

The House of Spirits

Care and the Revolutionary State in Cuba

Martin Holbraad

Abstract

With reference to one man's remarkable struggle to rebuild his home in Havana following its partial collapse, this article contributes to the emerging anthropological literature on care by thematising the role of the state as carer-in-chief. Experiences such as that of Lázaro, the protagonist of the article, demonstrate the central paradox of care as a state project—one that receives its most extreme expression in the totalising project of revolutionary state socialism—namely, the contradiction between the particularistic, affective, and aesthetic character of care and the generalising and neutralising rational order of the state mechanisms charged with delivering it. Drawing on the ritual and cosmological template of Afro-Cuban *espiritismo*, Lázaro effectively solves this paradox by supplementing his relationship with state structures with an intricate, ever-evolving, and deeply personal relationship with spirits. The upshot is Lázaro's remarkable sense of inner conviction in the efficacy of state bureaucracy, underpinned by the aesthetics of care that spirits practice provides.

Keywords: aesthetics, affect, care, Cuba, housing, socialism, spiritism, state

Revolutionary socialism and the caring state: The problem of means versus ends

It is remarkable that, in the recently proliferating anthropological literature on concepts and practices of 'care', the role of the state as, often, carer-in-chief has not been explored more systematically. To be sure, many of the practices and institutions that have become the empirical focus of this literature—social welfare (Buch 2015), healthcare (Mol 2008; Mol et al 2010), care homes and hospices (Buch 2013; Miller 2017), technoscience (Puig de la Bellacasa 2011; Martin et al. 2015)—are organised and sponsored by the state (see also Thelen et al. 2014; Lammer 2017). That this should be so, however, points to a far deeper sense in which the state is invested in care, even as it may (or may not) invest in it. Namely, that its very *raison d'être*, as a political form, is, to invoke a Hegelian thought, providential. The state as provider.



Indeed, while Hegel's much-cited suggestion that the modern state is God-like was a statement about the state's absolute character as an expression of reason (Hegel 1942), one could just as well pursue the analogy between state and God in the key of care. If God is there to care for us, among other things, so certainly is the state. Law and order, national security, redistributive taxation, welfare benefits, healthcare, education, sanitation, transportation—the common denominator of nigh on every state function one can think of is a project of providing for citizens' needs, which is to say, a project for their care.

As with so many aspects of the state form, state-socialism takes this to its logical extreme. What is sometimes described as a characteristic tendency towards 'state paternalism' in socialism ('the nanny state') is, again, only a superficial symptom of a much deeper and definitive commitment to care as the animating force of state process (see also Read and Thelen 2007). If in liberal democracies the state cares for citizens mainly by securing the terrain in which they can safely be supported to go about their lives—the state as guarantor of 'civil society', imagined as a relatively autonomous field of action—in socialism the state becomes a 'total' phenomenon (Mauss 1992) inasmuch as its structures and processes do not merely provide the means through which citizens can realise their life projects, but rather become themselves the ends of those projects. While this in a sense reverses the vector of care, demanding of citizens that they care for 'their' state (to be a good socialist citizen, one might say, is to care *for* the state—cf. Graeber and Sahlins 2018), that might be just because the state's commitment to the total care of its citizens—from cradle to grave, and everything in between—is so all-embracing that it almost entails its own reciprocity. State and citizen become logically coterminous, one might say, insofar as their respective goals are so moulded as to be identified, such that the state's actions, almost by definition, count as care for its people, and vice versa (this being the project of the New Man, ubiquitous in state-socialist societies, in which people mould themselves into wanting only what the state wants of and for them—Blum 2011; Holbraad 2014; Cherstich et al. 2020).

All this, of course, is purely ideo-typical. 'States' may set themselves up as projects of care, and 'state-socialism' may gain the ethico-political high-ground by posing itself as the limit case. But no state ever fully took care of its citizens (providentially speaking, that would indeed be paradise on Earth), nor are citizens ever quite satisfied with their state in this regard. How far and in what ways the state can or will take care of its people is always a moot question for them, and hence the inordinate energy that is expended by politicians in trying (periodically at least) to convince people that this is nevertheless on the cards. Politicians are only always promising, one might say, because it is in their constitution to be expected to provide—indeed, to care. Conversely, a great deal of the discourse one might call political consists in commentary on the degree to which those charged with state power wield it in ways that deliver on their promises, meeting the expectations of their citizens, that is to say, their expectation of care.

