcendence and immanence, fantasy and reality, quantity and quality, calculation and transaction and so on, in order to bring into focus the moral and deeply affective effects of acts of commensuration in particular—how the state planners' divestment of the money-form of its commensurative role rendered the peso a token-like index of the needs-based moral weight of goods, and how the release of commensuration as a fantasy game in the post-Soviet era made of the dollar a catalyst for the experience of poverty as an all-encroaching force in people's lives.

In line with the invitation issued by the editors of this special issue, one could see this argument in the spirit of a Lévi-Straussian 'qualitative mathematics'. Certainly, if Strathern is right that anthropologists have a predilection to license binary thinking (and in that case it could be no accident that the father of such license in social theory should come from our discipline!),

then the editors of the present collection, Lévi-Strauss himself, as well as my Cuban informants and the coins in their pockets and in their minds, would all conspire to suggest that this kind of thinking is most productive when it is oxymoronic. The idea of a qualitative mathematics is delicious because it is logically aberrant—mathematics is supposed to be quantitative. Similarly, the editors' invitation to think of the quantitative properties of money in material terms is provocative because it cuts against the standard reflex of thinking of money's quantity as a conduit for its abstraction (Holbraad 2005; Maurer 2005; Pickles 2013). Seen in this light, however, I note that the oxymoron of my own argument on the morality of commensuration cuts in the opposite direction. Rather than looking for the (e.g. material) qualities of quantification, I have sought to locate, in the act of commensuration, the quantitative conditions for nevertheless irreducibly qualitative operations of people's moral judgment—indeed, when it comes to poverty, their existential discomfiture. One may wonder whether, as a coin for thinking, money may also be supremely well suited for just this kind of analytical flipping.

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Notes

1 *Posadas* are motels that let rooms by the hour to couples.

2 On concepts of *necesidad* in Mexico, see Díaz Barriga (1996). For an interesting comparison, see Bourdieu (1984: 372–396) on the French working class ‘taste’ for ‘choosing the necessary’. For an analysis of changing constructions of needs in a post-socialist context, see Haney (1999) on welfare mothers in Hungary.

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