So if, as Laszczkowski and Reeves argue, the state is 'affective', 'the object of emotional investment' (2015: 3), then that may be because its very *raison d'être* as source

of care—both ultimate and proximate—is cast at the deepest level in an affective register. A prime index of this is the affective character of the judgements people make as they measure the distance between what they expect of the state (indeed, what politicians promise them) and what it actually delivers: disappointment, indignation, dejection, apathy, cynicism, anger, even rage, sometimes righteous in its intensity. If these are among the political emotions that the mismatch between what the state promises and what it is felt to deliver generates, that is only because the most basic premise of the state's existence is that of care. The state is there to care for—to take care of—the subjects in its charge. In all of their intricacy and depth, these are all emotions of having been let down, and one only feels that way if what one had expected in the first place was to be cared for. Seen in this light, it is hardly surprising that the signature affective comportment of citizens in state-socialism in particular is cynicism (Yurchak 1997; Steinmüller and Brandtstädter 2015). If, as I have suggested, socialism totalises the expectation of a caring state, then that expectation is just as totally thwarted by the realities of the state's operation (Verdery 1996) and cynicism becomes not just a reaction on the part of let-down citizens but their constitutive condition qua citizens of such a state.

With reference to the experience of state-socialism in contemporary Cuba, this article charts out this conception of state (as) care by attending ethnographically to the central tension on which it turns. The hiatus between care promised and care delivered of which state socialist societies present the limit case, I suggest, is inherent to—indeed, constitutive of—such societies because it emerges out of the fundamental contradiction between the ends and the means of the state's project of care. On the one hand, by its very nature, care is particularising, contextual, and affective (see also Alexander 2002; Street 2012; Nading 2017). In the terms laid out in the present special issue, care is an inherently 'aesthetic' phenomenon, involving precisely the kinds of crossover between affect and perception that Lamrani puts at the centre of this special issue's argument in her introduction (this volume). Targeted at the body above all, care's successes and failures are registered in the languages of the senses—one either feels cared for, after all, or one does not. On the other hand, the state apparatus with which socialism seeks to realise its telos of care is exactly the opposite: generalising, averse to context, and organised as an expression of reason and order, as Max Weber (as well as Hegel) so famously described (1994). Drawing its claim to sovereignty on the transcendent order of reason itself (Gilmartin 2019), the state apparatus claims to operate on such principles as impartiality, neutrality, and equality for all. It is literally meant *not to care* for or about any person in particular, insofar as caring in such a way would by definition be iniquitous, impractical, and inefficient. By its very nature, in other words, the state seeks to care only in principle, and in general.

To the extent that socialism totalises the state's responsibility for care, it presents the limit case for this contradiction. No wonder, then, that state-socialism should have borne the whole anthropological and social scientific literature on, of example, 'economies of favour' (Ledeneva 1998; Henig and Makovicky 2017)—the myriad ways in which the bars of the proverbial 'iron cage' are bent in daily practice, to

allow the rigidities of state reason to yield to the personal projects to which the state is otherwise meant to be there to cater. To be sure, favours, nepotism, and even forms of ‘corruption’ all feature in the ethnographic story I shall be telling to illustrate the problem, showing how these putatively extraneous ‘pathologies’ of the state are in fact integral to the state’s need to bridge the gaps its inherent means/ends contradiction opens up. However, rather than presenting an ‘apt illustration’ of this dynamic, in what follows I deploy ethnography more in the Manchester School tradition (Evens and Handelman 2008; Kapferer 2015), presenting an ‘extended case’ of sorts that, centred on a singular event involving an exceptional person, brings to the surface the inner workings of this contradiction by rubbing against its coordinates, showing vividly how they come to be at stake in the lived experience of state socialism.

My focus is on the remarkable story of one man—a good friend of mine, called Lázaro¹—who is himself utterly remarkable in at least two (connected) ways. First, at a time of pervasive cynicism on the part of ordinary people in Cuba about the state’s capacity, let alone intention, to deliver on the programme of care for the people that the Cuban revolution has held as its ‘national project’ for now more than sixty years, Lázaro holds fast to the idea of the state as the prime means for addressing his own needs—needs that in his case, as we shall see, are nothing short of dire. Crucially, for Lázaro, the state’s role in this regard is a direct function of its bureaucratic order—a space of reasoned structures, processes, and regulations that Lázaro himself is adept at navigating and for which he holds unflinching respect. At the same time, however, Lázaro is under no illusion as to the severe dysfunctions of the state apparatus in its day-to-day operation and lays no store at all at the prospect of its functionaries caring about his situation. His extraordinary sense of inner conviction that the state will yield to his just demands is rather founded on a different source entirely, namely his intimate—and intricately aesthetic, as we shall see—relationships with spirits with whom he confers on a daily basis and who have guided him in his interactions with the state authorities at every turn of his harrowing story. The intricately affective and sensorial relationships with spirits that sustain Lázaro in his day-to-day dealings provide him with exactly the kind and order of care that the state is constitutively unable to deliver and in that way serve to reveal the contradictory nature of state care even as, for Lázaro, they help to overcome it.

Lázaro’s story

‘This house, my home, my family’s home, where my mother and my father died, almost became my grave last year’, Lázaro tells me in 2016 as we sit in his three-bedroom apartment, situated on the top floor of a turn-of-the-century building on a busy street of inner-city Havana. ‘And now, in this grave, I have to live, under the stars...and the rain’. Sitting on the floor of what he continues to refer to as the living room, the reference to the stars and the rain is gappingly obvious: the flat is entirely bare, with all the furniture having been put in storage, following the collapse of the

roof in the kitchen, in the early hours of the morning more than a year ago now. ‘The people from *viviendas* [the municipal agency responsible for housing] came in when the neighbours called them as soon as they saw what happened’, he explains. ‘I tried to cover up the damage, but it was impossible to hide—the whole ceiling fell through, and people heard it’. So it was that the flat was declared uninhabitable, and the construction wing of *viviendas* came within a week and demolished the remaining parts of the roof to avoid further accidents. And so it is that since that time (and still today, in 2021), Lázaro lives alone, in a flat with no roof.

Crumbling housing stock has been an endemic problem for decades in Cuba. Consistently since the early 1990s, when Cuba was thrown into the radical economic crisis Fidel Castro at the time branded as its ‘Special Period in Times of Peace’, provoked by the end of Soviet support, thousands of people have died due to the infamous ‘*derrumbes*’ (collapses). Collapsing buildings are an everyday feature of life in Havana, particularly for the old colonial neighbourhoods in inner-city areas, after years of neglect and lack of state investment, in the context of an ever-stringent US embargo, vindictively still in place since 1962. In addition to the casualties, according to recent estimates (Castellanos 2017) approximately 150,000 people have had to be relocated to temporary accommodation—the infamous *albergues* (shelters) in which people sometimes are stuck for decades with often minimal amenities.

For purposes of the present argument, it is worth noting that housing reform has, from the start, been a prime avatar of that ongoing and by now deeply institutionalised process of (putatively) total socio-political transformation that in both official discourse and common parlance in Cuba is referred to as ‘the revolution’ (*la revolución*).² Already in *History Will Absolve Me*, his 1953 manifesto for the revolution, Fidel Castro identified decent housing as a prime demand of the struggle, and pledged accordingly:

A revolutionary government would solve the housing problem by cutting all rents in half, by providing tax exemptions on homes inhabited by the owners; by tripling taxes on rented homes; by tearing down hovels and replacing them with modern apartment buildings; and by financing housing all over the island on a scale heretofore unheard of, with the criterion that, just as each rural family should possess its own tract of land, each city family should own its own house or apartment. (Castro Ruz 2001 [1953])

Reflected in (and in fact well surpassed by) the raft of measures that were taken quickly after Castro’s revolutionary ascent to power in 1959, and in particular the Law of Urban Reform (LUR) of 1960 in which private (though not personal) ownership of housing was forbidden in one fell swoop (Holbraad 2018), this programme of promises is the apogee the socialist state as carer-in-chief—promises underpinned, in Cuba as in most other socialist states, by the arch principle of Marxist redistribution, ‘from each according to their ability to each according to their need’ (Brotherton 2012; Wilson 2013; Gold 2015; Holbraad 2017), which enshrines care as the most basic responsibility of the socialist state. As in all other vital

fields—health, education, nutrition, family planning—so in housing the socialist state has from the 1960s occupied the role of prime provider for the population's 'basic needs' (*necesidades básicas*), with state authorities holding ultimate control over individual citizens' living arrangements, through the legal jurisdiction accorded them by the LUR and the regulatory and institutional infrastructure built upon it (see Trefftz 2011).

Even as it bears out the point about the role of care in state-socialism, however, the state's control of the provision of shelter in Cuba and the woeful deterioration of the housing stock to which it led demonstrates also how the state's organisational structures constitutively fall short of their promises, due to their basic asymmetry to the personalised, aesthetic quality of care (as such). While the reasons are more complicated than that (shortages of resources, scarcity of materials, logistical inefficiencies, the capital's climate, and the aforementioned US embargo have all played their role), the inability of the state bureaucracy to respond to people's individual, and so often absolutely dire, housing needs is so obvious to people in Havana that it is hardly commented upon with anything more than a shrug of the shoulders (see also Holbraad 2018).

In some ways Lázaro's story typifies the problem. When the roof of his flat collapsed, he too was offered that never-as-temporary-as-advertised accommodation in a far-off state shelter, but he resolutely declined it, knowing full well that this would put at the very bottom of the pile his legal claim to a state subsidy with which to repair his home. Still, to avoid one trap Lázaro now finds himself in another, stuck in a flat with no roof with no immediate prospects for finding the resources to repair it. The way he sees it, this is just the outcome of a situation in which he has been trapped for years. When he and his parents moved into the flat in the 1980s they knew the ceiling had problems, but as an employee of a state engineering firm at that time he expected that the authorities, charged by law with the maintenance of deteriorating housing stock, would support him in his own efforts to fix it. While, as he admits today, even then, in the 1980s, the dismal combination of shortage, inefficiency, and corruption was already a standard feature of the daily operation of state services and organisations (cf. Verdery 1996), his parents were model revolutionary citizens (his father was himself an honoured combatant of the revolutionary struggle, while his mother was active in the local 'CDR'—the neighbourhood-level 'Committees for the Defence of the Revolution'), and their entitlement to decent housing could therefore be expected to be met by the authorities as a matter of course. But then the Special Period arrived, his father died of a broken heart after Lázaro's younger sister died of a congenital disease, and when his mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's in the late 1990s, he had to give up his job in order to take care of her, until her death a decade later. With no job and with state authorities who simply cited the lack of resources in denying him, over and again, help with fixing the ceiling, his home effectively has had him trapped for years.

To be sure, in the neighbourhood, Lázaro's situation is perceived as nothing short of calamitous. For example, the man who originally introduced me to him—a university administrator who lives on the other side of the street, almost directly

opposite Lázaro's collapsed flat—presented to me his case as an example of the 'misery that exists in this country now', as part of a long litany of complaints about the kinds of situations *la revolución* has created after six decades of gradually increasing dysfunction, as he saw it. 'How can you not be disenchanted with this ["*desencantado de esto*", 'esto'—'this'—being a term that is habitually used to refer to 'the revolution' as the horizon of existence in Cuba; see also Holbraad, forthcoming] when you see *that*?', he exclaimed, pointing me to the now open expanse of the flat opposite, which I later got to know as Lázaro's home. Indeed, since that initial conversation in 2016, I have kept track in subsequent visits of Lázaro's on the whole deteriorating relations in the neighbourhood, through updates from the university administrator and from Lázaro himself. In the period immediately after the collapse, a number of the neighbours offered Lázaro support, with the university administrator, for example, helping him carry and store some heavy metal rods he was able to procure in preparation for his projected house repairs, while an adjacent neighbour agreed to pay for a small part of the roof to be restored, since this also suited her because part of it was overhanging her own property. Over the subsequent months and years, however, with the situation more or less unchanging through the seasons (and not least through the terrifying days of Hurricane Irma in September 2017, for which Lázaro prepared meticulously and was able to survive unscathed), neighbours have tended to see Lázaro's living arrangements more and more as a festering problem. To the concerns about the safety hazards that his exposed apartment presents to the properties below and beside it (which, as he is keen to point out, Lázaro has done a great deal to minimise), is added increasingly a feeling that Lázaro's continuing battle to rebuild his home is unsustainable, and that his live-in in such dire conditions should have ended years ago.

Still, what is so atypical of his story is that, faced with this calamity, Lázaro himself is anything but despondent. The litany of complaints that is such a standard feature of daily conversation in Cuba—laced with the affect of revolutionary 'disenchantment', exemplified by Lázaro's aforementioned neighbour above—is largely absent in Lázaro's case. With him what you get instead is a sense of steadfast determination, to rebuild his flat, and with it his life. This sense of inner conviction is movingly conveyed by the careful, meticulous way in which the meagre building materials that Lázaro managed to salvage from the collapse (though some he had been acquiring piecemeal since), are ordered in the different surface-spaces of the flat. The carefully flushed piles of bricks in the living room, the metal pipes leaning against the kitchen wall in order of length, the rusting long rebars placed as unobtrusively as possible along the floors of two of the bedrooms, the tarpaulin-covered breeze-block structure of makeshift selves in which he now kept his clothes, toiletries, and other personal valuables, such as the bulging folder in which he keeps the 'papers' of the house, as he calls them. As I later found out when our friendship developed, these include not just the original ownership deeds and the mass of more recent documents generated by his ongoing negotiations and disputes with the state and local housing authorities but also meticulously drawn and redrawn designs for the repair project, drawn by his own precise hand, and costed over

and again in clear handwriting in seemingly endless iterations on different sheets of paper.

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I believe it was some weeks into our acquaintance in 2016 when I felt I could ask Lázaro directly the question I had been wanting to ask him from the start: why was he so adamant about staying in the flat under these inhuman conditions? His reply was not straightforward, since it centred only partly on his relationship with the state agencies charged with dealing with collapses of this kind. 'If I accept to be moved', he explained, 'then my problem as far as they are concerned is solved. But I want to remain a problem to them, because this is where I live'. However, as he continued on this theme, the deeper significance of staying in the flat and in this way, as he hopes, keeping it became apparent:

In this house I saw my sister die, and my father, and then my mother. In these rooms we took care of each other. Towards the end I would hardly sleep....I'd lean out onto the street on the balcony in the early hours of the morning, enjoying the stillness, thinking, listening....I guess you could call it insomnia, but for me...it was different.

It was in the ellipses of Lázaro's account that I began to sense that his reference to the deaths of his sister and parents was not offered only as a story of personal sorrow, though clearly it was that too. What is at stake for him hit me somewhat between my ethnographic eyes a little later on in that conversation, when we turned to the events of the collapse itself. 'It was in the dead of night, before sunrise', he responds to my goading questions about what had happened and how:

I was lying in my bed in the other room. And then they came and they showed it to me. They gave me a warning, although there really there was nothing I could do. They took me into the kitchen and said, 'look? So I got up and followed them—it's all I could do. 'Rrrrraaackkata!' This whole part [indicating with his arm the far end of what had been the kitchen, above a now disused kitchen sink] fell through. And then, as though it were in slow motion, this one too [indicating above our heads, in the part of the room in which we were now standing]. ['You were hurt then?' I ask.] No, not at all. They didn't want me to be hurt. They just wanted me to see, to be there. ['They protected you?' I suggest.] They do protect me. They always protect me.

When he talks of 'them' in such contexts (the same pronoun, importantly, that Cubans commonly use to refer to the state and its agencies), Lázaro is referring to spirits, and in particular to his own idiosyncratic elaboration on *espiritismo*—a set of practices for communicating with dead spirits that is pervasive in Cuba, originating in the complex admixture of mainly 'spiritist' practices imported from Europe in the nineteenth century and central and west African ritual and cosmological frameworks brought to the island by slaves who were being imported en masse during the same period. Referred to commonly as '*muertos*', though he

prefers to designate them more accurately (in his view) as ‘*espíritus*’, these spirits are conceived and ritually substantiated as personages from the historic past, who, depending on their manner of life and death, and the subsequent interactions with the living, have ‘evolved’ or ‘developed’ into increasingly well-defined personalities with whom the living can enter into long-term relationships.

In a way that is entirely pertinent to our argument here, the excellent literature on Cuban spiritism (e.g., James Figarola 1989; Espirito Santo 2015, 2018) emphasises the intricate forms of care through which relationships between humans and their spirits get solidified, in order then to be utilised for mutual benefit—the spirit is ‘developed’ by its medium so as to gain increasing forms of ascendancy and ‘light’, while the medium in turn gains the spirit’s guidance and protection, which they can then also put to use in helping others. Intricately kinaesthetic crossovers between affect and perception are a central feature of this process, with practitioners literally feeling their way towards increasingly multidimensional relationships with their spirits. Sight, sounds, smell, touch, and taste all serving as possible fields through which the spirits’ presence, character, and particular desires and motives in any given context can be detected and articulated, often with the help of different material aids—candles, flames, glasses of water, dolls and other effigies, songs, murmurs, bodily gestures, and dance-like swaying movements that can act in different contexts and stages of the spirit’s development act as conduits, attractors, or indeed materialisations for the spirit and become the focus of the medium’s developing spiritual sensorium.

While Lázaro’s account of how his spirits woke him up and spoke to him on the fateful night of the collapse is but one example of this blend of sense and personal care and affect, we may note here that Lázaro accounts for his own ability to hear and see his dead spirits as a personal ‘gift’ (*un don*) rather than an ability developed through more formal instruction or apprenticeship, as is common for many of the professional mediums in Havana today who offer their ritual services to clients in exchange for fees (a kind of transaction Lázaro tends to avoid). Lázaro became conscious of his gift around the time of his sister’s death, as he later told me, and he associates it particularly with the time when she was ill at hospital in the 1980s and 1990s. Spirits, he explains, would whisper to him what to do for his sister, how to care for her, what to say to his father and mother, and what he needed to do to take care of them. It used to be just one or two spirits, but over the years, following his sister’s death and his parents’ ensuing frailness and ill health, more and more of them began to be added to what adepts of spiritism would call his *cuadro espiritual*, that is, the ‘frame’ or ‘chart’ of spirits with whom he has relationships, who ‘accompany’ him in life, and who care for him in the measure that he too cares for them.

Relationships with spirits are pervasive in Lázaro’s life, and he speaks about them with a tenderness that recalls the bonds of care and affection that, as he often recalls, made life with his parents and sister so united and loving when they were alive. Indeed, while living life as a loner since then, Lázaro has become ever more intricately embedded in a developing web of relationships with a whole array of individual spirits, with which he engages in order to help people that he meets on

his daily peregrinations across the city—relationships that can be seen as modelling, complementing, and extending the kinds of bonds of care his family life, as he sees it, typified, and which he sometimes contrasts with the kinds of antagonisms and hostilities he sees as pervasive in everyday life, including among his neighbours (cf. Harkonen 2016).

Accordingly, spirits played an entirely central role in the aftermath of the collapse of Lázaro's roof, as a prime factor, for him, in the ongoing drama of his interactions not only with sometimes hostile and often scheming neighbours but also with the state authorities themselves. His narration of the current stalemate in which he finds himself centres on what he perceives as a combination of indifference and ineptitude, and on occasion malice, on the part of a whole rollcall of functionaries at different levels of the state apparatus: the president of the state construction agency who alerted him to a recent change in the subsidy regulations; the municipal delegate who promised to look into his case but has been dragging his feet now for over a year; the local delegate who is trying to swindle him out of his flat; and so on. But in the face of what to most Cubans would consider a rather hopeless situation, Lázaro calmly counter-poses the 'protection' his spirits provide. While he never expressed this directly, his whole demeanour when he links his decision to remain in the dilapidated house with what 'they', the spirits, have told him he should do is one of quiet, if a little mischievous, confidence. In fact, it would appear that from the moment the spirits themselves let Lázaro into the momentous event of the night of the collapse, the whole story of his home for him has played itself out as an intimate relationship with them. A dialogue with the dead (to recall the title of Piers Vitebsky's 1993 study of spirit possession and [as] care among Sora people in India) in which spirits have told Lázaro at every turn to remain steadfast in his demand for state help, given him strength in dealing with ever more disgruntled neighbours who would like him and his problem to go away, and helping him see through the bureaucratic morass that have been his weekly dealings with different state agencies, complaint and appeal procedures, endless requests for paperwork, and so on.

Alas, unlike Vitebsky's marvellously documented Sora séances, Lázaro's dialogues with the dead are mainly internal. Yet perhaps therein lies part of their power. Perhaps the reason for which spirits are such a source of strength for him lies not in the detail of what they say but in the very fact that they are there to say it to him at all. The mischievousness on Lázaro's face when he alludes to the guidance he receives from his *espíritus* is not a hint of his access to some secret spiritual information or power. It speaks to the sense of protection that having the dead there, whispering in his ear and caring for everything that he does, gives him. 'They protect me—they always protect me', as he said. Indeed, in our many conversations in my visits to Cuba since 2016, the closest Lázaro came to explaining to me the power of his spirits was in the context of explaining how he puts his gift to work for the benefit of others, in his daily wanderings from one house to another in the inner-city *barrios* of Havana. 'Everybody here is suffocating in their own bubble of problems—no one has the time to listen', he said:

I've had cases of people coming to me from very difficult situations...and with even just simply telling them a few words the person is able to breathe again. These are not my own words; they are the words that correspond to the person in question. Often they are the words that a dead relative used to tell them, and just by hearing them the person says, 'this is what my grandmother used to say to me' and starts weeping, as if to say, 'now I feel accompanied, I feel protected', something that maybe they had not felt for a very long time. When a person feels accompanied, protected, they act differently. They may feel alone but then they say, 'on the other side I have someone who listens, who can help me'. All I do is open that door for them, and then leave them to walk through....To have someone who is there for them, just for them, as your relatives are there for you, un-transferably so. [Q: So how do these words that you utter occur to you, where do they come from?]. Oh, they tell me and I just say it. [Q: Your spirits?] Yes, sometimes it's the accompanying spirit itself that speaks, since they [the spirits] are desperate to speak to their relative and help them. They don't wait for the ones who could act as intermediaries [referring to his own spirits], so they just speak to me directly.

While Lázaro here is talking about the emotional consequences of his relationships with spirits for the people he helps, this is just as much an account of the power these affective relationships have for him. Against state structures he experiences as opaque and largely indifferent to his predicament, he pits the intimacy of spirits who care *for* him constitutively, by virtue of the very shape of their relationship with him. The point he makes about the emotional character of this intimacy speaks beautifully to the sheer conviction that undergirds his ongoing battle for his home. To the extent that his relationship with spirits in this way comes to lend emotional depth also to his relationship with the state and the revolutionary project the state is meant to uphold, Lázaro's story casts the broader relationship between the personal and the political, to coin that phrase, in an altogether new light.

Conclusion: The spirit of care

Lázaro's experience vividly reveals the deeper stakes in the state's role as prime provider of care for ordinary people like him—a role that, as I have suggested, becomes totalised in state-socialist contexts such as Cuba's, in which the state apparatus becomes the prime machinery through which a (literally) revolutionary agenda for care is meant to be realised. As we have seen, Lázaro's relationship with spirits has effectively come to take the place of his earlier relationship with the revolutionary process—a process that has always presented itself as one of care for the people, and which Lázaro in earlier years of his life supported. Spirits, it would seem, take on the qualities of care and protection that Cuba's revolutionary state always sought to deliver, even though they have for so long manifestly failed to do so, as the story of Lázaro's collapsed home illustrates.

We saw that Lázaro's calm confidence that his home will be rebuilt is in stark contrast to the kind of indignant expressions of frustration one grows accustomed to hearing from people in post-Soviet Cuba. Significantly, these litanies of complaint

are a prime means through which the contrast between revolutionary promises and state-delivered realities—the ‘ought’ and the ‘is’ of state socialism—gains its salience as a framework for living in a society that designates itself as revolutionary. For people in Cuba are not so much frustrated or disappointed as dejected and indignant: ‘The state says it provides a decent wage and subsidised food but who can live on what they give?’ ‘The revolution gave us free healthcare but try going to a hospital and see what you get’. Or, as my friend the university administrator said at that meeting in his flat when he first told me of Lázaro’s predicament, referring ironically to one of the government’s well-known slogans, ‘Revolution is to construct (*revolución es construir*), so how come that man has to live like that?’. The point of such statements is not so much to state the obvious, namely that the reality of the revolution hardly ever lives up to its ideals and promises. The near-phatic and continual way in which such statements are repeated each and every day and in all manner of contexts, rather, turns them into a form of life in their own right. To live in a revolution that is implemented through the apparatus of the state *is* to negotiate the distance between ideals and realities, and these everyday comparative calibrations are in that sense navigational tools, setting out the parameters of people’s experience of institutionalised revolution (see Cumbreira Mesa et al. 2020).

What makes Lázaro’s case revealing in this regard, then, is that he largely abstains from this manner of living the revolution. As with everyone else in Cuba, he is entirely aware of the failings of the revolutionary state to deliver on its own idealised *raison d’être*—acutely so, given his circumstances, and not least in his daily interactions with local state authorities and functionaries. However, the role that his spirits play in guiding him through this impossibly cumbersome process, giving him the inner certainty to stick with what he knows to be a path to eventual success, effectively inverts the relationship between the state-socialist ‘oughts’ and ‘ises’ of care. What the spirits tell him is that what his fellow citizens see as insurmountable realities (the ‘is’ of revolutionary life as Cubans know it) are only obstacles to be overcome: their insurmountability is, after all, illusory. On the other hand, the putatively hollow promises of the revolution—the ones that are never actually delivered, such as safe shelter—describe precisely the state of affairs that Lázaro’s spirits confirm will actually come to pass. Notwithstanding the ill treatment, the delays, the procedural errors and all the scheming by neighbours and state functionaries alike, as far as Lázaro and his spirits are concerned, the state will provide the resources for the house to be rebuilt, exactly as it ought to do. Revolutionary ought and revolutionary is, the spirits affirm, will be one and the same (cf. Holbraad 2010).

This logical inversion goes to the heart of the paradox of state care with which I began. In mediating (also in the mediumistic sense) Lázaro’s relationship with the state machinery, spirits are able affectively to attach an aesthetics of personal care to the workings of state processes. This, in effect, short-circuits the paradox of state-care. Through their abiding participation in it for Lázaro, spirits render state care all the things its universalising logic would otherwise prevent: personalised, affective, contextual, particular, in short, caring in the fully affectual sense of

the word. But crucially, spirits do this with Lázaro in virtue of the state processes through which they guide him rather than despite or against them. Spirits, here, are not the structural equivalent of a state official doing Lázaro a 'favour', if that is understood as bending the rules for a client's benefit (usually in exchange for some form of reciprocal benefit), as the Cuban expression getting things done 'from the left' (*por la izquierda*) indicates.³ Rather, they shape the equivalent of what state care would look like if its machinery were, as per the unattainable ideal, personalised after all. To return to the Hegelian analogy, the spirits bestow upon the state the real miracle of God: that of being omnipresent, omniscient, and all-powerful, but nevertheless being able constitutively to care for everyone *personally*, protecting them in the detail of their life circumstances. And as with God also (though no doubt differently), this personalisation is fully aesthetic in its character, melding the affectivity of care and protection with the multimodal sensorium of spiritist practice—apparitions, visions, whispers, and voices being the ways in which spirits' care is, literally, felt. Even as cynicism, then, is the constitutive affect of the paradox of state care, as we saw, Lázaro's serene sense of conviction in state institutions is the affective corollary of the spiritist aesthetic of his relationship with them.

Indeed, one of the many things that are so arresting about Lázaro's account of his situation is the way his relationship with the spirits acts to intensify his relationship with state institutions and the revolutionary process they are meant ('ought') to embody. Spirits do not provide Lázaro with a way out of the state-socialist order, in that sense, but into it. After all, to him the spirits allow him to see his way through the dismal realities of what he, like everyone else, recognises as an ailing revolution, and into a deeper realm of state-revolutionary process that he is convinced can and will work for him. Tellingly, on each of my return visits since our initial meeting in 2016, Lázaro's updates have expanded the set of state agencies and authorities he has been able to involve in his case. Stories of incompetence and malice on the part of local functionaries are countered with tales of the competence and gravitas of higher-level authorities. In 2019, for example, he presented his case to the public surgery of the Council of State—the national government's prime legislative wing. While fully aware that this is a long shot, he saw having a record of his case being dealt with at this highest of levels as an important element in his campaign to receive at municipal level the full state subsidy for home reparations to which he believes he is entitled. 'These people are serious, and they understand you when you speak to them,' he explained. 'They know that what they decide has weight and no one can ignore that.' 'You probably know more about the workings of government than the officials you are dealing with,' I commented. 'Well, yes. In many cases I have to teach them how to do their job. But for me the task is to align all of these levels—the State, the Province, the Municipality, the delegates. When I have it all working in synchrony,' he continued, extending his arms widely as if to embrace the whole administrative structure of the revolution, 'that's when the works will start.' 'Finally!', I added. 'Finally,' he smiled back.

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Martin Holbraad teaches social anthropology at UCL. His main field research is in Cuba, focusing on Afro-Cuban religions and revolutionary politics. Recent books include *Truth in Motion: The Recursive Anthropology of Cuban Divination* (Chicago, 2012), *The Ontological Turn: An Anthropological Exposition* (co-author, Cambridge, 2016), and *Anthropologies of Revolution: Forging Time, People and Worlds* (co-author, California, 2020).

Email: m.holbraad@ucl.ac.uk ORCID ID: 0000-0002-8419-7933

Notes

1. Fluent in four languages, including English, Lázaro read and approved drafts of this article before publication. He preferred that I use his real name in my account of his circumstances and actions. We are at present collaborating on a longer, co-authored work.
2. The event of revolutionary struggle and upheaval that brought Fidel Castro's revolutionary government to power in 1959 is in Cuba referred to as 'The Triumph of the Revolution', as distinct from 'the revolution', which refers to the process of political, economic, societal, moral—in short 'total'—transformation that these events initiated and which is deemed to be still ongoing, notwithstanding the many trials and tribulations of the post-Soviet period in particular.
3. The structural equivalent of officials' favours, in this context, would rather be the many and complex witchcraft/sorcery-like options that are available to Cubans in their efforts to influence state processes, with particular divinities, spirits, and initiates of different Afro-Cuban ritual traditions being understood as being efficacious in particular fields (the justice system, professional development, etc.).

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